Eco-Identities:

Subtle Forms in Aboriginal Films

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1. Introduction

In contemporary Australia the struggle over narratives about national identity often aligns with an ethnic divide between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. A question that arises concerns the place Aboriginal presence has in the self-perception of Australians, who are mostly non-Indigenous. Such a question begs another, equally interesting one, which concerns the nature of a specifically Aboriginal identity: What does it consist of, and how is it produced? This thesis looks at one particular aspect that is founded upon Aboriginal self-perceptions, but has been modified through the portrayal of Aboriginals in the media. It is an aspect of their identity that aligns Aboriginal people with the environment and presents their cultures as ecologically sustainable. Thus I call it the Aboriginal eco-identity. One place where this identity strategy gets expressed is in Aboriginal filmmaking.

Over tens of thousands of years,[1] Aboriginal societies managed their environment through a culture that inscribed meaning in every aspect of it. As the eminent Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner put it, the land was to Aboriginal people "a humanised realm saturated with significations" (Stanner, *White Man* 131). Yet European settlers had little interest in identifying the meaningfulness of Aboriginal presence. Whereas for the European eye, the tilling of fields and building of villages constitutes the most immediately recognisable vestiges of an agrarian economy, Aboriginal land use leaves few outward signs, and so Europeans did not recognise the form that the cultivation of land took. Aboriginal management practices were keeping the land productive even if they did not use recognisable farming techniques (Rose, *Nourishing* 18). The belated discovery of how Aboriginal people had been caring for country and what constitutes their identity slowly filtered through to media representations of Aboriginal people. Amongst the competing images of Aboriginals as drunkards, as lazy, as criminals or as hopeless victims, were also images of them as 'noble savages' possessing ecological wisdom.

A former British colony, Australia has a history of colonial subjugation. The rights of Aboriginal peoples in Australia only entered the public consciousness in the second half of the 20th century with the success of a referendum on the recognition of Aboriginals as citizens. This led to further activism that culminated in the installing of an Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawn of Parliament House in Canberra, designed to be a constant reminder that Aboriginals do not enjoy the same rights as other citizens and are made to feel like outsiders in their own lands. The politics of recognition continue to be crucial to both Aboriginal identity and national identity alike. Films made by Aboriginal people, either alone or in collaboration with other, non-Indigenous people, are one way for Aboriginal people to negotiate their public image.

Since the 1980s when video technology became affordable, Australian indigenous film-making has grown exponentially. Some of the content is made in the indigenous languages spoken in regional Australia, and is therefore aimed solely at a local audience. Yet there is also a steadily increasing

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[1] Archaeological and paleontological evidence suggests the Australian continent was inhabited for as long as 60,000 years, but little is known about how far back a sustainable cultural system like Dreaming may have existed. For evidence of early human presence, see for example Cosgrove (1989) and Thorne et al. (1999).

proportion of films that are made in English with a broader audience in mind. Rather than passively accepting the narratives that have been told about them by others, Indigenous communities have begun telling their own stories. In this sense, self-imaging practices are inherently political, as Indigenous people refuse the mostly inaccurate, often racist, and almost always misinformed portrayals of their communities and cultures. Video and visual media are being used by Indigenous people to convey cultural values and aesthetics that exist sometimes outside and sometimes alongside the western mainstream. These are alternative ways of representing ways of being, of being in place. In telling their own stories, many Aboriginal films represent projects of identity formation, promotion and cultural maintenance, and in doing so they draw upon several recurring themes. One such theme, or subtext, is that of environmental guardianship. It is on this subtext that my thesis will focus.

The idea that indigenous peoples have a better understanding of their local environment or are in some way better suited to maintaining it is widespread. A great number of Indigenous cultures in Australia are founded upon regionally based ontological philosophies known collectively in English as the Dreaming. In my analysis of contemporary Aboriginal films from the arid centre of Australia, I identify moments where the sense of 'caring for country' – an eco-philosophical ethicality informed by Dreaming – is established visually. In these moments, the depiction of the land is achieved in tandem with the depiction of human presence, in a way that is suggestive of responsibility for or knowledge of that place. The portrayal of environmental awareness is formed in some cases primarily through narration, in some cases primarily through sound effects, and in some cases primarily through visual means. In all cases, the sense of unity with place (or the severance of this unity) and the importance of landscape in the culture of the people is multi-modal and reliant upon images of people on the land with which they identify. The majority of Aboriginal communities in Australia are beset with a staggering complexity of social problems. Coping with these problems forms an unavoidable backdrop to many films and often enters into these filmic moments of environmental reflexivity when individuals are portrayed navigating the loss of environmental knowledge; the inability to fulfil their traditional responsibilities to places of significance; or changes to traditional lifestyles caused by modernity and influences from Western culture generally and White Australian culture in particular. And yet the vast majority of these films are decidedly optimistic in tone. When the certainty of their relationship to place and their role in its maintenance is intact, the subjects of these films appear empowered by their search for solutions.

My thesis is divided into three main parts. The first deals with the formation of an ecologically oriented identity. Chapter 2.1 is a brief history of the Aboriginal experience of colonisation, with an emphasis on changes to the legal status of their relationship to land. Chapter 2.2 provides an overview of the socio-cultural (and legal-philosophical) system, commonly known as Dreaming, which produces and frames the Aboriginal sense of identity. 2.3 then looks at the nature of Aboriginal relationships to place and goes into more detail about the eco-philosophical ethicality mentioned above. 2.4 outlines some criticism of the idea that indigenous people have a necessary relationship to place that affords them insights into ecology, while 2.5 concludes the chapter with three examples of the eco-identity, which are provided to give a better sense of what this phenomenon is.

Chapter 3.1 goes into more detail about how Aboriginal people represent themselves, the history of this self-representation, and what political issues surround it in relation to the colonial history of Australia. The notion of authenticity is dealt with throughout this thesis, but 3.2 takes a closer look to see how it might impact upon the films I analyse. 3.3 deals with the phenomenon of remoteness and what significance it has for film form. In present-day Australia, the remote is the locational source of the eco-identity. The uptake of Aboriginal ideas about Dreaming and sustainability by the mainstream media has its epicentre in the cities. But the original source was in the continent-wide space of the pre-colonial era, which, given the distribution of people across the land, should be understood as entirely non-remote. Obviously remote communities are not remote from their own culture but from the urban centres. They hold the last vestiges of a connection to the pragmatic meaning of Dreaming and so function more readily as places where the manifestation of an eco-identity can be performed. 3.4 then presents some thoughts concerning the authorship of films in remote areas, and links this back to both authenticity, self-representation and eco-identity. For as Faye Ginsburg suggests, remotely produced Aboriginal media have become part of the mediascape of the Australian national imaginary (Ginsburg, "Embedded" 89).

Chapter 4 consists of an analysis of three films made in the arid interior of Australia. The first, *Samson and Delilah*, is a feature film or narrative film, while the second, *Aboriginal Rules* and the third, *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* are both documentaries. In a documentary film, some effort is normally made to allow the views and opinions of the subject of the film to carry through to the audience unmediated. In other words, documentaries rely on a semblance of realism and impartiality, even if we as an audience know that true impartiality and absolute faithfulness to an 'objective reality' is impossible. Feature films can potentially deal with the same subject matter, but do so with somewhat more freedom from the constraints placed upon form by viewer expectations. That is, a feature film can overtly manipulate viewer emotions through its formal strategies, without seeming to jeopardise its own integrity as a depiction of the given subject. The factual nature of documentary films rarely stands up to scrutiny however. The formal techniques might be subtle, but admit nevertheless of the maker's control over the narrative. On the premise that all films are narratives, and that the form the expression of Aboriginal eco-identities takes is influenced by Aboriginal story-telling more than it is by theoretical distinctions between types of film, the differences between these genres are not discussed in any great detail. While many films from both the remote interior of the continent and the settled coastlines could be analysed for signs of an eco-identity, what makes these three films particularly interesting in relation to one another is a similarity in the visual code being used. The Central and Western Deserts are sandy places, and it is this medium that comes to play a subtle, but by no means insignificant role in both the formation and expression of an eco-identity as it manifests in desert regions. This is not to posit sand as integral to the eco-identity. Rather, it is something which the three films have in common, seemingly because of its ubiquity in the desert environment. A close reading of specific scenes reveals that there are powerful meanings behind the connection between sand and Aboriginality in the Central and Western Deserts.

Filmic form can bring the image of ecological sustainability into coherence with modern Aboriginality. All three films achieve this in ways that appear to be deliberately unspectacular, so as to

subtly reinforce the stereotyped image of the Aboriginal as possessing environmental knowledge and belonging to a culture that is ecologically sustainable. The stereotype, based at least in part on a factual account of cultural identity, is politically efficacious. My aim is to find small moments in films where a particular kind of identity is performed or constructed. These moments are not necessarily a reflection of the primary meaning of the film. The intention is to explain how filmic moments can express an identity construction that positions Aboriginal people as harbouring ecological wisdom, not because the film on the whole is an example, but because it contains a subtle reminder, a recirculation, of a type. The films I analyse then, deal with cultural identity. An eco-identity is not something that stands in opposition to cultural identity, but is rather an aspect of it.

2. Aboriginal Geography

This chapter looks at the Aboriginal experience of colonisation. Special attention is given to the way White settlement was framed by British law. The legal justifications for settlement have had consequences for the struggle over land rights, a theme dealt with in *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*, and which impacts upon the constitution of Aboriginal eco-identities. The idea of Dreaming is described as it is an important source of Aboriginal identity constructions, including the sense of ecological awareness. The eco-identity is then treated at length, including questions over the validity of some of the ideas it is based upon. The chapter closes with examples of how eco-identities rely on creative appropriation and interpretation, and thus are dynamic, even though the relation to sustainability associated with the eco-identity relies on narratives of permanence.

2.1. The Aboriginal Experience of History: Contact, *Terra Nullius* and Country

The arrival of The First Fleet at Sydney Cove on the 26th of January 1788, carrying some 1030 convicts and soldiers from Britain, marks the beginning of White settlement on the Australian continent (Becke 38). Since this first contact, indigenous peoples have been coping not only with deliberate attempts by settlers to exterminate them and government attempts to assimilate them, but also the enormous impact of the introduction of hitherto unknown diseases, culture and law. The issues affecting Aboriginal lives are many and complex, but this chapter briefly touches on just a few historical factors in order to give a broad sense of how colonisation brought immense change to the lives of the first Australians. A status quo had been manifest in the distribution of tribes across the land. Each tribal group had responsibility over certain areas, which were for the most part known to and respected by neighbouring tribes. The upsetting of this status quo occasioned by processes of colonisation is relevant to a study of ecological motifs in indigenous film-making in that Aboriginal lives were, and in many ways still are, entirely dependent upon and centred around a relationship to the land. Being 'on country' is of crucial importance in the Aboriginal consciousness, as will be explained in chapter 2.3. For now an historical overview of some factors that reduced the ability of Aboriginal communities to resist invasion will suffice, as it informs the way in which concepts of 'country' are circulated. This chapter, then, starts by mentioning the spread of disease and the use of force as ways in which Aboriginal sovereignty was impaired, before giving a brief outline of how the pastoral industry impacted the lives of Aboriginal people, and in some cases forced them to abandon a foraging lifestyle. Federal government policies of assimilation will also be touched upon, as this subtler expression of power often resulted in the removal of people from their ancestral lands and their families. The focus then shifts to the legality of the dispossession of Aboriginal people of their lands, languages and cultures. Just as there is no single cause of Aboriginal disadvantage in contemporary Australia, so too is it not possible to single out any single object of blame for their dispossession historically. Yet as juridical ways of understanding the Aboriginal sense of a connection to 'country' surface in some of the films analysed in this thesis, it is worth reviewing the legal grounds upon which it is alleged that dispossession took place. In essence, the British legal system made dispossession permissible. The doctrine of *terra nullius*, it has been argued,[2] was used as an ethical defence of colonisation. Whether or not this is historically accurate is now subject to debate,[3] yet *terra nullius* has been presented in recent legal and historical discussions as demonstrating the insubstantiality of the British claim to ownership of the land by way of a comparison with indigenous claims, which on an ethical level could be understood as more substantial, given the now widely accepted view that Aboriginal ancestry formed an unbroken chain stretching over millennia (Sutton 1996).

Aboriginal populations were severely diminished by the inadvertent spread of diseases such as smallpox by European settlers. In letters written by Governor Phillip in 1788, he reports that up to 50%

[2] For example, Frost (1981) and Banner (2005)

[3] For example, Fitzmaurice (2007).

of the indigenous population of the Sydney region died from smallpox within the first year of colonisation.[4] Although some early settlers had contact with the Eora people of the Sydney region and could bear witness to the changes brought about by colonisation, few took sufficient interest to record their fate with any detail.[5] Nevertheless, such a sudden loss of life is assumed to have greatly impaired the functioning of Aboriginal society in the Sydney region. At the very least it weakened the ability of the Eora to resist invasion. Beyond establishing a colony at Sydney Cove, settlers were encouraged to find and cultivate arable land. The presence of people on this land was understood as inconvenient, but clearing the land of inhabitants proved relatively simple given the mismatch in numbers, in weaponry, and thanks to the smallpox epidemic, in physical condition (Reynolds 127). Had disease not wiped out such a large proportion of the population, one might speculate, initial resistance could have been more effective.

Whether or not mass murders took place has been vigorously debated amongst Australian historians in recent decades. The argument, known as 'the history wars', has polarised opinion. Former Australian prime minister John Howard weighed into the debate when in 1996 he suggested that Anglo-Australians should not feel ashamed of their past. He insisted that the "black armband version of history" was misrepresenting the nation's "heroic achievement", by which he meant, the building of a nation by Anglo-Australians (Howard 1999). The issue however, has less to do with whether or not mass murders – or any other systematic attempts to eradicate the indigenous population – took place, but to what extent the historical record bears witness to events that were even at the time, considered inglorious (Brantlinger 2004). It was not necessarily in anyone's best interest to admit to the planning and executing of an attack, and the evidence of the victims, had they even had access to legal process, was never going to be given credit. They were silent crimes,[6] but colonial administrators did not, for the most part, openly condone murder. Murder, or arguably genocide,[7] was mostly committed out of sight and out of reach of the colonies, the governors of which had finite resources for monitoring the behaviour of the pastoralist[8] settlers who were spreading across the continent. It would be a gross oversimplification to suggest that all contact between settlers and the first Australians resulted in deaths, or that all settlers attempted to eradicate the people they encountered. So too is it inaccurate to portray Aboriginal people purely as victims in what was often a form of guerrilla warfare (Reynolds 179). When members of their community were killed, both sides felt the imperative to reciprocate:

> Frontier conflict was then widespread in colonial Australia. Most districts saw fighting between resident clans and encroaching settlers although it varied greatly in duration and intensity. Conflict was triggered by tension and misunderstanding, by the possessiveness of Europeans towards the land and water, by competition over women and by diametrically opposed concepts of personal property. Once blacks had been injured or killed their relations were impelled to seek vengeance. Reciprocal violence quickly spiralled. (Reynolds 196)

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4 *Historical Records of Australia*, 1:1, pp.66 – 67.

5 Watkin Tench's memoirs are a primary source for the devastation caused by small pox (1793).

6 Rose (1992) quotes G.W. Broughton (1965) on the invisibility of mass murder in Northern Australia: "Native life was held cheap, and a freemasonry of silence among the White men, including often the bush police, helped keep it that way."

7 For an account of the extent of the eradication of Aboriginal people, cast in terms of genocide, see Moses (2004).

8 Pastoralist is a term applied to sheep and cattle farmers in Australian English.

Yet the balance of power was clearly in favour of those with modern weapons, horses, and a supply of storable food, and they did not believe they had anything to gain from the indigenous population other than some basic geographical knowledge such as the location of fresh water.[9] In spite of all this, there are in fact multiple accounts of mass murder, from all parts of the continent, but perhaps representing only a portion of that which occurred. The depletion of the population through violence and disease meant that there were not only fewer to defend it from settlement, but also that the transmission of practical and cultural knowledge of the land was impaired, for responsibility and knowledge were dispersed according to familial lineage (Elkin 81).[10]

Reynolds recounts the various ways in which Aboriginal people made use of the sudden influx of farm animals into their lands. Though careful observation from afar, Aboriginal people learned shepherding techniques employed by Whites, and turned them to use in stealing whole flocks (Reynolds 316). But theft of a flock of sheep in the Victorian highlands, or the spearing of a stray bullock in the Central Desert all too often attracted disproportionate retribution from pastoralists.[11] In the case of desert communities in particular, the impact of cattle grazing was catastrophic. The few waterholes that Aboriginal people relied upon for fresh drinking water were quickly fouled by a few head of cattle, rendering them unusable for years afterwards.[12] Such communities were completely reliant on these sources, which pastoralists knew. But as Letnic explains, the pastoralists' decisions were based on economic strategy, not conservationist principle or empathy with the indigenous population. Letnic's account of the expansion of cattle grazing in Central Australia draws partially upon Durack's 1959 memoir, *Kings In Grass Castles*, in which the author explains that pastoralists knew there would only be sufficient water to increase herd size in good years when rainfall was above average. This meant that in dry years, livestock would linger around water sources, making it impossible for humans to survive from their traditional, nomadic lifestyle (Letnic 300).

The introduction of grazing spelt the abrupt end of a foraging lifestyle, forcing them to move toward homesteads or population centres where a supply of food and water could be guaranteed. While the movement from a semi-nomadic, traditional lifestyle to a settled one in which people became reliant on White pastoralists or missions was not always made reluctantly, it came with a high price. Traditions needed to be honoured, but getting to ancestral lands required walking perhaps hundreds of kilometres. Aboriginal law and custom had competition however, from certain aspects of White society, such as gainful employment, modern technology and access to food and clothing, which would have been appealing to young Aboriginals, if only the prejudice had not proved such a barrier (Reynolds 338). Furthermore, dispossession resulted in the coming together of tribes in newly established communities on other people's ancestral land. Reynolds describes the difficulty this presented, as "the traditional owners of a town site could control the access of more distant clans to both the town itself and the food

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[9] Rose (1991) gives accounts of the usefulness of Aboriginal trackers to the police, mostly for hunting down other Aboriginals.

[10] Elkin (1964) "Those who belong to [the land], and own it, are usually a group related in the male line, together with their wives who come from other [localities]." p.80. If all male members of a family who are old enough to be privy to the cultural and religious knowledge pertaining to an area are killed, then knowledge of and responsibility for that place is impaired.

[11] See for example, Perkins (2008), Episode Four.

[12] Letnic p.299

and tobacco available there. This issue was probably a major source of conflict all over the continent" (Reynolds 380). With the spread of pastoralism across the continent came the subsequent mapping of the land, in order to sustain White claims to ownership. The division of land and its record as White property turned it into a commodity within a system that did not recognise traditional ownership (Davis and Prescott, 1992).

Violence, disease and the competition for land and resources had a significant impact on Aboriginal populations throughout the 19th century, breaking the patterns of land use to which Aboriginal cultures were anchored. A less overt, but no less significant factor was the policy of assimilation. This was the attempt to bring Aboriginal people into the broader Australian community, to inculcate the values and beliefs held by the White majority, and crucially, to abet the demise of Aboriginal culture. Most infamously, assimilation came in the form of the forcible removal of children of mixed ethnicity from their Aboriginal mothers. This was government policy in Australia right up until the 1970s, but was most actively carried out up to 1940 (Manne 217). In Western Australia it was referred to by the Protector of Aborigines, a government administrator responsible for 'managing' indigenous people, as "ultimate absorption" (Armitage 44). The programmatic attempt to make Aboriginal culture disappear was enacted by raising these children on missions, at homesteads or in boarding schools where no Aboriginal languages were used and no traditional knowledge was taught. It was based on the Social Darwinist[13] assumption that 'full blood' Aboriginals would soon die out in accordance with the 'laws' of natural selection, and that the government had but the responsibility to "smooth the pillow of a dying race". This particular phrase is attributed to the amateur anthropologist Daisy Bates (1966), who spent decades studying peoples from the Kimberly through to the Nullabor, and who, with her own Social Darwinist convictions, firmly believed that Aboriginal people were destined not to survive in the face of White settlement. The phrase became a standard rationale for an outwardly benign policy of caring for those who apparently could not, or would not, take up the opportunity offered to them by modernity. Yet the 'care' was anything but benevolent. The Aboriginal Protection Board was predominantly concerned with containing and neutralising Aboriginal presence in the broader community. In the words of Russell McGregor, "[a]ssimilation sought to reduce Aboriginal culture to Aboriginal folklore" (McGregor 303).

In order to explain the history of the Aboriginal experience of colonisation in relation to the impact it had on the sense of connectedness to and/or ownership of land, it is worth dwelling now on the legal principles upon which Australia was invaded, or settled.[14] British colonies in Australia were founded on the belief that, although inhabited, the land was not actually being 'used', and was therefore available for the taking (Banner 2005). The semi-nomadic lifestyle of most Aboriginals meant that they did not live in permanent settlements, nor did they farm the land. Such was the attitude to so-called 'primitive' people, that finding anything less than a European style of development would, in the eyes of the colonisers, mean the land was vacant. Furthermore, the indigenous population was widely believed

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[13] Social Darwinism was a set of justifications for institutionalised racism that inferred a correlation between the biological principles of evolution as described by Charles Darwin and race. Socially defined categories such as 'primitive' and 'civilised' were assumed to be empirically verifiable and biologically determined.

[14] Although both terms are valid, it is evident that one assigns guilt, while the other evades it.

to be without any forms of organised government or law. Their social organisation was considered to be based on long-standing (but weakly defined) tradition. The settler and explorer Edward John Eyre wrote in 1841, that "[t]hrough custom's irresistible sway has been forged the chain that binds in fetters a people, who might otherwise be said to be without government or restraint" (Eyre 384). The 'discovery' of uncharted geography was a Eurocentric phenomenon in that the belief that lands were unknown was intertwined with the expansion of European empires across the globe. That is to say, implicit in the idea of discovery as it manifested in the 18th century voyages of Captain Cook or the overland explorations of the Australian continent by the likes of Robert Burke and William Wills in 1860, is the idea that European – or more specifically British – culture and values are superior, and that empirical conquest is morally sanctioned on the grounds that it acts as the vehicle for spreading both Christianity and 'progress' to peoples who are greatly in need of it.

Helen Tiffin stresses the general differences between indigenous populations and colonisers in attitudes to environmental resources and the sense of responsibility that may or may not attend to their usage. She argues that through processes of colonisation, "[c]ommunal biotic subjectivities and place-integrated identities were irretrievably suborned by a European instrumentality yoked to a destructive ideology of technological 'progress' that was rapidly applied to the 'new' land and its inhabitants" (Tiffin xiii). This is to say that British colonisation brought a new attitude toward land and land use, which stood in stark contrast to the attitudes held by Indigenous Australians with their "place-integrated identities". Tiffin further argues that for many indigenous peoples "the very concept of 'the human' had been constructed by and within their surrounding environments" (Tiffin xiii). There is a stark contrast between a British or European understanding of the ownership of land, and the indigenous Australian understanding of exisiting in relationship to it, a point that will be expanded upon in chapter 2.2. Suffice to note for now, that indigenous "peoples understood their humanness as constituted and expressed through" their environment, which Tiffin contrasts with philosophies of the post-Enlightenment era which posited humanness as standing in opposition to it. For Aboriginals, "place was not so much crucial to identity as actively constituent of it" (xiii).

There is a flip-side to this dichotomy of attitudes, however. For just as Indigenous people in pre-colonial or 'traditional' circumstances might have seen themselves as necessarily embedded within and a part of their environment, without making a 'rational' distinction between themselves and the world, they were often similarly understood by colonisers as a part of the *alien* environment, more or less indistinguishable from it, but therefore of no particular significance. In other words, from a European perspective in which the evidence of civilisation was measured by similarity to one's own, some civilisations were unrecognisable and therefore those people were treated as effectively inseparable from raw nature. This attitude is suggestive of the humanist distinction between mind and matter, whereby human culture stands apart from the physical world as an expression of mind. The European position took the separation of mind and matter as a given, whereas indigenous Australian peoples did not. This fundamentally different perspective on the representation of human consciousness will be developed in chapter 2.2, in the discussion of Dreaming. Again, Tiffin suggests that the "closer to nature a people, the less deserving of ethical concern they were" (xiii). The corollary being, those places might be considered effectively empty, or available.

It has been argued by many historians that the British had developed a legal framework to justify territorial acquisition, known as *terra nullius* (Banner 2005). In recent years, some legal scholars have questioned whether *terra nullius* was actively discussed in the 18th and 19th centuries as a way of justifying colonisation, or whether it was a product of legal arguments about the nature of colonisation that came about at a later date. Fitzmaurice argues that a more widely circulated idea was *res nullius*, which held that in a state of 'primitivism' – which might be akin to a Rousseauean concept of the state of nature – no sole individual could claim property rights. The argument was used to counter colonialist expansion: The fear of an absolute monarch who could trample the sovereign rights of citizens motivated the fear that it might do the same to its citizens back home (Fitzmaurice 9–15). Bain Attwood has demonstrated that the occupation of land developed piecemeal and somewhat organically, and might never have required any formal acknowledgement by the British government. By the time it was reviewed, Aboriginal rights to land were already considered no longer an issue; the indigenous population being considered effectively doomed anyway:

> No less a force than the famous humanitarian British House of Commons Select Committee on the condition of aboriginal peoples in the British colonies of 1835–37 concluded that the recovery of indigenous rights in land in the Australian case would serve no useful purpose. Government had been granting settlers title to land as though the British crown was the one and only sovereign and owner of the territory. Any attempt to reverse this practice would have posed terrible administrative and political problems and it would have exacted an economic cost no one in government would have been willing to pay. (Atwood 187)

Regardless of the historical validity of *terra nullius*, legal attention to land rights claims since 1990 has solidified it as a concept in so much as the validity of some famous cases was judged based upon the assumption that *terra nullius* was indeed a legal argument used to enable and sustain colonial expansion.[15] Irrespective of the extent to which the doctrine exerted influence during Australia's colonial period, Aboriginal people were considered by many people not to have property rights because they were not using the land, and did not constitute a sovereign nation because their culture, or way of life, was to European eyes unrecognisable as civilisation. It is on this basis that I consciously sidestep the debate as to whether *terra nullius* was ever quoted by colonial administrators of Australian colonies, or not. The concept has had very real effects on land claims made since the middle of the 20th century, irrespective of its provenance.

Based distantly on Roman law,[16] the doctrine of *terra nullius* assumed that the Australian continent was discovered empty by the British, because the inhabitants were not actively cultivating the land or engaged in any other industrious usage of it. Australia, understood as *terra nullius*, was effectively "a land without people".[17] Deborah Bird Rose describes *terra nullius* as egocentric: Unable

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[15] See for example, *Mabo vs. Queensland*, 1992, and *Wik Peoples vs. Queensland*, 1996.

[16] The Roman law of 'first taker' was the starting point for sixteenth century discussions of the legality of colonisation in relation to the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Essentially a form of natural law in which property rights are understood to fall to that person who takes something that was not previously owned by another, the principle was initially used to argue against colonial expansion on the grounds that indigenous Americans had preexisting property rights. In 19th century England, the principle was used to argue the opposite: mere 'savages' could not have sovereignty as they had no civilisation, and therefore could not exercise property rights over land. This was a shift in the use of the notion from the discernment of private property to an evaluation of the sovereignty of a people. (Fitzmaurice 9-12).

[17] Gordon Briscoe in *First Australians*, Episode 7.

to see any familiar signs of ownership, the British developed a legal doctrine that entrenched the failure to recognise others in law. Settlers were oblivious to the fact that the entire continent

> was already travelled, known, and named; its places were inscribed in song, dance and design; its histories were told from generation to generation; its physical appearance was the product of specific land management practices; its fertility was the product of human labour which had been invested in the land. (Rose 22)

Terra Nullius itself, or at the very least the attitude towards Australia's first peoples that informs the use of the term, made it possible for representatives of the British Government to effectively ignore the actions of settlers who sought to remove Aboriginal presence from land that they wanted. In contemporary usage, the concept of *terra nullius* has come to represent an attitude toward indigenous sovereignty that conveys a sense of legal weight. The suggestion that there was a legal doctrine that enabled colonisation is used today as a weapon in land rights claims (Gibson 54), especially since the 1993 Native Title Act, which recognises the right of indigenous peoples to ancestral lands, so long as they can prove the relationship they have to the land is unbroken, and so long as the land is not privately owned.[18] The mention of *terra nullius* carries moral force in so much as our perception of what constitutes civilisation and how property rights ought be understood has changed to such an extent that understanding the Australian continent as once empty now seems ludicrous. But for a long time, Aboriginal presence was mostly ignored. Deborah Bird Rose brings this into the context of the equally strange notion of wilderness, which is used widely in debates over the preservation of forests and now uninhabited desert regions, and suggests "that if one cannot see traces or signs of one's own culture in the land, then the land must be 'natural' or empty of culture" (Rose *Nourishing* 17). For Rose, this is essentially the same as *terra nullius* in that it "depended on precisely this egocentric view of landscape" (17).

Yet the self-perception of the Aboriginals was that they were – and importantly, some would say still are – a part of nature, albeit for entirely different reasons than those that may have been used within British law to justify their dispossession. Seen from an Indigenous perspective, the association of a 'state of nature' with a lack of civilisation might count as deeply ironic: That peoples on the Australian continent were thought of as no more than a part of the landscape, numbered among the exotic species of animals, had the effect of rendering their sovereignty invisible.[19] Yet by their own discernment, they figure as a part of nature not because they are of no consequence, but precisely because they fulfil a crucial role in the maintenance of place, whereby places are ecosystems both producing and produced by human involvement. This intersection of nature and culture in the production of Aboriginal identity will be explained further in the following sections of this chapter. It is important here to note that Aboriginal peoples understood their own cultures as necessarily a product of themselves in consort with the places

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[18] The Native Title Act requires that "Australian governments recognize that Indigenous Australians (Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) had held sovereign rights of ownership to land and waters in Australian territories prior to the assertion of British Sovereignty (1788) and that such rights of ownership were not automatically extinguished through the assertion of British Sovereignty, even if they would no longer be recognized as sovereign rights" (Pilbrow 222). The act was instigated following a High Court decision in 1992 on the case brought by Eddie Mabo on behalf of the Meriam people, (*Mabo vs. Queensland*) in which he successfully argued that the assumption of jurisdiction over the land by the Crown had not extinguished native title.

[19] Aboriginal nations had stable, yet sometimes overlapping, territorial boundaries, as well as rigorously maintained legal codes. None of it was written down, but was transmitted verbally in languages which the majority of settlers felt no inclination to learn. For tribal boundaries, see for example, Elkin (1964) 60-61, Sutton (1996) 14 and Lewis (1976) 254.

they inhabited. There could be no separation of people from place, or of culture from nature as there was in the European mind/matter distinction. As Tonkinson puts it in relation to Western Desert peoples, "[t]hey attribute neither superiority nor autonomy to the forces of nature, since to do so would suggest an opposition between nature and humanity (Tonkinson 30). The very seamlessness of Aboriginal relationships to place was and is a result of cultural complexity, even though in the minds of the colonisers it was regarded as the opposite. The connection between traditional, historical Aboriginal conceptions of place relatedness and the contemporary reality is neatly encapsulated by Hodge, who argues that

> Traditional culture provided a highly flexible set of ways of encoding a nexus of rights and obligations towards the land. It gave rise to aesthetic statements which were essentially political and juridical rather than personal and expressive. This quality made it equally well adapted to the needs of Aborigines today, all of whom are in some respects fringe-dwellers in their own land, needing a means of relocating themselves in White Australia, reconstructing an identity which is fully Aboriginal yet adequate to the new situation. (Hodge 412)

Reconstructing and circulating Aboriginal identities is precisely what the film projects included in this study are about. As oral cultures, story-telling had always been the technique by which cultural knowledge was reproduced. Stories that link people to land through innovative means that nevertheless respect tradition are proving the vitality of ecologically-oriented identity projects. The tenure of land by Aboriginal people is in many cases far from secure (Rose, *Dingo* 32). Reclaiming legal title over land under the newly introduced European system of law is a way of ensuring their ties to land will not be further impeded, just as is story-telling, whereby the demonstration and constant reminder of how and why people belong to their land serves the broader political purpose of making visible relationships to place that are otherwise unseen and unacknowledged.

2.2. The Dreaming: An Aboriginal Eco-Philosophy

Having provided an overview of the Aboriginal experience of White settlement and how it has impacted on the legal status of the land, it is necessary to explain a little more about the nature of the cultural and psychological relationship that many Aboriginal people have to their environment. This is crucial to understanding Aboriginal identity projects such as films, because ideas about who Aboriginals are that circulate through the media are often dependent upon the belief that they have a relationship with certain places that exceeds, or at least differs from, what non-Indigenous people have. This special relationship is due, to a large extent, to a spiritual-philosophical knowledge system called Dreaming, which has at its core an ecologically grounded ethics of land management.

The English word Dreaming – or sometimes Dreamtime – attempts to encapsulate a wide range of interrelated concepts which in some Aboriginal languages have separate names, in others perhaps just one or two.[20] The term is now used by Aboriginals when speaking in Standard Australian English, Aboriginal English or in Kriol[21] to describe their system of beliefs, and has thus become a standard term in pan-Aboriginal discourse.[22] W.E.H. Stanner was already using the term in 1953 when he wrote his essay on the Dreaming, but credited other anthropologists for its invention (Stanner, *White Man* 23).[23] Of interest is the fact that the term came out of the study of desert societies, which all have a similar concept of the Dreaming. Yet the use of 'Dreaming' is now continent wide, with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people having adopted the term to describe Aboriginal culture as it relates both to specific cultures and to pan-Aboriginality.

Stanner began his treatise with a consideration of Aboriginal conceptions of time, which in traditional culture – meaning pre-colonial – were circular or iterative. Lacking, or possibly eschewing, methods for the keeping of history, time lasted only as long as living memory in one sense, and in another was eternal. Stanner's observation reads thus:

> One cannot 'fix' the Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen. We should be very wrong to try to read into it the idea of a Golden Age, or a Garden of Eden, though it was an Age of Heroes, when the ancestors did marvellous things that men can no longer do. […] it has for them an unchallengeably sacred authority. (Stanner, *White Man* 24)

Dreaming is an encapsulation of all time, both living memory and mythological time. Mythology is not irrelevant to the Aboriginal sense that identity is invested in the land, as the ancestor spirits still inhabit places of significance. Yet Dreaming means more than this. Stanner goes on to write that Dreaming "is

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[20] For example, the closest word in Aranda (Central Desert) is *alcheringa* (Stanner, *White Man* 23), in Warlpiri (Central Desert) it is *jukurrpa* (Biddle 9), whereas in Yolgnu (East Arnhem Land) a comparable term is simply not used (Deger 234n3), even though the spiritual-philosophical system is contiguous with other Aboriginal concepts of Dreaming.

[21] Kriol is a creole containing a high proportion of English words, but using a grammar based on a mixture English and Indigenous languages, and spoken widely in Northern Australia. Kriol is spoken as a first language by many Aboriginals who have grown up in the highly multilingual environments of missions, town camps and cattle stations, where a lingua franca was needed by groups that had previously not had contact with one another.

[22] A useful definition of pan-Aboriginality can be found in Martínez (1997): "The term pan-Aboriginal is used to refer to a 'modern' sense of the nation, in that it is conceived of as an Australia-wide phenomenon. This is contrasted with the idea of 'traditional' lands as the basis for the individual Aboriginal nations" (Martínez 135).

[23] Specifically to Spencer and Gillen, who studied Aranda culture around 1900.

many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened, a kind of charter of things that still happen, and a kind of logos or principle of order" (24). Everything, all knowledge of the world and the world's contents as it was known to Aboriginal people was bound up in Dreaming because everything was imbued with spiritual presence, and thus had stories attached to it. Across many traditional story repertoires, the creator spirits were at once human and animal, and the evidence of their passage across the landscape during the creation era is not only a set of iconic representations permanently preserved in rock and river, but also the embodied being of those ancestors. E. A. O'Keefe provides a useful summary that makes the link between mythology and land. For Dreaming concerns not just metaphysical knowledge but also the lives of all living things as well as the well-being of the land itself. Land is imbued with the presence of ancestor spirits, and animal totemism plays a role in the mediation of Dreaming:

> It is this belief that not only the land, its features and animals, but also man, were created by the Dreamtime beings that ties traditional Aborigines so inextricably to the land. They are in a sense at one with the land and all that is on it. Traditional Aborigines believe in the Dreaming and their evaluation of their world is reflected in the totemic nature of such a world. This totemic view of life is based on the assumption that man and the world around him are in complete unity. (O'Keefe 51)

Similarly, Deborah Bird Rose describes how place, mythology and knowledge are intertwined, all forming a cohesive cultural system. Each society shared its stories and songs with its neighbours to make an interconnected system of emplaced knowledge that stretched over the entire continent.[24] In her words, "[t]here is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation" (Rose, *Nourishing* 18). In Robert Tonkinson's study of the Mardu (Western Desert) from 1978, "stones, sand and stream beds" are offered as exemplary places where meaningfulness may have been found (Tonkinson 14). Sand, that quotidian substance, permeating in one way or another expectations of what kind of a place the desert is, may be inhabited by the presence of ancestor spirits that need to be remembered, and sometimes conciliated. The land to which one belongs, organised through kinship systems and longstanding tradition, is a sacred source of cultural knowledge.

So far I have mostly been using the word land to describe the terrain to which Aboriginal people relate through Dreaming. However they themselves tend to refer to land as 'country' which, even though often left uncapitalised,[25] is both a common noun and a proper noun. Country is land rendered significant, or as Rose describes it, sentient:[26]

> Country is a living entity with a yesterday, a today and tomorrow, with consciousness, action, and a will toward life. Because of this richness of meaning, Country is home and peace: nourishment for body, mind and spirit; and heart's ease. (Rose, *Nourishing* 7)

Milroy and Revell have also written about the importance of country and how storytelling about sacred places in Aboriginal culture is formative of identity. They describe the relationship between Aboriginal people and country as "an intensely intimate and loving one" (Milroy 4). Rose builds upon Stanner's description of Dreaming as a "principle of order" to explain how it is also a form of mapping: The

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[24] This is the basis of the notion of songlines: songs as a mnemonic for remembering geography (maps).

[25] In keeping with much of the literature I will not capitalise 'country', though some of the secondary sources I refer to do.

[26] The suggestion that Central Desert peoples attribute sentience to country is disputed by Peter Sutton. I return to this debate when discussing the idea that Aboriginal identity is inherently ecological.

stories code the country. For those in possession of them, stories make large areas memorisable even without having seen it for many years, and they provide a set of laws by which to live. Dreaming is therefore a "set of meta-rules: rules about relationships" (Rose, *Dingo* 44).

Tonkinson describes how Dreaming also encapsulates Aboriginal law. Because laws are seen as eternal principles for living, supplied by ancestors who now reside in country as spirits, they are inflexible and permanent. The bond that Aboriginals had to country were a part of "a logically unified order, in which all will be well if only they live according to the rules laid down by the spiritual beings who created their universe" (Tonkinson 14). Tonkinson argues that this static relationship to the universe, in which change occurred long ago when the ancestor spirits roamed the world but no more, means that the observance of laws takes precedence over all else. Especially in desert societies where resources are scarce and must be properly managed, law is the difference between life and death. As a subsidiary notion of Dreaming, law also encapsulates all aspects of life. An example may be found in Cane's study of dietary habits in the Great Sandy Desert. He quotes an informant who describes a toxic acacia seed as inedible because it does not observe law (Cane 405).[27] But as Tonkinson remarks, if laws are observed by people, then "humanity reaps the benefit of reciprocity, in the form of of continued fertility of living things and the maintenance of a long-term ecological and social status quo" (15).

The management of resources is deeply ingrained in Aboriginal attitudes to country. What has been dubbed by Rhys Jones as 'firestick farming' was the seasonal burning of land in order to offer grazing animals new growth and thus to improve the supply of of food to hunt. Several of the desert plant species are attuned to regular burning. It opens the seeds of certain grasses, and stimulates the regrowth of tubers for the following season (Cane 395). In a traditional lifestyle, Aboriginals would burn in order to maintain the flora, and to provide new, green grass shoots for grazing animals such as kangaroos, which were then hunted for meat. In semi-arid and woodland environments, burning also had the effect of restricting the growth of young trees, thus keeping wooded terrain open and allowing for more grass growth. Open woodlands are also easier to traverse and easier to hunt in than densely timbered forests. Without the advanced technology for fighting fires that we have today, Aboriginal people relied on seasonal knowledge and their keen observance of meteorological conditions to judge when and where to burn. (Bowman 390). On the other hand, fires were less likely to burn out of control if the land was repeatedly burnt, as dry fuel such as bark and leaf litter would not build up as much, meaning fires would not burn as intensely. Controlled burning counts as one of the most important and effective tools pre-contact societies had at their disposal for a kind of sustainable land management practice that is based on an eco-philosophical ethicality, or what is otherwise referred to as 'caring for country'. The conservative approach to land use taken by Aboriginals is a product of Dreaming – and law – just as much as the stories, songs and other cultural products are. As Elizabeth Povinelli suggests, they had a "supreme confidence in the giving environment" upon which they built an integrated social and philosophical system (Povinelli 679).

Stanner's 1968 follow-up paper on the Dreaming goes into some detail about the Aboriginal relationship to country. He states that our own attitudes to land have precluded our understanding of

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[27] The informant describes the seeds that cannot be eaten as follows: "That the different one, he got no law. We can't cooking damper, nothing. No. He can burn you, finish you. You'll drop."

theirs. We are left "tongueless and earless toward this other world of meaning and significance" (Stanner, *White Man* 230). Because each elder in a tribe was directly responsible for a specific place or series of places, knowledge of which was codified in songs and stories to which only other elders within the right kinship group had access, the disruption of Aboriginal societies had devastating effects on the transmission of sacred environmental knowledge. Stanner describes the overwhelming loss of people and concomitant loss of environmental knowledge as "a kind of vertigo in living", whereby "no social network had a point of fixture left" (230). This admits to the fact that topography, society and culture were bound into the one conceptual system. Across Australia, much knowledge that was encoded into songs and stories and reserved for authorised elders has now gone. However, in the arid zones, where colonisation occurred much later, people have been able to preserve much more of their knowledge. The Dreaming for many desert areas is still being observed.

Dreaming is, then, at once a legal and ethical code, a mythology, and a system of social and environmental information that provides – or provided – indigenous people with the knowledge to be able to sustain themselves on their ancestral lands. It is fundamentally ecological in its orientation, as indigenous life prior to the colonisation of Australia was reliant upon good land management practice. As a spiritual system that has incorporated – but not been replaced by – Christianity, Dreaming is still integral to Aboriginal cultural identity in many parts of Australia, irrespective of its functionality as a source of local knowledge about country. The most important aspect of Dreaming for the purposes of this thesis is perhaps the sensuousness of the relation to place that is achieved through attributing spiritual presence – in the form of ancestors and Dreaming figures – to country and recognising it as a source of law and culture. The extension of country into society, and thus into individuals, through totemic relationships with the fauna and ancestral relationships with locations results in a unity of physical and metaphysical properties. One interesting point of contact between the physical and metaphysical is sand. Especially in the Western Desert but also to a great extent in the Central Desert, sand is ubiquitous. From the West Australian coast extending eastward for at least 1000 kilometres, the Great Sandy Desert is made of unbroken, longitudinal lines of sand dunes and intervening sand plains. Rocky areas, including bluffs and mountains are also present, but sand is by far the most prominent feature, and is where harvestable desert flora grows most abundantly (Cane 393). The films analysed in chapter 4 contain scenes where a community elder traces lines in sand to represent culturally significant places. As shall be seen, making marks in the sand inscribes law and culture back into the country from whence it was derived. These short filmic scenes obviate the sensuousness of the relationship to country, and evoke the widely diffused idea that Aboriginal identity is ecological in nature, just as their culture once was built upon the necessity of sustainability.

2.3. Aboriginal Eco-Identities

I have demonstrated so far how pre-colonial Aboriginal identity was, via Dreaming, heavily invested in relationships to the physical environment. For Aboriginal people retaining at least a partial knowledge of their traditional culture, this environmentally predicated aspect of identity is still relevant and contemporary representations of Aboriginal identity repeatedly recirculate the sense that there exists a special connection between people and country. This chapter explores this ecological relationship a little further, and examines the difference between the significance of the eco-identity in pre-colonial societies, to which many iterations of Aboriginal identity refer, and the contemporary context, in which the Aboriginal eco-identity still draws upon Dreaming and tradition as a resource, but is complicated by its increasing politicisation.

A.P. Elkin wrote in 1938 that "nature is to the Aborigines a system in which natural species and phenomena are related, or associated, in space and time" (Elkin 34). Aboriginal people could read their environment for signals of what was to come. Such was their knowledge that they could interpret the change of wind or the appearance of a certain flower as an indication of the migratory return of the magpie geese or the upstream movement of barramundi, for example.[28] For Elkin, the subtlety of the Aboriginal relationship to place is also expressed in a metaphysical relationship. Thus the country "knows them" as much as they know the country (43), for a person is "tied" to country as it houses his or her spirit (80). To outsiders however, country remains unreadable, as "it's secrets or Dreamings, each a complex of myth, ritual and local knowledge, binding man and nature in a living, personal relationship, have not been revealed" to them (43). Important here is the way sacred knowledge is transmitted. If never initiated into the ethics and rituals of caring for country, a person will have but a superficial relationship to it. This inadequate relationship may suffice for finding nutrition, but will not enable him or her to "take any part in ritually perpetuating the cycle of life in natural species and in man" (44). In traditional Aboriginal ontologies, only initiated Aboriginal adults who are recognised by the spirits inhabiting the environment can properly care for country, and to be a fully responsible adult means being alert to the needs of country. Building on Elkin's observations, it seems reasonable to remark that just as for adults being a responsible member of society with duties and rights over country is inescapable, the ecological grounds of one's identity were not optional. If country provides for you, and you in turn must care for country in order for it to remain productive, then ecological sustainability is central to being. We can say then, that prior to colonisation Aboriginal people had an eco-identity by default. It pays to explore the psychological importance of this eco-identity a little more fully in order to understand its importance today.

Elkin's observations, echoed by many other writers, pertain to a way life that had already disappeared in the east of the Australian continent, but was still observable in more remote areas. Yet as Peter Sutton describes in his appraisal of W.E.H. Stanner's research on remote communities, already by the 1960s, the "nexus between plants, animals, water and warmth both as givers of life and as providers

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[28] Elkin's examples relate to the monsoonal North, but the idea is valid for all the peoples who lived on the continent prior to colonisation.

of the totemic symbolism of various human groupings had been loosened or was well on the way to being sundered" (Sutton, *Stanner* 172). In remote Australia, the easier access to sustenance that came with the arrival of White settlers and the concomitant reduction of the need to forage for food meant that the bond between human social structures and the physical world was becoming less relevant. Goods such as tea, sugar, tobacco and flour held such an appeal to Aboriginal people that many *chose* to leave their country in search of it. Thus the idea that *all* Aboriginals were forced off their land is an oversimplification; an argument made by Stanner in 1958 (Stanner, *White Man* 41-66). These changes to Aboriginal lifestyles have an ongoing significance. Sutton explains the difference between a connection to country based on having once had to rely upon it for survival, and a more recent and purely conceptual connection:

> To explore and record bush country with people who had grown up on it beyond the reach of the sedentary economy, whose very lives had once depended on an intimate relationship with the land's resources and seasons, was to see a rather different set of emotions than among people whose lives have been those of householders on settlements. Identification with the same country may sometimes be felt equally by older and younger, but it still has a different feel to it, the older people bound to it more comprehensively and viscerally, and less secular-politically, the younger bound to it more *ideationally*, and from their position in a more secular polity. For many, country is no longer simply the world. It has become an objectification.
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> Of deeper impact, and with greater implications for the future, are related changes through which remote-area Indigenous Australians have been passing for decades. Expanding mobility, the emergence of individual self-consciousness, the diminution of the encompassing power of kinship, the swelling tide of emphasis on private property and consumer goods, and the rising importance of residential community identities, among younger generations, are interconnected. They also impact on land relationships. (Sutton, *Stanner* 172)

The secular-political relationship to land referred to above now includes the status of ancestral lands under Australian common law. In a similar way, Gibson describes Indigenous claims to sovereignty based on attachments to land as a form of "indigenous strategic 'essentialism'" (Gibson, "Cartographies" 53). The ecological character of Aboriginal identity is no longer founded just on direct relationships to country as it is now also mediated through law and bureaucracy. The image of an intrinsic relationship is now available for use in the pursuit of economic and political objectives.[29] Sutton suggests that "this disarticulation of religious territory from economy" that came with the movement of people off ancestral lands and into new communities has become the new norm (Sutton, *Stanner* 173-175). The claiming of rights over land is a revival and recirculation of an ecologically based identity, but as Sutton writes, "[t]he landscape, as an artefact of material culture …gradually becomes something other than what it was. Its structure is no longer principally physiographic or anatomised by Dreaming tracks. Its new skeleton is the road system" (176).[30]

Sutton cautiously points out however, that readers' should not interpret this insight as nostalgic, arguing instead that to criticise Aboriginal communities for now being less traditional in their identifications with country is both paternalistic and essentialising (176). Communities are not static,

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[29] And while the sentimental grounds upon which media representations of an Aboriginal spiritual attachment to country are usually built is also politically efficacious, to argue that such pragmatism is the *only* reason why Aboriginal people might want to perpetuate the circulation of such positive images of Aboriginality would be to indulge in a degree of cynicism that I recoil from. It would also be misrepresentative.

[30] For a fascinating account of how roads in the Central Desert have entered into contemporary artistic practice as significant objects, see Biddle (67).

even when the glue that binds them is the belief that their traditions are unchanging. So too are identity strategies always already political, including when invested in ideas of ecological sustainability. While an earlier generation of anthropologists such as Strehlow may have concluded that Aboriginal mythology is moribund in its adherence to ancient, unchanging tradition, Stanner found the opposite. He saw creative vitality in the interpretation and re-presentation of stories amongst northern Australian tribes, where the "traditions themselves are a continuous inspiration (Stanner, "Religion" 237). Culture is, virtually by definition, processual: As a reflection of thought, it is open to change in order to accomodate new experiences. This is as true of what is described here as 'traditional' culture as it is of modernity. The tendency to see Aboriginal culture as either traditional or non-traditional – and perhaps equally as urban or remote, as will later become clear – enforces an inaccurate distinction, whereby pre-colonial culture can be understood as being bound to the past. Stanner's insight refuses this distinction. The relevance here is in how this sense of tradition as indicative of fixedness gets recycled in the struggle over identity that is forced upon those whose primary concern is actually a struggle over land. If country is bound to identity, both because it is understood as formative of identity within the culture, and because, external to the culture, the Australian legal system requires claimants to prove an ongoing connection to country, then there are political grounds for projecting stasis as an aspect of identity, just as there are political grounds for recirculating images of an Aboriginal identity based upon environmental responsibility and ecological sustainability. So successful is the Aboriginal re-appropriation of eco-identity strategies, that such an identity project has even become desirable in certain sectors of the non-Indigenous community. Jane Mulcock describes what she terms "emergent indigeneity" as a claim to be in touch with a spiritual dimension of place, modelled on ideas of Aboriginal identity and Dreaming. What motivates this claim to an eco-identity among Whites is in part the "myth and reality that Indigenous peoples have an intimate (and) spiritual relationship with nature that White people living in industrial societies have lost" (Mulcock 64). The appeal of the Aboriginal eco-identity to certain non-Indigenous Australians suggests that the circulation and re-circulation of representations of Aboriginality is not abating.

2.4. Ecological Wisdom

Having ended the last chapter with the observation that Aboriginal eco-identities hold an appeal for some non-Indigenous people, an exploration of the ideological nature of the link between ecology and indigeneity seems germane. This chapter looks at how an eco-identity might be partly based upon the assumption that some people have a degree of 'ecological wisdom' that affords them a deeper, more meaningful relationship with the 'natural' world than other people might have, and how this figures as both an identity strategy and a resource. Some questions over the validity of claims made about Aboriginal beliefs will be covered, as well as some further thoughts on the mechanics of identity circulation in the Australian media environment. By providing a more nuanced appreciation of the Aboriginal eco-identity, it is hoped that the appropriateness of subtle examples in chapter 4 will become apparent.

The perception that humans degraded the physical world has a long history. Indeed, it is clear that humans have been both deliberately and unintentionally changing their environment for thousands of years at the least. One could argue that the flight from Europe into the 'New World' of North America throughout the 19th century had brought people into contact with an environmental sublime, whereby the undeveloped landscapes people encountered were understood as wilderness: undifferentiated, wild spaces, free of human influence or control. In other words, pure 'nature'. The denial of the existence of human presence – in the American example, of indigenous American tribes – allowed for the convergence of notions of a pristine, non-human world and the concept of nature. Western notions of the environment which emerged during this period are in part based on this binary differentiation between nature on the one hand and culture on the other, whereby the purity of nature automatically excludes anything man-made, or cultural. Again in the American example, pioneering and westward expansion ushered in new relationships to physical space, displacing cultures that had a supposedly sustainable relationship with nature or the environment. The framing of wilderness as antithetical to culture, combined with the perception that indigenous peoples 'belong' to the wilderness, rendered – and still does render – those people as 'natural'. In applying this dichotomy to Western modernity, one can see how citizens of virtually any highly industrialised society including former colonies such as Australia, might come to be associated with culture, while people from distinctly non-Western, non-industrial cultures living traditional or semi-traditional lifestyles are collapsed into nature.[31] This conceptual shift does not necessarily deny the existence of indigenous cultures per se, but brackets them as repositories of what Kay Milton, in her study of the relationship between human cultures and ecology, describes as "ecological wisdom" (Milton 109).

Environmental change turned into a significant issue in the 20th century once the effects on the physical world of more than a hundred years of industrialisation and a greatly expanded world population became noticeable: Polluted waterways and air, soil erosion and deforestation, the encroachment of urban space on arable lands, and more recently, depletion of the ozone layer and the

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[31] This includes people who have a known history of having once lived a traditional lifestyle, and whose identity is partially based on this condition, even if it is no longer a lived reality.

all-encompassing concern with climate change. Emotional responses to environmental change, in which change is perceived *a priori* as negative, are dependent on a sense of loss. That is, change is change-for-the-worse because the environment was necessarily better the way it was before in its earlier and therefore more original state; a state closer to a perceived purity of being, free of human – impure or fallen – influence. In other words, a state of 'naturalness' or 'wilderness'. As stated at the outset of this chapter, humans have been witnessing the consequences of their own actions upon the environment for the whole of recorded history.[32] Associated with this is the understanding of so-called 'primitive' peoples as having a deeper connection to and better understanding of their environment. Milton has identified some of the ways which contemporary Western conceptions of non-industrial peoples depict them as possessing a sounder appreciation of their environments than people who live in modern industrialised societies. She contrasts these images of people who have "spiritual ties" to land with the predominantly commercial orientation of people living in industrialised societies (Milton 29). It is a generalisation, but conceptually useful nonetheless.

Milton describes a romantic tradition amongst developed nations of seeing non-industrialised societies as groups of 'noble savages', living in a harmonious equilibrium with 'nature'. A 'natural way of living' is one that transforms the environment the least, leaving it "as close as possible to its raw state" (Milton 109). This evaluates hunter-gatherer societies as worthier than agricultural societies in that they appear to use less resources to sustain themselves. Their nomadism tends to be associated with low-impact and sustainable land management practices, but the association hides the fact that many nomadic or semi-nomadic societies have engaged in practices that substantially alter the environment. In the Australian context, this is the seasonal burning of grasslands. The practice of burning has been incorporated into Aboriginal cultural identity, as most traditional or semi-traditional communities understand themselves as having a responsibility to burn the land irrespective of how such practices might have once benefitted their nutritional needs. The romanticisation of the tribal lifestyles of indigenous peoples, regardless of what the lives of indigenous peoples are actually like, leads many environmental activists to "advocate a greater respect" for them, as their cultures are seen as the opposite of Westernised, industrialised society. They are understood as the "appropriate guardians" of the resources to be found in any given region (Milton 111). People concerned with ecological conservation often align themselves politically with traditional societies because they see them as role models for sustainable resource management. The status these peoples earn as role models is based on the sense of them having ecological wisdom. Put simply, 'they' know better than 'us'. This view is then "dogmatically asserted", which Milton suggests puts the notion of ecological wisdom into the realm of myth. Those features of traditional society that align with the concerns of environmentalists are taken up as representative of subsistence-based culture as a whole, enabling the widespread use of transferrable and romantic notions of indigeneity and tribal lifestyles, and applied in relation to particular contexts where indigenous people still live on country.

Similarly, Michelle Harris has critiqued of the notion of 'purity' as it is associated with indigeneity. She argues that most perceptions of what constitutes an Indigenous identity are too reliant

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[32] See Oelschlaeger (1991) and Glacken (1967) for discussions of early records of a conscious distinction between untamed nature and man-made, agricultural environments, and signs of the cognisance of the attendant drawbacks.

on a singular, "hegemonic" form of being, and that the outward signs of identity are inalienable from the person:

> One of the most crippling problematics of the stricture of a pure cultural form is the assumption that 'culture' is ontological – and to the extent that it exists, it must do so in some true, identifiable dimension. This is illustrated in the very popular conception that indigenous peoples have a mystical and ancient, or as Goldie (1989)[33] termed it, "prehistoric" tie to that which was (culture, land, behaviors), so as to make their existence today irrelevant. (Harris 13)

This is to say that the image of the Aboriginal exceeds in its importance the individual itself. However, as the image is being kept aloft by its constant circulation through the mediasphere, it is available for modification by anyone with the means to influence the production of media content.

Following these general observations about the fixing of indigeneity into an ideological form that encompasses environmental responsibility and ecological sustainability, it would be worthwhile to see what evidence there is of this in the Australian context. The process of idealising another culture certainly plays a part, and has been commented on. For example, Peter Sutton suggests that in academic and scientific circles, Aboriginal society can easily get idealised through what might be a nostalgic process of highlighting the positive attributes of a socially oriented traditional land tenure system, in comparison to a privately oriented system of ownership (Sutton 171). Similarly, Nicolas Petersen questions perceived ambiguity in the writing of some anthropologists such as Biddle (2007), Rose (1996) and Povinelli (1993) when they posit Aboriginal belief in a sentient environment. He argues that the move from viewing the attribution of spiritual presence to an environment as metaphor, to understanding it as a belief in sentience, is questionable (Petersen 177). It might be remarked that Elkin (above) did not make this distinction entirely clear either. While I draw upon the work of the three writers that Peterson questions,[34] it is in reference to the way eco-identities – which can insinuate belief in a sentient environment – get circulated, as the circulation of representations formulated by researchers draws academic discourse into the broader media environment. Rose herself also commented on the way White Australians have produced a distorted account of recent Australian history and in turn have represented Aboriginals according to their own needs. Writing in 1992, she suggested that Aboriginals are constructed by the media "as emblems"; meaning they are used to signify an idea of what being Aboriginal means, and likely one not proliferated by Aboriginals themselves. The idea which the circulation of images of Aboriginals serves is often irrelevant to their experience of being Aboriginal. For Rose, they simply add texture to a version of Australian history, without playing any necessary role in it (Rose, *Dingo* 2).[35]

Similarly, Langton makes clear the contingent nature of Aboriginal identity when claiming that before the White settlement of Australia, "there was no 'Aboriginality' in the sense that is meant today" (Langton 32). Rather, there was a multitude of people organised into overlapping tribal and kinship relations. The tribal affiliation was grounded upon knowledge of place, of language and of

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[33] Goldie, T. *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Literatures*. Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1989.

[34] And refrain from casting judgement on the matter.

[35] For an interesting response from an indigenous artist to this tendency to turn Aboriginality into an emblem for White consumption, see Tony Albert's piece "Ash On Me" (2009), in the permanent collection of the National Gallery, Canberra. https://artsearch.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=190246&pictaus=true

culture. White settlers, often unable to distinguish one tribe from another, or one language from another, simply conflated the difference into otherness. To 'Whites', they were all just 'Blacks'. Thus Langton suggests that

> 'Aboriginality' arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people on television or reading a book. Moreover, the creation of 'Aboriginality' is not a fixed thing. It is created from our histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white in a dialogue. (Langton 31)

On the basis of this, it is possible for Langton to claim that the "most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between White Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors" (33). That is to say, non-Aboriginals have had their impressions of Aboriginal people formed by the stories that other non-Aboriginal people have been telling about Aboriginal people over generations. Further to this, Aboriginal people are caught up in the production of 'Aboriginality' not only by providing the grounding reference points for the story-telling, but also because they actively contribute to the formation of those stories. Langton offers three categories for discerning the various constructions of 'Aboriginality'. The first manifests through the interactions of Aboriginal people who in their contemporary existence are not isolated in any way from mainstream Australian culture or its attendant ideologies. The second is the way in which Aboriginal people are iconised by White Australians, most of whom have little or no contact with Aboriginals. This second category contains representations of 'Aboriginality' – from postage stamps to movies – that get circulated independent of real people, but potentially have far more consequence for the formation of public perceptions. The third category is that of impressions derived from actual dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, which necessarily means that Aboriginal people are actively contributing to the construction of 'Aboriginality' (33). I would like to offer a potential fourth category: Aboriginal people are able to take those circulated impressions of what Aboriginality is and absorb them into their own understanding of what it is to be an Aboriginal person. This understanding, born of intersubjectivity and therefore only distantly referring to an 'authentic' identity, and immersed in pan-Aboriginal discourse, is available to Aboriginal people to blend with their own experience of themselves and their cultural environment, and then be seamlessly projected as 'genuine'. Thus iconic representations of Aboriginality and of Aboriginals as ecologically wise, irrespective of their source or how many times they have been added to or adjusted by the process of recirculation through media outlets, could theoretically become as much a part of an 'authentic' Aboriginal identity as anything else, so long as they go unchallenged.

Eco-identities entail wisdom. The Australian Aboriginal eco-identity is built on the belief that Aboriginal people who still have their corpus of traditional knowledge at their disposal are in possession of environmental knowledge, a spiritual connection to country (irrespective of whether it is presented as real or imagined) and sustainable cultural practices. In the next chapter, three examples are given of how Aboriginal identities are being creatively modified and recirculated. Two of the examples incorporate conspicuously ecological themes, while one is only more distantly ecological in its frame of reference. They help to build a picture of eco-identity strategies that will act as a backdrop to the analysis of fragmentary moments of Aboriginal films where the ecological status of Aboriginal identity is alluded to only in passing. Such relatively concrete examples as I supply in chapter 2.5 do not, however, constitute

my thesis, which is concerned with how the formal properties of Aboriginal films provide subtle reinforcements of ideological claims. My point is that in subtle ways that easily pass unnoticed, Aboriginal films are repeatedly recirculating the eco-identity, the cumulative effect of which might be the further entrenchment of an ideal type, which is a resource on which Aboriginal people can draw for improving their public image, expediting land claims, and reminding the broader Australian public that Aboriginal presence on country could be beneficial to the environment.

2.5. Approaching the Eco-Identity

Before demonstrating how Aboriginal eco-identities can manifest in films, it is worth citing three very different examples of the production of Indigenous identity that have occurred in Australia in recent years, all of which rely on relationships to country, both real and imagined. What the authors of the two academic studies and one documentary film that I draw upon are demonstrating is how traditional cultural knowledge and identity markers are adapted and continue to evolve, and how this occurs within the context not only of Aboriginal society but of Australian society as a whole; an observation that is relevant to the way eco-identities get circulated. An eco-identity could be understood as a subset or facet of cultural identity in general, and thus examples of how Aboriginal identities are produced and maintained will help set the scene for the analysis of those subtle moments in Aboriginal films where identity is positioned as being founded upon ecological stewardship and the sustainability of cultural forms. In spite of the political appeal of pan-Aboriginality, Aboriginal people are not a single, homogenous group. 'Traditional' Aboriginal culture gets appropriated and incorporated into an apparently authentic experience of Aboriginality by Aboriginal people for their own consumption, as well as for the consumption of non-Indigenous, mainstream Australia. To an extent, the examples of this process described below highlight the instability and ambiguity of 'tradition', and demonstrate perhaps the positive effects of the engineering of authenticity, by which I mean that a degree of liberation is attained when responsibility for the manufacturing of narratives of identity is assumed by those very people whose identity is at stake.

The first example comes from the outskirts of the city of Sydney and concerns the way a claim to tribal identity can be supported through the adoption of traditions where none have survived. Creating 'tradition' from scratch, seemingly an oxymoron, turns out to be a mechanism for the assertion of identity. The relevance of this to my thesis lies in how what I am positing as an Aboriginal eco-identity can be understood as 'constructed' out of existing tradition or knowledge, and re-circulated through the Australian community – both within and external to Aboriginal Australia – and how this eco-identity is not just the result of those pre-existing traditions, but is affected and altered by the media through which it is expressed, and the contemporary conditions under which it is formulated.

Kristina Everett has written about an urban Aboriginal group that she calls "Gwalan"[36] which consists of some three to four hundred people. Everett is mostly concerned with one portion of this group, who have been adapting practices taken from other cultures, both indigenous and non-indigenous, and using them in their emergent traditional repertoire. She prefaces her account with the suggestion that our ideas of what counts as traditional knowledge in the indigenous context might be in need of review:

> Most accounts of urban Aboriginal practices in every discipline associated with Aboriginal Studies discount the possibility of surviving Aboriginal religious practices in cities. Cowlishaw,[37] for example, argues that to attribute any kind of traditional knowledge to suburban Aboriginal elders is a form of racial essentialism – a false assumption that Aboriginality is somehow 'naturally' imbued with knowledge of ancient traditions.

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[36] A pseudonym adopted by the author for political reasons to do with the ongoing status of land claims and the internal identity politics of the 'Gwalan' community.

[37] Gillian Cowlishaw, *The City's Outback*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2009.

This may indeed be true in some, or even most cases, but is not necessarily always the case and depends very much on what precisely 'counts' when we are talking about tradition and custom. (Everett 239)

Everett is mounting an argument for reconsidering what constitutes continuity, a particularly contentious issue in the present age of native title claims. The appropriated and reformulated cultural practices of this particular group are being maintained with an eye to creating a new set of traditions in lieu of what was lost. Given that any notion of cultural authenticity is troubled from the start, and that all tradition, in order to remain relevant, has to be constantly adapted, the emphasis should perhaps be placed on whether or not a belief system is "culturally binding" (239), not whether or not it is free of the "polluting aspects of Western civilisation" or even whether the rituals they perform are 'authentically' Gwalan. Yet paradoxically, authenticity is clearly central to any claim to a coherent identity. Gwalan want to have, and be understood by others to have, what is known to them as 'Dreaming', and which Everett defines in their case as "a spiritual world-view that draws from Aboriginal heritage" (239). For "[p]erhaps as importantly as effecting ritual transformations and affirming identity within the group, 'having Dreaming' is also a primary marker of 'authentic' Aboriginality according to dominant discourses concerning what constitutes 'real' Aboriginal tradition" (239). In which case, having Dreaming is as much a political issue as it is a spiritual one (240). The Gwalan claim to an authentic Aboriginal identity is disputed by some other Aboriginal people. But this does not stop them from identifying with their found traditions. They lead urban lifestyles but perform their rituals in bush settings in order to validate the claim to Aboriginality. One could surmise that the appropriate environmental conditions makes the expression of Aboriginality feel more authentic. In this sense, the Gwalan are constructing an eco-identity, because being Gwalan relies on having a particular relationship with a non-urban environment.

The second example is from the state of Victoria, where the majority of Aboriginal people living on ancestral lands had been displaced and dispossessed well before the start of the 20th century. The descendants of these tribes or language groups have extreme difficulty proving a continuing relationship to place and to cultural tradition, and therefore typically are less successful than people in sparsely populated areas when making land claims in the courts under the Native Title Act. Tim Pilbrow, an anthropologist working on the verification of Native Title claims, has written about changes in the way Aboriginal people in Victoria identify themselves. Prior to colonisation, people would have associated their identity with a language group or tribal affiliation – the two often being much the same. With dispossession and the loss of cultural knowledge came the need to survive in mainstream Australian society. The easiest way to do this would have been to assimilate oneself into the traditions and norms of the prevailing culture. One such norm is the focus put on immediate family as opposed to the broader and more complex kinship structures through which Aboriginal people had previously understood themselves. Thus from the late 19th century up to the early 1990s, indigenous people in Victoria were defining themselves through their immediate familial relations and through associations with their places of dwelling that may not necessarily have been their ancestral lands. In addition to this, they identified themselves broadly as 'Koori' – an identity term used by large numbers of Aboriginal people living in the south-east of Australia – as opposed to identifying with their language groups. With the success of land claims by certain indigenous peoples[38] in the 1990s, a governmental need to identify indigenous

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[38] The Meriam of the Torres Strait for example, or the Wik from Far North Queensland.

people according to tribal affiliation became more apparent. Indeed, Pilbrow suggests that it is "the state's need for differentiated and bounded groups that correlate to a reconstructed 'at sovereignty' condition" that in part prompted Aboriginals in Victoria to prefer tribal names like the Yorta Yorta[39] over the more general term Koori. As potential claimants of rights over crown land, they are fitting in with the needs of the state to define them, as well as making a claim to an original identity that had been partially forgotten:

> I argue that this logic of differentiation has been fairly uncritically adopted by Aboriginal claimant groups in Victoria because of a convergence of dominant-culture mythopoeia and Indigenous mythopoeia. That is, the desire by the state for administrative certainty plays into Indigenous peoples' own desires for groundedness. Yet the convergence is neither complete *nor unidirectional*. Victorian Aboriginal communities appear to be harnessing new resources in their ongoing identity construction, and are not merely reactive to the attempts by the state to structure and legitimate particular forms of Indigeneity. (Pilbrow 232, emphasis added)

The way individuals mark the continuity of tradition, in this case through the use of tribal names, to support their identity claims effectively stops those markers from becoming moribund. What is more relevant, however, is the way those markers have been taken up by institutions and reflected back at people, to the extent that resuming the use of a particular type of identity marker no longer signifies a direct and autonomous connection to ancestry, but a connection that has also been circulated through the media and the law. Furthermore, the circulation is entirely necessary to proving and promoting the force of the connection to ancestral lands in contemporary Australia. The inflection on the significance of tribal affiliation provided by the state and other institutions such as the media is consequential in that forms of Aboriginality are receiving external ratification and are becoming more powerful as markers of identity because of it. This is a clear example of how the very circulation of identities that are built upon an association with a specific place reinforces those identities, making them more relevant *and* more acceptable to outsiders.

The third example of the production of an indigenous identity is taken from the documentary film *Buckskin* (Dylan Mcdonald, 2013). Jack Buckskin, a young Aboriginal man from Adelaide in South Australia, has learnt and is now teaching Kaurna, the language of his ancestors. The last known speaker of Kaurna died in 1931, and Jack has learnt the language entirely through study as an adult. Kaurna was reconstructed by the linguist Rob Avery from notebooks left by Lutheran missionaries. Avery subsequently taught Jack. The appeal of Kaurna to Jack is in the sense of identity it provides him with. Both his Aboriginality in general and his identity as a member of the Kaurna people in particular is secured by having and actively using cultural knowledge. The use of an Indigenous language is a very public display of Aboriginal identity, but not the only one that features in this film.

The younger generation of Kaurna people in Adelaide are not only trying to relearn a lost language, but also to reinvigorate their culture more generally. Jack Buckskin states that only two traditional dances have been passed down to them. The rest they have choreographed themselves by watching what other Aboriginal people do in other parts of Australia. He claims that "the whole reason for the dances is to connect with country", and that "as we are learning these dances, we feel the connection to country" (McDonald 23:02). In other words, even a dance that is partly derived from others and partly invented anew affords a sense of connection to one's ancestral lands. Jack gives a

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[39] The Yorta Yorta people traditionally lived around the Murray River on the border of New South Wales and Victoria.

rationale for this when recalling an exchange he had with a young nephew, who had remarked to him that publicly performing their dances affected his eyesight and made him feel "really weird". Jack recounts the explanation he offered the boy:

> When we do our welcome to country dance, that's when we stomp our feet into the ground. We're calling spirits to come and join us. That's the way we call the spirits. They're living in our ground, so you stomp your feet and it gets them to rise; you're sending the vibrations that tell them to come. That's the connection to country that we have all been longing for and we're slowly getting there but there's still a lot of work to go. (McDonald 23:25 - 23:48)

Jack justifies appropriating cultural knowledge on the grounds that his ancestors would have done the same: Tribes did not hermetically seal themselves off from one another. Ideas and knowledge would have been shared along trade routes throughout the country, and taking inspiration from other people's dances and songs is in keeping with the way cultures influenced one another prior to White settlement. In his words, "You put it in your language and that's what *makes* it unique to your country" (McDonald 22:40, emphasis added). This openness to influence in the quest to reclaim tradition might appear to sit awkwardly in relation to any declaration of authenticity, which logically relies on a sense of originality, or uniqueness. Theoretically at least, copying might be understood as a threat to the autonomy of the original, but the purity of theory bears little relation to the messiness of lived experience, and Buckskin's attitude is entirely pragmatic in that he treats tradition not as fixed or pure, but as open and malleable. The claim to inhabit an authentic Kaurna identity is made through the demonstration of language skills and traditional dance, both of which have been altered through transmission. It is as if the moment of colonisation forms a kind of 'authenticity horizon', prior to which cultural influence has no effect on originality or authenticity, everything being part of the one totalising field of Aboriginality. However an authenticity horizon is an entirely notional boundary and is being constantly undermined by such effects as the transmission of Kaurna language via White missionaries and linguists. Indeed, Buckskin refers to the Lutheran missionaries' written record of the Kaurna language as being "like a modern Dreaming for us… our Dreamings tell stories from the beginning…and this book in the future is gonna be… a new Dreaming" (McDonald 25:46). He accepts and incorporates the influence and mediation of non-Indigenous people into his conception of Dreaming; that fundamental concept driving the sense of how Aboriginality stands apart from other forms of identity.[40] The Kaurna example demonstrates on the one hand how dubious the notion of authenticity is in relation to Aboriginality, and yet on the other hand how useful, nay vital it is to the continual formation, renewal and recirculation of Aboriginal identities. Jack Bucksin says the Kaurna people have been "longing for" a connection to country which they no longer have, and believes that it is retrievable not only through the resuscitation of cultural knowledge such as their language, but also by "sending vibrations" to earthbound spirits, whose apparent acknowledgment of a Kaurna presence on country will certify the authenticity of their claim to a locationally specific identity. Whether simply anyone who self-identifies as Kaurna could be recognised by the spirits residing in the land remains – necessarily – a moot point. What is clear is that the Kaurna believe that acknowledgement of their presence by country itself can occur because of their status as

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[40] Similarly, Jennifer Biddle suggests that what counts as Dreaming, or *Jukurrpa,* in Alice Springs is living culture, or cultural products that reflect the ongoing, immersive state of being on country, rather than a set of static artefacts that remain cut off from lived experience. According to her account of the Warlpiri, the sacredness of particular places is not just related to historical or ancestral significance, but also the way they are continually represented.

Kaurna, which is to say that they are integrated with their environment in a way that other, non-Kaurna people cannot be. That is in essence an eco-identity.

What these three examples have in common is the way in which Aboriginal identities, in spite of referencing a stable past and a mythology of eternal spiritual presence, are in fact dynamic and undergoing change, as the individuals who attach themselves to the identities draw inspiration from other peoples' ways of performing Aboriginality or are influenced by external demands for a particular kind of Indigeneity. These identities therefore manifest a paradox, whereby stability and contingency both seem integral to identity. All three examples reference a relationship to country that is built upon the circulation of images of what it means to have an Aboriginal identity, be it Gwalan, Yorta Yorta or Kaurna. In two of these examples, one can see the operation of an eco-identity strategy. In the example from Victoria, Yorta Yorta identity might be ecologically grounded, but the evidence here is restricted to external, governmental perceptions of their relationship to a specific location, rather than their relationship to a concept of ecologically integrated and sustainable cultural practices. These examples give a sense of the ways in which Aboriginal identity strategies are being played out. While the Kaurna example was drawn from the *content* of a film, my thesis is that some eco-identities are also being circulated through the media by means of *formal* cinematic technique. This means that it is not just a matter of what gets said, but how it is said.

3.   Aboriginal Film

After reviewing the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people and their relationships to land, the previous chapter identified features of the Aboriginal eco-identity and went some way towards analysing it as a media phenomenon. Both the pre-colonial cultural origins of the eco-identity and the colonial and contemporary conditions of its development were considered. Yet there is more to say about Aboriginal identity in general. On the one hand, the notion of authenticity has been touched upon, but the impact of it on Aboriginal identity has not been fully explicated. On the other hand, the politics of Aboriginal self-representation need elaboration before the formal strategies used to express an eco-identity in films from the remote centre of Australia can be adequately treated. Authenticity debates and Aboriginal politics feed into the processes of circulation that cause the eco-identity to become more and more normative with every iteration, such that it can be alluded to briefly, almost imperceptibly, without intruding upon or distracting attention from a narrative.

Only in the last 40 years have Aboriginals had the means to influence the way they are represented in the media. The empowerment this entails is directly relevant to the modulation and circulation of eco-identities through film. The first and longest section of this chapter then is a discussion of the history and politics of Aboriginal self-representation in Australia. It is followed by an elaboration on authenticity that demonstrates the complexity of Aboriginal identity politics, and helps to explain the contingency of the eco-identity. The emphasis then moves from general considerations to the specifics of remote media productions. A comparison of urban and remote environments explains the significance of location, while some detail on the implications of communal authorship prefaces the study of individual films in chapter 4.

3.1. The Politics of Self-Representation

This chapter looks at the history of Aboriginal self-representation and how anthropologists have attempted to conceptualise the field of ethnographic filmmaking for the sake of finding better, more appropriate ways of working in Aboriginal communities. By providing a background to the notion of self-representation, the importance of the difference between being spoken for and having one's own voice heard in public will become clear, as will the relevance of self-representation to the questions of authenticity that plague indigenous identity politics in Australia.

On the whole White Australians have not understood, nor cared to understand, just who their Aboriginal neighbours are. Indeed throughout the 19th century and into the 20th there was no perceived need to understand, for the displacement of responsibility for their misfortune onto the 'forces of progress and modernity' meant that Aboriginal people were considered doomed anyway. Although, as Moses writes, after the Second World War, "[u]ltimate Indigenous extinction was abandoned as an assumption of governance, …large sections of the public continued to entertain the fantasy of a White Australia" (Moses 8). Australia, in the minds of those with British or Irish heritage, was theirs for they had built it through toil and thus had greater rights than Aboriginals. Media depictions of Aboriginals have consequently recycled stereotypes of a racial 'other' to the Anglo-Australian norm. The stereotypes were based both on this sense of racial superiority and on fear – as individuals Aboriginals remained largely unknown. The total domination of Whites over Blacks meant there was little room for Aboriginal voices to be heard through any channel. Sacha Clelland-Stokes has noted how skewed representations of Aboriginals were in the Australian media, right up until the 1980s. Aboriginals were typically represented as a problem that needed to be dealt with (Clelland-Stokes 95). While such attitudes persist in various segments of the media, they now compete with positive depictions, in part because some indigenous people have finally risen to positions of influence both within the media industries and in politics.[41]

From the 1970s onwards, Aboriginal people across Australia began agitating for equality. The land rights movement was at the centre of the political upheaval, but many of the most educated and most politically active young Aboriginal people at the time were simultaneously involved in speaking back to the way their people were being represented in the media. Media portrayals at the time relied on heavy handed caricatures of Aboriginal people as either childlike and incapable victims, dangerous criminals, or indolent drunkards. The National Black Theatre in the Sydney suburb of Redfern was a focal point for resistance to these media portrayals in the 1970s.[42] Actors such as Bob Maza and Gary Foley trained there, honing their skills to make shrewd stabs at mainstream Australia, including through

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[41] Examples from the news media: journalist Stan Grant, who has worked for both SBS and the ABC as a news anchor, or the prominent journalist and television host Ray Martin, who has recently hosted a TV series titled *First Contact*, in which White Australians are invited to meet with Aboriginal people and to experience first hand the difference between media portrayals of Aboriginality and reality. One could also cite a plethora of authors, artists, performers, politicians and athletes, none of whom shy away from expressing their views, and act as role models for Aboriginal youth. In the context of this thesis, the most relevant would be the film directors currently working in Australia, including Ivan Senn, Rachel Perkins and Warwick Thornton, to name but a few.

[42] See *The Redfern Story*, dir. Darlene Johnson, 2014.

the television comedy programme *Basically Black* (dir. Nicholas Parsons, 1973) which screened on ABC television, but proved to be too controversial – and perhaps also too sophisticated – for White audiences. *Basically Black,* the title itself knowingly ironic, consisted of reflexively aware sketches that pointed out racism and illustrated how real Aboriginal people differ from the way they are perceived by Anglo-Australians. Intended for television, it was made at a time when the industry was slowly crossing from black-and-white technology to colour, a fact the writers of the programme exploited to full-effect in their opening scenario: Screened in black-and-white, a 'traditional'[43] Aboriginal man stands with spear, looking over the Australian bushland from atop a cliff. He appears to be very much the 'noble savage', master of all he surveys, and 'untainted' by any knowledge of modernity. Pointedly however, the camera looks down at him from above and zooms in on his face, thus mimicking the race relation that might exist between a typical viewer of Australian television and this caricature of what a White audience would have recognised even then as the stereotypical 'native'. He turns and looks up to address the viewers, and in an accent that one would typically associate with an educated member of the middle class he announces, "Welcome to colour television". In one fell swoop, the conceit of White superiority has been exposed and inverted, with terrific comic effect. The humour does not rely solely on an awareness of the multivalency of the word 'colour', of course, as the inversion of race relations is achieved in several ways, including the use of camera angle, speech style, and the actual, technical lack of colour, which itself operates metaphorically as a demonstration of the politics of privilege that makes sense with respect to the historical moment in which the sketch was made. Only one episode of *Basically Black* was ever produced. Nevertheless, both it and the National Black Theatre are examples of how Aboriginal people living in urban centres took the first steps toward control over their representation in the media.

Prior to the Black Theatre few Aboriginal people had the means or the opportunities to present an alternative to the racial stereotypes that prevailed. Aboriginal people, if represented at all, were almost always either 'noble savages' or hopeless victims, but rarely treated on a par with White society. As Marcia Langton has pointed out, the "easiest and most natural form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible" (Langton 24). If Aboriginal people are continually spoken about or for, and ignored when they themselves speak, then it is little wonder that they have remained largely misunderstood. To a great extent, this has been the impetus for Aboriginal people to begin representing themselves cinematically, or to engage in dialogue with those who would try to represent them without discrimination.

In the study of Aboriginal self-representation, the anthropological literature tends to focus on a different trajectory; one that arrives at the development of indigenous media in remote, as opposed to urban, locations by people understood as 'traditional'.[44] Up until the 1970s, most anthropologists studying Aboriginal culture did so from their own viewpoint as educated, non-indigenous subjects. But the slow turn away from speaking *for* indigenous people could be said to have started in the 1920s with the Malinowskian position in ethnography of "trying to grasp a native's point of view, his relation to life,

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[43] The Aboriginal man is cast as a 'native': in his dress and his stance one sees no evidence of contact with Whites, except for the tone of his skin which suggests he is possibly of mixed descent.

[44] Traditional in the sense that they maintain connections to country and continue to use their own languages.

to realise his vision of the world" (Malinowski 19). The pioneering documentary film-maker Robert Flaherty put this credo into films that reflected his subjects' opinions on the very act of being represented. His project *Nanook of the North*, also dating to the 1920s, includes not only an attempt to have the Inuit comment on his portrayal of them (de Groof 121), but also involved training Inuit to handle some technical responsibilities for the production of the film (Ruby, "Speaking" 51). It was not until the 1970s however, that the crisis of representation was recognised in relation to films about others. In an interview in 1973 the Scottish pioneer of the documentary genre, John Grierson, described his vision for film. He divided the history of documentary film into four stages that represent a progression in the development of the genre. The first is one in which the film maker, understood in this model as an outsider, speaks entirely for the subject. The last stage is one in which films are made locally as acts of self-representation by the people in the film, with the intervening stages being situated somewhere between these categories (Sussex 30).[45] In fact, Grierson's encapsulation of this progression was informed by Flaherty's work, which he saw as limited by its exoticism: Flaherty mostly filmed people in far flung locations. In Grierson's view, those 'exoticised' people should ideally be portraying themselves. This is a progression of the control of representation from ethnographer to subject which has, in the eyes of Faye Ginsburg at least, "demonstrated the irrelevance of ethnographic filmmaking" (Ginsburg 68), and which ultimately set the stage for the eventual introduction of affordable film technology into indigenous communities in the 1980s.[46]

In the 1980s the field of anthropological film-making underwent a crisis of representation, as researchers began to question their role in the process of depicting cultures to which they did not belong. (Marcus and Fisher 1986). The growing self-awareness of the ethnographers that questioned who has the right to represent or to speak about Aboriginal culture was broadly concurrent with the push within Aboriginal communities towards self-determination. By contrast with urban populations, Aboriginal people living in remote areas had had little exposure to modern media such as radio and television, and illiteracy often meant that text-based communication was unavailable to them, although this began to change as literacy rates improved among the younger generations of Aboriginals and as radio slowly became more available. The anthropologist Eric Michaels arrived in Australia from the United States in the early 1970s with the aim of emulating a study of Navaho film-making practices.[47] He spent three years working with the Warlpiri in Central Australia, where he oversaw the distribution of and induction into video recording and broadcasting technology, with the result that some community members were then able to produce their own content for local television on a low budget and without outside assistance (Ruby, "Eric" 335).

Michaels theorised the process of representation that he witnessed through his fieldwork. He described an interpretive circle in Australian television, whereby the transfer of information is depicted

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[45] An Australian example of a film that could be categorised into one of these intervening categories is *Two Laws* (1981), which was produced collaboratively by the Borroloola community in the Gulf of Carpentaria with the non-indigenous directors Alessandro Cavadini and Carolyn Strachan. The film looks at the intersection of traditional Aboriginal law and Commonwealth law as it applies to land rights cases.

[46] One could extend this idea of shifting the control of representation to include not just ethnographers, whose attitudes might generally be sympathetic to their subjects, but also to journalists and politicians, or indeed anyone who feels the need to publicly comment on indigenous affairs.

[47] Sol Worth and John Adair, *Through Navajo Eyes*, 1972.

as a flow from the conciever(s) of the programme to the reciever(s), via the producers, and the medium (in this case televisual transmission). The circle is completed through two more stages, in which receivers negotiate meaning by comparing it to their previous experience, and then share their interpretations with their social milieu (Michaels, "Teleported 306). A primary source of friction between Aboriginal and mainstream Australia occurs in these final stages, but not because Aboriginal people living in such places as Yuendumu[48] have trouble understanding, accepting or negotiating the content delivered to them. Rather, the circulation of images of these communities produced by outsiders gives rise to friction. Remote communities that agree to work with film crews run the risk of being misrepresented:

> [W]hen Aborigines attempt to participate in the media, when indigenous content is produced and mass broadcast, the potential for direct and irrevocable damage to the tradition is raised, even assured. Oral tradition does not allow for such widespread and public access to its texts and the consequences of poorly conceived Aboriginal broadcasting will assuredly be sacrilege and desecration. Because Aborigines have long been appropriated as media subjects by European Australians, this danger always existed. But until now, traditional Aborigines remained outside the mass media market, isolated from books by illiteracy and from broadcast media by distance and inaccessibility to the electronic communications network. Now that isolation is breached and remote Aborigines see the texts Europeans produce about them on TV, great damage is being done and great anger is growing throughout remote areas. (Michaels, "Teleported" 315).

Michaels recognised that there was an increasing awareness among Aboriginal people of how grossly misrepresented they were by the media in Australia. The anger he witnessed was often due to the way journalists ignored, or remained unaware of, taboos on the sharing of sacred knowledge: "The only national network, the publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Commission, has a near criminal record in the matter to date. It is not unusual to view programs containing restricted secret rituals and other violations of Aboriginal copyright" (Michaels, "Teleported" 315). The Warlpiri were very concerned about the "unauthorised display" of secret knowledge, but also about the use of "'rhetorical' narrative devices which isolate Aborigines and constitute them as exotic" (Michaels "Restrictions" 261), the very same concern that motivated the comedy sketch described above. Michaels wrote that "the problem of visual media for remote traditional people arises because they are isolated from the mass media, and rarely get to see or comment on the results of recording". By the time the Warlpiri got to see the way they were being portrayed the opportunity to "negotiate solutions" would have already passed (274). Michaels also noted the difference in attitudes towards the circulation of information that exits between societies that have been largely using oral communication as opposed to the written word. In particular, the ownership of information is often treated very differently, whereby in an Aboriginal society that maintains a significant degree of its traditional culture, the ownership of a story has more to do with responsibility for its targeted transmission, so that the right people come to hear it and it is not circulated beyond the societal strata it is appropriate for (Michaels, "Content" 286).

Writing in 1991, Michaels stated that with the commissioning of a communications satellite dedicated to Australia-wide media broadcasting (AUSSAT),[49] delivering mainstream Australian interpretations of who or what Aboriginal people are to remote communities would have a more destructive effect on Aboriginal culture than the influx of non-indigenous culture would:

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[48] The remote Warlpiri community where Eric Michaels conducted the bulk of his research.

[49] AUSSAT was launched in 1985 and is now superseded.

> Our newly constructed, media-simulated Aboriginality, delivered as content by AUSSAT to the remote communities, can succeed in subverting their traditions in a way that no other invasion has. It is not in the dumping of European content into these locations, then, but in the transmission of a powerful competing Aboriginal image, appropriated from the bush, purchased at the expense of local media, and filtered through the grid of a manufactured history, that culturecide could readily be accomplished. (Michaels, "Content" 296).

Michaels' is clearly suggesting that Aboriginality is a construct being offered to Aboriginals via mainstream media outlets, and that it threatens to usurp existing identifications because of the power of the medium itself. In the face of this, his suggestion is to think of community, not Aboriginality, when allocating funding to media projects. That is to say, remote media organisations should be understood as services that provide for specific communities, as opposed to providing for Aboriginal people. Avoiding issues of *who* is getting funded by concentrating on *where* funding is going would enable media organisations to produce content for a local audience without needing to compete nationally for resources, or indeed meet the requirements of any external body, be it a peak Aboriginal government organisation or other. Sidestepping the essentialist conundrum, Michaels argued that independent voices can only be heard if they have the funding to gain access to the materials and techniques of political representation.

In her 1995 paper "The Parallax Effect", Faye Ginsburg saw the development of filmic self-representation by Aboriginal Australians as occurring within the context of ethnographic film-making, though argued that "this is not a revolution for the genre, but the logical next step for a field that has been shifting slowly over the last twenty years toward more dialogical, reflexive, and imaginative modes and away from the monologic, observational, and privileged Western gaze stereotypically associated with the field" (Ginsburg, "Parallax" 74).[50] Ginsburg refers to Aboriginal self-representation as media sovereignty; that is, "practices through which people exercise the right and develop the capacity to control their own images and words, including how these circulate" (Ginsburg, "Sovereignty" 583). Marcia Langton – herself an indigenous Australian – had previously argued, however, against the "naive belief that Aboriginal people will make 'better' representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives 'greater' understanding" (Langton 1993, 27). Langton argues that such an assumption is itself a form of racism in that it collapses difference and treats Aboriginals as a homogenous group, equally in touch with their 'Aboriginality' (27). She is forced by circumstance it would seem, to at once deny the existence of an essential Aboriginal identity, to which all indigenous Australians can refer, yet relies on it entirely for pursuing the political agenda she shares with other Aboriginal Australians. Staying one step ahead, however, Langton has suggested that Aboriginal people have turned self-representation into "a sophisticated device" for mirroring – and thus subverting – mainstream Australian conceptions of Aboriginality (Langton 84). The implication here might be that so long as ideas of what constitutes Aboriginality are produced by Aboriginal people, then differences between claims to what constitutes an identity as Aboriginal need not be of any real concern. Ginsburg has also written that the politics of representation sometimes are in excess of the need that the discourse is intended to fulfil, to the extent

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[50] Inherent in the very argument Faye Ginsburg builds for recognising the value of indigenous film-making is the contextualisation of self-representation by the ethnographic genre, meaning that indigenous film cannot shake itself free of the paternalism that gave rise to it. Seen through the prism of anthropology, such films are not understood as independent works of art – do not achieve autonomy in the sense described by Adorno – and thus are constrained by the very discourse seeking to enable them. See Theodor Adorno, "Commitment", in Frederick Jameson (ed.) *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: Version, 1980.

that "only members of particular communities are considered entitled to represent these groups, thus re-inscribing essentialism in the face of a growing recognition of the complexity and instability of identity" (Ginsburg, "Parallax" 68), while Langton finds a view similar to this in John von Sturmer's paper "Aborigines, Representation, Necrophilia" (1989), which she quotes:

> But while it is reasonable to assume the truth of a society is to be found embodied in each of its members (how could it be otherwise?), it is quite another matter to assume that any of them has the capacity to enunciate in filmic terms the truth of their own condition or that of their own society. It involves an act of translation, an imaginative recreation invoked and unleashed by the potentialities of the medium. Truth may be there in every moment of lived reality, of actuality, but fiction alone provides the mechanism for the expression of truth. (von Sturmer 135)

This idea that there might be a societal "truth" that can be "embodied" will be touched upon again in the discussion of the authenticity of Aboriginal films in chapter 3.2.

Chris Gibson has charted the way indigenous communities produce representations of themselves for the purpose of asserting their right to self-determination. The term 'self-determination' is widely used in Australia in debates over ways of enabling Aboriginal communities to gain more political and financial independence. Its use implies an alternative to previous government strategies which treated Aboriginal people as dependents, incapable of managing their own lives. Gibson refers to a variety of "geopolitical texts" such as "policy statements, news articles, speeches and declarations, and popular cultural forms such as popular music" that use narrative strategies to create a compelling argument (Gibson, "Cartographies" 48). Furthermore, he notes the "explicitly spatial nature" of Aboriginal politics, which is rooted in the land rights movement that began in the late 1960s. In most Aboriginal communities, self-determination hinges first and foremost on access to and control over ancestral lands, but also upon the ability to project an image of who one is and what that might mean. The overlap with Eric Michaels' argument here is noticeable, with the added emphasis on the interpellation between a connection to country and a sense of identity validating strategies of self-representation. As will be seen in the analysis of the film *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*, successfully convincing the courts of the validity of this link is of the utmost importance in native title claims. Convincing the wider public is also important for deflecting charges of inauthenticity.

Gibson has also picked up on the issues surrounding the creation of positive representations of indigenous people that Marcia Langton wrote about in her essay for the Australian Film Commission (1993).[51] Like Langton, he cautions against the tendency towards self-censorship that results from trying to counter the negative portrayal of Aboriginals in the media; as if only "'safe' versions of Aboriginal culture" should be depicted. But as Langton herself pointed out, this tendency to portray Aboriginal society only in a positive light is yet another instance of the collapsing of all Aboriginal people into a homogenous group, which Gibson, via Langton, claims is a form of racism. It is part of a tendency toward the production of forms of Aboriginality that can be marketed to "Western audiences" within "symbolic frames set up and governed by urban cultural industries" (Gibson, "Decolonising" 281). Gibson states his desire to avoid the use of "representational binaries" that evaluate cultural production as good or bad versions of Aboriginality, just as he hopes to skirt around the complexity of whether non-

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[51] "Well I Heard It On the Radio and I Saw It on the Television" was written for the Australian Film Commission in 1993 as a guide to film-makers wishing to engage sensitively with Aboriginal Australians.

indigenous writers can comment on indigenous affairs, but in the process temporarily loses sight of another vexing and reductive binary: that of urban and remote locations as indicators of authenticity (281). Of interest here is how the ultimate referent of the concept of Aboriginality is based on the assumption that remote communities house greater degrees of authenticity than do urban ones. For just as the tendency to essentialise Aboriginality is being denied, it can be found lurking in the hierarchisation of the remote over the urban, a point to which I shall briefly return in chapter 3.3.

Stuart Hall has written on the way representation directly affects social relations. He argues that is it through discursive representations that meaning is made, far more powerfully than in non-discursive – that is tangible or physical – interactions. These "regimes of representation in a culture…play a *constitutive,* and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event role" (Hall 224). Images carry meaning and have real world effects because of the significance we assign them. This is to say that Hall understands the meaning of an image not as a fixed quality but as an ideological investment that is provided, usually, by the dominant culture or by an institution or group that holds power. Thus when mainstream media outlets such as news services or other discursive apparatuses such as popular films represent Aboriginal communities as failing, or Aboriginal people as perennially intoxicated and unable to care for their children, those representations have a tangible effect on the attitudes of both indigenous and non-indigenous viewers. With their induction into the processes of media production, at least some community members in certain remote locations – such as Yuendumu in the Northern Territory – are able to choose how and what they portray, even if, as Langton observes, the hope amongst Aboriginal people that they could become entirely responsible for how they are perceived is a fantasy relying on aspirations towards censorship (Langton 10), by which she means that the understanding that "there is a 'right' way to be Aboriginal, and [that] any Aboriginal film or video producer will necessarily make a 'true' representation of 'Aboriginality'" is misconstrued, based as it is upon essentialising notions of what it is to have a given identity (Langton 27). Just as Aboriginality itself is a fraught notion, given that it relies simultaneously on a sense of similarity – or shared cultural background – while refusing to give up difference – the concurrent identity positions of being Aboriginal and being of a specific tribe or language group – self-representation by extension suggests that there is a coherent group of people wanting to represent themselves in generally similar ways, or for similar reasons. Following Hall however, one could argue that the contestation of representation by Aboriginal groups, whose experiences and cultures are not dissimilar, could have a cumulative effect on the overall perception of who Aboriginal people are and what defines their identity. The hegemony of the mainstream media is assailable, and has been challenged by many Aboriginal groups. The Northern Land Council,[52] for example, felt the need to challenge racial stereotyping. In 1987 it issued a protocol for filmmakers intending to work in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory:

> Just as Aboriginal land is regarded as having no intrinsic value until the arrival of a film crew, Aboriginal people are often similarly regarded as having little use other than as an exotic backdrop… many filmmakers seem to have the perception that Aboriginal people are just hanging around under trees, 'on hold', and just waiting to be 'activated' by a documentary crew, or 'scripted in' to a drama. …Almost to a person, filmmakers demand—and expect—Aboriginal participants to behave 'traditionally' in ways that only the

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[52] Aboriginal Land Councils are local representative bodies for indigenous people. Their remit often extends beyond supporting land claims to political representation and working with Aboriginal people to further their cultural and social pursuits in general. They often serve as a point of contact between Aboriginal people and the broader community.

lens of a camera seems to understand. …A large number of scripts and treatments that are submitted to the land councils depend on depicting Aboriginal culture as something mysterious: an amalgam of mumbo jumbo and children of nature. (Mackinolty and Duffy 9)

Self-representations, if made with the wider, non-Indigenous audience in mind, could slowly adjust perceptions of who Aboriginal people are. Aboriginal films are unlikely to be laden with the suppositions and clichés referred to by Mackinolty and Duffy above. Instead they often contain creative elements that help to align the audience with the content of the film. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal aesthetics bear upon the making of the works. As a technology adopted and adapted from Western society into the cultural circumstances of remote communities, film cannot help but bring with it an aesthetic history, which blends with the localised aesthetics to which remote societies have traditionally been oriented.

In strategic expressions of Aboriginality, the narratives of ecological sustainability and environmental responsibility are available to visual communicators, though are wielded most convincingly in relation to those places where a semblance of the traditional, pre-colonial worldview still holds. This suggests that the geographical contexts within which instances of Aboriginality are performed are not all equally amenable to the eco-identity. Further, if the eco-identity is an important means of gaining political leverage, then Aboriginality remains mired in issues of authenticity. While authenticity has already been alluded to several times, the next chapter goes into more detail in order to better understand how Aboriginal eco-identities are utilised by the makers of Aboriginal films.

3.2. Authenticity Again: The Circulation of Identity Strategies

Until recently the circulation of representations of Aboriginal identity hinged upon the distinction between the producers of those representations and those whom they represented. Indigenous Australians had little access to the media themselves, and so their media image was constructed for them; their role in the circulation of meaning was simply as an original source from which White Australian concepts of Aboriginality could be lifted. Now, however, there are an increasing number of chances for them to control the way they are represented and therefore to influence public perceptions of their identity. But if the identity of a group of people can be a site of struggle, then what is it that makes one representation seem more reliable than another? And what is the attraction for non-Aboriginal people in Australia in producing and circulating versions of Aboriginal identity? The sense that there is something original, rare and precious in Aboriginal culture plays a role. The value of originality and rarity relies on authenticity: that Aboriginal culture is stemming from a pure source of being that predates contact with outsiders. The idea that Aboriginal culture, and people, are authentic has been projected by the media in Australia perhaps for as long as there has been a media industry in existence.[53] The effects of the mystification of that 'other' which stands in opposition to White society linger. This chapter takes a further look at authenticity and identity in the Aboriginal context, and shows how being understood as authentically Aboriginal has a range of consequences, even within the Aboriginal community itself.

Debates around the authenticity of persons, groups and the cultural products they produce tend to focus on either the verifiability of an identity – which is to treat authenticity as a scientifically determinable fact of existence – or on identity as a product of the discourses surrounding those people – that is, as socially constructed (Handler 964). Whilst the latter is certainly the more widely accepted position within academia, any claim to a particular identity is posited on the tacit understanding that there is something essential to a person's being that renders that person or their cultural output authentic. Marcia Langton brought the politicisation of Aboriginal identity into focus in noting that defining what is and is not Aboriginal is difficult even for Aboriginal people, and has consequences for both in-group identity and media portrayals. Langton's essay was published in 1993, and nineteen years later the difficulty had not subsided. In 2012 a televised debate was held on the Special Broadcasting Service's current affairs programme *Insight*, in which indigenous Australians contested this very issue. Titled "Aboriginal Or Not?", the broadcast bore witness to significant disagreement within the Indigenous community about who has the right to call themselves Aboriginal. While Land Councils, who regularly have to decide upon the Aboriginality of individual citizens, rely on whether or not a person is known in

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[53] In relation to the positioning of Aboriginals in their portrayal by non-Aboriginals, Muecke surmises that discourses of repression have been produced throughout the entire period of colonisation to date (Muecke 407). On the other hand, one could point to the first reports on Indigenous peoples by the British who arrived on the First Fleet, some of which were balanced in their outlook. In response to the fear amongst the Whites generated by the partial resistance of Blacks to colonisation, Watkin Tench wrote, "I confess that, in common with many others, I was inclined to attribute this conduct, to a spirit of malignant levity. But a farther acquaintance with them, founded on several instances of their humanity and generosity, which shall be noticed in their proper places, has entirely reversed my opinion; and led me to conclude, that the unprovoked outrages committed upon them, by unprincipled individuals among us, caused the evils we had experienced" (Tench n.pag).

their community as Aboriginal, some of the Indigenous audience members were certain that they could judge the Aboriginality of others solely by the colour of their skin.[54]

The need to define a person's Aboriginality also has legal ramifications. For the purpose of deciding who has rights over land, the commonwealth must have definitions of what constitutes Aboriginality. Such definitions of identity are an attempt to concretise a person's societal position based on race and social relationships, with the focus clearly on the latter:

> The Commonwealth definition [of an Aboriginal person] relies on High Court opinion. It is more social than racial: an Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal. (Langton 29)

Emphasis is put on the social here, but the racial is still very much a part of the equation. Race is posited by both the Australian government and Langton as something tangible and concrete which, in combination with less physically discrete social characteristics pertaining to a person, can be used to authenticate their identity. The very attempt to define Aboriginal identity admits to its own impossibility, on the one hand, while also acknowledging the necessity of doing so regardless. The necessity is generated by Aboriginal communities themselves, who need to define themselves simultaneously as belonging to a specific nation – usually associated with a language group and a region – as well as belonging to the broader, Australia-wide pan-Aboriginal community. Without being able to prove themselves Aboriginal they cannot win land claims, let alone have their identity respected and understood by others.

While at times the desire to belong to both a localised Indigenous community and to identify with the broader national Aboriginal community seems to entail a conflict, it need not necessarily be so. Land might be the point at which local and pan-Aboriginal identities comfortably intersect. Julia Martínez has shown, for example, that a sense of connectedness to country is not only available to people still on or near their ancestral lands. In fact any nationalistic sense of identity is based on the idea of having (or having had) a homeland. Martínez argues that nationalism on the Australia-wide level demonstrates that identity can be simultaneously based on local or tribally specific attachments and more abstract attachments to a shared identity as belonging to the Australian continent. In fact, an Australia-wide sense of Aboriginal nationalism (pan-Aboriginality) is largely a result of the efforts of successive governments to instil a sense of national pride across the whole Australian population (Martínez 142). Aboriginal nationalism troubles notions of Aboriginal authenticity because it is inclusive of people whose identity is only pan-Aboriginal, having lost specific connections to place and culture. Aboriginal nationalism sits comfortably with localised identity claims nevertheless, for while "individual communities have laid claim to their traditional lands, the issue of Land Rights has been a unifying force precisely because land is a symbol which carries meaning for all indigenous Australians" (143). Martínez argues further that "new models of Aboriginal nationalism emphasise loyalty to clan, to family and this reflects the many Aboriginal nations. Nationalism as a pan-Aboriginal phenomenon has not been replaced by this model so much as enriched by it. The notion of a federation

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[54] One could comment at length on the internalisation of racism in relation to this example, but it would be a digression.

of Aboriginal nations; each with its own sense of community, ensures a stronger base on which to found a national 'imagined community'" (146).

Even so, some contradictions attend the formation of a national Indigenous identity based on relations to country. Dalley and Martin describe the way people in remote communities navigate the multiple identity formulations they need to maintain. They note that Aboriginality is a political position that affords certain rights. Local identity is built on shared language and location, or connection to country (Dalley 9). With the increasing importance of local identity for the pursuit of native title claims, however comes the increasing emphasis placed on the associated connection to country that people still living in areas near to their ancestral lands have. This marker of identity has jumped across to the broader, pan-Aboriginal scale, even though statistics show that nationally 40% of Aboriginal people do not identify with any specific tribal group (9). If a connection to country is a hallmark of Aboriginality, does this lessen the authenticity of people who self-identify as Aboriginal even though they live an urban existence? If indeed such a question must be asked, it might be found to lack an entirely satisfactory answer.

Sonia Smallcombe notes that Aboriginality is produced in multiple ways, both within and external to any given Aboriginal population. In relation to the circulation of notions of what an authentic Aboriginal person might be, she suggests that researchers writing about Aboriginal people have a part to play in the production of identity, their work often being "based on their assumptions of [what is] the 'authentic Aborigine'" and produced within the context of "relationships of domination and subordination that are manifest between Aboriginal and White Australians" (Smallcombe 156). This aligns with Langton's point that authenticity is not an inherent quality of Aboriginal people or their culture, but the result of intersubjectivity; "when both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects" (Langton 32). For one must not lose sight of the fact that Aboriginality only came into existence with colonisation by settlers who did not differentiate between the various peoples they came into contact with (Ginsburg, "Embedded" 89). Arguably, there is no authentic Aboriginality in the sense of a pre-contact state of being, and Aboriginal people are just as caught up in the intersubjective exchange of perceptions as are non-Aboriginal people. Any claim to authenticity, then, can only be partial and temporary.

In order to build an argument in relation to authenticity and identity, it is impossible to avoid using terms like Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, or Indigenous and non-Indigenous, even if only to deny their absoluteness. For convenience, and perhaps as a demonstration of Aboriginal nationalism, Langton pairs "Australian" with "Aboriginal" and argues that the former only know the latter through the stories they have heard from other Australians, past and present (Langton 33). The stories allow Whites to assimilate Blacks (another useful but inaccurate pairing of terms) into their normative understanding of Australian geography. It is through their interpretations of stories about Indigenous experience, often without any direct experience of their own to draw on, that the majority of White people obtain their understanding of Aboriginal people.[55] As Ginsburg writes, the stories rely on a clear demarcation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, one that in turn relies on a perceived difference between 'civilised' and 'primitive' society:

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[55] As evidenced by the researching and writing of this thesis.

> The very notion of 'we' and 'they' as separate is built on the trope of the noble savage living in a traditional, bounded world, for whom all knowledge, objects, and values originating elsewhere are polluting of some reified notion of culture and innocence (Ginsburg 68).

For Langton, Aboriginality is a textual construction that may occur through dialogue between Whites and Blacks, Whites and Whites, or between Blacks and Blacks, all of these dialogues yielding different results but feeding into the shared understanding of what Aboriginality is (34). The making of an image of Aboriginality is a constantly unfolding process. This recursive operation sucks up new 'evidence' as it progresses, hopefully rendering over time a more sympathetic picture of Indigenous people, but one manufactured by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike, and manufactured for reasons that may not have anything to do with a given individual or community's self-perception. One image of Aboriginality is that of the environmental guardian; the 'native' in communion with nature, whose sensitivity to their surrounds is built upon ancient knowledge and whose responsiveness to the environment derived from a metaphysical connection to natural forces. Aboriginal eco-identities are founded on the circulation of such images which may be partially based in reality and therefore not solely a media projection. They are instances of a politically complex intertextuality.

With the role of intersubjectivity and the ongoing debate over the constitution of Aboriginality in mind, it is possible to approach issues around the authenticity of identities from a pluralistic vantage point. The separation of the spectator – assumedly White – from the spectacle – the exotic indigene – is the product of a false distinction, as if indigenous people in remote communities lived in a stable and alternative reality that did not intersect with the modern world. But in questioning the distinction between the self and the other, or the "'we' and 'they'", Ginsburg suggests that the legitimacy of representation is a perennial problem, no matter who is behind the camera and what their relationship to the subject is. Thus in her analysis, even auto-ethnography or self-representation by an indigenous group can be frustrated by the same kinds of objectification that pertain to journalism or narrative film-making, be it a documentary or a scripted work. Ginsburg seeks a resolution to the complex and seemingly perennial issue of authenticity – be it projected *upon* or projected *by* the subject of a film – in the above mentioned notion of intertextuality,[56] whereby a film might make explicit the debt it owes to a range of voices, both in front of and behind the camera. Chris Gibson also points out the need for a way of describing Aboriginality in terms of "a field of intersubjective relations where multiple voices, representations and interventions are made" (Gibson, "Decolonising" 277).

Graham Huggan has suggested that the idea that there might be a "true Aboriginality" presents Aboriginal people with a problem. Although it is politically efficacious, the "horizon of expectations" that it entails is one that Aboriginal people must subsequently serve (Huggan, "Ethnic" 42). Huggan describes the desire for authenticity as an "exoticist representational mechanism", meaning that images of Aboriginal people are being formed and manipulated by non-Aboriginal people for their own consumption (Huggan, "Ethnic" 41). Similarly, Stephen Muecke has argued that it is difficult for

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[56] Ginsburg quotes David Macdougall, who has written about his own filmic collaborations and argues in "Complicities of Style" (1992) that an 'intertextual cinema' may "help us recast the problem of Self and Other more productively as a set of reciprocal relations". Macdougall was amongst the first non-indigenous anthropologists to suggest that at the very least, Aboriginal people should be participating in the making of documentaries about their lives. His own films were collaborations in two senses: with his anthropologist wife and with the subjects whom they filmed. See for example, *Collum Calling Canberra*, 1984.

Aboriginals to find space to express themselves independent of the preceding and encompassing constructions of Aboriginality that exist in mainstream Australian culture, arguing that the constraints placed on Aboriginal texts by the contexts in which they are produced – the media environment – are not negative, but something to which the aesthetics of the texts can be addressed (Muecke 417-18). Dalley and Martin have also pointed out that these constructions might either serve the interests of Aboriginal people or hinder them:

> That identities are socially-mediated by others and at times self-reflexively performed for particular audiences is unsurprising given that authenticity remains a dominant currency in identity politics. Just as some are celebrated for their traditional knowledge, it is not uncommon to hear prominent Indigenous people dismissed on the basis of their supposed inauthenticity, a salient form of critique across Australia. (Dalley 9)

Again, the situation is changing, as more opportunities for indigenous artists, writers and performers become available to present alternative viewpoints. With a steady increase in the number of Aboriginal self-representations being circulated, the more accurate – and perhaps positive – the overall image of Aboriginality will be. Technological change also assists in the dissemination and reinforcement of alternative identity constructions. Already in 1993 Faye Ginsburg was able to write about the variety of representational options being taken up across Australia in a paper titled "Aboriginal Media and the Australian Imaginary". She suggested that media be viewed "not as causing good or evil but as part of larger social formations" (Ginsburg, "Media" 560). Once the lode has acquired sufficient richness, one could speculate that the ongoing circulation of images of Aboriginals be heavily informed by those produced from the subject position. A good example of the expansion of Aboriginal self-representation into mainstream media is the television series *Redfern Now*, produced by the Special Broadcasting Commission (SBS TV) in which Aboriginal directors and actors portray a series of vignettes from the daily life of urban Aboriginals. They are compelling, realistic portrayals – albeit fictive – depicting the kinds of challenges faced by Aboriginal people which, although quotidian, do not beset the non-Indigenous population. Because of the combination of a specificity of experience with a common setting, in this case the seeming normality of suburban middle class life, *Redfern Now* appears to be speaking to both a specifically Aboriginal audience and a general Australian one. When Aboriginal communities (and not just individuals) are able to control the depiction of their own culture, questions concerning the authenticity of a film that are based on the identity of those involved in its production may cease to be so relevant. Drawing on the experience of the Warlpiri, it is possible to see how being in a position to control what is depicted is actually more important than whether or not every member of the production team identifies as Aboriginal, or every voice that is heard is that of an Aboriginal person. When form and content are negotiated, then it can no longer be said that a Western gaze is simply stripping indigenous people of their authority to tell their own stories.[57]

Having acknowledged the complexity of Aboriginal identities in relation to authenticity, and seen the role it has played in the historical development of Aboriginal film and how it continues to impact self-representation, the next chapter discusses the impact of remote locations on the form and content of Aboriginal film. Authenticity will necessarily reenter the discussion but in the context of

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[57] In the past, ethnographers had often filmed Aboriginal ceremonies without sensitivity to exactly what may be filmed, or to what restrictions need be put in place on the viewing of the films. Those films are now mostly restricted, and cannot be accessed by the general public. See Langton's summary of the Warlpiri experience, pp75-80.

treating cultural products on their own terms: as deliberate, politically efficacious acts of communication, in which the content of film is complemented or extended by its form.

3.3. Remote Communities

The settlement of Australia by Europeans was initially confined to coastal areas, easily accessed by sail and with sufficient and regular rainfall for establishing agriculture. This resulted in a more prolonged period of contact in the southeastern part of the continent than anywhere else. The growth of towns and cities in the southeast, as well as the intensive use of land by Whites, has led to the almost total dispossession of indigenous people in these regions from their ancestral lands. Over time, Whites began to move toward the dry interior and northward into monsoonal regions, though White settlement in these areas remains comparatively sparse. While none of the indigenous peoples of Australia were able to avoid the consequences of colonisation, rates of dispossession are highest where contact has been most frequent. People living in less accessible places tend to have retained more of their traditional knowledge and culture, and tend to have more access to their ancestral lands than those living in areas where the population of non-indigenous people is higher. People in remote areas are also more likely to speak the language of their ancestors than are people in urbanised regions of Australia.[58] These social conditions have led to the formation of a distinction between urban and remote Aboriginal communities. The distinction is by no means absolute, or even always entirely useful. It is not a neat binary, but is nevertheless indicative of the heterogeneity within Aboriginal Australia. This heterogeneity exists, therefore, not only on the level of tribal and language affiliation, but also on the level of access to or knowledge of the cultural traditions pertaining to the tribe one is from. It is suggestive of the debate over authenticity that vexes Aboriginal people, both in their individual search for signals of identity, and in their collective attempts to regain rights to ancestral lands.

Slightly different is Marcia Langton's distinction between 'settled' and 'remote' Australia (Langton 11) which allows her to exclude from the remote category those rural areas such as country towns in which tribal affiliation and cultural knowledge has disintegrated in ways similar to wholly urban areas. While Aboriginal communities in settled areas are likely to have become somewhat more integrated into mainstream, Anglo-Australian culture, remote communities often struggle to reconcile the traditional and the modern; the difference between the two remaining due to their continuing relationship with the 'country' over which they have responsibility, and the overt presence of cultural tradition in their lives. This is the difference between belonging to a people with an intact body of local knowledge and set of laws, and the broader concept of being Aboriginal per se. In non-remote areas Aboriginality may not be so uniquely specified by the traditions and practices pertaining to that place alone.

The complex range of issues besetting Aboriginal people today are often less visible in communities within the settled area defined by Langton, be they rural or urban communities, as the semblance of a 'normal' life can gloss over social problems that many communities still suffer from, not to mention the trauma of unhealed psychic wounds, sustained through generations since the initial displacement from ancestral lands and the associated loss of cultural knowledge, or from the separation

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[58] Although many languages are dying out in remote regions, as people from different tribes have found themselves living together on missions or cattle stations, and have had to adopt English, Aboriginal English and Kriol in order to communicate with one another, as well as with Whites.

from family.[59] On the other hand, many Aboriginal people living in settled areas have benefited from the infrastructure that the government and the economy can provide, be it education, housing, health or employment, and now lead successful, fulfilling lives. With remoteness, then, comes the sense of a discrete cultural identity. But again, this is mostly a perception held external to the communities, as in some areas people were forced off their lands and into neighbouring areas in search of sustenance, resulting in communities that are in reality highly diverse.[60]

In their analysis of the use of the concept of the 'intercultural' in anthropological studies of indigenous Australians, Cameo Dalley and Richard Martin point out that the heterogeneity of the social environment in even remote communities is often overlooked. The term 'intercultural' often gets applied to the variety of indigenous cultures, or crossing between various language groups within indigenous Australia (Dalley 3). In such a case, White or non-Indigenous Australians are represented as homogenous. They might be treated en masse as part of the 'broader Australian society':

> It is a product of this denuding that the autonomy of Indigenous people can be maintained from those others with whom they share physical, emotional and (frequently) intimate space. This autonomy also contributes to the tendency to produce 'wildly overdrawn' accounts of the differentiation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous personhood… (Dalley 8)

Relationships formed through shared interests, such as sport or music, which are not based on race, language or familial connections might have equal relevance to daily life, but are often overlooked in ethnographic work. Remoteness as a category comes to be indicative of Aboriginality, all the while ignoring the fact that non-indigenous people are often living in these communities as well.

Just as Aboriginal people themselves are diverse, Aboriginal media production is not a singular entity, but a multifaceted genre. Media producers may be addressing a localised audience for historical and educational purposes, but simultaneously keeping an eye on the broader reach of their projects, which, depending on what the objectives are, may be distributed to other communities or to the broader Australian public. Langton (1993) and Ginsburg (2003) have articulated how a video might be made on a low budget for the distribution of legal or health information to specific local communities, for example, or might be a better funded project made for television broadcast across an entire region, or even nationally, while still also addressing a particular, localised audience. Ginsburg describes these works as "inherently complex cultural objects, as they cross multiple cultural boundaries in their production, distribution, and consumption" (*Embedded* 89). She also uses Langton's classification of Australia into settled and remote areas. Through its use of a regionally specific language which itself encodes culturally specific practices and beliefs, a film or video may demonstrate the singularity of a remote community. At the very same time, however, its use of cultural practices and motifs from outside the traditional repertoire are indicative of the absence of any 'purity', whereby all culture is in flux and constantly being recirculated though a shared media environment. *Aboriginal Rules* is an example of this. The production value and sophistication of the narrative of this film demonstrates the skill of makers, who are versed in the techniques and meanings of cinematic form, and can thus successfully communicate a local identity project to a broad audience. The sophistication of media projects from the

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[59] What is known as the Stolen Generation.

[60] For the few who stayed out in the bush for as long as they could, the lack of social contact with those other members of the tribe who had moved to settlements made it impossible to continue a fully traditional life.

remote centre of Australia is not surprising perhaps when one considers that places like Yuendumu have had for many years access to at least some of the cultural products that have been circulating internationally in the form of VHS videos and DVDs. Thus even in remote communities Aboriginal Australians constitute an informed audience (Mackinolty 9).

The idea of remoteness incorporates at least two different notions of value: in being remote, communities are sometimes understood as being untouched by modernity, and therefore valuable because they are more 'authentic' and closer to 'nature' than non-remote communities. This is not a function of remoteness as such, but of the equivalence between remoteness and Aboriginality in the minds of many non-Indigenous Australians, whose understanding of remote communities is largely built upon the circulation of media representations rather than on direct experience. In *Remote Avant-Garde* (2016) Jennifer Biddle explodes this static understanding of what remote communities are like by analysing the work of contemporary Indigenous artists working under the regime of "humanitarian imperialism" that has been invoked since the erstwhile Howard Government ordered the Australian military to occupy remote Northern Territory communities in 2007 (Biddle 219).[61] Those very places deemed sources of cultural authenticity – places in which there is an intact body of traditional knowledge about the land and its people – are zones of exception from the Australian cultural norm; a norm which many Anglo-Australians cherish for its implication of continent-wide cultural and social homogeneity. Biddle points to the inherently political stance of certain artworks, which resist the branding of remote communities as the dysfunctional sources of that 'pure' traditionalism that holds them apart (Biddle 3). The artworks do demonstrate their rootedness in tradition and the artists' intimate association with country, but at the same time challenge the presumption that the traditional remote is the polar opposite of the progressive urban through their innovative forms.

Biddle provides a useful example of a work of visual representation that encompasses this questioning of the remote/settled, or remote/urban distinction. It is an example I want to cite here, because it demonstrates how this distinction is caught up both with notions of authenticity and with the perception of an environmental sensibility, similar to that which will be identified in the filmic moments I analyse in chapter 3. Margaret Boko Nampitjinpa's painting "White Kids and Black Kids Jumping on Cars" (2011) depicts exactly what the title suggests: children playing on cars in a landscape featuring the plain of the desert, sparsely situated eucalypts, and stretches of road. What Biddle points out is that these roads are iconically defined through the use of white dots along the centre of each dark stripe. Building up images out of dots of paint is a traditional method from the Central Desert, associated with, amongst others, the Pintupi and Warlpiri tribes. These kuruwarri marks are understood as traces of the presence of the ancestor spirits on country, and are derived from the traditional adornment of bodies for ceremony (Biddle 9), which brings the body of the performer into alignment with both country and the Ancestors. Since modern art materials were first made available in the desert, the marking of bodies with dots has been transformed into the production of canvases for sale and exhibition in the contemporary art market

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[61] This 'Intervention', as it is referred to, was an attempt by the federal government to address long-term cycles of abuse and impoverishment in remote Aboriginal communities. One consequence of the targeting of remote communities was their re-inscription in the public perception as dysfunctional and wholly different to mainstream Australia. This perception of difference is partially justified, given the geographical and cultural particularity of the communities. But it is also a result of and a contributor to simple prejudice.

system.[62] Boko Nampitjinpa, herself Warlpiri, uses the dots both as traditional symbols of her own investment in place, and as an iconic representation of the reality of outback geography. The road is that bridge between the centre and the margin, and between various remote centres of Aboriginal life. It is brought into relationship with the traditional custodian's relationship to place, and is indicative of the importance of mobility. Biddle describes Aboriginal presence in remote areas as "signifiers of Aboriginal resistance to frontier colonial settlement". In this sense, a road painted with dots, in a location where most roads in fact remain unsurfaced, is a claim of sorts on the land it traverses, and on the identity of the road itself as Aboriginal. In Biddle's words, the "road in this sense embodies at once radical refusal, prior territorial tenure, and the screaming fact of obligated responsibilities to be present continuously and repeatedly in more than one place, in order to be responsible for, responsive to, country and others in their distinctive, distributed, emplaced demands" (Biddle 67). The road becomes integral to country. While roads can be understood as symbols of both distance from and access to the mainstream or centre, they also come to embody Aboriginal presence on country, figuring as features of locality. The shift of dots from the traditional register of outlining a pictorial element (dots indicative of Ancestral presence) to completing the rendering of the element as realistic (dots as markings on the surface of the road) brings roads into the corpus of traditional art, just as it integrates them into a holistic vision of life. Similarly, filmic form can bring the image of ecological sustainability into coherence with modern Aboriginality. *Samson and Delilah*, *Aboriginal Rules* and *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* achieve this in ways that appear to be deliberately unspectacular, so as to subtly reinforce the stereotyped image of the Aboriginal as possessing environmental knowledge and belonging to a culture that is ecologically sustainable. The stereotype, based at least in part on a factual account of cultural identity, is politically efficacious.

So far in this chapter a consideration of the politics of authenticity has deepened and extended the theoretical discussion of representation, while a consideration of the impact of remoteness as both a reality and an idea has shown how representation in Aboriginal cultural output is often tied to location. The next chapter discusses the communal nature of authorship in remote film projects, which helps to explain the relevance of instantiating the eco-identity to a community of people wishing to circulate more pertinent and useful interpretations of themselves.

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[62] Bodies were painted with various marks, including dots, but dots were also used in sand drawings, a fact that carries poignance in relation to the films analysed in chapter 4.

3.4. Co-authorship in Remote Aboriginal Filmmaking

The shift to self-representation entails a change in authorial strategy. The concept of the auteur has less relevance in the context of remote Aboriginal productions, because the authorship of the stories that are considered worth telling does not lie with the individual but with the Dreaming, and Dreaming is shared. Because traditional culture is partially intact, contemporary experience often gets reconciled with Dreaming as well. This does not mean that individual inputs to the making of a film are not recognised, but that the significance of a story often lies in the way it is reconciled with Dreaming.[63] Thus a cultural system that denies individual authorship still holds sway, or at least that is the understanding upon which the idea of community self-representation is built.

Both Eric Michaels and Marcia Langton emphasise a seemingly fundamental difference between the way people of the Central Desert and Anglo-Australians perceive the world, and therefore a difference in the way they would represent it. In remote communities, Langton finds that "the social meanings of the Aboriginal relationship with land… have emotional, affective and aesthetic content" (Langton 15). This informs the way video is communally produced for local consumption, a hallmark of which is the distribution of authority over the production according to who has the rights over a story.[64] In this way, "Aboriginal law governs video production in much the same way as in any other arena of life" (Langton 15). By Langton's account, the Warlpiri do not organise the world according to a division of subject from object, as has been done for centuries within the western philosophical tradition. Social roles are distributed according to Aboriginal Law and Dreaming, which are in turn structured according to a perceived relationship with the environment (Langton 66).

Langton links this distinction between individual and communal authorship to the difference between settled and remote production that she had previously established, but is quick, however, to acknowledge the artifice of the parallel, as communally authored films have also been made in settled or rural areas (Langton 13). For to claim *any* film as the work of a sole individual is risky, even when one can point to the singular vision that we associate with an established filmic identity such as Tracy Moffat, whose work is accented with the creative license that comes from producing contemporary art.[65] Moffat's work often deals with issues central to Aboriginal experience such as the loss of land, culture and family that resulted from the assimilationist policies of successive Australian governments throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. As with any film project, however, her work is the result of cooperation, drawing on the expertise of producers, actors, sound and cinematographic technicians and so on. And while, in the case of distinctive works of art that are identified with the singular vision of the artist, we can easily ignore the authorship question, it is much harder when discussing films that aim to comment on or promote a stance held communally.

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[63] See for example, the successful integration of Christian belief into traditional Aboriginal culture in communities that were originally set up as missions.

[64] Such rights are determined by kinship and seniority, but as the systems of kinship in Aboriginal cultures are so complex a discussion of how rights over stories are allocated would prove distracting.

[65] For example, *Bedevil* (1993), *Night Cries – A Rural Tragedy* (1990) and *Nice Coloured Girls* (1987).

Writing in 1991, Jay Ruby questioned the validity of the term 'co-production' – or we might say communal authorship – on the grounds that few films are made within a system of true political equity. Collaboration is rarely achieved at all stages of production – all stages demonstrably adding to the meaning of any film – and the subjects of films are rarely as well versed in the mechanics of production, let alone the semiotics:

> While the idea of films where the authority is shared might have a certain appeal, there are few documented cases. Films labeled in this fashion seldom contain descriptions of the interaction between the filmer and the filmed nor have people associated with the production written about the complex mechanics of collaboration. […] For a production to be truly collaborative the parties involved must be equal in their competencies or have achieved an equitable division of labour. (Ruby, "Speaking" 56)

Ruby went on to wonder whether a truly collaborative film would ever be made, or indeed whether the making of films might ever be solely in the hands of the represented, describing such a situation as "subject-generated media" (57), what we might otherwise think of as a form of community-based auto-ethnography.[66] Seemingly a democratisation of film, there have been, and are, many examples of community-based film-making both within Australia and throughout the world (Weatherford 1990). This does not, in Ruby's opinion, undermine the robust relationship of the director or producer of a film with their subject; the singular auteur still being recognised in the credits of any given film, irrespective of the maker's relationship to their subject (Ruby 58).

Calls for multi-vocal film made by the likes of Eric Michaels (1991) or Sol Worth (1981) were predicated on the belief that representations of indigenous people would always be channelled through television, which often fails to represent peoples and cultures on their own terms – or even represent them at all – resulting in the perpetuation of a dominant culture's stereotypes about 'others' (Ruby, "Speaking" 61). The relative ease of producing film, first occasioned by the shift to video technology, and more recently the combination of mobile technology and internet connectivity, may have circumvented this process to a degree. Online services such as Vimeo and Youtube have made it possible for anyone to upload their own footage, and there is evidence that people in both rural and remote communities are doing just this.[67]

Nicole Ma, the director and producer of *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*, deals with the question of authorship in a dual way. On the one hand, her name appears in the credits in the above capacities which makes her the primary story-teller, even though there are no formally reflexive moments in the film in which she exposes herself as such. On the other hand, she credits the central characters in the film, Spider, Dolly and Putuparri, not just as deliverers of the story within the diegesis, but also as communal owners of the story external to the film. She suggested that her involvement in the telling of the story is a result of having been given permission by these people, but that the story remains theirs on a communal level. Her role was restricted to facilitating "the story telling by giving it a narrative logic that would work for western audiences", while Putuparri's narration, although scripted, was based on multiple interviews carried out over many years, and was thus his own input (Ma, personal

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[66] Ruby's primary example is the work of the anthropologist Jean Rouch.

[67] I have found innumerable examples online, including some shot by Jennifer Deger, whose own book on Yolgnu film-making, *Shimmering Screens*, touches on these themes.

communication).[68] Ma is suggesting that because in the worldview of the Aboriginal participants there is no ownership of the traditional stories concerning country, she herself has no claim to authorship over the film. As the foremost creative decision-maker, however, she is doubtless aware of the power she has over the final form. Yet given the force with which the participants' voices are heard, it does seem appropriate that Ma acknowledges communal authorship of the film, and that she offers the finished result as first and foremost an act of self-representation, irrespective of her own involvement. In the case of *Aboriginal Rules*, allocating authorship might be just as complex were one to try to unpack the ways in which different voices are channeled. The point would be academic, however. Given the level of community involvement it makes more sense to accept *Aboriginal Rules* as the result of communal authorship with a clear relationship to a Warlpiri worldview.

If the authorship of an Aboriginal film is understood as communal, and the narrative deals with how those people relate to country – in the full sense of the word as it is used in Aboriginal English – then it follows that the film will contain expressions of the ecological identity of that community. The identity of the director, despite inhabiting the role of the auteur, might be played down. But irrespective of how the film is marketed, communal authorship is more likely to be reinforced within the diegesis. Just as land rights claims are not pursued by one individual but by a group of senior representatives of a community, the political efficacy of assigning authorship to a group is far stronger, especially since those people may also be, or at least understood to be, party to cultural knowledge that a non-Indigenous audience does not have. The ecologically-oriented identity markers that add to the narrative of Aboriginal emplacement are given more authority by their association with a sanctioned form of authorship.

This chapter has presented arguments for and against understanding Aboriginal film through the notions of authenticity, remoteness, communal authorship and as acts of self-representation. It would appear that no matter how much one tries to circumvent or resolve these issues, they remain pertinent to any discussion of the expression of identity in Aboriginal filmmaking. In important ways, they give weight to the expression of an Aboriginal eco-identity, reinforcing the connection between people, their stories and specific locations. It remains now to see how eco-identities are being subtly expressed through the formal techniques used in Aboriginal films.

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[68] Ma put it in her email to me in this way: "I was in the right place at the right time and introduced into the community by the right people that enabled me to accompany the family to Country and record the journey. That was my job. In their worldview there is no authorship, there are just stories. It is the difference between I and We, Mine and Ours."

4.   Subtle Forms in Aboriginal Films

Documentaries, as the word suggests, are seemingly non-fictional documentations of factual information. They are supposedly different from fiction films or narrative films in the sense of there being a correspondence with reality. Our expectations of the genre generally dictate that creative license does not encompass playing with the factual content. The staging of a narrative is inevitable however, and unsurprisingly, the difference between fact and fiction is never as clear cut as we assume. Although the second and third films analysed in this chapter can be categorised as documentaries, I have avoided referring to them as such in order to play down the emphasis on factuality. It seems more appropriate to simply refer to films, without any recourse to genre specifications, and to treat all films as parts of the media environment and thus as potentially adding to the ongoing circulation of social values.

A formal analysis looks at the way a story is presented, in order to see what techniques are being used to influence the experience of the content. Meaning is not only in the story, but in the way the story is told. The most overt expressions of meaning in a film that uses the documentary form are often embedded in the dialogue and narration, which can be entirely scripted and are closer to the story level of a film than are say the mise-en-scène or lighting. Narration and dialogue are important to my analysis, but I treat them on a par with other elements such as editing, framing and environmental sounds, not because of the very limited use of dialogue in the first example, but because all these elements contribute to the production of eco-identities. My primary interest is in understanding how form conveys implicit meanings associated with the portrayal of Aboriginal people. The eco-identity, a product of both Indigenous experience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous interpretation, and the subsequent reintegration of those interpretations into Aboriginal self-representations, is at times expressed directly as dialogue, but just as often and perhaps more effectively, it can be inferred through the use of filmic technique that reinforces the dialogue or narration. With this in mind, I now turn to three films made in the arid centre of Australia which contain fleeting examples of this phenomenon. As stated in the introduction, these filmic moments express an identity construction that positions Aboriginal people as harbouring 'ecological wisdom' and as possessing a culture that is rooted in ecological sustainability. The first film however, does this in an elliptical manner. Outwardly, the film is mostly concerned with a range of traumatic experiences that some present-day remote communities are coping with. A pessimistic assessment of *Samson and Delilah* might argue that for their community, the writing is on the wall. Instead I argue the opposite. There are fine drawn references to how Aboriginality is able to incorporate influence and thus adapt. The drawing, as will become clear, is very much in the sand.

4.1. *Samson and Delilah*

Samson and Delilah[69] (Warwick Thornton, 2009) is a love story of sorts, set in a remote community outside of Alice Springs as well as in the town of Alice Springs itself. The story follows two teenage Aboriginals, conceivably from the Arrernte tribe, upon whose lands Alice Springs is situated, as they cope with the unrelenting effects of White settlement and concomitant cultural change. After conflicts within the community leave them isolated, the pair steal a vehicle to escape into Alice Springs, where their lives become further unstuck. Living on the dry riverbed under a bridge on the outskirts of the town, they survive for a few days by stealing groceries from the supermarket and through the generosity of another Aboriginal man with whom they share the space. Samson has an addiction to petrol sniffing, a common recreation practiced by youth in remote areas where the supply of alcohol has been restricted. The effects to the brain from sniffing are long term and serious. After being abducted and raped by a group of young White men, Delilah also sinks into petrol sniffing, and in her impaired mental state crosses a road, only to be hit by an oncoming vehicle. Samson, too inebriated in the moment to notice her accident, slowly becomes aware that she has disappeared and sinks further into despair. Upon release from hospital, Delilah rescues Samson from under the bridge, and they return to their community, after which they then move on together to reside in an isolated shed where they can recuperate in peace.

  Samson and Delilah differs from the two documentaries I will analyse later not just because it is fictional, but also because the hand of the auteur is more overtly displayed. It can be understood as a co-production in so much as a large Indigenous contingent was involved in the making, but it clearly displays the imprimatur of the writer/director/cinematographer Warwick Thornton, who himself is Indigenous and has a long-standing relationship with the Aboriginal community in Alice Springs. Whereas it is easy to identify a positive message about Aboriginal presence on country in both *Aboriginal Rules* and *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*, finding such optimism in *Samson and Delilah* is harder. Yet it is there. Thornton does not shy away from confronting the full range of problems that beset remote communities, including domestic violence – some acts of which are incorporated into Aboriginal law and are thus endemic – drug abuse, loss of language and cultural knowledge, as well as an inability to fully participate within mainstream Australian cultural life and the simultaneous withdrawal from tradition. Indeed, Susan Ryan-Fazileau's reading of the film concentrates on the signs of trauma that Thornton has built into the story. For example, she reads the lack of speech in the film through this prism, whereby the restricted amount of dialogue, much of which is in Arrernte, and Samson's inability to speak, are both read as symbolising the deafness which characterises the mainstream Australian public's response to the plight of remote communities. In the repetition of violence, often carried out by the old against the young, we see not only the inescapable, self-perpetuating cycle of harm into which the people around Alice Springs have fallen, but also unfortunate traditions in Arrernte culture such as

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[69] The name refers to characters from the Old Testament. Biblical themes very obviously constitute an important part of the implicit meaning of the film, and do impact upon the reformulation of an eco-identity towards the end. A relationship between Christianity and Dreaming is present in all three films analysed here, and would in itself make fro an interesting thesis. I have therefore chosen to restrict my study somewhat, and will not be discussing theological implications.

payback during 'sorry business' (Ryan-Fazileau 4).[70] Yet in spite of the shock this film delivers in its portrayal of dysfunction, there is also hope, delivered through the use of humour, the romance theme, and some subtle cues as to the survival of Aboriginal culture. On the surface of it, eco-identities in this film appear to be refuted, for the loss of culture seems inexorable. I argue however that eco-identities are present and in fact being subtly reinforced.

While it is clear that the distressing content of the story suggests the depletion of ecological wisdom through the disintegration of traditional Aboriginal culture, the film is not entirely pessimistic. It is realistic, and realist, but in the moments of humour; in the displays of love; in the moment of repair in the final shot when the protagonists smile at each other; and in the depiction of country, it is possible to identify a sense of optimism or confidence in the capacity of Aboriginal people to survive and prosper. The film is arguably reinstating an eco-identity in the very process of showing how fragile it is. For in those moments analysed below in which relations to country appear severed, the very fact that they are portrayed at all must be acknowledged. Just as the sheer number of cooking fires depicted throughout the film indicates an ongoing presence on country,[71] so too does the very display of symbols of reduced environmental sensitivity suggest that an intact eco-identity must have once existed. In offering redemption for its protagonists, the film necessarily posits the loss of cultural knowledge as at least partially reversible and by extension the existence of an eco-identity. Whereas on the story level the eco-identity is denied on the grounds that the protagonists are too damaged to count as authentically ecological, form subtly hints at the opposite.

A prominent theme in *Samson and Delilah* is the deprivation that comes from living in economically depressed remote communities. Deprivation is depicted through the use of pointlessness, an observation made by Kerstin Knopf, who notes that the film can be likened to absurdist theatre. The analogy highlights the way in which the patterns of violence and abuse, when seen from the outside, appear to be senseless, but are in fact symptomatic of the history of colonial repression and the ongoing social conditions in which Aboriginals live (Knopf 196). The pointlessness of existence is suggested through the use of repetition in the first half of the film, when the action takes place in a small, remote desert community: A band plays the same riff endlessly; a public telephone rings repeatedly and no one bothers to answer it; and with no work or schooling opportunities in sight, Samson moves aimlessly around the community, occasionally diverting his attention with trifling activities. Following Delilah is the closest he can come to meaningful occupation, for within the context of the economic conditions in the community, she is relatively active. In rendering the space of the community sparsely populated, Thornton highlights the lack of meaningful interactions or learning opportunities for Samson. The depiction of deprivation seems realistic, as services in remote communities are often poorly delivered or non-existent, and there is little to no employment. The partial reliance of these communities on government support, which has not always been well planned or sympathetically executed – and does

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[70] "Part of the grieving process in some Central Australian Aboriginal cultures is the idea that someone needs to take responsibility for a death. It is usually the person or people who are most responsible for looking after the deceased that get beaten by other relatives as part of the 'sorry business' ritual." (samsonanddelilah.com.au. n.d. n.pag.)

[71] There are 21 scenes containing a burning or smouldering fire. Fire is not only central to land management, but was the focal point of Aboriginal sociality in the pre-colonial era.

not receive universal approval from the wider Australian community – means that their livelihoods remain unavoidably politicised.

The relationship in the film between deprivation and the social or economic space of the community is transferred into representations of physical space. The community is depicted nestled into the dry, rocky hills of the desert, yet a prominent feature of several shots of the community is the openness of the space, with clear skies and large areas of horizontal ground abruptly abutting the hills. In spite of the humour in Samson's interactions with Delilah and others, the mise-en-scène compliments the sense of social and psychological isolation experienced by Samson, as few objects, be they people or vehicles ever seem to come and go. In some shots horizontality renders the space of the film as stage-like. Combined with some low camera angles, this reinforces the theatricality of the repetition which in turn feeds into the absurdity noted by Knopf. The use of humour to portray such depressingly accurate depictions of social deterioration also adds to the absurdism, and sometimes occurs in scenes in which the landscape is noticeable. But whereas Knopf argues against an ecological reading of the film on the grounds that long shots of landscape are followed by comic moments (Knopf 197), presumably upsetting the earnestness that one might normally associate with appeals to environmentalist sensibilities, I see no such impediment to reading an ecological orientation in these sequences. The seeming refutation of "an ecological perspective" (198) through the depiction of cultural loss and social dysfunction actually emphasises the idea that Aboriginality partially consists of the eco-identity. If depictions of the landscape accentuate a sense of isolation, and this effect works to deny connections to country, then it is on the grounds that the connection has been lost, not that it was never there. Loss in general is a part of Thornton's subject matter, and is signified by Samson's slight hearing impairment and lack of speech. In this sense the representation of silence in the film can be taken as a metaphor for the inability of Aboriginal people to have their voices heard, but also enables the landscape to 'speak'. For in the stillness between interruptions of amplified music we may hear an environmental soundscape dominated by birdcalls. One might indulge the thought that in an environment imbued with Dreaming, birds are calling out to people who are no longer listening, just as the people themselves are not listened to by mainstream Australian society. I will return to the use of silence and birdcalls, but first the significance of Thornton's use of close-ups of the landscape is worth describing.

As stated above, horizontality and spatial openness in the composition of long shots reinforces the sense of isolation, as well as reminding us of the beauty of the environment in which the story plays itself out. Knopf points out the use of associative montage in shots in which ants covering a dead bird are soon followed by Samson sniffing petrol (Thornton 1:13:56). Such a progression of scenes, she argues, is suggestive of his own demise through self-destructive behaviour, which in turn is indicative of the collapse of Aboriginal culture (Knopf 198). An earlier scene in which ants crawl over Samson's feet is described by Knopf as having "a comical effect in connection with the next shot" in which Delilah pushes her grandmother's wheelchair back from the clinic, with Samson trailing at a distance. The movement of the figures from left to right across a long shot of the landscape, and later back again, relates to the absurdity which, according to Knopf's reading, renders an ecological theme "weakened" (197). But in the very same sequences of shots there is evidence to support an alternative analysis. Consider the shot of the dead bird. Between shots of an inebriated Samson mourning his

assumed loss of Delilah, there is a cut to a shot of a bird carcass crawling with ants. The camera is hand-held, which supplies continuity with the next shot of Samson standing unsteadily, as if looking down at the bird. It's torso is ripped open as if something had partially devoured it, and it is partly covered in sand. It is a gloomy combination of shots, and induces distress in the viewer no doubt (Thornton 1:13:56). But within the context supplied by the film as a whole, which I argue is ultimately an optimistic portrayal of survival, the shot of the carcass could be read along the lines of an environmental memento mori: what grows also decays, or given the strongly Christian themes in this film, ashes to ashes and dust to dust.[72] This is to say that the shot of the bird can be interpreted in multiple ways, one of which sustains an argument for the presence of an ecologically oriented sensibility. In the other scene singled out for mention as denying the possibility of an ecological reading, Samson and Delilah wait while Delilah's grandmother Kitty visits the health clinic, a 1950s era caravan. A row of the standard, white stackable plastic garden chairs that can be found throughout Australia, indeed the world, is lined up in front of the clinic (Thornton 17:50). Delilah is perched with her feet up on the seat of her chair, while Samson sits normally. There is cut to a close-up of Samson's feet, over and around which scurry hundreds of ants. He then sits up like Delilah and brushes them off. I see no reason why the context created by shots before and after of the protagonists moving across a stage-like landscape precludes an alternative reading of this scene: After Samson hops up onto his chair, and before the bookend shot of their return over the landscape, there is a shot of the ants roaming freely and seemingly randomly over the dry ground. On the left of the frame is a barren area, possibly consisting of hardened clay. On the right is an expanse of sand. The combination, along with the areal perspective provided by the camera

angle, the depth of field and the scale of the ants, conveys the sense of an extreme long shot over a vast desert plain. It takes only a little creative license to envisage this plain as densely populated not by ants,

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[72] The use of firelight and lighting effects in general is a further connection between the eco-identity and Christian symbolism, especially in the scene in which Delilah digs herself a shallow grave to sleep in; the firelight used contre-jour to illuminate the dust rising from the sandy riverbed.

but according to the scale evoked by the cinematography, by a fully occupied and energetic Arrernte community. This shot of industrious hither and thither provides an antithesis not to the listlessness or inertia of the actual human community so much as to their lack of economic opportunity. In the bygone era of subsistence foraging people travelled the desert in search of food, just as these ants do. But unlike the ants, they possessed stories, songs and a semiotic system of sand drawing that showed them the way. They had an eco-identity, even if it were not so named or apprehended. In the film, that eco-identity has not been lost, or not entirely anyway.

Just as Delilah and Samson know how to keep their feet free of ants, so too do they still have a command over many other traditional forms of knowledge, which arguably link them to Dreaming and country. One such field of expertise is the subtle use of hand signals which at times augment and at other times take the place of dialogue. Silence is used to reference trauma and neglect in this film, but not only. Jennifer Green and David Wilkins, among others, have studied Central desert sign languages. According to their research, hand gestures are often used singly to enhance speech, but can at times be used independently, and as such make up an alternative to spoken language. This is especially so in story-telling and during 'sorry business' – periods of mourning. During sorry business, people speak far less because restrictions are placed on near relatives' communication, but also because the desire to speak wanes (Green 237). Samson's silence could be interpreted as pertaining to the absence of his parents, to his speech impediment, or to his relative need for words. For there are many scenes in which he communicates with Delilah using hand signals, just as other characters do with him. There is a direct link between silence and loss in Arrernte culture, and by extension a link between silence and law, for the rules dictating to whom one may speak and when are taken very seriously. In traditional society hand signals also enabled communication over long distances, such as during hunts, and to display respect when entering another tribes' country. The use of signalling is an example of how, in spite of the trauma, not all traditional knowledge has been forgotten.

Further evidence of the retention of traditional knowledge comes in a scene positioning Samson as a successful hunter. When early in the film Samson sits and watches Delilah work with her grandmother, the sound of the band incessantly playing their repetitive tune wafts across. By this stage the tune has already gathered associations of purposelessness, and its insertion into the scene has the effect of highlighting Samson's redundancy (Thornton 24:20). Recognising his own superfluity, he leaves the settlement and wanders to a sandy expanse at the base of some low cliffs. At the bottom of a depression Samson pauses to peruse the lay of the land and appraising his current location as suitable, drops to his knees and starts to dig. Knowledge of his environment has made it possible for him to pinpoint the location of a soakage under the uniform sand, into which he digs a bath-shaped hole.[73] In the process he finds a fist-sized stone which he lays to one side. Samson then immerses himself in the shallow, muddy water (Thornton 25:30). This moment is similar to one in *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*, in which for ceremonial reasons tribal elders sit in the muddy water of a soakage they have recently dug out (Ma, *Putuparri* 14:05). Soaks were – and still are – sacred sites for desert peoples, and

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[73] A soakage, or soak, is a water source in desert regions that lies underground. Soaks differ from springs in that the water is not coming up from the artesian basin, but rather is rain water that has soaked into the ground and remained there, essentially hidden from view. Memorising their locations and then knowing how to find them when no outward sign is visible on the surface was one of the keys to the survival of the desert tribes.

contact with the water is akin to contact with the spirits of the ancestors. Samson is both in the water and in the sand, and while lying quietly there, hidden below surface level, a kangaroo comes to dig beside his bath.[74] Samson capitalises on his opportunity and with a true aim that itself speaks of his competence, kills the roo with the stone he had previously unearthed. It is by being literally embedded in the environment that Samson is able to act.[75]

When Samson proudly returns, he walks in full view of the community with the roo, now an emblem of his masculinity, draped over his shoulders (26:06). He places the kill beside Delilah's cooking fire while she prepares food for her grandmother and herself from a tin. Delilah somewhat unwillingly brings him a plate of tinned tuna to eat. Although in itself not unhealthy, the tuna is indicative of the replacement of a traditional bush diet with reliance on industrially prepared foods. Specifically, it is this idea of health that is highlighted when Samson opens the side of the roo to check the fat content.[76] Such an act indicates his knowledge of the traditional sources of nutrition and the traditional ways of preparing food. This sequence provides sufficient evidence that Samson, who within the context of settled life in the community lacks direction and opportunity, is nevertheless competent in his traditional bush skills. His eco-identity is under threat, but by no means extinguished.

In this film at least, the desert is not a silent place, although with the emphasis placed so far on the infrequency of voices, one might be tempted to think so. Aside from the inter-diegetic music of the

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[74] One might surmise either that a significant duration of time is collapsed, in order to allow time for the kangaroo to wander across unaware of Samson's presence, or that it is somehow attracted to his Dreaming. The film does not provide evidence either way.

[75] Samson's t-shirt reads, "birthday party", Nick Cave's first band in the early 1980s. Their music was dark, very very dark. The grating solo that Samson pushes out on his brother's electric guitar seems inspired by such post-punk phonic excess and counts as another inversion, whereby Samson's repertoire of skills is confined to the traditional (Thornton 02:50).

[76] With regard to fat, the anthropologist Daniel Vachon writes: "Fat is highly prized in desert cultures, whether that be the intestinal and kidney fat of a kangaroo or the delicate fat of snakes and lizards. With the roo, in the traditional cooking method of people like the Pitjantjatjara (but I would say most desert cultures), you take the intestines and cook them in hot sand and coals." (Vachon, personal communication).

band playing a repetitive ska riff, there are two main environmental soundscapes accompanying the action. The first is birdsong. Perhaps it would risk superfluity to go into too much detail over what birdsong can mean, for when considered hypothetically it seems such an obvious reminder of the presence of nature, attaching itself to a great array of emotional connotations. While it can be faintly heard in many daylight scenes, there is a subtle increase in the amount audible during scenes where Delilah is shown waking in the morning sunlight.[77] Despite the bleak perspective that this film affords on the reality of Aboriginal lives in and near Alice Springs, the overall tone is anything but hopeless; the birdsong in general acting as a constant reminder of the beauty of the natural environment. But more importantly, when present in scenes portraying Delilah waking, birdsong links her to the knowledge and competence that comes from being on, and aware of, country. Some scenes which depict despair and the collapse of tradition also contain fainter and less frequent birdcalls, reminding us that Aboriginal knowledge and tradition have not been entirely lost. Birdsong can be understood as a call to hope, and a reminder that the desert ecology still has a place for Delilah and her people within it. Birdsong operates as a very subtle evocation of the Aboriginal eco-identity.

The intimation of a relationship with nature that is provided by birdsong is placed into a contrast with another, distinctive sound environment.[78] All of the scenes in which the protagonists are camped under the bridge are permeated with a mechanical, rhythmic thumping sound, presumably coming from vehicles passing overhead. In scenes without dialogue this sound is slightly louder than it is when there is speech, suggesting the effect has been carefully manipulated. This mechanical sound can be divided into two types: a higher pitched, metallic sound, as if a steel component of the bridge were slightly loose and were being vibrated by the tyres above, and a deeper – and more frequently used – sound, more like the rubber of the tyres hitting an expansion gap between two uneven concrete slabs forming the tarmac above. Both versions of the sound are doubled as the front and back wheels of vehicles pass over the surface inconsistencies in quick succession, which in the case of the deeper sound, gives the effect of a random heartbeat. In contrast with the higher pitched and more varied sounds of the birdcalls, these mechanical sounds are somewhat ominous. The two soundscapes overlap at times, as birdsong is not eliminated from the riverbed scenes – it being as much a part of Arrernte country as any other. The sounds made by the passing vehicles are restricted to the riverbed however, and in their baleful influence on mood, subtly distinguish the site where Samson and Delilah hit rock bottom. The overwhelming visual presence of the bridge in the framing of these scenes, combined with the haphazard beats, can be read in opposition to the decisively non-industrial sounds of birds in the bush. Via the generalised and pervasive presence of modernity, the bridge is a visual and aural symbol of oppression. It is under this bridge, on the sand of the riverbed and with both soundscapes activating references to a division between pre-modern Aboriginal lives and the contemporary experience, that a subtle suggestion of the Aboriginal eco-identity is made. The scene I wish to point out as indexing the Dreaming-oriented relationship with the physical environment does not present an overly cheerful account of the experience

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[77] Specifically, in the three scenes occurring at these timecodes: 03:15, 1:05:29, and 1:25:40.

[78] While the inter-diegetic use of amplified music also counts as a competing sound environment, it is not the one I wish to focus on here.

of the Arrernte people, but nevertheless expresses a fundamental premise: that the eco-identity is not entirely lost.

The scene comes roughly two-thirds of the way through the film. In the hope of generating some income, Delilah is using stolen art supplies to produce a canvas in the style of her now deceased grandmother. The implication is that Delilah has inherited the rights to the Dreaming for these images – although we will shortly discover that her right is not recognised by Whites. In her state of having recently fled from the community, still mourning the death of her grandmother and with only a limited selection of tools available, the work she produces does not have the finish of others that she had collaborated on. The few colours she has stolen are lying on the sand beside her as she works: an orange ochre, green earth, yellow ochre, and a larger tub of a much brighter middle blue – possibly a cobalt hue or an ultramarine. The volume of the container and the fact that it does not attempt to mimic one of the hues that naturally occur in the region makes the blue unlike the smaller tubes of earth colours.[79] The selection approximates the colour palette of the desert environment, though does not precisely match it, for the orange ochre is clearly much brighter and more saturated than naturally occurring ochres, even if it is not nearly so strong as the blue. As she uses her hand to spread blue paint across the fresh, white expanse of canvas,[80] Samson, who has his container of petrol to his nose, stands up and comes over to look at what she is doing (Thornton 58:50). In doing so, he inadvertently steps on an uncapped tube of orange paint, squeezing a large amount of it onto the ground. Synthetic orange paint makes contact with the natural orange of the sand. The paint is tonally brighter and more saturated than is the colour of the sand.

Importantly, both birdsong, symbolising nature and by extension ecological setting, and the thumping sound of passing vehicles, symbolising modernity and alienation, are audible in this scene. While both protagonists are portrayed as damaged and suffering, their eco-identities are still being subtly reinforced by the presence of birdsong. In producing a canvas in the traditional style with non-traditional materials, Delilah can express her Dreaming overtly, albeit literally underneath a symbol of White oppression. Her eco-identity is mediated by the canvas in so much as the artwork refers to cultural and environmental knowledge. Pre-colonial desert art practices mostly used the sand as a surface *into* which lines were drawn with fingers or sticks, a fact which will receive more attention in the next chapter. For lack of tools perhaps, Delilah paints with her hands. Or so we might reasonably assume, given that she could probably only carry away from the store what she could hide under her hoodie. But the story is not the point. Her hands are immersed in paint because she is immersed in 'culture'. In addition to this point it should be noted that her marks are mediated by canvas laid *onto* the sand.

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[79] Earth colours are less saturated and thus more 'earthy' in their appearance. Traditionally, earth pigments were made with naturally occurring mineral ingredients such as ochre, iron oxide, manganese oxide and charred bone. Some manufacturers of modern pigments will use the term earth to label what are in fact chemically derived pigments, mixed in order to resemble the subdued hues of their mineral counterparts.

[80] The use of blue is interesting in itself. Acrylic painting in the desert has evolved quickly. What can be defined as traditional bears little resemblance on a technical level to what Aboriginal art was before the introduction of modern materials. Blue, as with other industrially produced colours, would not have been available to artists working with locally sourced pigments. Yet such colours are now seamlessly integrated into contemporary Dreaming. Delilah is preparing her canvas with a blue ground, another departure from tradition, but this time the tradition of European painting, in which a ground is typically prepared with an earth colour. This reversal of traditions adds an interesting level of complexity to the way the eco-identity is both promoted and simultaneously challenged within the film.

Outwardly, Samson seems completely lost; the constant presence of the petrol container reminding us that he risks permanent and severe damage to his brain.[81] But just as Delilah successfully marries tradition with modernity in her painting, Samson's squeezing of the synthetic orange paint *directly onto*

the sand symbolises, via the differences in saturation and texture between the artificial paint and the natural sand, another instance of how a modernised form of the eco-identity is being laid over its pre-colonial foundations. A story oriented analysis might read this moment as evidence of Samson's loss of control, rather than as instantiating the eco-identity and thus demonstrating potential. Story alone does not do justice to meaning: Samson steps on the tube and Delilah, irritated by his clumsiness, waves him away, so he returns to his spot under the bridge, all the while inhaling the debilitating fumes. Yet tellingly, the composition of this crucial close-up shot is centred on the ochre paint with his foot above; ochre being an easily recognisable symbol of earthiness and the ubiquitous sands of the desert expanse. Thoughtlessness on the story level is directly contradicted by the reminder of innate ecological wisdom on the aesthetic level. In the next scene – the cut to which is visually abrupt and marked by a slightly louder 'heart beat' from the bridge above – Delilah takes her finished work to offer the gallery that sells her grandmother's paintings, which is run by a White Australian. She is rejected, and so moves on to offer it to the non-Indigenous patrons of a cafe, whereupon she is again rejected. The Whites seem unconvinced by the authenticity of her Aboriginality, as they only have her outward appearance to go on.[82] The reading of her Aboriginality as inauthentic is exacerbated by her circumstances. Her appearance is rough and so she fits a competing image of Aboriginality; that of the unpredictable and criminal drunkard. Yet in other scenes the authenticity of the protagonists' eco-identities is licensed by their immersion in the sand, which for Samson occurred when he visited the soakage and for Delilah will occur when she later digs herself a pit to sleep in (Thornton 1:04:00). With respect to the claim that

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[81] The petrol/vehicle motif can be said to operate on multiple levels throughout the film.

[82] Thornton cast an actor of mixed descent to play the role of Delilah.

the paint-on-sand scene appears to make, these two sand immersion scenes act as a sort of cross-referencing of ecological credentials.

We can say then that the painting scene offers a subtle reinforcement of the eco-identity of Aboriginals. This identity strategy promotes them as possessing environmental knowledge and as members of a culture that is ecologically sustainable. The sustainability is due to their knowledge, their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and the sheer fact that they are surviving the onslaught of modernity. The dissolution of Arrernte culture outwardly suggests a traumatic break with an 'authentic' past, but the subtle signs of continuity provided by an adaptable eco-identity challenge the suggestion that 'culture' has been lost. One can imagine that representing the Arrernte as capable, even in the midst of ongoing trauma, has positive political effects, both within and external to the Arrernte community. The eco-identity is only hinted at but this understatement is the source of its rhetorical power. The film very discreetly recirculates a positive representation of Aboriginality. Equally subtle cues are to be found in the next film, albeit embedded in a more overtly optimistic story.

4.2. *Aboriginal Rules*

Aboriginal Rules (Liam Campbell, 2007) is a documentary about the Australian Rules Football competition in Central Australia. Focussing on the Yuendumu Magpies team, the film records the difficulties faced by the coach in maintaining player discipline, but also the enthusiasm with which the games are played, and the significance of the sport to the communities in the region.

Yuendumu was the first of the remote desert communities to take up Australian Rules football (known variously in Australia as football, footy, Aussie Rules, or by the initialism AFL, which stands for Australian Football League). The community is situated several hundred kilometres north-west of Alice Springs in the Tanami Desert, on Warlpiri country. The place name Yuendumu is an anglicised derivative of a Warlpiri word, *yurntumulya*, meaning 'dreaming woman' (Brown 23). From the late 19th and into the 20th centuries, a combination of drought and increasing competition for land and water from both the mining and pastoral industries displaced the Warlpiri from their traditional lands. In 1946 Yuendumu was chosen as a site for a rations depot by the Northern Territory government in order to provide for displaced Aboriginals who had not moved into unpaid employment on cattle stations, and within a few years the depot had a semi-permanent population of around 150. The Warlpiri, like many tribal groups are not a homogenous body, but in fact several groups linked by language. Once people had become settled in Yuendumu, tensions between these groups began to flare up, some of which were, according to Meggit,[83] longstanding and serious. In 1957 the Northern Territory government gave control of the settlement to Baptist missionaries, who were involved in arbitrating these disputes, along with most other administrative tasks (Brown 23-33). There are competing versions of how football was then introduced in Yuendumu. One version has it that the missionary Tom Flemming used football as a way of distracting attention from quarrels and finding alternative ways of settling disputes, while another suggests that Ted Egan, a government administrator, introduced the sport in 1958 (Mackinnon and Campbell 967). Regardless of the source, Australian Rules football has been a focal point for the community ever since. Indeed the game has spread to all of the desert communities, and there has been a regular competition for several decades now. While the standard of play is considered relatively high, few Aboriginal players make the transition into the fully professionalised competition that is played nationally and based in Melbourne. The underrepresentation of indigenous players from the desert communities in the national competition has been explained by Mackinnon and Campbell as resulting from the network of familial responsibilities that tie desert people to their communities and make it hard to leave; a general fear amongst desert people of the "big smoke" (cities); the sense of cultural deprivation that they may endure from living away from home; and perhaps also from the suspicion held by clubs that Aboriginal people who have moved to the city from remote communities might go 'walkabout', or in other words, slip away unannounced to return to visit their families and ancestral lands (971).[84]

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[83] Quoted in Mackinnon and Campbell (2012): M.J. Meggitt, *Desert People*. Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1962.

[84] 'Walkabout' is an Australian English term used to describe the peregrinations associated with traditional Aboriginal lifestyles. The term is used by both indigenous and non-indigenous people alike and is essentially neutral, though it can be used disparagingly by Whites to pass comment upon an Aboriginal person who is considered unreliable.

One of the most productive of its kind, the Warlpiri Media Association[85] is known for having produced both the now famous *Bush Mechanics*[86] and *Aboriginal Rules*. Based in Yuendumu, WMA is the association with which Eric Michaels worked in the 1980s. Michaels had at the time collaborated with Francis Jupurrurla Kelly, who went on to make numerous films for local consumption including *Manu Wana*,[87] a children's television programme, and *Bush Mechanics*, a series of comic, magazine-style programs for television, depicting a group of Aboriginal men who fix up dilapidated vehicles and drive them across the desert.[88] Kelly and Neil Jupurrurla White, both Warlpiri residents of Yuendumu, are co-directors with Liam Campbell of *Aboriginal Rules*. While the majority of the language used in the film is English, Warlpiri (with English subtitles) accounts for perhaps one third of the dialogue.[89] The target audience would appear to be mixed: both a local audience, for whom the subtitling would be irrelevant, and a broader non-indigenous Australian audience. As such, the film could be understood to have multiple aims. On the one hand, seeing a film that celebrates contemporary Central Desert social events and contextualises them as significant cultural enterprises would have a positive impact on a local audiences' sense of self-worth, especially considering that the production quality is relatively high. On the other hand, the insight into how tradition is manifesting in contemporary lifestyles would provide a wider Australian audience with a better appreciation of the values and experiences of indigenous people living in Central Australia. Perhaps we can conclude from the inclusion of an explanation of the rules of the game that an international audience is also anticipated. The film is bracketed with short comic scenes featuring Kelly as a traditional Warlpiri warrior, representing the history of the Warlpiri on their ancestral land, and accompanied by a young Warlpiri boy, representing, in turn their future. Opening the film is a scene in which the two representative Warlpiri males sit on a rock beside a desert waterhole while a male voice sings in Warlpiri a narrative of what is being nominated somewhat ironically by this film as a singular transformational historical moment for the Warlpiri, namely, the arrival of football. A Sherrin match ball[90] falls out of the sky unannounced, and lands in the water, surprising the pre-modern man played by Kelly, who had apparently been puzzling over how to fit his spear to his woomera.[91] The full relevance of this and the closing scene, in which these two characters reappear, will be returned to shortly.

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[85] Now a subsidiary of Pintubi Anmatjere Warlpiri Media Communications.

[86] Dir. Francis Jupurrula Kelly (2001). 4-part series.

[87] Produced in the 1980s, exact dates unknown.

[88] Beattie points out the criticality of Kelly's *Bush Mechanics*: "Beyond the generalized mockery of conventional documentary representation, the series parodies a flourishing genre on Australian television of Outback adventure and travel." (Beattie 78). Much could be said about the way Kelly uses humour to address changing Warlpiri relationships to country, but for lack of space.

[89] Martínez has put the use of Indigenous languages into the context nationalism. She describes how language is linked to identity and and quotes an informant as saying, "You have to know your language because you'll never be able to learn your Dreaming and if you don't know your Dreaming you can't identify where you belong". She then argues that a "post-modern understanding of nationalism would suggest that there is no need to eliminate cultural diversity" in order to attain unity at a pan-Aboriginal level (Martínez 142).

[90] The iconic red ball is the standard ball used in this sport and would be instantly recognisable to most Australians.

[91] A woomera is a stick used to throw a spear at a greater velocity than would otherwise be possible. Probably derived from the Dharuk language word *wamara*.

Australian Rules Football is distinct from other football codes played around the world. The game is played on a large, ovular field – essentially the same size and shape as a cricket ground – using a ball similar to that used in rugby, albeit somewhat narrower. It differs from rugby however in that the focus is very much on kicking for goal as opposed to running the ball over the line, and differs from traditional football (soccer) in that one can carry the ball. The extreme athleticism required to play well and the fast pace of the game have contributed to its popularity. Unlike other places in Australia where the game is played, however, most ovals in the Central Desert lack grass coverage. This means that falling on the compacted soil can lead to more injuries than otherwise. In the words of the captain of the Yuendumu Magpies, Sherman Spencer, "[w]hen you tackle someone on hard ground, you feel the pain" (Campbell, *Aboriginal* 5:00). Spencer considers it proof of a player's manhood that they can play energetically and without fear of getting hurt when they fall.

Considerable attention is paid to Spencer in the film. His comments on what makes the game significant to the Warlpiri go the heart of the narrative: "Out in the desert the family used to hunt. They used to be in one mob, and they come back with food. That's the same thing that is happening. We representing Yuendumu going out to communities, and bringing trophies and money back to the community" (Campbell, *Aboriginal* 5:30). Life in the desert has changed since people gave up a traditional lifestyle in favour of access to a reliable food source. Having settled at Yuendumu, people had to renegotiate clan relationships and find new ways of using their time; food gathering and hunting no longer being crucial for survival. For Spencer and many other Aboriginal people, football is a way of passing the time, of keeping fit, but most importantly, a way of producing group identity. In the face of the redundancy of the traditional roles Aboriginal men filled, on-field competitiveness offers them a way of defining their masculinity. They can still be warriors and hunters and they can still provide. The resilience required to play is understood as a demonstration of manhood. The film does not appear to question or pass comment on these values. Rather, there is a tendency to reproduce the somewhat sexist ideology that places male experience in the field of vision and excludes that of women. Indeed the importance of manliness in Warlpiri culture is made evident in the film when a player states that "[y]ou got to be a man. You got to be strong too." And yet proving one's manhood is also a matter of being a part of the team: "You can't just work as one bloke. You gotta work as a team" (Campbell, *Aboriginal* 6:10). The word "team" could be substituted for 'tribe' as the football team can be understood as representative of a community which, despite having been riven with disputes between people who have been left their traditional lands and are all living in the one spot, is seeking unity and stability, and to provide a better life for its inhabitants. In the face of social disintegration caused by substance abuse, high incarceration rates and the low moral that comes with chronic unemployment, being a team player and wearing the Yuendumu jersey is a source of pride. The existence of the team is a demonstration of the health and well-being of the Yuendumu community, and a reminder that Warlpiri are still on Warlpiri land, even if not in the distribution patterns that might have once existed.

So far, *Aboriginal Rules* has been described in relation to the history of Yuendumu and its football club. I want to now focus in on specific scenes in the film in which a relationship to country is made evident. The first scene I describe acts as a bridge for my argument between the discussion of manhood and tribal affiliation above, and the more directly relevant topic of how eco-identities are

circulated by Aboriginal films. The second scene, albeit only a few seconds in length, is an example of how the process of re-inscribing identity in relation to the physical environment is realised in subtle ways. Two other scenes featuring Francis Jupurrurla Kelly bookend the documentary, and will also be discussed in connection to reflexivity and the role it plays in the communication strategy of the film.

In the first scene I wish to describe, the contrast between city and outback is used to illustrate the internal conflict felt by some players who would like to pursue a professional sporting career, but whose attachment to home – both people and place – is too great. The focus again is on the team captain, Sherman Spencer, who articulates many of the major themes of the film. Immediately prior to this scene, an extended segment illustrates the downfall of the team during the 2006 sports season and culminates with the Yuendumu Magpies' loss to Lajamanu,[92] causing their exit from the competition. The segment ends with Spencer driving home to Yuendumu disappointed, but accompanied by the sound of radio commentary praising his leadership nevertheless. A fade to black indicates the change of scene and prepares us for an accompanying change in mood from disappointment to reflection. There is a fade up to an establishing shot of a spinifex[93] landscape lit with raking light suggestive of dawn. Spinifex figures in widely in the Australian imagination as a symbol of the outback, of remoteness and the beauty of the desert landscape, while the low angle of dawn light not only adds a golden cast which highlights the beauty of the region, but symbolically suggests renewal. The shot is from a slight rise, allowing us to see over a broad expanse of land with a distant range of hills acting as a counterpoint to the ineffability of the desert expanse and adding texture to the horizon. A pan to the left takes in this landscape; silently lingering for over 4 seconds. The length of the shot, and the absence of sound, creates a reflective mood which might bring viewers into a receptive state of mind, thus opening the way for an appreciation of Spencer's meditation on the importance of football to him personally and to his people. Kelly is on record as having explained his use of sustained pans across the landscape as emulating the movement of "unseen characters" from the Dreamtime (Ginsburg, "Embedded" 92), from which we can deduct that the makers of this film are very aware of the ways in which film can be exploited for telling Aboriginal stories. The next scene shows Sherman Spencer wandering through the bush under the midday sun and is paired with his introspective commentary:

> Football is life to me y'know. When I was about seventeen I think, one of the AFL teams tried to give me a paper just to sign and just move down south to Adelaide. But I was thinking, if I go away, I'll only get homesick, because I never grew up in big cities. I know football is important, but family comes first. (Campbell, *Aboriginal* 26:35)

That crucial first sentence comes directly with the cut to the scene of Spencer in the bush. Spencer is hunting with other men from the community. Unlike the received image of a traditional Aboriginal hunter, barefoot and carefully stalking his prey with spear in hand, these men walk casually through the landscape but are nevertheless paying close attention to the ground: they are looking for animal tracks. Hunting is reliant on acute awareness of one's surrounds and knowledge of local environmental conditions. As Tonkinson points out in relation to hunting in the Australian desert, "the amount of information encoded by [animal] tracks and other markings on the ground is enourmous" (Tonkinson

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[92] Of the 24 teams playing in the Central Desert competition in 2006, two are wholly Warlpiri. Lajamanu and Yuendumu have a special relationship based on shared culture and country, but the on-field rivalry is nevertheless intense.

[93] A tough, spiky grass that grows throughout the dry interior of the continent.

31). For an informed audience, what looks outwardly like men causally strolling with downcast eyes is in fact footage of skilled and informed tracking. Another cut to Spencer firing his rifle, and then we see that he has indeed shot a small kangaroo. From a close-up of the animal's intestines being examined for fat content – itself an indication of his traditional knowledge – the film cuts abruptly to an urban scene. This appears to be the clubhouse for Collingwood Football Club in Melbourne. With identical club colours and mascots, Collingwood has a long-standing donor relationship with Yuendumu, providing clothing and equipment. In the foreground of this shot is a sculpture of a Collingwood player in his unmistakable black and white striped jersey, catching a golden ball. The pair of competing priorities is symbolised by the objects placed in the foreground of successive shots: a kangaroo followed by a football, both having been hunted, and both being trophies of manhood in the Warlpiri mindset.

The Collingwood team is idolised by the Yuendumu players. Many of them wish they could not only play professionally at the highest level, but particularly for the team upon which their own was modelled. Collingwood is a suburb of Melbourne, and as such the club, both rich and successful is used in the film as a marker of the distinction between the city and the bush. This abrupt cut from a close-up of a freshly killed kangaroo to a sculpture of a golden football being caught by a smiling player in the Collingwood/Yuendumu team colours emphasises the vastly different priorities and lifestyles associated with the two clubs in their two vastly different environments. Football is "life" to Sherman Spencer, as it is to many other desert Aboriginals. But their life is in the desert, and the sense of belonging they feel to place and commitment to family, outweighs any personal career ambitions. The weight of Aboriginal law and tradition feels close at hand. At the same time however, the juxtaposition of hunting and playing football suggests that these are things that Warlpiri men know and can do well. If hunting relies on an intimate knowledge of the environment, including animals such as kangaroos which have totemic significance, and hunting is being likened to football, then football, through its filmic adjacency to hunting, is also a form of locally significant 'men's business'.[94] The link from this to an eco-identity relies on this subtle reminder that the Warlpiri are at home in their environment, where hunting and football make sense and are fully incorporated into the lives of successful men; success being achieved on the field and in the field, as it were. The sequence of shots illustrates the tension between career ambition and community responsibility, but also demonstrates how traditions change and can be adapted to contemporary life. For just as the experience of hunting has changed from walking barefoot with spears to wearing boots and carrying rifles, so too has the introduction of football given life a new focus. It, along with hunting using rifles and driving vehicles instead of walking, is an aspect of modern Warlpiri life. Contemporary hunting practices still utilise place-specific knowledge: One must know the habits and movements of the animals being hunted, and one must be able to find them by studying their tracks. Furthermore, all of these activities are performed on Warlpiri land, to which the Warlpiri are

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[94] In most Aboriginal societies, and particularly in those of the Central and Western Deserts, men and women have many separate ceremonial activities, referred to in Aboriginal English as men's business and women's business. The differences are codified in law, and often specific to particular sacred places, such that there are places where men can and cannot go because they are sites for women's business. The reverse also applies for women in men's places. While I do not have any evidence at my disposal that suggests a football field is a place specific to men's business in the sense of sacred ritual, it is at least clear from the film that only men are playing for the Yuendumu team. For an explanation of the division of space according to gender in Yaraman culture (Kimberley region), see Rose, *Nourishing* 36-38.

emotionally and psychologically bound. The simultaneity of image and dialogue makes the link between place-specific knowledge and 'new traditions'.
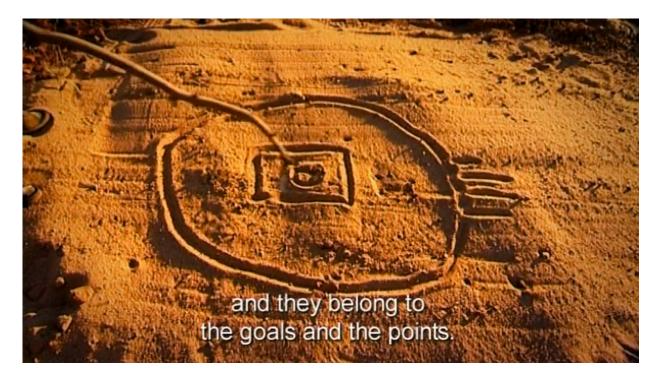
One elder in the community remarks that football is equivalent to *Jukurrpa* (Dreaming) as it has cultural relevance to contemporary life (Campbell, *Aboriginal* 39:00), while a team member who is working as a community police officer in Yuendumu also ascribes significance to football, calling it "our culture". He remarks that it "was there before us, and we've still got it" (45:40). He is referring to the fact that the game, having been introduced in the late 1950s, was played by the preceding generation and therefore counts as traditional. But the link between long-standing tradition and solidarity around a sporting code is not only forged conspicuously through the interpretations provided by community members. Showing the men engaging in hunting – traditionally their responsibility – with overlapping dialogue that discusses the importance of football draws a comparison between the two activities, and thus football acquires cultural significance through the careful editing of scenes. The cultural ingenuity that is harnessing sport as a marker of tradition is expressed through the form this film takes, not just through its content.

Aboriginal Rules is not overly concerned with demonstrating the Warlpiri connection to country, instead taking this as a given. The primary meaning of the film is how football occupies a central role in life in Yuendumu, and what positive effects this has for young men in the community whose lives might otherwise turn for the worse for lack of an occupation. Football is repeatedly presented as a new tradition, one to which the Warlpiri can attach significance, but this is not because the makers of the film are specifically projecting a vision of how football links to the traditional ownership of land or other aspects of the Aboriginal connection to country.[95] The cues are understated and rely on the assumption that the audience is familiar with how certain activities code as traditional and place-specific. The lack of an overtly ecological theme is precisely why the film is of interest, for it is sometimes in the interstices rather than within the dominant narrative that underlying assumptions collect, where we might find them and bring them to light. The kangaroo hunting scene is an example of how the link between men's place-based tradition and modernity is carefully produced in the film. However a still subtler and much shorter scene that comes even closer to my thesis – that a specifically Aboriginal eco-identity is being recirculated by films such as this – occurs within the first two minutes.

After the opening credits and title shot, Simba, the coach of the Yuendumu team, gives a quick explanation of the rules of the game. The style is reminiscent of filmic genres that contain fast-paced editing and short, to-camera narrations such as those magazine-style programmes that appear on prime-time television in Australia, more than it is of documentary film-making genres which are based on a slower, more deliberative style. The soundtrack contains a catchy rhythm and the coach's summary of the rules is as brief as possible. Just enough to give a viewer with no knowledge of the game a sense of what they will be looking at for the next hour. Given that an explanation of the rules is unnecessary for a Warlpiri audience, it might be a testimony to the directors' sense of humour that this sequence, consisting of three scenes, is narrated entirely in Warlpiri, albeit with English subtitles. But the humour

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[95] An important subtext in the film is the role Christianity plays in both team identity and the formation of new traditions. While syncretism is itself arguably relevant to the formation of an eco-identity, in which a refigured conception of Dreaming is spliced with a system of Christian belief which includes such foundational stories about mankind's relationship with the environment as the garden of Eden, it is outside the field of this study.

is pointed, not flippant. The first scene is of Simba holding a football and giving the Warlpiri name for the game, a claim to ownership of their 'new tradition'. The second is of an area of sand that has been smoothed over and into which his hand draws with a stick the outline of a football field. The third is of a player demonstrating how to catch, kick, pass and score points. It is the second of these scenes that I wish to explore in more detail.

Within the space of three seconds, Simba's hand draws the shape of a football oval, marks in the centre square[96] and goal posts, and then with the help of a time-lapse sequence of still images, stones appear to represent the positions of players on the field. There are two observations to make about this scene that are relevant to the circulation of an indigenous eco-identity. The first is a broad one pertaining to the use of Warlpiri language. As a feature of Warlpiri culture, language can also be understood either as pertaining to a specific Aboriginal identity – for those that can recognise it as Warlpiri – or a generic Aboriginal identity – for those that simply recognise it as an instance of Aboriginal language. Few Australians would recognise Warlpiri itself, but equally, few would fail to recognise it as an Aboriginal language, as opposed to just any foreign tongue. In this non-specific moment of recognition there is the added likelihood that pre-existing associations will be triggered in the viewer. Such associations could be multiple and possibly even conflicting, depending on the viewer. One salient association amongst the many, however, is the idea that Aboriginal people, when depicted in outback[97] settings, are in a place to which they belong. The image of the Aboriginal 'in situ' is powerful enough alone to do this associative work, but the sound of the language significantly reinforces the stereotype of someone 'authentically' Aboriginal and therefore in possession of knowledge about country that non-Indigenous people do not have – and in being rendered as outsiders by the unintelligibility of the speech, cannot obtain. 'Language' as Aboriginal languages are sometimes collectively referred to, figures as a repository of

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[96] The football oval is divided by a few lines marking areas of play, one of which is the centre square.

[97] Australia's remote interior.

impenetrable mystery. Aboriginal languages are a part of that unified cultural heritage that sits under the umbrella term Dreaming, and are therefore inextricably bound to place not just through demographics but also through metaphysics. The signalling of an eco-identity occurs subtly in moments in which the constant bouncing back and forth of ideas about Aboriginal people gradually builds into an ideology. In particular, it is the idea that an 'authentic' Aboriginal is one who is emplaced; the place being a non-urban environment to which the person has a complex, cultural-historical connection. Mainstream Australia, being predominantly urban, sits in conceptual opposition to remote Australia. Iconic symbols of Aboriginality as 'other' to the mainstream, when enhanced by the imaging of place-specificity, can easily attach themselves to an eco-identity. The eco-identity was in the first instance generated by Aboriginal culture itself, only to be homogenised and simplified by the media, before being re-appropriated by Aboriginal media interests for the sake, in some cases, of propagating an image favourable to the pursuit of land claims, and in others for the sake of garnering respect.[98] Such a broad claim could be attached to any scene that contains 'language' and depicts country. The sand drawing scene goes beyond this basic combination however, which brings us to the second observation.

The second observation that needs to be made is the bush setting, and the fact that the directors chose to explain the rules through the use of a sand drawing, as opposed to say a sketch on paper or with the help of post-produced graphics, all of which would be equally feasible, and perhaps just as, if not more, effective for communicating the rules. Around the very edges of the frame are signs that the sand is outdoors, and most likely in the bush somewhere. There are shadows, loose stones and a few footprints. The smoothed area of sand is not perfectly even, nor is the sand completely homogenous. This is not the tabula rasa of a blank screen or pure White sheet of paper. The bush setting is a prompt. We are being told, firstly, that this is not about football in general, but about football in the desert, a point underscored by the use of Warlpiri for the narration. In a minor act of reverse-colonialism, the Warlpiri have taken ownership of the game by inscribing it into the surface of their land and describing it in their language. Secondly, we are being told that the claim on football and its incorporation into Warlpiri culture is complete. The self-confidence that this sequence exudes makes it clear that football is very much a part of the fabric of life in Yuendumu; so much so that it has made the transition into traditional cultural practices such as sand drawing – to which I shall return – not to mention having acquired an Aboriginal name at a time and in a place that is extremely multilingual, with Aboriginal English and perhaps to a lesser extent Kriol in widespread use.[99]

The conspicuous connection is between football and Warlpiri identity, which itself is place-oriented, but the sequence also builds upon pre-existing associations that Australian viewers would have which see people in remote communities as being somehow in possession of an authentically Aboriginal identity which is guaranteed by their custodianship of the land, irrespective of whether or not those people are indeed living on their ancestral lands. It is one narrative in competition with other, less positive ones. But it is a powerful narrative nevertheless, and one which shows no signs of exhausting

[98] Sadly, Australia remains a very xenophobic country, a fact that the White population on the whole has great trouble recognising.

[99] Aboriginal English is similar to Standard Australian English, but with many words specific to Aboriginal experience, including loan words from indigenous languages and from Kriol. Kriol is a creole spoken throughout the Northern Territory, and is the most widely spoken language there after Australian English.

itself. In spite of the almost total lack of Aboriginal women in this film, it is possible to understand it as speaking for the interests of an entire community and not just those of the men. This is not to argue that men can or should stand in for women, or that women's experience is too particular and thus not convertible into generalisations about community-wide identity in ways that men's experiences are. Rather, the film only addresses a certain range of experience, but this range does affect everyone in the community, and draws upon cultural identity strategies that Warlpiri people also use in other ways. Further, the sand map in particular can be interpreted via the *idea* of desert peoples as possessors of traditional knowledge about the land. It need not be articulated forthrightly in order for the narrative to gain momentum as it circulates back and forth between the mainstream and Aboriginal peoples, and it need not be embedded in a film that pays equal attention to all sectors of the community along gender lines or any other kind of division, be it generational or racial.

Indeed, sand drawing – what the Warlpiri and other groups in the Central and Western Deserts call *walkala* – has been shown by Nancy Munn (1986) and Christine Watson (1997) to be highly gendered. Some practices of making marks in the sand are quotidian, but others, such as women's *kuruwarri*[100] marks relate to sacred knowledge and the Dreaming, and thus are restricted. Equally men have ceremonial drawing practices that may not be viewed by women (Watson 106). Watson, however, notes that not all marks related to *Jukurrpa* are restricted along gender lines. In her description of sand drawing in the Western Desert, she argues that publicly visible *walkala* are associated with Dreaming via "the skin of the land, in which the bodies of Ancestral Beings are transformed" (108). Her observation is that the Wangkatjungka at Balgo, like the Warlpiri at Yuendumu (Munn 1986), see the drawing of meaningful lines into the sand as an act of inscription on the body of the land:

> At this point it is appropriate to look more deeply into the implications of penetrating the surface of the earth with marks made in *walkala*. For local people, the earth is saturated with cultural meanings and associations, gender symbolism and the bodies and power or essence of the Ancestors. The generic word for the land in Kukatja is *ngurra*: the camp, country, one's place.[101] The layer of the earth on which human beings live is a domain where gendered human beings, gendered animals, gendered plant species and gendered landscape features co-exist, all linked to each other by kinship ties and ultimately to the *Tjukurrpa*. (Watson 111)[102]

As such, the practice of drawing in the sand is widely used for instructional purposes. Warlpiri and Wangkatjungka youth need to be schooled in the ways of the tribe. This was and still is performed orally with visual aids such as lines in the sand, combined with small objects like leaves or stones to represent people in their relations to one another (Green 35). The sand map at the beginning of *Aboriginal Rules* cites traditional ways of imparting knowledge, and links the content – a set of rules by which young Warlpiri men should, in the context of a certain type of ritual, conform – to the land itself. For as Watson states, *walkala* is invested with more meaning than the translation into 'sand drawing' suggests. The word connotes the materiality and three-dimensionality of the surface. In fact it is less about surface
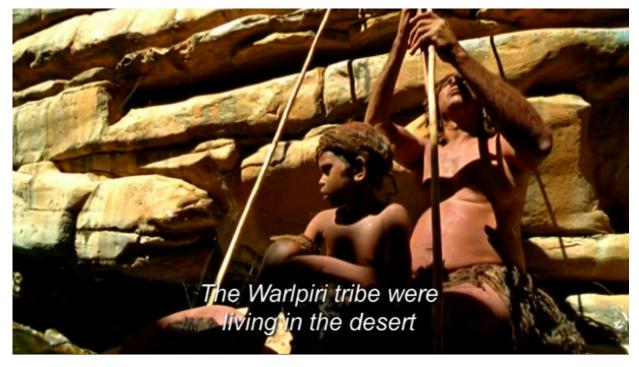
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[100] Watson describes *kuruwarri* as designs that "relate the deeds of Ancestral Beings and the sites they created. They may be drawn in the sand, with ochres on the body, or on ceremonial objects. They are at the same time marks or traces of the Ancestors, and are believed to contain their Power" (Watson 106).

[101] Valiquette 1993:155

[102] The term *ngurra* will be relevant in the discussion of *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*. Variations in the spelling of words like *Tjukurrpa* (*Jukurrpa*), are common.

inscription than it is about marking the "body of the land" (112), the land being invested with ancestral presence. Using a finger to draw means it is "haptic as well as a visual medium, in which there is a direct connection between the touch of the person indenting the sand, and the visual designs they produce" (109) and thus also a direct connection with their experience of country as bound to identity. Thus a brief scene ostensibly imparting the rules of football actually tells us more about the Warlpiri relationship to country than it does about the game. The use of traditional modes of communication that connect story-teller to country in the explanation of a recently imported set of rules are signs of the Aboriginal eco-identity is capable of adaptation.
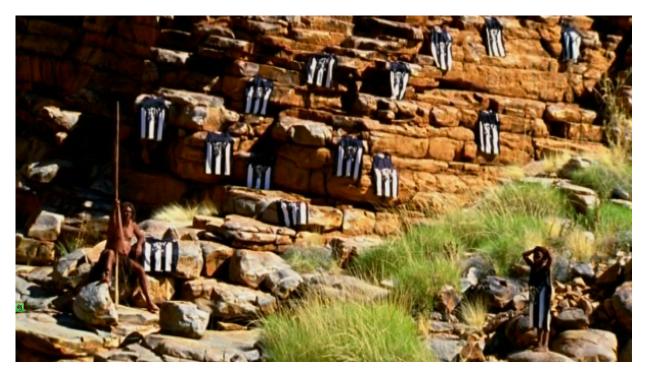
Returning to the opening scene in which a Warlpiri man is sitting by a waterhole with a boy and looking confused by the technology in his hands, we can see how Kelly's sense of humour comes to the fore in the way he subverts our ideas about the 'nobility' of the 'primitive' hunter by depicting him as slightly incompetent. No initiated Warlpiri man would have struggled to fit his woomera to his spear, nor would he have been surprised by his environment, having a detailed, lifelong knowledge of it. Or at least this is the stereotype of the traditional hunter – knowing the songs and stories about the country and

initiated into his culture – with which Kelly plays. It is clearly a case of canny film-makers laughing at themselves as much as they might be examining the image we have of their people.[103] Indeed, the style of singing is precisely that which registers in the minds of most Australians as traditional Aboriginal song, the content of which they probably cannot understand but which they accept with deference as meaningful because of its cadences and the fact that it is being sung 'in language'. The singing lasts for 27 seconds, but the subtitles simply record the lyrics as, "The Warlpiri tribe were living in the desert when there was an unfamiliar sound in the sky" (Campbell, *Aboriginal* 00:00).

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[103] Given that hunting with spears is likely only done nowadays in order to maintain a tradition for its own sake, and given Kelly's own immersion in modern technology, the confusion figures as highly ironic.

The humour and the astuteness return in the second to last scene of the film, when the two traditional characters return. Shots of them walking across the landscape are interspersed with footage from a football game, landscape scenes from the region, and close-ups of senior community members' faces, while a voice sings, this time in a modern style, a nostalgic song about who the Warlpiri were before colonisation. The character played by Kelly walks with the boy to a rock face where they proceed to spread out the Yuendumu team guernseys.[104] The final shot in this sequence shows them in front of the sunlit orange cliff framed by lush green tufts of grass at its base, with the guernseys spread evenly

across the frame. The cliff has an appealing texture that consists of rock strata, slightly off from horizontal. At approximately 352 degrees, the angle made by the lines between the rock strata form a pleasing composition in relation to the centrally located axis created by the base of the cliff, which rises from left to right and forms a boundary between fields of colour and texture. The composition of the naturally occurring forms is then overlaid with the pattern made by the interspersed guernseys, with their strongly contrasting black and white stripes running almost-vertical and perpendicular to the lines in the cliff. That these stripes are almost-vertical is due to the fact that the guernseys hang on the lines of the cliff, which themselves are not quite horizontal. Thus three interrelated axes form a harmonious but not static composition made of segmented lines. The overlaying of the modern striped shirts on the stripes of the ancient rock strata is a visual metaphor for how changes to Warlpiri society can be incorporated into an ongoing social and cultural system, rather than necessarily displacing it. The pleasing aesthetics of the composition help to reinforce the positive message that the combination of old and new is intended to have, which is being witnessed by the two male Warlpiri characters presiding over the scene. Thus *Aboriginal Rules* could be said to open and close with an existential statement about the integration of football into Warlpiri tradition, in which the physical environment plays a categorical role. For without the context provided by the all-important landscape, the relation between icons taken from Australian

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[104] The sleeveless team shirts worn in the AFL are referred to as guernseys.

Rules football and the lives of the Warlpiri would not have the significance that it does. Campbell, Kelly and White have used subtle humour at strategic points to subvert their own narrative about the positive effects of football in Warlpiri society, but for the sake of pointing to an underlying assumption upon which the relationship between football and the Warlpiri is built, which is the idea that there is a necessary connection between the landscape and its people. It is not a belief that is being rejected, however. Rather, the knowingness with which it is re-inscribed suggests that the makers of the film are aware of the processes of identity circulation and how they can be, to an extent, manipulated in order to add weight to a claim. Reflexivity, in this case putting a decidedly accomplished film-maker into the role of the unwitting 'native', is used for comic effect and for the serious business of preempting and subverting the circulation of fixed identity options. It is interesting to note that Kelly was described by Michaels in the 1980s as a keen early adopter of new technology. His acceptance of the influence of other cultures and his mocking of the stereotype of the authentic 'native' give emphasis to the deliberateness of the act of decorating the landscape with such symbols of Warlpiri modernity as football guernseys. The directors, it seems, know very well that identity options are not fixed and can be selected, even if ancestry cannot. The eco-identity, partly chosen, partly inherited and partly foisted upon them, has not been ignored in this film. The central thesis of this study is that identities based upon the assertion of an affinity with the physical world are manufactured and maintained by the circulation of that identity through the Australian mediasphere, and that while those identities might have as their original source the Aboriginal people who tried to explain their relationship with their ancestral lands to Whites, they are also very much a product of mainstream Australia's projections onto Aboriginal people, which in turn have been at least partially taken up by Aboriginal people, albeit not uniformly, and often in the context of the production of a pan-Aboriginal identity which, as an easily communicated generalisation, assists in the promulgation of a local identity. The identity work done in *Aboriginal Rules* linking football (modernity) to Aboriginal culture (tradition) cannot help but make a sidelong reference to widely dispersed and deeply embedded notions of environmental guardianship. The sand map scene, itself superfluous in a purely informational sense, contains the implicit suggestion that unobtrusive inscriptions of Aboriginal presence on land are being repeated in novel contexts.

4.3. *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*

The third example of a film that uses the Aboriginal eco-identity also deals with relationships to country. In some scenes the relationships are being stated overtly. But again it is the subtle attribution of an eco-identity through the use of formal means that is of interest. *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* (Nicole Ma, 2015) follows Tom Putuparri Lawford and his 'grandfather'[105] Nyilpir Spider Snell as they try over many years to get native title recognition of their traditional lands in the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia. They are members of the Walmatjarri and Wangkatjungka tribes, who along with other language groups, began losing their lands to the expansion of the pastoral and mining industries in the Western Desert and Kimberley regions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The director, Nicole Ma, worked on the film over a period of ten years, slowly getting to know the Wangkatjungka people living at Fitzroy Crossing from 2001 onwards (Redwood 73). Over time she came to focus more and more on the experiences of one person, Tom Putuparri Lawford. In a sense, Ma's desire to understand the Wangkatjungka – her motivation for making the film – is paralleled by Putuparri's own desire to bridge a divide between the traditional knowledge that his grandparents want to pass on to him, and the temptations and pitfalls of modern lifestyles in settlements like Fitzroy Crossing, where Putuparri was raised and which is now home (74). As will become clear, the sandiness of the Great Sandy Desert is an understated but significant feature of the film, which carries meaning that reaches beyond the specifics of geography and creates a link with a scene of particular interest in *Aboriginal Rules*.

When settlers drove stock north from Perth towards the Kimberley, it was the first time many of the desert people came into contact with Whites. Precious waterholes were later turned by the government surveyor Alfred Canning and his team into sealed wells for watering cattle along what is known as the Canning Stock Route, a 1500 kilometre track for bringing cattle out of the north for sale in the south. The appropriation of scarce water sources for stock forced the Walmatjarri and Wangkatjungka people onto cattle stations like Christmas Creek, where they settled and began to work. When Aboriginal people got citizenship in the 1960s, pressure was put on cattle station owners to pay Aboriginal workers. Unwilling to do this, the owners forcibly removed Aboriginals from the stations, and left them on the banks of the Fitzroy river at what is now the town of Fitzroy Crossing. The town is not on Wangkatjungka land, and is in fact nowhere near the area where Spider grew up. The combination of poverty, a lack of basic rights and the extreme remoteness of their traditional lands has kept the Wangkatjungka from visiting country. Putuparri, Spider, Spider's wife Dolly and a number of others, are particularly focused on returning to and claiming title over a *jila* (sacred spring) called Kurtal which lies some 500 kilometres south of Fitzroy Crossing (Mira 2007). *Jila* and *juma* (soaks) are considered to be 'living water', meaning they contain the spirit of one of the creator beings and are thus attached to the Dreaming. Not all waterholes in the desert are attached to the Dreaming. The *jila* known as Kurtal is where a great snake spirit resides in the earth. Thus the name Kurtal is both a place name and the name of the being inhabiting that place, whom Spider directly addresses when visiting the site.

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[105] In fact Spider is Putuparri's uncle, but the system of kin relations in Aboriginal societies understates this difference.

As a creator spirit associated with the Dreaming, Kurtal is also a human ancestor (Author unknown, "Jila Men" n.pag.). In another film by Nicole Ma (*Kurtal – Snake Spirit*, 2014), Spider explains that although he and his brothers have been away from the sacred *jila* for decades and thus unable to care for it, the snake spirit is still residing there. According to the Dreaming story, a *mapam* (medicine man) once travelled down from the north looking for a home. Upon finding Kurtal, he changed himself into a snake and went into the water (Ma, *Kurtal* 2:18). In the same film, another traditional owner explains his connection to Kurtal: "Jila is your father, your father is your country" (20:25). For the Wangkatjungka, the connection made between Dreaming story, ancestry and physical location is very real. In fact, Spider and his immediate family all believe that once they die they will return to Kurtal to inhabit the site, just as all their ancestors do.

Putuparri struggles to reconcile his modern lifestyle in the village of Fitzroy Crossing where he now lives and works, with the traditional Wangkatjungka culture that the tribal elders want him to learn. The film focuses on Putuparri's internal struggle to meet the expectation that he take a more active role in the promotion of his people's culture. Filmed over a period of ten years, it depicts his growth into a responsible community elder who can learn and pass on Wangkatjungka culture, and also help organise the fight to gain native title over Kurtal. Having spent his early childhood on Christmas Creek cattle station, he only knew of the *jila* through the elders' stories. Over the duration of the film, four trips are made to Kurtal. The trip in 1994 was the first time that the elders had returned in the 40 years since they had walked out of the desert. It was also Tom Putuparri's first visit, which he himself filmed as evidence for a potential land claim. The landmark Ngurrara[106] Native Title Claim that was won in 2007 by a conglomerate of peoples from the Great Sandy Desert is used as a subplot throughout the film. *Ngurrara* means 'home' in several of the languages spoken in the Great Sandy Desert and Kimberley regions. While there is no particular tribe with this name, it has been adopted as a general term for people from the region for the sake of making a coherent and unified native title claim.[107] I will return to this native title case shortly, as the way in which it is portrayed is relevant to the circulation of eco-identities.

Putuparri and the Rainmakers fits into the genre of long-form historical documentary making, having been filmed over more than ten years, and encompassing the personal growth of the protagonist from violent alcoholic to community leader (Ma, "Production" n.pag.). Incorporating footage from several shoots made between 1994 and 2006, including the VHS tape recorded by the protagonist, the formal style of the film is varied. Unity is achieved however, through the strong narrative focus on the life of Putuparri and the meaning of Kurtal to his people. Throughout the film, shots of Spider, Putuparri and others burning grass in order to both alert the snake spirit of their approach and to rejuvenate the grasslands, remind the viewer that these people are actively engaged with maintaining their country, just as footage of Spider calling out to Kurtal confirms the very direct relationship between people, spirits and country. Kurtal is simultaneously place, person and spirit. The holistic view that desert peoples have

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[106] See nntt.gov.au.

[107] One could also explore the implications of the recent acquisition of a group identity that sits on a level between the tribe and the pan-indigenous notion of being Aboriginal for the sake of appearing as a coherent group in front of the courts. Relevant also to the way land claims are pursued is the fact that they are done collectively, just as the ownership of land is understood in terms of collective responsibility. Gibson writes that the "paradigm of 'owning' differs dramatically from the individualistic premises of non-indigenous 'private property' (Gibson, "Cartographies" 55-56).

of their world, including its spiritual dimensions, preexists the uptake of Aboriginal eco-identities by the media. The way in which representations of Aboriginals make use of a preexisting identity and stresses its importance through formal filmic technique is an amplification and recirculation of the eco-identity.

During the process of making their land claim over the desert, the various tribes involved were searching for evidence of an ongoing relationship to their ancestral lands that would be acceptable to the court. Given that these were oral cultures which made no permanent settlements, there are few records to prove their claim. Tommy May, a Wangkatjungka man, suggested they collaborate on a painted map of country that indicated their knowledge of the environment. The result was the massive Ngurrara canvas which was completed in 1997, and measures 10 x 8 metres.[108] Milroy and Revell argue that as a map, the canvas asserts "not just title to land but also Aboriginal law" (Milroy 6). Similarly, Larissa Behrendt describes it as "an embodiment of Aboriginal law" in so much as it translates into visual terms the rights that exist over land as recorded orally in the stories and knowledge that elders have (Behrendt n.pag.). It is an alternative to the cartographic[109] mapping that is recognised as evidence by the Native Title Tribunal. The painting sits at the intersection of law and identity politics, but before explaining this is in any more detail, it might be worth returning briefly to what native title is.

The *Native Title Act* of 1993 makes the connection between traditional law and the relation people have to land (and in some cases sea). As Kirsten Anker reminds us, if the traditional law of a people identifies them as custodians of an area of country, and they can prove that they have had an ongoing relationship to that land since colonisation, and the claim is being made over unused crown land, then the claim will be recognised (Anker 40). It could be argued, then, that Australian common law is able to recognise traditional Indigenous law as it pertains to the people whose law it is, and puts an onus on lawmakers to translate Indigenous law into rights held under common law. Claimants therefore need to establish, through mapping, the places they belong to (and belong to them), as well as establish that those places are cited in their law. Chris Gibson has summarised the problems associated with the pursuit of evidence of a connection to country through the use of cartography in native title disputes. He notes that in "defining the process by which indigeneity and authentic 'traditional' ownership can be known, the map continues to act as an instrument of power in the negotiation of territory and identity" (Gibson, "Cartographies" 52). Yet he goes on to suggest that an "implicit emancipatory potential underpins these post-colonial critiques within geopolitics—in providing opportunities to rupture colonial hegemony and re-assert indigenous spatialities" (52). In other words, the absoluteness of mapping does not, on the face of it, seem to allow room for other ways of knowing space. But an alternative type of map equates to an alternative way of knowing space, and if the court could be convinced to take other forms of mapping into account, then the divide between common law and Indigenous law might be bridged. Graham Huggan has also analysed the consequences of mapping in the postcolonial context, and suggests that "while the map continues to feature in one sense as a paradigm of colonial discourse, its deconstruction and/or revisualization permits a 'disidentification' from the procedures of colonialism" (Huggan 411). The Ngurrara canvas could be understood as just

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[108] See the National Museum of Australia website for more information about the painting of the canvas.

[109] By which I mean, those maps produced within the Western scientific tradition that attempt to render accurately to scale the distribution of physical features across a precisely defined area.

such a revisualisation. However its acceptance as evidence was not independent of the kind of maps that a court could rely on for a scientific analysis of space. Rather, it was presented alongside such maps. It cannot be claimed, therefore, to have overthrown the "procedures of colonialism" entirely, but certainly its acceptance as a map and not just as a work of art troubles the distinction. The distinction runs deep however, as Aboriginal expressions of traditional knowledge are considered factual by the makers. The Dreamtime was a creative period to which all Aboriginal people are considered to have access. Their role in the universe, if you will, is focused on the sustainability of the social order, achieved through the repetition of traditions. The present is therefore not a period of creativity, but of sustained iteration (Tonkinson 18).[110] The Ngurrara canvas, albeit using the form of a work of art which exploited the promotional capacity of art museums in Australia,[111] is very much intended as a statement of ongoing fact, not of creative license.

This brings us to the scenes in *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* where the artists who worked on the Ngurrara canvas are standing on the areas of the image which they themselves painted. The claim the artists make has nothing to do with creativity, but is a demonstration of their ancestral relationship to those places and their rights over them under their particular systems of tribal law – each of which is recognised by the other claimants. As Anker points out, claimants were obviating their individual relationships to specific sites for the sake of the court, but not only. Because the painting is a 'factual' representation of the land, it is understood by the claimants as an embodiment of their law which connects responsible people to that land, and thus standing on the painting is the same as standing on the land itself (54). Putuparri confirms this in his narration: "When they stand on it, it's just like standing on your homeland. It's like going home" (Ma, *Putuparri* 36:05). Indeed, when Spider is filmed sitting on the canvas with his grandson Buster, he slaps the image of Kurtal hard and exclaims, "This one he proper Kurtal! This one proper Kurtal!", apparently proving the physical reality of the place (35:50). This direct correspondence between image and reality becomes clear as the elders break into tears, remembering their sacred *jila* from which they have been separated. For the visual elements of the painting – dots, lines and circles – to be treated normatively as geographic facts and facts of ownership by the federal court for the sake of the native title claim, they have to be interpreted, and the interpretation is no longer on the level of aesthetics, but of law. And yet the performance of Indigenous knowledge that the painting achieves *is* reliant on its aesthetics: The way it looks is what convinced the court, and this has a lot to do with the way it corresponds to preconceived ideas of what 'authentic' Aboriginal art looks like. For Anker, the link between aesthetic effect and the status of the painting as evidence relied heavily on its being presented on country – in the desert, not in a courtroom in Canberra – and on the physical relationship the custodians performed by standing on the image (Anker 54). This physical relationship of land, people and map bridged the ontological divide separating common law from Aboriginal law, and brought the painting into equivalence with cartographic mapping in terms of its persuasive power. It also underlined this interpenetration of kinship relations, land and law that exists

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[110] This is not to say that there was, nor is, no change in Aboriginal society. Nor is it to claim an absolute position in regard to creativity or its lack. Rather, it is the general principle upon which Dreaming is based. See also Williams (47) on the continuity of land tenure and Stanner (*White Man* 34) on Aboriginal conceptions of time.

[111] The canvas has travelled to many venues, including the National Gallery in Canberra and the Museum of South Australia.

in Aboriginal culture. It is interesting to note, however, that this complex interaction of meanings, in which long-standing – and in a sense timeless – tradition is given recognition, is entirely reliant upon a recent technological and aesthetic development in the culture of the desert peoples, namely, acrylic painting on canvas. The map/painting is itself an example of how identity projects are circulated through the Australian mediasphere. Traditional graphic systems of representation have been revolutionised in that they are now made with modern materials and for different reasons. Whereas painting may have once served ritualistic and mnemonic purposes, celebrating and codifying important places, there are now also financial incentives to paint, as well as the claiming of rights through demonstrating knowledge about Dreaming. The Ngurrara canvas was solely made for the latter purpose, its claim to authoritative knowledge bolstered by the aesthetic appreciation it garnered on its tour of museums. It is because the filmic depiction of the Ngurrara canvas and the associated native title claim reinforces the relationship between land, law and culture and promotes the eco-identity of the claimants that I wish now to analyse particular moments in the relevant sequence.

Around half way through the film, Putuparri narrates how his life spun out of control under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Domestic violence charges led to a stint in prison. After being released, he attempts to resume a normal life, and to rejoin the fight for land. It is at this point that the relevant sequence in the film begins. According to his narration, the land claim took nearly 15 years to be processed by the courts, during which time many of the elders passed away. The Native Title Determination for the Ngurrara claim was held in 2007 at Pirnini, a remote location in the desert where the artists had originally assembled to paint the canvas. The sequence opens with female elders walking through the spinifex to the temporary shelters that have been set up for hosting the legal process (Ma, *Putuparri* 58:45). Preparations for the event are underway. Shots of Putuparri and others unfolding the Ngurrara canvas in front of the tents are accompanied by an affecting musical soundtrack which highlights the sense of achievement, but also the sadness that comes with the thought that not everyone has survived to witness the momentous day. This is ensued by a juxtaposition of shots that show lawyers dressing in their formal attire and claimants painting themselves for ceremony, supplemented all the while with this orchestral music containing a hint of melancholy. An equivalence of power between the Australian government (here represented by the Federal Court) and the people assembled under the name Ngurrara is suggested by this interlacing of preparatory rituals, reminding us that there are two systems of law being brought into parity at this moment. But it is an equivalence that will ultimately prove contingent. For the point of this sequence is to emotionally involve the audience in the celebration of a win, only to then feel the disappointment all the more keenly when it is discovered that Kurtal does not fall within the boundaries of the claim.

After a long sequence of shots depicting the judge and audience during the delivery of the determination, the judge congratulates the claimants on their success. Putuparri narrates how he nevertheless felt that "something was wrong" (1:01:05). The film then cuts to shots of the claimants standing on the canvas with photographers from the press, lawyers and an assembly of other interested parties around the edges, giving a sense of the significance of the moment. The camera is hand-held (at head height) and the shots take in the canvas in the gaps between bodies. In many shots, the focus is on interpersonal relationships as the judge moves among the claimants shaking hands – and poignantly

patting Spider, whose sacred *jila* has been excluded from the claim, on the shoulder before moving off to talk to others. But when the camera pans down to film feet standing on sacred places, the relation between crowd and canvas appears suggestive of both the legal function and the aesthetic function of the map simultaneously. Standing on 'country' while standing on country, as it were, confirms the translation of legal recognition from one code to another, and back again. That is, Aboriginal law codes country as belonging to particular people, which has been accepted by Australian common law, and this acceptance, ritually performed on country at Pirnini through the presence of a retinue from the Federal Court and the signing of legal documents, is then translated back into Aboriginal law by the presence of all parties standing on the map of country together, while also standing on physical country in the Great Sandy Desert.

But although this counts as a major win for the tribes assembled under the name Ngurrara, from Spider and Putuparri's viewpoint the entire process has been to no avail. In a to-camera shot, likely filmed in a different location and after the fact, Putuparri exclaims, "all that hard work for nothing, you know? All them old people, most of them all gone now." The film then returns to images of people mingling on the canvas at Pirnini, and Putuparri relates that "the problem was the boundaries of the land claim. *Kartiya*[112] asked the old people, 'where your country?' And *kartiya*, they just draw a straight line on the map. Kurtal was outside the boundary."

As alluded to above, the relationship between Australian common law and land has its parallel in the relationship between Aboriginal law and country. I vary the terms of reference here to signal the spiritual and cosmological implications that the latter entails. Despite being essentially the same thing, country is the word adopted by Aboriginal people to indicate that sense of belonging they feel, which is based not only on sentiment but also on law. Country in the traditional Aboriginal worldview is more

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[112] White people, foreigners, non-Indigenous Australians. Note that the orthography of words from Aboriginal languages varies in the literature. My spelling of *kartiya* varies from the film but is in keeping with other sources. This applies also to some tribal names such as Wangkatjungka.

than physical space. It harbours ancestor spirits that bring people and places into correspondence. Or as Deborah Rose puts it in her explanation of how the word country is both an abstraction *and* a set of specific and meaningful places invested with ancestor spirits who must be continually acknowledged, "country gives forth life, and included in that life are the people of the country" (Rose, *Nourishing* 39). This difference between the usual understanding of what land or country means in English, and what Aboriginal people mean when they talk about country, as well as the difference between what the two legal systems can accomodate, is neatly encapsulated by Putuparri in a scene immediately following the native title determination.

In this ensuing scene, Spider is depicted sitting on a fine day in the shade of a tree, only the trunk of which can be seen on the far right, the crown being cropped by the frame. He sits on the dry ground in front of a horizontal panel consisting of brightly coloured paintings executed using features of the Western Desert style – including, in some images, the hallmark lines and dots – but also figurative elements such as trees, a lake, grass and sky, and incorporating graphic elements such as the iconic Aboriginal flag. Stylistic differences suggest that they have been executed by a range of younger artists, none of whom have attained the level of mastery that Central and Western Desert artists are now famed for.[113] The perspective system used in those panels depicting landscapes executed with techniques associated with European traditions of painting does not clash with the flatter, more traditionally oriented technique in the abutting panels. On the contrary, harmony is generated through the consistent use of bright colours and 'unschooled' shapes, the overall mood of the painting series being positive and upbeat; a mood which complicates the meaning of the scene, as will become apparent. The shot is taken from a low angle, with Spider's eye height more or less corresponding with the height of the camera, and thus theoretically with where the line of the horizon would be, were it visible. This has the effect of putting the viewer on a par with the subject, prompting us to empathise with his plight. It also places Spider directly in front of the painting, with its long, horizontal shape running as a band across the middle of the frame, neatly dividing orange earth from the blue sky and indeed replacing the horizon. The real landscape that might otherwise be visible behind Spider, receding according to the principles of geometric and atmospheric perspective, is replaced by the multiple perspectives of these local, colourful interpretations of the environment. One could say then, that a heterogenous but overwhelmingly positive image of local Aboriginality is forming the horizon of possibilities in this shot. The paintings are made with a mixture of styles and techniques, blending tradition with modernity in both the painterly methods applied and the materiality of the media, which is presumably acrylic paint on mechanically woven, cotton canvas. This scene represents a coalescence of Australian common law and Aboriginal law, as

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[113] Anthropologist Daniel Vachon and Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) chairman Tom Putuparri Lawford, both of whom appear in the film, have confirmed that the painting was made in 2001 at Fitzroy Crossing by local school children. The 8 metre long canvas was then displayed at the Wanamindi Festival held at the Aboriginal community of Ngumpan, located 95km southeast of Fitzroy Crossing, in 2011, which is probably where the footage described here was taken. The painting is now stored at KALACC in Fitzroy Crossing (Vachon, personal communication, who contacted Lawford upon my request for information). The source of this information could perhaps count as a reminder that in the case of Aboriginal films, authorship does not rest primarily with the director, whose own response to my question about the location and provenance of the artwork was less specific, and partially in conflict with Tom Lawford's account. I am unable to confirm beyond doubt whether Lawford's account is more factual than Ma's, but it is interesting to note that Ma recalls the painting as having been "made by multiple artists from all over the Kimberley not just desert but also river, saltwater and plains people" (Ma, personal communication). For the sake of this analysis, I am siding with Lawford's opinion that it was local school children who made these images, and with Ma's opinion that they represent a range of environments from around the Kimberley region.

will be shortly explained. But it is not the actual landscape that forms a backdrop to it. Rather, it is a set of representations of country by young local people, whose positive relationships with their environment are articulated through these paintings. The shot described above is not presented as a single sustained scene however. There are cuts from an initial close-up of Spider in front of the paintings, in which he is clapping a slow, regular rhythm with his hand against his thigh;[114] to a shot of a group of women and children also sitting on the ground – implying that Spider's land claim is for the community, not just for himself – back to the framing of Spider as it is described above; and then to a final shot of a silhouette of dead branches with an orange to yellow colour gradation in the background, evocative of a desert sunset, itself a recurring feature of the desert environment to which the Wangkatjungka people are bound. Underpinning the various shots that constitute this scene is a quiet, nondiegetic soundtrack. It is used repeatedly throughout the film, usually during scenes where images or dialogue relevant to the spiritual and emotional bond with country is alluded to. It consists of a combination of sustained, high-pitched synthesised notes; a note bowed on a string instrument such as a violin that has a slow rising finish; and a sustained, tonally deeper and resonating note, possibly sung by a male chorus, which sounds electronically processed and was conceivably taken from a recording of a traditional song relating to Kurtal. The recurrence of this underlying soundtrack suggests that the narration and the images are addressing something integral to the meaning of the film; the mysterious quality of the sound evincing a sense of the sacred or esoteric. But as what is sacred or esoteric in this film is embedded in the land, and as the overall sequence of scenes is dealing with the harsh realities of land claims, the sacredness pertaining to Kurtal is made politically significant and bound to the identity of the Walmatjarri and Wangkatjungka people.

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[114] Although only just audible, the stability of the rhythm in Spider's traditional singing here is arguably in itself a restatement of the sense of regularity and continuity that is a constituent of an Aboriginal eco-identity, with the concomitant imputation of sustainability.

Spider sits on real country, surrounded by artistic interpretations of what country is, while Putuparri voices Spider's opinion of the Federal Court's determination:

> Spider can't understand what the confusion is all about. It's his country, and always has been his country. In his mind, he never lost it in the first place. The problem is the whitefella law. It's written on paper, and it always changes. The blackfella law is written in the stars, on the ground, and in the countryside. And it has never changed. (Ma, *Putuparri* 1:02:00)

Putuparri's narration addresses the notion of stability: Blackfella[115] law is seen as more permanent and indeed more binding than whitefella law because it has been in place for possibly tens of thousands of years. Given that it operates within the context of the overarching philosophy of Dreaming, it is considered unchanging – ongoing relations with the Dreaming being understood as static – even if, as previously suggested, the reality might sometimes be otherwise. Whitefella law, on the other hand, is regularly adjusted to suit the needs of the population. The irony in imputing instability to laws written on paper is clearly deliberate. As sources of authority, the Crown and the Federal government garner less respect from Indigenous Australian populations than does an oral system of law that is thought to have been given by the ancestor spirits, and thus to be timeless. Furthermore, a continuity of presence and use is posited by the statement that Kurtal "always has been [Spider's] country". This defies the notion of *terra nullius* which, even if it is actually a misinterpretation of historical documents, has been influential in debates around the validity of Indigenous land claims. *Terra nullius* has been represented in academic, legal and public discourses as having assumed that the land was not in use; the presence of an Aboriginal population, although acknowledged, not reaching a minimum condition of meaningful occupation from the point of view of the colonising forces. So far as the circulation of eco-identities is concerned, the significance of this scene lies in the way the inseparable link between country and people is simultaneously demonstrated by the soundtrack, the narration and the framing of the image. The necessity of an Aboriginal presence on country is stated visually by swapping out the horizon for a series of paintings depicting country.[116] The desert expanse is not *terra nullius* but the cultured space of Aboriginal history, which is obviated by the painted version standing in for an expanse of country that had previously been interpreted as empty. Aboriginal history can be proven by the knowledge they have of their environment, which, in a neat reflexive turn, itself is proven by their painted representations of it. That Spider is portrayed with this frieze of identity promulgation in line with his head and with the horizon, visually corroborates his claim to Kurtal, just as it reinstates his identity as a tribal elder with both the mandate and responsibility to care for country. The children who painted the scenes, the community as a whole, and Spider in particular are all signalled as custodians, present and future. Their stated reciprocity with country, via Dreaming and Aboriginal law, is the basis upon which concepts of ecologically sustainable Indigenous cultures are built, which are being subtly alluded to through the conceptual interpenetration of painted image, physical environment and responsible elder that this shot

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115 This term for Aboriginals has crossed over from Aboriginal English into Standard Australian English. The corresponding term for Whites is usually only used in SAE when referring to an Indigenous point of view on Anglo-Australians. In some cases, Whitefella is used the same way as *Kartiya* (Central and Western desert) or *Balanda* (Arnhem Land) which can both refer to any non-Indigenous people, treated collectively or individually. Interestingly, the Yolgnu word *balanda* is said to have been derived from the Macassan (Indonesia) traders, whose word it is for their colonial masters, the Hollanders (Deger 247).

116 The irony that some of the paintings use a traditional Aboriginal visual grammar and others a mixture of traditional and non-traditional speaks to the contradictions inherent in any claim to stability, but only in so much as stability is equated with unchangingness.

achieves. This is reinforced by a narration which posits the ecologically grounded ontology of Aboriginal presence as a fact of environmentally situated law.

Having made the claim to country, the next scene depicts the elders gathered at Fitzroy Crossing to consider what to do about the exclusion of Kurtal from the native title decision. Upwards of 15 people sit and stand in a circle between parked cars, with a large, printed map of native title claims in the Kimberley spread out on the bare ground in the middle. The soundtrack consists of a simple, calming melody plucked on an acoustic guitar and voices discussing the map in 'language'.[117] As various people point to the map to make their point, Putuparri's narration states that "[w]hile some people used *kartiya* maps to discuss the boundaries of country, old Spider he preferred his own map" (Ma, *Putuparri* 1:03:20). Upon the pause between clauses, there is a cut to a different shot. The second clause of this sentence is paired with Spider's hand drawing in the sand at his feet. He has not cleared the ground of

sticks, grass and leaves in preparation for a formalised act of drawing. Instead, the image appears to corroborate the narrator's intimation that this is a more spontaneous act in reaction to the use of a "*kartiya* map". Spider can be heard talking in 'language' and repeating the word "Kurtal" as he draws an undulating line. The curves of the line would appear to function in multiple ways. They are an act of mapping as suggested by the contextualisation of the shot in a discussion of boundaries. A topographic reading of the linearity of the mark and the movement of the hand suggests passage through the desert sand towards a location. But the curving line also represents Kurtal, and in this sense the line as a whole represents a place, an ancestor, and a snake. A sand drawing is able to combine these levels of meaning in a way that a purely topographic map does not. Its simplicity, and its inscription into the ground, speaks of the directness of Aboriginal engagements with country. Showing the person with responsibility for the sacred site as favouring a sand drawing over the "*kartiya* map" places forms of knowledge into a

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[117] The film does not state which Aboriginal languages are being used in this scene, nor would this information affect my observations.

hierarchy, with the experiential taking precedence over the conceptual. The scene uses an ironic inversion to make its most pertinent point: Unlike the legally binding "*kartiya* map", the sand map is transient. It will be rubbed out or trodden across as soon as the meeting dissolves. But as was stated in the preceding scene, Aboriginal law is eternal and embedded in the ground. By juxtaposing shots of a sand map and a paper *kartiya* map, the latter is made to look relatively impermanent, sitting incongruously on the ground instead of being drawn into it. Sands shift, but Aboriginal laws do not. By drawing in the sand, Spider states his relationship to place as permanent and reciprocal, in a way that a "*kartiya* map" cannot. The significance of the sand drawing scene is understated by its fleetingness, but reinforced by the title sequence which also shows a hand drawing the curving line in sand. This time the curves are laid into a network of cross-hatched straight lines which reference traditional sand maps which, as previously described, were an abstract representation of geography used as a mnemonic aid (Ma, *Putuparri* 00:48). As Christine Watson argues in her study of sand drawings by Wangkatjungka women in the Great Sandy Desert, "the relation between the sign and its referent is not arbitrary but grounded in material reality" (Watson 108).[118] Spider thus demonstrates his own eco-identity, which is a proxy for that of the community at large. His eco-identity is achieved through subtle cues that reinforce the narration.

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[118] Watson takes this concept from Pierce's semiotics, which she uses throughout her analysis.

5.   Drawing a Conclusion in the Sand

Fleeting moments in Aboriginal films in which the Aboriginal eco-identity – an identity strategy that draws on the idea of 'caring for country' and is a kind of eco-philosophical ethicality – is established visually are of interest because they reinforce Aboriginal identity as being fundamentally ecological. The claim to an eco-identity might sometimes be made explicitly and verbally by individuals or on behalf of a community, although is not likely to expressed in using the terminology I have adopted here. Yet the subtle aesthetic means of expressing a cultural form of sustainability through mediums like film are worth equal attention as any overt claim to be 'caring for country'. They have the potential to persuade viewers tacitly by drawing upon already formulated stereotypes and recirculating them within contexts aligned with Indigenous politics. In many films, a few of which have been analysed here, the depiction of country is achieved in tandem with the depiction of human presence in a way that is suggestive of responsibility for or knowledge of place.

This study of how Aboriginal eco-identities are formally expressed began with a brief history of Aboriginal experience. Particular focus was placed on how the occupation of land may have been justified through the legal concept *terra nullius*, and mention was made of the fact that the limited understanding settlers had of indigenous culture meant that they did not accept that the land was occupied. Irrespective of whether *terra nullius* was important to contemporaneous debates in Great Britain about the right to colonise Australia, it has had an effect on the history of the Aboriginal land rights movement in Australia. The onus is still on Aboriginal people to prove the continuity of tradition and the ongoing use of country for traditional purposes, be they ceremonial or practical. A contrast was mentioned between the ownership of land under Australian common law and having a relationship with land under the orally transmitted system of Aboriginal law, in which mutually recognised rights were distributed according to kinship. The way country is formative of identity was then shown to be underlying the recirculating images of an Aboriginal identity based upon environmental responsibility and ecological sustainability. The basis upon which the Aboriginal eco-identity is formed was also explained by referring to Dreaming and the idea that Aboriginal people are sometimes thought to have innate ecological wisdom. Dreaming was shown to be significant because it makes relationships to place sensuous, as well as instilling country as a source of law and culture. Sand was offered as an example of this point of contact between the physical and metaphysical. Drawing in the sand involves movement and creativity akin to that performed by the ancestor spirits, whose acts are recorded by Dreaming. The transience of drawings in sand was also noted, because transience is in itself a formal embodiment of the principle of ecological sustainability that informs the eco-identity.

External representations of Aboriginal identity were described as being predicated upon the common understandings of a difference between nature and culture, while the eco-identity in particular was shown to be premised upon a mixture of Aboriginal spirituality, practical knowledge of the environment and non-Indigenous ideological projections onto Aboriginal people. Story-telling was described as making visible relationships to place that are otherwise unseen and unacknowledged. Examples were given of how eco-identities can be creatively formed and recirculated through the media

by Aboriginal people, working either within their communities or within the framework of a largely non-Indigenous production, which was related to the struggle over the circulation of stereotypes and how Aboriginal self-representation is tied up with identity and thus dogged by questions of authenticity. The idea that aesthetics is used to political ends was put forward and contextualised in relation to remote communities.

From the analysis of the three films above, it is possible to see how the Aboriginal eco-identity is founded upon the assertion of an affinity with the physical world. Aboriginal films can be understood as politically efficacious acts of communication, in which the content is complemented or extended by its form. The circulation of the eco-identity through the Australian mediasphere sometimes results in the incorporation of non-Indigenous perceptions of indigeneity. This sometimes occurs in the context of the production of a pan-Aboriginal identity, and sometimes the need of remote peoples to reinforce a local identity. We can say then, that the eco-identity is not just the result of long held traditions, but is affected and altered by the media through which it is expressed, and the contemporary conditions under which it is formulated. Sand drawing has been demonstrated as a particularly good example of the way filmic form can reinforce unobtrusive inscriptions of Aboriginal presence on land. Form can bring the image of ecological sustainability into coherence with modern Aboriginality. *Samson and Delilah*, *Aboriginal Rules* and *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* all achieve this in ways that appear to be deliberately unspectacular, so as to subtly reinforce the image of Aboriginals as possessing environmental knowledge and being party to a culture that is ecologically sustainable. As such the relationship between ephemerality and permanence that is symbolised by the sand drawing motif can be seen as characteristic of the Aboriginal eco-identity. The non-Indigenous majority in Australia has played a role in the creation and dissemination of the eco-identity. But going forward, with increasing development pressure on many remote areas which are rich in mineral resources and the ongoing debate over how to assist remote communities in their endeavour to meet the challenges posed by the deterioration of the social fabric, the question of how non-Indigenous Australians chose to relate to the Aboriginal eco-identity – whether to recognise or refute it, absorb or abhor it – remains open.

6.   Appendix: A Map of Australia

7. Filmography

Aboriginal Rules. Dir. Liam Campbell. Warlpiri Media Association, 2007.

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