

**Cinematic Campfires:
Australian Feature Film and Reconciliation, 2000-2010**

By

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Declaration of Originality

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A Note on Terminology

In this thesis I use Aborigine (with capital A) and Aboriginal people to refer specifically to Australian first nation peoples and indigenous (with lowercase i) to refer to first nation peoples more broadly. Consistent with current practice, Aborigine is used as a noun and Aboriginal as an adjective.

Articles

Various material from the Introduction and Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 7 of this thesis appears in the following journal articles:

Marsh, Pauline. "Family Tremors: Margot Nash's *Call Me Mum*." *Journal of the European Association of the Studies of Australia*. (forthcoming). Print.

Marsh, Pauline. "The Primitive, the Sacred and the Stoned in Richard J. Frankland's *Stone Bros*." *Studies in Australasian Cinema*. 6.1 (2012) 29-44. Print.

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List of Abbreviations

The following terms and their abbreviations are used regularly throughout this thesis:

Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC)

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

Australian Film Commission (AFC)

Australian Football League (AFL)

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC)

Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA)

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR)

Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER or NT Intervention)

Reconciliation Australia (RA)

Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC)

Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)

Abstract

In a speech at the Sydney Film Festival in 2005, actor Tom E. Lewis likened the Australian film industry to a campfire (see Lawson, “Along” 214). His metaphor creates a picture of the cinema as a site where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people gather to relax, tell and listen to stories, as they would around a campfire. This image of an inclusive cinema is especially pertinent given developments in the Australian feature film industry between 2000-2010. During this time an unprecedented number of feature films that focus on settler-indigenous relationships were released, drawing attention to a wide range of issues associated with co-existence. Moreover, many deploy new and sometimes challenging representational strategies to depict Aborigines, settlers, and settler-indigenous relations. The central concerns of this thesis are these films and their extra-textual contexts. Although they are a varied collection, when considered together they constitute a new movement in Australian cinema: Reconciliation Cinema.

In all its guises, Reconciliation Cinema is provocative. Reconciliation is not only the key conceptual, political, personal, social, and cultural context informing these films, it is also the subject of their critiques, celebrations and contestations. It is, however, an ongoing and problematic process in a perpetual state of redefinition. In Australia, reconciliation primarily involves recognising past wrongs, addressing the inequities that have resulted from the colonisation and dispossession of Aboriginal people, and ultimately improving relationships between settler and indigenous peoples. Reconciliation Cinema contributes new ideas to this process: through nuanced, fictional representations of Aborigines, settlers and settler-indigenous relations; and through the example of collaborative filmmaking. This thesis demonstrates the centrality of Reconciliation Cinema in developing self and national understandings of reconciliation.

I contend that during 2000-2010 a cinematic metanarrative of reconciliation—a conglomeration of drama, intrigue, surprise, trauma, sorrow and celebration—was firmly established in Australian cinema. This thesis comprises close readings of feature films, which reveals the ways that reconciliatory notions become manifest in cinema. In addition, it examines and analyses the broader contexts in which these films are situated. I identify three sites of intersubjectivity—on-screen, off-screen and reception (between spectator and

screen)—where dated modes of cross-cultural interaction are re-negotiated, and new models of behaviour are determined.

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Introduction

Breaking the Silence

A teenage Aboriginal girl, dishevelled and filthy, walks slowly into an empty church in Alice Springs. The camera follows her down the aisle, and as she looks sideways we catch a glimpse of her bruised and grazed face. This is not a cold, stark cathedral, but a modern, warmly lit building and on one of the walls hangs a framed picture of an Aboriginal Madonna and child. The girl's gaze lingers on this unusual iconography for a moment, before she turns calmly to see behind her a young priest—a white man—standing with his hands held loosely behind his back. His smile is faint, and gentle. The two characters observe each other briefly (figures 1 and 2), before the girl slowly retreats back up the aisle and exits the church.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The girl in the church, Delilah (Marissa Gibson), is the protagonist in Warwick Thornton's 2009 multi-award winning film *Samson and Delilah*, and the scene described takes place during a horrific period of her life. Since arriving in Alice, Delilah has been abducted, bashed, (presumably) raped and has become dependent on petrol sniffing. She and her boyfriend Samson (Rowan McNamara) are homeless and hopeless. Walking into the church is a pivotal point in the narrative: an intervention is needed to avert her death. Nevertheless, inside the church nothing happens. No words are spoken and things do not change for Delilah until after she leaves, when she is hit by a car. The silent encounter begs obvious questions: Why does she not ask the priest for help? Why does he not offer? Another option is for the priest to act the righteous clergyman and shun Delilah—indeed, in

the original script the priest shouts at Delilah to “get out ” (Gallasch 24)—but he does not do this either.

Whilst this is not a life-changing moment for Delilah, the silent church scene has a significant impact extra-textually for two reasons. First, it is an active rejection of past modes of representation in Australian cinema. Thornton, who also wrote and shot the film, stated he was uncomfortable with the priest’s aggressive dialogue so changed it at the time of shooting (qtd. in Gallasch 24). In deliberately choosing silence over a verbal outburst, Thornton also decides against depicting the clichéd images of racist and paternalistic white clergyman and a misunderstood black victim, representations that have dogged Australian cinematic imaginings of settler-indigenous contact. These more ambivalent characters are indicative of new strategies of representation of settler-indigenous relations, which are evident in a number of recent Australian feature films that foreground indigenous characters or focus on settler-indigenous relations. Second, the scene speaks to the complexities of contemporary cross-cultural relations in Australia. The ambiguity of this interaction allows multiple meanings to be formed not only about the two people involved, but also about that which they represent; it foregrounds, for instance, issues to do with past and present relationships between the church and Aboriginal people, racial hierarchies and intersecting spiritualities.

This exploratory approach to interculturalism is not unique to *Samson and Delilah* but typical of recent films that engage with issues, ideals and practices that lie at the heart of reconciliation: “negotiation, collaboration and reciprocity” (McGonegal 33). Moreover, there are synergies between on-screen cross-cultural relations and the activities occurring in the production arenas of these films as well, in particular, cross-cultural collaboration. Thornton’s production team for *Samson and Delilah*, for example, is a working arrangement combining professional skills and personal friendships: “The people I work with are the sorts of people I’d go down to the pub with or cook dinner for. Right down to the focus puller, not that we had a focus puller, but these are the people that I love.” (Thornton qtd. in de Bruyn 24). The central concern of this thesis is recent Australian feature films’ engagement with interculturalism that is, I contend, indicative of a new cinematic paradigm: Reconciliation Cinema.

“Cinematic Campfires: Australian Feature Film and Reconciliation, 2000-2010” analyses the complex interactions of select films with Australia’s broad, conflicted and persistent reconciliation process. Drawing on actor Tom E. Lewis’ metaphor of cinema as a

campfire (qtd. in Lawson, “Along” 214; Albert 7), my starting point is fiction film as a means by which stories, ideas and imaginings about settler-indigenous co-existence are shared. Cross-cultural intersubjectivity—that is, the dialogical (Bakhtin), visual and/or emotional exchanges between settler and indigenous subjects—is the dominant mode of interaction not only on-screen but also in the off-screen environs of the films at the core of this project. Extending Marcia Langton’s argument about the capacity for intersubjectivity to remake Aboriginality (*Well I* 33), I propose that cinematic intersubjectivity is also a method by which truths about reconciliation are explored, tested, promoted, dismissed or verified. Thus the cinema (or indeed any of the plethora of contemporary viewing sites) is a space where viewers have the opportunity to develop new meanings and understandings about notions of interculturalism and long-standing issues of cross-cultural interactivity in Australia.¹ Reconciliation Cinema is, thus, central to understandings of what it means to reconcile.

I begin with a brief look at past representational strategies of Aboriginality and cross-culturalism, leading up to 2000, to demonstrate how cinematic depictions preceding this period of Reconciliation Cinema have helped its facilitation.

Australian Cinema and Past Representations of Aboriginality

It is a truism that Aboriginal people have been largely underrepresented in Australian feature films since the industry began in the early 1900s: “relatively few films about them have been produced (and those that have been were made almost exclusively by whites)” (Zielinski 113). In 2003 Peter Krausz estimated that out of approximately 1000 feature films that had been produced in Australia up to that time, only 50 depicted Aborigines (90). Aboriginal characters that were often went uncredited, for example, the “Jacky” drovers in Harry Watt’s 1946 film *The Overlanders*. At other times they were substituted for black-faced whites, such as the actors in *Caloola* (1911) (see Pike and Cooper 28) and the Nugget-covered² Ed Deveraux in *Journey out of Darkness* (1967). Not until the 1970s did Aboriginal characters (played by Aborigines) become more frequently seen and central to

¹ Notwithstanding the problematic nature of bounded definitions of cultural identities, throughout this thesis I use “cross-cultural” to indicate two separate cultural entities, and “interculturalism” to refer to the state or condition that results from cross-cultural interactions.

² The term “Nugget-covered” or “nuggetted” derives from a well-known black shoe polish brand, Nugget.

narratives. Prior to this time not only were representations scarce, those extant were largely stereotypical and reflected a lack of “genuine understanding of the culture” (Zielinski 113).

Australian feature cinema has subscribed to certain rules of Aboriginal representation, resulting in a collection of clichéd, stereotypical tropes, with a limited and limiting scope of signification. These are often the images that comprise the primitive Other, whom Marianna Torgovnick describes as a conglomerate of idealised prehistoric people, places and behaviours: the “ultimately unknowable original state” (*Primitive* 4), mystical and harmonious with nature (*Gone* 8). To western-world spectators the cinematic image of the native primitive is well known (Columpar 75), and in Australian film (along with other visual mediums) particular indicators of Aboriginality are repeated: dark-skinned, mystical, outback and loin-clothed (Waitt 149). Aboriginal characters are invariably depicted as either part of the landscape (see McFarlane, “Back Tracking” 60; Crilly 37; Sargent 5), or savages (see Langton, *Well I* 34; Moore and Muecke 39; Molloy 124; Sargent 3), stock Hollywood jungle figures (see Pike and Cooper 142, 173; Pike 7) or other such objects of derision (see Molloy 124; Bodey, “Adjust” 19). Sometimes they are powerless victims (French, “An Analysis”) who are marginalised from white settlement (McFarlane, “Six” 30), at other times cinematic Aborigines are the “familiar stranger[s]” (Palmer and Gillard 75) who stall the pursuit of colonisation (see Krausz 90; Molloy 124). They are, moreover, either “non-adult, non-human, even inanimate” (Moore and Muecke 38), or even cultural artefacts or objects of curiosity (see Rekhari, “Jedda” 5; Rietiker Leigh 4). Mick Dodson adds another contemporary representation to these recurring tropes: “the aggressive drunkard, alternatively bucking and living off the system” (“The Wentworth” 9). In his seminal work on Australian feature films of 1930-60, Bruce Molloy notes there have also been sympathetic depictions of Aboriginal culture, particularly in Charles Chauvel’s films (124). *Jedda* (1955) for instance is notable for its attempt to convey the complexities of co-existence (see Molloy 139; Pike and Cooper 200; O’Regan, *Australian* 191). Nonetheless, the overall picture generated by past representations is one of a distorted (Langton, *Well I* 33), underdeveloped and unconvincing trope of Aboriginality.

It follows that if there was a dearth of Aboriginal characters in Australian fictions, and those that did appear were primarily autochthonous primitives, few opportunities were created for nuanced portrayals of the relations between Aborigines and non-Aborigines either. There is no option of intersubjectivity when one subject is either absent or otherwise represented only as object. In their respective texts on the history of the Australian film

industry, Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper and Tom O'Regan document a wide repertoire of films that were produced in Australia prior to the 1970s. These include early bushranger and drover films (O'Regan, *Australian* 168-69), convict films, gold rush and sporting dramas in the 1900s (Pike and Cooper 2-3), which were followed by war films and comedies (Pike and Cooper 48) then later documentary realist explorations of city life (Pike and Cooper 86, 150). Clearly, the actions, experiences, stories and ideologies of settler Australians are central to these films. Anne Hickling-Hudson contends that even when featuring Aborigines, Australian cinema has told its stories from white perspectives (264). The marginalisation of Aboriginality results in a hierarchy of representation that ultimately restricts interactions between equals.

However, in the 1970s the Australian film industry, sparked by increases in Government funding and the establishment of the Australian Film Development Corporation (which in 1975 became the Australian Film Commission [AFC]) began to increase production of feature films. At this time arts councils and State funded cinema bodies also directed money into cinema production (Pike and Cooper 234). The injections of funds triggered a revival of the film industry, which had stalled during the 40s and 50s. Not only was there a marked increase in the quantity of films produced, so too in the variety of content, genre and techniques; for example, filmmakers began to make the first Australian science fictions, feminist cinema and exploitation films (O'Regan, *Australian* 171-74). This diversity was also a result of increased transnational influences on cinema, a flow of global influences across national borders that started to impact during the 1970s (O'Regan, *Australian* 51), and was a substantial factor by the 1990s (Avram 23-24). One effect of a range of external influences on films is that their geographical place of production becomes less of a limitation (Ezra and Rowden 1). As a result of transnationalism Australian cinema became less discretely and identifiably "national" (O'Regan, *Australian* 50-51) and developed a more worldly awareness. Correspondingly, a shift in Aboriginal representational strategies also began to occur, and filmmakers and audiences began to be more interested in exploring themes of settler-indigenous relations.

While stereotypes and myths continued, and continue, to influence cinematic depictions of Aborigines (Crilly 37; Sargent 8-9), films in the 1970s began to portray characters and issues of interculturalism with added creativity and depth. O'Regan notes, at this time "the cleavage between the indigenous and settler culture(s) ha[d] become increasingly central," (*Australian* 275) socially, politically and in cinema. *Walkabout*, the

1971 feature by Nicholas Roeg, is an iconic film that exemplifies this cinematic shift. Notwithstanding apt criticisms of stereotyping, it depicts a journey of three young people, two white and one black, that is unconventional in both style and subject matter. Other examples of this period include Tim Burstall's comedy *Eliza Fraser* (1976), in which the non-indigenous characters replace the indigenous ones as the objects of derision, and two films that depict a loving friendship between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal characters: Henri Safran's heart-warming *Storm Boy* (1976) and Phillippe Mora's bushranger drama *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976). Andrew Pike claims that the Aboriginal characters in two 1977 dramas, *Backroads* and *The Last Wave* conform to archaic stereotypes (7-8), nonetheless he demonstrates that settler-indigenous relations is a central rather than peripheral theme in these films, as it is in Fred Schepisi's disturbing and groundbreaking *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978). For a period following Schepisi's film Australian cinema avoided films about race-relations, in part triggered by *The Chant*'s box-office failure and negative critical reception (see McFarlane, "Back Tracking" 60; Reynolds, *Chant* 56-9). Nonetheless, John Honey directed a gentle and moving film about a lonely Aboriginal woman, *Manganinnie*, in 1980, and in 1986 three films were released comprising very different interpretations of cross-cultural co-existence: Bill Bennett's collaborative production *Backlash*, *The Fringe Dwellers* by Bruce Beresford, and the box-office success *Crocodile Dundee*.

During the 1990s the range of indigenous-related issues being raised in feature films began to widen and become even more diverse. For example, *Jindalee Lady* (1992)³ tells the story of an Aboriginal fashion designer who is deeply conflicted by her loyalties to both ancient and modern worlds, and O'Regan notes two others: *Deadly* (1992) which attempts to break away from the depiction of Aborigines as a "social problem" and *Day of the Dog* (1993) that depicts multiple difficulties experienced by young Aboriginal people (*Australian* 286-87). *Dead Heart* (1996) is another ambitious drama of this decade that also foregrounds indigenous disadvantage, but the most notable film of this period is arguably Rachel Perkin's *Radiance* (1998). In this film, three strong but flawed Aboriginal women are portrayed with a complexity that eschews cliché and stereotype.

All of these films, through their engagement with racism and issues of contact and co-existence, paved the way for a decade of cinematic activity starting in the 2000s in

³ *Jindalee Lady* is the first feature film by an Aboriginal director, Brian Syron, although this claim is sometimes contested (see Langton, *Well I* 54).

which innovative depictions of interculturalism have become a regular feature. These films comprise the primary texts for this thesis. Brian McFarlane asks if anyone in the 1970s would have imagined *Ten Canoes* (2006), an Aboriginal language film that circulated in mainstream cinemas (“Six” 30). *Ten Canoes* was the first Australian feature length fiction film that required subtitling into English. Many other “firsts” have also been produced since 2000 and one might also wonder if viewers would have imagined, for instance, the musical *Bran Nue Dae* (2010) that sings and dances its way from Perth to Broome? Or the stoner comedy *Stone Bros.* (2009), that sniggers at a contemporary preoccupation with skin-colour and apologies? Moreover, *Yolngu Boy* (2000) was the first feature film to be made in Yirrkala in the Northern Territory. As well as these innovative indigenous films are re-imagined genre films: the contemporary road-movies *Beneath Clouds* and *Lucky Miles* (2007), three westerns that de-romanticise the Australian frontier—*The Tracker* (2001), *The Proposition* (2005), and *Red Hill* (2010)—and a court-room drama, *Black and White* (2002), that scrutinises the judicial system of the 1950s. Dramas such as *Boxing Day* (2007) and *Samson and Delilah* that foreground dysfunction in Aboriginal communities are surprisingly confronting additions to the Australian film collection. In 2002 four feature films depicting complicated past and present settler-indigenous realities in Australia appeared (*Australian Rules*, *Black and White*, *Beneath Clouds* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*); thus this year is often cited as a significant turning point in Australian cinema’s engagement with indigenous issues (see Chan 128; Colbert; McFarlane “Back Tracking” 60; Ferrero-Regis 94). In addition, minor indigenous characters and cross-cultural relations or indigenous issues as sub-themes have re-appeared in recent cinema, for example, in *Blessed*, *Last Ride* and *The Combination* (all released in 2009).⁴ During 2000-2010, as films have begun to expand the visual repertoire of codified images further and in ways new to Australian cinema, the pessimism in and about early portrayals of Aboriginal people has been replaced by an optimism amongst critics and scholars.

It is significant that three of the feature films from this decade were made by Aboriginal filmmakers (*Bran Nue Dae*, *Stone Bros.* and *Samson and Delilah*), as it demonstrates a significant increase in indigenous activity in the Australian feature film industry. This is partly the result of a deliberate strategy by Screen Australia, which began in earnest in 1993 when the AFC established an Indigenous Unit which aimed to develop

⁴ Issues pertaining to Aboriginal actors playing minor roles, or roles that are inconsequential to their Aboriginality are raised in Chapters Three and Four.

the skills of Aboriginal filmmakers and provide opportunities for production (Glow and Johanson 71, 82). This triggering a “renaissance ... of indigenous filmmaking” (Frankland qtd. in Siemienowicz) and Screen Australia (formed when the AFC amalgamated with the Film Finance Corporation in 2008) continues the original vision of the Indigenous Unit. Screen Australia also extends the work of indigenous-controlled media organisations in remote areas, such as The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), which also providing media training for Aboriginal people. These local organisations can be a stepping-stone into the industry (Ferrero-Regis 91; Glow and Johanson 79), as Thornton’s progression from camera operator to critically acclaimed writer and director attests. In addition, support from the Adelaide Film Festival has enabled a number of major film projects with central indigenous characters and themes to be realised, including *The Tracker*, *Australian Rules* and *Boxing Day*.

What is most remarkable about the releases by indigenous directors is the fact that while the three films—*Samson and Delilah*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.*—challenge the codes of representation established in earlier cinema, they also negotiate the counter-codes that have come to be expected of indigenous responses to colonisation. Ironically, prescriptive demands on indigenous modes of representation can have a limiting effect on “speaking back” to colonial images. That is to say, it has come to be expected that indigenous films will be political, anti-colonial, or decolonising (Turcotte 8), and thus exist in a sort of cultural cocoon. However, *Samson and Delilah*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.* eschew such limitations. They are instead reflective of a Fourth cinema that is defined as Corinn Columpar does, as a cinema which employs a “diverse array of representational practices” and constantly engages in dialogical interactions with other strains of cinema (for example, First, Second and Third cinemas⁵) (xiv-xv). The three films are completely unlike in style and content, and each is thus a unique “imaginary site:” consequently, they create a dynamic liminal space where people can (re)negotiate their identities (Ferrero-Regis 89) as well as their understandings of their relationships with others. Australian Fourth cinema is also part of a general industry maturation, which is characterised by its “uncompromising scrutiny” of Australian society (McFarlane, “Resisting” 47). That is,

⁵ “First Cinema” commonly refers to Hollywood, or western-world cinema; “Second” to Art House cinema, or the works of auteur filmmakers; “Third Cinema” refers to the theory and practice of cinema that is counter to the dominant First and Second modes (not to be confused with “Third World” cinema, which applies to films produced in Third-world countries). Fourth Cinema refers specifically to indigenous films, although the criteria for inclusion into this category are not fixed. For a comprehensive explanation of the development and definition of Fourth Cinema see Columpar.

these and many other Australian feature films are picturing the nation not through the uncritical deployment of clichés and tropes, but through more complex modes of representation.

The films at the centre of this thesis both influence and are influenced by their contemporary extra-diegetic arenas. Australian films that focus on settler-indigenous relations are part of a movement that is not only cinematic but also much broader, and one that has been occurring over many years in a range of Australian public and private domains: Australia's reconciliation process. This thesis does not study the history of reconciliation in Australia, nor critique the movement *per se*. Rather, it considers reconciliation to be a key element of the social, conceptual and political contexts of these films, as well as the concept and mode of practice that facilitates their production. It is also the movement upon which they exert their strongest influences. Therefore, because Reconciliation Cinema is both influenced by, and influences, reconciliation, before discussing the films themselves, firstly I provide an overview of reconciliation as both concept and practice.

Reconciliation: Concept and Practice

Reconciliation is a loose, dynamic and contested concept that informs a process that is also frequently being reshaped. In its theological context, reconciliation refers to the restoration of relationships between people and God, and between estranged individuals (Phillips, "Aboriginal" 116). Fundamentally a moral project, its emphasis is on peacemaking through repentance and forgiveness (see Phillips, "Aboriginal" 116; Kiss 82; Schlink 72; Van Roermund 179) rather than the pursuit of truth and punishment for past wrongs. National reconciliation agendas are common not only to settler-colonised nations such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, but also to countries in the aftermath of war or prolonged oppression under dictatorship to end violence and promote peaceful co-existence: Libya, Afghanistan and Liberia are recent examples, and others include European countries—most notably Germany and the Balkans—and parts of Asia, Africa and South America. However, in all of these countries that deal with the aftermath of ethnicity-based injustices, including Australia, reconciliation is rarely just political; rather, a combination of institutional, social and faith-based actions comprise the process.

Reconciliation entails the deployment of multiple efforts, public and personal, to transform relations and inequities.

Reconciliation is most aptly described as an ongoing process that seeks “new conditions of interactions [as opposed to those ascribed to colonial or neo-colonial encounters]—conditions centred on the ideals of negotiation, collaboration and reciprocity” (McGonegal 33). Importantly, as this definition by Julie McGonegal suggests, central to the process is cross-cultural intersubjectivity. To understand reconciliation in this light allows for its dynamism, and avoids anticipating an imminent end-point. It does not foreclose or ignore the many flaws and shortcomings of the process either. The transformational changes that occur under these conditions do so on the basis of egalitarian moral imperatives, such as negotiation and collaboration. These same ethical principles are also the most evident concerns of Reconciliation Cinema.

In Australia, reconciliation entails recognising prior wrongs committed against Aboriginal people under the auspices of colonisation, as well as rectifying the inequities and divisions that persist in its aftermath. It is constituted by three separate yet intersecting elements: practical measures to address indigenous disadvantage and racial inequities; symbolic and spiritual acts of apology, forgiveness and solidarity; and measures to implement and maintain indigenous rights. The elements that comprise these three facets of reconciliation—practical, symbolic and rights-based—are often also categorised under the banners of formal (or political) and informal (or personal) reconciliation measures. Notwithstanding important preceding political events of the 1960s and 70s (including the Referendum in 1967 and Land Rights Legislation⁶) formal reconciliation officially commenced in Australia with the passing of the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act* in 1991 and the appointment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). The rationale behind the *Act* was that dispossession had occurred without negotiation of a treaty, and consequently Aborigines suffered great disadvantage in relation to white Australians across a gamut of social indicators (*CAR Act*). The ultimate aim of the work of the Council was for “A united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all” (CAR, *Final*).

⁶ The 1967 Referendum resulted in the removal of a discriminatory clause in the Australian Constitution that excluded Aborigines from being counted as citizens, and permitted the Federal Government to pass legislation affecting Aborigines. The *Aboriginal Lands Right Act (Northern Territory)* (1976) was the first major piece of national legislation passed to recognise Aboriginal land ownership; it enabled the granting of inalienable freehold title.

The Council's ten-year life involved community consultation, public education and policy development. In 2000 the Council released the "Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation," a document that captures the multifarious nature of reconciliation and is designed to set the future political and social direction for the reconciliation process. It acknowledges the need to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as original owners and custodians, their customary laws, and their unique spiritual relationships to land; the need to heal the wounds sustained through colonisation; and that reconciliation is as much about attitudes as it is rights, responsibilities and practical measures to overcome disadvantage (CAR, *Australian Declaration*). In 2000 the non-Government body Reconciliation Australia replaced CAR.

Reconciliation remains the umbrella policy for Government programs that relate specifically to indigenous Australians and race-relations. Although the "Declaration" advised a broad approach, political initiatives introduced since 2000 under the Howard, Rudd and Gillard Governments respectively have focussed mainly on practical elements of reconciliation. That is, addressing indigenous disadvantage through such measures as Shared Responsibility Agreements, The Northern Territory Intervention and "Stronger Futures" policies, and the "Closing the Gap" initiatives.⁷ For the most part, symbolic expressions of reconciliation have been deployed beyond the political arena as part of a largely informal people's movement. These include, but are not limited to, mass bridge-walks in major Australian cities in 2000, signing of "Sorry" books that travelled the country, establishing workplace Reconciliation action plans, and attending reconciliation reading groups.⁸ Its preference for practical measures notwithstanding, the Federal Government did perform a highly symbolic political act in 2008 when it issued a formal apology to the Stolen Generations at the opening of parliament.

⁷ Shared Responsibility Agreements, introduced in 2004, involve Aboriginal communities signing a contract with Government for certain services in return for actions undertaken by the community concerned. For example, the community of Mulan agreed to wash children's faces prior to school (necessary to prevent trachoma) in return for bowlers for the non-addictive Opal Fuel to be installed in the community. The Northern Territory Interventions and Stronger Futures Policy are discussed in detail in Chapters Four and Five. The "Closing the Gap" initiative is discussed in Chapter Five.

⁸ In 2000, approximately 250 000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge to show their support for reconciliation. Similar walks took place around the nation. "Sorry" books were initiated by the lobby group Australians for Native Title in 1997 and were made available around Australia for people to sign and write a personal message of apology to the Stolen Generations. The Stolen Generations are often the focus of Reconciliation Cinema, including *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and *Australia* (2008), and are discussed throughout this thesis. Reconciliation action plans are facilitated by Reconciliation Australia, with the aim of increasing education about indigenous issues and enabling reconciliation specifically in the workplace or community organisations. Reconciliation Reading Groups, in operation across Australia, facilitate shared reading and discussion of select texts dealing with reconciliation issues.

Addressing indigenous rights involves both formal and informal measures to foster and maintain discrete Aboriginal cultural identities, consistent with the principles outlined in the United Nations “Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” which Australia endorsed in 2009. This arm of reconciliation is also importantly concerned with addressing the imbalance of power relations between black and white Australians (Gunstone 4). The Australian movement for indigenous rights calls for the establishment of a treaty, constitutional recognition and the facilitation of (various forms of) Aboriginal sovereignty. Whilst there have been some highly influential formal measures that have addressed some aspects of indigenous rights in Australia—for example the passing of the Land Rights and Native Title legislations—in general terms addressing indigenous rights has not been a political priority, particularly since 2000 (Gunstone 3-4). Perhaps with this in mind, longstanding champion of indigenous rights and former co-chair of Reconciliation Australia, Mick Dodson, in the annual Australian National University Reconciliation Lecture in 2009, undertook to demonstrate how symbolic and rights-based approaches to reconciliation were not necessarily mutually exclusive (“Annual”). A shift toward recognising Aboriginal rights in the formal arena in more recent times is, however, apparent. The new national body representing indigenous Australians, The National Congress for First Peoples, was launched in 2010 by the Gillard Government with the principal aim to “advocate for the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ rights” (*National*). The Congress has commenced negotiating for constitutional reform, as well as work on a range of similar activities.

Reconciliation evokes much debate and discontent. To claim as I do that it remains an important presence in Australian cultural life requires an acknowledgment of its problematic connotations. There are multifarious criticisms of reconciliation, which come from a variety of political and ideological positions. A dominant condemnation of Australia’s political reconciliation agenda to date relates to its underlying agenda of unification. Striving for unity, that is, to seek cultural interconnections and similarities, can be a means of effecting peaceful co-existence and restoration (Schlink 78). However, scepticism of national unity derives from the belief that “unity” is a euphemism for neo-colonial white dominance, and that unity comes at the expense of cultural differences and indigenous rights (see Moran; Brennan; Short; Gunstone; Wadham; Djerrkura qtd. in Clarke, *Larrpan* 264-66). Arguments against addressing indigenous rights are based on a reverse logic: pursuing indigenous rights is divisive, separatist and counter-productive to

reconciliation aims (see Gunstone 3; Newspoll et al 36; Pearson, “The Need” 263). Formal reconciliation is thought incapable of accommodating indigenous rights (see Nicoll; Burrige; Gunstone; Short; Farley 111); and an alternative but related point of contention is that the whole movement is not driven by a moral imperative to address inequities, but rather by an overwhelming sense of settler illegitimacy (Moran). That is, reconciliation is the means for freeing “the nation of the guilt and shame associated with its foundation” (Moran 101) rather than achieving transformative changes for Aboriginal people. As such, staunch critics of formal reconciliation regard it as not only assimilationist, but deeply racist (see Moran; Wadham).

Symbolic gestures of reconciliation evoke similarly passionate criticisms. These are best understood through an examination of the public and scholarly reactions to one of the central motifs in the nation’s reconciliation narrative, the formal apology to the Stolen Generations. A formal apology had been recommended in *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From their Families*, conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1997 (250-51). However, the Howard Government refused to deliver such an apology (Maddison 50) and this became the source of much controversy for the ensuing eleven years. Concerns about *Bring Them Home*’s bias and inaccuracies (Sutton 209-10) and about the impacts that apologising might have on the present (Morton 255), amongst others, delayed a formal apology until a change of Government in 2007. For some detractors, the apology is further evidence of guilt-ridden settlers’ envy, melancholy and need to secure a “legitimate sense of belonging” (Gooder and Jacobs 212) for themselves. It is considered to have falsely and prematurely obliterated past wrongs, and circumvented dealing with uncomfortable truths (Gooder and Jacobs 213). Reiterating this idea, Sarah Maddison, in her book *Black Politics*, discusses a tension between mourning and celebration that she sees permeates reconciliation. An appropriate period of mourning is necessary, she contends, when dealing with past wrongs, and caution must be exercised to avoid moving too rapidly toward any form of celebrating (213).

Harking to its religious affiliations, the acts of apologising and granting forgiveness are intertwined with reconciliation’s emphasis on reparative or restorative justice. With a focus only on restorative measures, “true” justice may be pushed aside; for instance Damien Short claims: “All too often it seems the notion of forgiveness does ‘win out’ over justice” (304). Peter Sutton also worries that large-scale “sacramental” acts give nations a

false sense of absolution for crimes past (195). Two years following the apology in Australia opinions were mixed as to its lasting significance and impact. Isabelle Auguste championed its importance, and claimed that it put reconciliation “back on track” (317). However the event was also considered to be only a transient foray into the realm of symbolism by a Government that then retreated back to a practical pursuit (and consequently lost its “heart”) (“Reconciliation Push” 6). While Mick Dodson thought it had been a positive step toward healing and restoration, for him it represented only “one piece of the complex puzzle” (“Many” 7), and his thoughts were loudly echoed by Michael Gordon in a post-apology feature article in *The Age* newspaper (7).

As well as widespread criticism there is also much support for reconciliation, but it is most commonly reserved for informal actions rather than the formal processes per se; that is, when reconciliation is expressed culturally, personally or socially it often attracts a positive response. For example, successful reconciliation is considered to comprise of healthy personal relations (Dodson, “Annual”) and collaborative acts that occur “automatically” (Sutton 208). Reconciliation is for leaders *and* people, argue Michelle Grattan (7), Frank Brennan (32), Henry Reynolds (“Crossroads” 54), Dodson (“Annual”) and Linda Burney (70); as well as Paul Keating in his iconic Redfern Park Speech.⁹ Telling and hearing stories are also beneficial in the process of comprehending, experiencing and achieving reconciliation (see Brennan; McGonegal; Olubas and Greenwell). To date, reconciliation in Australia has embraced autobiography and oral testimony particularly, which has resulted in a “narrative view” of the self and of the nation (Whitlock 242, 250). Reconciliation is, therefore, personal and political, as well as cultural and artistic (Byrne 26). The informal arenas—personal relations, storytelling and creativity—are where feature cinema takes its place.

These disparate concerns and appreciations that comprise the public discourses of reconciliation make evident two key features of Australia’s reconciliation process. The first is the enormous breadth of the task that it undertakes. The second is the ambiguous nature of reconciliation which allows for a myriad of contesting and competing interpretations of its meaning. This thesis explores how both features—enormity and ambiguity—also permeate cinema’s engagement with issues of reconciliation. With an ear to broader social

⁹ Delivered on December 10, 1992 in inner-city Sydney, the Redfern Park Speech called upon white Australians to accept responsibilities for past injustices against Aboriginal people, and to work together to “turn the goals of reconciliation into reality” (Keating 63).

and political contexts, Reconciliation Cinema seeks and establishes conditions of cross-cultural interactions that expand understandings of what it means to reconcile.

Reconciliation Cinema: An Introduction

This is our campfire.

Actor Tom E. Lewis (qtd. in Lawson, “Along” 214; Albert 7)

Blackfellas and whitefellas made this film together. It’s a bit of a metaphor for what this country can do.

Director Wayne Blair (qtd. in Bodey, “*Sapphires*”)

Australian Reconciliation Cinema comprises of films that speak directly to the notions and practices of reconciliation in Australia. The core films in this thesis demonstrate an explicit interest in relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and interculturalism is at the centre of their narratives. Reconciliation Cinema foregrounds the aims of Australia’s reconciliation process, but at the same time critiques, celebrates and contests those very ideals.

Critics and scholars have noted cinema’s increasingly important role in reconciliation. Sarah Jane Scott, for example, argues that cinema has begun to function as a site for the national reconciliation movement (169) and Catriona Elder also claims that filmic receptions are part of its broad dialogue (142). Prompted by an increased prominence of issues of reconciliation in films, Margaret Pomeranz also claims that Australian cinema has started to make an important contribution to the broader process (“Bad Box”). Sylvia Lawson, looking at the long queues for the annual Message Sticks festival of indigenous films in 2009, wonders whether this is an indication that “the reconciliation process has perhaps inched a little further on” (“The New Black”). Actor Aaron Peterson, in an interview to promote Melbourne’s 2010 Blak Nite indigenous cinema festival, also used the metaphor of the campfire to express his belief that film is important to reconciliation efforts: “The bigger the audience around the campfire the better. A united campfire, that’s what I want” (qtd. in City of Melbourne). This thesis explores further what is hinted at in these comments, and through close reading and extratextual analysis demonstrates the ways

in which Australian feature films are engaging directly with reconciliation and what they offer to the process.

There are three sites of cinematic engagement with the concept and practices of reconciliation. The first is on-screen, through strategic representational techniques. Indeed, the most immediate way that Reconciliation Cinema enters into broader discourses is via the politics of representation, an integral component of reconciliation. Representation in cinema is a discursive schema of signifying practices that are reflective of and influential upon both the filmic context and the broader social, cultural and political arenas within which they circulate. Although films are “the products and expressions of the particular set of social, economic, and political relations of the period in which they were made” (Sargent 1), this is counter-balanced by the important fact that cinematic representation in fiction film does not seek to replicate reality or truth, nor its opposites (Moore and Muecke 36). The majority of the films comprising Reconciliation Cinema not only depict Aboriginal characters with complexity, they also frequently portray more nuanced and intriguing cross-cultural intersubjectivities than have been seen before. The diegetic relationships between characters are thus a means for exploring and negotiating what it means to reconcile. In addition, in *The Tracker*, *The Proposition*, *Red Hill*, *Australian Rules*, *September* (2007), *Beneath Clouds*, *Black and White*, *Lucky Miles*, *Serenades* (2001), *Jindabyne* (2006), *Call me Mum* (2008), and *Boxing Day* particularly, we see the characters themselves attempt, dialogically, to make sense of reconciliation. Notwithstanding that realism is the style of choice for some of the films in this project, and many of the films are based on real life situations or historical events, all of the films are fictional imaginings. As such, they represent “the life we might have lived, a parallel universe of experience and emotion” (Lydon 148); therefore, this thesis does not analyse the “truthfulness” of cinematic depictions of Aboriginality or of interculturalism. Rather it is interested in the meanings that the various fictional representations invite us to consider.

The second site where reconciliation is explored is the off-screen, collaborative filmmaking environment. Reconciliation Cinema comprises many cross-cultural collaborative projects that are made up of various combinations of indigenous and non-indigenous teams: filmmakers, actors, producers and crew. I argue that collaboration not only enables hitherto silent voices a place on-screen (Anderson, “I” 12) but also create the situation where those voices, the stories they tell and the identities they create, are constantly challenged and (re)negotiated throughout production. It is telling that one of the

founding members of the AFC's Indigenous Film Unit, Wal Saunders, champions collaborative filmmaking as an ideal means to negotiate representation (O'Regan, *Australian* 278), and that the Aboriginal media associations that have survived over the last twenty years are those that are deliberately cross-culturally collaborative (Hinkson 166). This thesis examines *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Ten Canoes* and *Yolngu Boy* to demonstrate the ways that collaborative production is reconciliation in practise. An analysis of collaborative production means that films that might otherwise be excluded from this thesis, because they feature almost solely indigenous characters rather than cross-cultural interactivities (e.g., *Samson and Delilah*, *Yolngu Boy*, *Stone Bros.* and *Ten Canoes*) are included as Reconciliation Cinema texts. These films, in which non-indigenous characters feature only fleetingly if at all, are nonetheless important texts to consider because whilst they do not always engage directly with interculturalism per se, they have much of importance to say much about cross-cultural co-existence.

The third site at which filmic reconciliation plays out is in the liminal space of contact between the spectator and the screen. I propose that intersubjective interaction between spectator and film is an opportunity for viewers to negotiate meanings of reconciliation. Meaghan Morris points out that while the spectator-screen encounter is not an actual dialogue, "it can help" (16). Reconciliation films create a space similar to the "transcultural zone" of literature (Devlin-Glass, "A Politics" 406) (see also Joseph; Herrero; Ashcroft), where viewers to enter into the narrative to explore the past, present and future of interculturalism. To consider reception thus, as intersubjective exchange, accepts the contemporary spectator premise that the spectator is not constituted by the powerful ideology of cinema (Hayward 374) but is a thinking-subject and meaning-constructor: both "effect and agent of the text" (Hayward 402). The establishment of the spectator as agent can be read alongside contemporaneous ideas in Marxism and psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism and post-structuralism,¹⁰ queer theory, race and ethnicity studies and postcolonialism: all which intersect with spectator theories.

Active viewership is a central tenet of post-structuralism, feminism, queer theory

¹⁰ For example, psychoanalysis explains the viewer/screen relationship in terms of the screen as the Lacanian mirror and each viewing experience "a repetition of the Oedipal trajectory" (Hayward 370). In this context, film functions metonymically for the unified ego-ideal, and projects desires and enables the viewer to access "imaginary unity and the site where the unspoken can be spoken" (Hayward 403). The structuralist view positions the spectator in an equally passive position, and considers film to be an Althusian ideological apparatus (Stokes and Maltby 2) which constructs the spectator to its liking.

and race studies. These fields of scholarship call into question assumptions inherent in the psychoanalytical and structuralist understandings of the spectator (as male, white, straight, passive and constituted by film). Cultural studies, particularly, insists on the notion of the active viewer. Stuart Hall claims that equal emphasis needs be placed on the decoder (the viewer) and the text (the encoded document) in order to understand how film generates meanings (“Encoding”). A range of determinants are thought to influence any viewing experience—intertextual and locational factors, as well as personal influences such as gender, class, age and cultural experience (Hayward 373-74). Kate Bowles adds geographical and distributional factors to this list, and argues that as a result of this multiplicity of influences, cinema going is an intricate process of “anticipating, negotiating, mobility and shared reflection” (“Limit” 84). An active spectator of Reconciliation Cinema means that the viewing experience is, therefore, interactive and intersubjective.

While spectatorial agency is on the one hand enabled by certain factors, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that other factors have a counter-function, namely ignorance and limited cultural knowledge. They claim that active decoding of mainstream (hegemonic) images is only possible to “the extent that collective life and historical memory have provided an alternative framework of understanding;” alternative, that is, to what the mainstream mass-market media provides (*Multiculturalism* 5). Whilst this may on the one hand appear a somewhat elitist argument, it nonetheless provides an important cap on idyllic notions of the spectator. It is also of particular relevance to resistance or postcolonial readings of texts, which Reconciliation Cinema sometimes invites, because in order to counter any hegemonic encoding one must first be familiar with such codes and their social, ideological and political implications. This does not alter, however, the premise upon which my research rests. That is, that an audience is not a homogenous, passive sponge, but rather a diverse and heterogeneous array of individuals who construct multiple, unpredictable meanings from their film-going experiences.

As these three sites of cinematic cross-cultural intersubjectivity (on-screen, in production, and at reception) intersect with broader extratextual arenas of reconciliation across public and private, formal and informal spheres ideas about what it means to reconcile are generated. It functions as a window into how the concept of reconciliation has been, and continues to be, interpreted into practice in Australia. Whilst Andrew Schaap, for example, separates the three main components of Australia’s political reconciliation—the practical, restorative (symbolic) and constitutional (rights-based) elements—from the more

ambivalent, overarching concept that informs it (250), Reconciliation Cinema insists on intersectionality. Reconciliation Cinema is thus central to personal and national efforts to make sense of our cross-cultural realities.

This thesis examines feature-length films, although there are many other modes (for example short film, television drama, YouTube clips) and types of films (documentary, experimental, or ethnographic) that might have been included in this project. Feature films, classified by Screen Australia as those 60 minutes or longer, are chosen because as works of fictional storytelling they have the capacity to be particularly effective and imaginative intersubjective experiences. Cinema has the ability to engender empathy, to be “seductive” (Lydon 139) and to convince us of the possibilities it presents. Aden Ridgeway, making a strong case for telling stories as a part of Australia’s reconciliation process, states “the art of storytelling is at the centre of reconciliation and reconciliation is at the heart of Australian society” (13). Reconciliation Cinema harnesses two important storytelling traditions in particular: the practice of indigenous oral storytelling and the imagining of Australia through story in film. Fiction films are an ideal mode for creating heartfelt connections between viewers and the characters, mise-en-scene, narrative and music; indeed, empathy is perhaps “difficult to achieve outside of the fictionalised setting” (Bennett and Beirne xix). Film is perhaps at its most expositive when connections are well established between the audience and the film.

It is possible to argue that all Australian cinema is unavoidably concerned with issues of indigeneity, colonisation, its aftermath and nationhood. However, excluded from this project are feature films that may well contribute to understandings of reconciliation, but do not focus on indigenous characters or themes of interculturalism or are not collaboratively produced. A key Australian cinema text *Cinema After Mabo* (2004) reads a collection of short films, television, documentary and features as post-Mabo texts, although they do not necessarily overtly engage with indigenous Australia. It examines the revisions and retractions of cinematic national imaginings following both the 1992 landmark High Court decision to recognise Native Title and the political fallout that ensued. The authors, Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, argue that the Mabo decision resulted in a seismic shift in the nation’s historical consciousness, and that this is evident in the changes in the cinematic treatment of familiar motifs such as landscape and home (7). Whilst *Cinema After Mabo* informs this thesis, my approach differs to that of Collins and Davis. Rather than spring-boarding from a particular political or social event in Australian race-relations,

my starting point is films that directly and overtly engage with interculturalism (through the strategic deployment of indigenous characters, themes of cross-cultural co-existence and collaborative filmmaking practices) and from this interpersonal standpoint I examine their relationships with broader associated discourses.

My project intersects with another key piece of recent related scholarship, Corinn Columpar's *Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film* (2010). In her book Columpar analyses the representation of Aboriginality in Fourth cinema from Australia, the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand. She too is concerned principally with cinematic interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. Columpar deliberately chooses films which "produce Aboriginality as a sign in their discursive economy—but they do so by a plurality of means and to a variety of ends" (xv), thus ensuring her analysis includes films that do not subscribe to any one representational strategy. Establishing broad inclusion criteria enables films to be considered that are not only made by indigenous filmmakers, or adopt an expectant "indigenous" representational strategy. This enables Columpar's discussion to move beyond the established conventions of representational scholarship, which she summarises as:

white versus Aboriginal filmmaker, stereotypical versus authentic representation, dominant versus marginal cinema, illusionist versus self-reflexive form, maintenance of the ideological status quo versus political subversion, fiction versus documentary. (xv)

My study also moves beyond these oppositional boundaries, as it reveals the new conditions of interactivity that are to be found in an analysis of Reconciliation Cinema texts and their extra-textual contexts.

The work of Columpar and Collins and Davis has been influential on the methodology—a combination of close reading and context analysis—I have chosen. I read the visual texts closely whilst paying attention to their extratextual environs and relevant intertextual influences that come to bear on the primary sources. Thus my analysis is both semiotic (identifying and analysing cinematic signifiers of reconciliation) and contextual (considering the impacts of social, political and cultural environments on the film, and vice versa). This methodological approach means a number of intersecting theoretical contexts are engaged, including, but not limited to, reconciliation theory, postcolonial studies and

reception theory; as well as the critiques of indigenous, Fourth, genre, and national cinemas. The chapters are organised by grouping the primary texts according to shared thematic, mode of production or genre traits. This approach means that the range of issues that the films raise for a reconciling nation are clearly illuminated.

Beginning with films that look at the early stages of interculturalism in Australia, Chapter One—"Re-visioning Collaboration on the Frontier"—examines how three Australian westerns, *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill*, engage with the colonial past. There is a shared sense of postcolonial longing in these films, as each imagines a frontier defined by an intricate interplay of violence and beauty, and of hatred and friendship. As black and white characters negotiate their way in and around these polemical positions, viewers are challenged to do the same. These three films unavoidably participate in the heated debates that persist in reconciliation discourses about the retelling of history: debates that question the value of fictional accounts of history, and create uncertainties about the relationship between the past and the present and ultimately about the nature of truth itself (see Van Roermund; Borneman; Attwood, *Telling*). Anxieties about the role that subjective memory plays alongside archival memory, in both history production and the representation of contemporary realities (see Chakrabarty; Attwood *Telling*; Attwood and Chakrabarty 201; Curthoys; Jacobs, *The Character*), are also explored. This chapter demonstrates that truth, falsehoods, reality and memory come to bear on these and many depictions of historical settler-indigenous relationships, and do not detract from capacity of *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* to reshape ideas about the colonial past and our present realities.

"Picturing a Golden Age," Chapter Two, focuses on three films that evoke the golden age of youth to explore the utopian ideals of reconciliation. In the coming-of-age films *Australian Rules*, *September* and *Beneath Clouds* the central young characters hold idyllic notions about friendship and equality that prove to be the keys to transformative behaviours. Intimate intersubjectivity, deployed in the close relationships between the indigenous and non-indigenous youths in these films, generates multiple questions about the value of normalised adult-world interculturalism. I suggest that the most pointed significance of these films lies in the nature of the young adults' compromises that they make. As they reach the inevitable moral crisis that awaits them on the cusp of adulthood, despite pressures to abandon their childhood friendships instead they sustain their utopian (golden) visions for the future.

The impact of formalised structures of power on interculturalism is the focus of Chapter Three, “Screening Power.” This chapter reads *Black and White* and *Lucky Miles* as two contrasting imaginings of cross-cultural relations. Both films are set within formal institutions and raise issues of institutional and personal racism. They hint at the possibility of a post-racial Australia and ask what might be lost or gained for reconciliation in either opposing scenario. Chapter Four, “Dancing with the Daughter of Mother Earth,” reveals how three stylistically divergent films with strong central female characters introduce important factors for consideration into reconciliation discourses: gender, family and sexuality. The films, *Serenades*, *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum*, explore the primitive, wise and flawless Aboriginal woman stereotype, the daughter of mother earth, in differing ways. While *Serenades* uses the trope uncritically, *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum* do so subversively to foreclose on romantic notions of an unattainable, ideal woman, who might solve the problems of cross-cultural co-existence.

In Chapter Five, “Respecting Yourself,” I examine how films that depict Aboriginal characters in dysfunctional situations contribute to understandings of reconciliation. An analysis of two confronting films, *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah*, demonstrates that both advocate a controversial position: the importance of individual self-respect. Interestingly, this presents a challenge to Australia’s reconciliation movement, which commonly places a high value on respecting collective Aboriginal culture. Furthermore, the filmmakers Kriv Stenders and Warwick Thornton respectively, have achieved critical acclaim for their crafts. This emphasis on individual achievement provides an interesting synergy between their own journeys and that of their protagonists. These two films also draw attention to the similarities between the emotive power of symbolic acts of reconciliation and that of films that realistically depict traumatic Aboriginal lives.

A shift to a focus on off-screen production takes place in Chapter Six—“Collaborative Decolonisation”—as I look at what implications the collaborative filmmaking efforts behind *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* have for reconciliation. Collaborative production raises issues of authorship and control of images, which tap into broader concerns about the silencing of Aboriginal voices and the misrepresentation of images that have dogged the Australian film industry. The use of industry protocols for the use of Aboriginal content is scrutinised in this chapter, as are arguments about the ability of a collaboratively produced film to do the work of decolonisation effectively. The synergies between “recuperative” decolonisation (Bird Rose

23) and reconciliation become apparent as I argue that a collaborative film can do the work of both: reconcile and decolonise.

“Pop Reconciliation,” Chapter Seven, completes my close reading of texts with an analysis of three popular genre films, *Bran Nue Dae, Australia* (2008) and *Stone Bros.* that collapse the boundaries between indigenous narratives and mainstream, entertainment cinema. The music and comedy in these films bring a refreshing lightness to cinema’s engagement with issues of reconciliation. Whilst intersubjective reception experiences are fostered by all of the films in this thesis, these popular genre films engage viewers with added enthusiasm. A number of techniques are used to encourage a sense of inclusivity, including harnessing the familiar frameworks and tropes of entertainment cinema. Audiences are drawn into direct emotive relationship with the characters of these films, and thus have the opportunity for a decidedly reconciliatory viewing experience.

To conclude I examine the primary texts collectively, as a cinematic metanarrative of reconciliation. Amid this diverse collection of drama, intrigue, surprise, trauma, sorrow and celebration, there are four elements that emerge as the key features of Reconciliation Cinema that demonstrate its centrality in reconciliation discourses. These are optimism; an interpretation of reconciliation as dynamic and negotiable; the practical application of reconciliation in production; and multiple sites of intersubjectivity, through which new meanings are negotiated.

Chapter One

Re-visioning Collaboration on the Frontier

The Tracker

The Proposition

Red Hill

The frontier dramas *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* picture early Australian colonies as places of extreme violence, and riddled with bigotry and hatred. Instead of celebrating colonial expansion, these three Westerns deplore a history of disgraceful massacres and murders. Nonetheless, punctuating the destruction and lawlessness of the frontiers in each film is also beauty and sensitivity, often generated through depictions of gentle and understanding relationships between settlers and indigenous characters. Whilst the films acknowledge a history of violent encounters, they simultaneously complicate those stories of a brutal past. As such, whilst the representations of the frontiers in *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* are ostensibly about racism and violence, closer examination reveals also meaningful, complex interactions between settlers and indigenes. These contemporary re-visionings of Australia's frontier past indulge in a particular type of reflection that I term a postcolonial longing. That is to say, the nostalgia in these films is not for triumphant colonial conquests or for the tragic fate of the Aboriginal people, it is for friendships and connectivity between non-indigenous and indigenous peoples.

Although stylistically diverse, common to each of the three films is the use of narrative and stylistic tropes of the Western—horses, wide-screen open landscapes, full moons and dramatic sunsets, the disillusioned white hero who is caught between civilisation and the uncivilised, and “Indians.” *The Tracker*, written and directed by Rolf de Heer and released in 2002, is set fairly late on the chronological timeline of the period of colonisation, 1922. However it takes place “... somewhere in Australia,” in an outback area where British settlement is barely evident, which strongly evokes the “unexplored” and lawless frontier of an earlier time. It is the story of a group of three policemen and an Aboriginal tracker on the hunt for a fugitive at bay. On horseback, the men fruitlessly pursue an Aboriginal man who has been accused of murdering a white woman. The Tracker (David Gulpilil) physically leads the men in the search for The Fugitive (Noel Wilton), who

remains, to the policemen's frustration, always a step ahead. Throughout the hunt the police taunt The Tracker and inflict gratuitous violence on the Aborigines they encounter during the search. However, The Tracker ultimately emerges from a guise of submission to avenge this white cruelty, and at the end of the film hangs the policeman in charge, The Fanatic (Gary Sweet). The complex nature of settler/indigenous relations is captured in The Tracker's relationship with both The Fanatic and the new young recruit, The Follower (Damon Gameau). The three men oscillate between respect, affection and overt hatred for each other. Interspersing brutality with moments of gentle respect brings an unsettling intricacy to this portrayal of frontier relations that bespeaks a longing for the truth of frontier history to accommodate violence as well as camaraderie.

John Hillcoat's *The Proposition*, released in 2002, also depicts a brutally violent, if inconsistently so, early colonial period. The title refers to a proposition put forward by Police Captain Maurice Stanley (Ray Winstone) to Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce), a member of a gang of Irish outlaws who, along with his brother Mikey (Richard Wilson), has been captured. Captain Stanley bargains for Mikey's life in exchange for Charlie killing his still-at-large, estranged elder brother Arthur (Danny Huston). Charlie accepts the offer and rides out to find him. Issues of frontier race relations are foregrounded through two key Aboriginal characters. Jacko (David Gulpilil, in a role similar to that which he plays in *The Tracker*) is an Aboriginal trooper who defends and betrays Aborigines, and Two-Bob (Tom E. Lewis) is a member of the outlawed Burns gang who is torn between allegiances to Arthur on the one hand and Charlie on the other. The complex interplay of loyalties and disloyalties in this film disaffects a simple demarcation between blacks and whites. Moreover, irrespective of race, men oscillate between being monstrous (uncivilised) and refined (civilised), bringing a complicating component to the barbarism of early colonisation.

Directed by Patrick Hughes, *Red Hill* (2010) is a postmodern pastiche of modern characters and frontier mythologies. It is set not on the frontier, but in a highly stylised modern Australia. Nonetheless, the film evokes the cinematic Western frontier at every opportunity through its empty, wide streets; generic shop signs; men on horseback; classic Western music; a wide and wild landscape; and rampant lawlessness. Constable Shane Cooper (Ryan Kwanten) has relocated to the small town of Red Hill that is, on his first day on the job, under siege from a disturbed and angry prison escapee Jimmy Conway (Tom E. Lewis). Conway is an Aboriginal man, once the finest brumby tracker in the area, who has

been wrongly imprisoned. He is on a quest for revenge for past injustices inflicted on him by the police sergeant Old Bill (Steve Bisley) and the local townsmen. In response, Old Bill and his team of vigilantes close down the town in an attempt to kill Conway; however, before he is finally gunned down Conway systematically kills almost all of the town's inhabitants. Cooper makes a stand for Conway, as he discovers the hidden truth about his mistreatment by the police in the past. The story is predominantly a classic morality tale of good versus evil, in which the corrupt are justly punished by the enlightened, pro-reconciliation, new generation of white police officers. However, in the mise-en-scene and narrative, truths and fictions are so interwoven in this film it is almost impossible to tell any difference between them.

The Western has a long cinematic history that commenced in Hollywood cinema but has since been adopted and reinterpreted by other national cinemas, including Australia's. Rather than classic Westerns, *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* are more appropriately described as "modern" or "revisionist," subcategories that refer to the socially critical Westerns that emerged in the 1950s and 1970s (Hayward 502).¹ The revisionist Western is identifiable by its ability to redirect spectator sympathies "onto the displaced 'natives'" (McFarlane, "Back Tracking" 62), and as such these films are also arguably postcolonial, as they explore the history of the settler-nation from points of view other than those of the colonisers. *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* also critique the politics, ideologies, power and race relations of colonisation and of its aftermath. By juxtaposing camaraderie against division, and beauty against horror, these works of fiction present contradictory frontier realities. These cinematic imaginings invite viewers to reconsider their own understandings of contact history, and of its relationship with contemporary ideas about reconciliation.

As works of historical fiction, these films add their particular stories to discussions about how history is and should be told, and stimulate debates of their own making about the relationships between truth, history and fiction. These debates permeate discourses of reconciliation. Tom O'Regan claims that a re-visionist history film challenges contemporary viewers to consider the state of contemporary cross-cultural relations: "It

¹ *The Tracker* and *The Proposition* have also been described as anti-westerns (Starrs, "Two Westerns"), and *Red Hill* as neo-western (Buckmaster, "Red Hill"). For a fuller discussion about the difficulties of classifying these and other Australian films as westerns see D. Bruno Starrs, "Two Westerns" and McFarlane "Brokeback."

problematizes the ‘pioneer legend’, it disturbs the comfortable legitimacy of settler institutions and lifeways, and it necessitates reconciliation as a public project” (*Australian* 276). In this chapter a close reading of the narrative and stylistic elements of each of these films explores how a postcolonial longing for a complex past, which permeates these cinematic retellings of history, engages with a reconciliatory future. The gentle aesthetics of the three films—the music, poetry and cinematography—are juxtaposed against confronting violence, which not only bespeaks the desire for cross-cultural camaraderie but also draws connections between the past and the present. This present-day yearning for evidence of nuanced frontier intersubjectivities intersects with many of the extratextual debates about the place of fictional imaginings of the past in contemporary understandings of reconciliation. Foremost, these films contest the notion of a single and certain truth about the Australian frontier and insist instead that multiple, discursively constructed truths explain the period more adequately.

Slanting Truth in *The Tracker*

On *The Tracker*’s frontier there is widespread racism and brutality. The white police consider themselves morally and intellectual superior to Aborigines and are quick to translate their beliefs into actions. During the journey, for example, the Tracker is placed in chains and made to walk in front of the horses while the others ride. The Fanatic frequently abuses, threatens and whips him and shoots at his feet. The Fanatic refers to Aborigines as “cannibals—very treacherous” and a “repulsive breed,” and he advises his colleagues “you have to be firm with them” because “they’ll kill a white man in broad daylight.” The policemen’s campfire talk is about avoiding violent blacks, and being at the ready: “watch your arses, watch your flanks.” The Fanatic makes it clear that the slaughter of Aborigines is a necessary part of his work, as he explains to The Follower:

The Government employs me for a certain duty. They supply me with rifles, ammunition in abundance and they expect me to use it for the good of the country.

His racism reaches its greatest depths in a scene in which he and the Follower chain a group of Aborigines together. Prior to this, when the police initially approach the Aboriginal

people, The Tracker fruitlessly tries to persuade The Fanatic that they are a peaceful group who are not involved in the Fugitive's escape. Ignoring The Tracker, and beneath Archie Roach's soundtrack in which he explains, "We are no longer free, disposed ... People of mine," The Fanatic and The Follower scream at the still, silent Aborigines while The Tracker, having claimed not to speak the same language, stands uncomfortably off to the side behind a tree. They humiliate and torture the group. The Fanatic grabs a woman by the hair, strokes a man's face with his gun, pulls out the man's tongue, and as a close up of his face shows him smiling the music stops and is replaced by gunshots and screams. After they have shot them all they hang them in the trees as a warning to others, and ride away (figure 1).



Fig. 1

Contrasting with this environment of friction and hostility in *The Tracker* are the fleeting moments of camaraderie and understanding that occur between the members of the police party. As well as the racist taunting of The Tracker, for example, The Fanatic also appreciates and trusts The Tracker's skills and shares his humour. For instance, in the opening dialogue he asks The Tracker to let him know when it gets too dark to see the tracks. Later, he defends him against The Follower's accusations of dishonesty and fraud and makes The Follower dismount to learn The Tracker's tracking skills through observing displaced rocks. The Fanatic also speaks a limited amount of The Tracker's language. While on the one hand this is used to meet his own needs, it nonetheless demonstrates The Fanatic's willingness to communicate with The Tracker and he appears slightly less arrogant as a result. The Fanatic's sporadic respect for The Tracker earns him some reciprocation. In one scene The Tracker starts off the hunt at a playful trot, calling back over his shoulder to the mounted policemen "Like this? We catch him quick ... Come on boss!" and The Fanatic smirks, showing he appreciates the joke. In another scene when The Fanatic's

suggests to The Tracker that he will hang for insubordination. The Tracker jests about Aboriginal people being “born for the noose,” and the two men laugh hysterically. While both attempt to establish a personal connection, it would be a giant stretch to call either character’s motives reconciliatory. Nevertheless, through these actions the characters traverse a polemic of bigotry and subordination and complicate the policeman-tracker hierarchy.

Toward the end of *The Tracker*, however, cooperation between the two all but dissipates when The Fanatic’s cruelty becomes unrelenting. He chains The Tracker by the neck as he walks, and ties him to a tree to rest. For his part, The Tracker attempts, unsuccessfully, to drown The Fanatic. However, the camaraderie they had is replaced by an alternative cross-cultural allegiance, between The Tracker and The Follower. It is a fragile alliance that begins in the aftermath of the aforementioned massacre, which deeply disturbs The Follower (figure 2). At the time The Tracker comforts him with a joke, reassuring him that “the only innocent black man is a dead man,” and then encourages him to laugh at the irony that a black man should make such a remark. As the journey progresses The Tracker sympathises with The Follower as he, too, is the target of The Fanatic’s abuse. In a single act of mutiny The Follower eventually betrays The Fanatic after he has shot at Aborigines indiscriminately for a second time; he then places The Fanatic in chains, with the intention of taking him to trial for murder. Ultimately The Tracker and The Follower become allies through shared ethics and understanding of justice. Notwithstanding that the displays of cross-cultural friendship are slight in comparison to the hatred that drives the slaughtering of Aborigines, their presence in the film inserts an example of cross-cultural understanding and dependency into an otherwise torrid imagining of the frontier.



Fig. 2

The friendships and cooperation evident between characters in *The Tracker* is similar to examples of interdependence that are documented in anthropology and history scholarship. Philip Jones, for example, reads ethnographic objects from early colonisation as evidence of cross-cultural sharing and mutual dependence. Acknowledging firstly that encounters between Aborigines and settlers were frequently characterised by conflict, he writes nonetheless that:

Comprehending the historical moment of exchange, by which a net bag or boomerang was acquired for a plug of tobacco or metal knife, not only helps to reveal forgotten codes and protocols of remote frontiers, but also confirms that those frontiers were loaded with other possibilities, even with a tentative and provisional interdependence between black and white. (6)

Peter Sutton also documents what he calls the symbiotic relationships between some “unusual couples” of anthropologists and Aboriginal people. He considers these couples not “as representatives of coloniser and colonised, male and female, or black and white, but as individuals whose experiences of each other were usually complex, may have at times been emotionally intense” (163-64). Similarly, Henry Reynolds has compiled evidence of settler-indigenous partnerships that took place amid periods of widespread colonial violence in his book *This Whispering in our Hearts*. Also, when making the documentary television series *The First Australians*, Rachael Perkins was reportedly surprised to learn of the closeness and duration of inter-cultural friendships in the years following the arrival of the first white settlers (George 22). Perhaps as a response to an “unease about the morality of settlement,” which Reynolds suggests has “been apparent throughout the two centuries of European occupation of the Australian continent” (*Whispering* xiv), *The Tracker*, like these examples, posits that within the same geographical spaces there was frontier conflict, but also allegiance, friendship and intimacy.

Working in conjunction with the narrative, and augmenting these complexities, is *The Tracker*’s attention to cinematic aesthetics. Beautifully shot scenes (that are a pleasure to watch) also contrast against the depictions of racism and brutality. For example, there are a number of long slow motion shots that are accompanied by unhurried and melodic music and lyrics by Archie Roach, and in these scenes lingering close-ups dwell on each character

as they walk or ride in time to the music. In one such scene *The Tracker* attempts to drown the Fanatic. He plunges himself from a cliff down into a waterhole, taking with him The Fanatic who is chained to him by the wrist. It is a rhythmical, almost dance-like moment and a prolonged pause within the chaos. Slow motion, close-ups and melodic song render the actions as beautiful as they are terrifying. As well, periodically throughout the film paintings by artist Peter Coad are used as a still graphic substitute for physical violence. Part distancing device, they also function to add another element of visual artistry to the film, and another level to the film's brutality-beauty dialectic.

There is also an interplay between violence and lyrical verse in *The Tracker* that has a similar effect. Murderous acts are often accompanied by the recitation of poetry, which gives a nod to the beauty of language in the incongruous context of committing an act of atrocity. For example, The Fanatic recites a Latin phrase after massacring the group of Aborigines: "Sic transit gloriosus mundi," thus passes the glory of the world. Later, The Tracker, after calmly passing judgement on The Fanatic for his murder of innocent people, repeats back to him the same Latin verse. The Fanatic recites two lines from a poem by Victorian poet Gerald Massey—"The world is full of beauty as are the worlds above/And if we do our duty, it might be full of love" (which David Shaw notes in *Gerald Massey* is drawn from the lyrical biblical book Song of Songs)—as he is strung up to die. On the one hand, the ironic juxtaposition of words of love and glory against acts of torture and murder augments the brutality of this frontier. However, on the other, it demonstrates that humans who are also conscious of the importance and significance of love and beauty are capable also of violence. As a result, rather than widening the divide, the intermix serves to further collapse the conceptual boundaries between brutality and beauty.

These intersections of good and evil occur also at the level of the cinematic trope in *The Tracker*, in the figure of the Aboriginal tracker. The trope of the tracker embodies the paradoxes of colonial contact. A conflicted figure, he (and it is mostly he) is at any given moment the "triumphant figure of culturally specific knowledge" and/or "part of an unwitting collusion in colonial expansion" (Probyn "Ethics"). He dwells somewhat uncomfortably in Homi Bhabha's interstices, between past, present, old and new (*Location*); and as such occupies a postcolonial third space of the Australian frontier. The tormented tracker trope spans the life of Australian cinema. In *Journey Out of Darkness* (1967), for example, a *Tracker* intertextual referent, the Aboriginal tracker Jubbul (Ed Deveraux) is distrusted by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. Like in *The Tracker*, the

tracker is vital to the success of the hunt for a murderer-at-large, and yet the visiting policeman-in-charge belittles him repeatedly. Jubbul tries to do what he considers morally right by the Aboriginal community, but they curse him for his traitorousness and he dies. An extra-textual dimension compounds Jubbul's multiple identity battle as actor and character embody different racial identities—Ed Deveraux is non-Aboriginal and disguised in blackface to play the role. A more recent example, Moodoo (David Gulpilil), the tracker in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), is a similarly complex figure. He too is essential to the search, in this film not for a fugitive but to find three missing girls, but is afforded little respect and has a reputation amongst Aboriginal people for ruthlessness. Like de Heer's Tracker, Moodoo treads a tenuous line between his allegiances. So too does Jacko (again played by cinema's quintessential tracker Gulpilil) in *The Proposition*. Jacko is subversive and attempts to protect Aborigines without police knowledge, yet to the Aboriginal outlaw Two-Bob he is a traitor.

De rigueur for contemporary trackers is to appear loyal to the police force whilst secretly outwitting their non-Aboriginal supervisors using cultural knowledge and intelligence. They are, as Marcia Langton describes The Tracker, a "credible character with intent, intelligence, emotion, humour, and the strength and capacity to subvert the imperial mission" ("Out From" 59). In reconciliation cinema, these strong, complex figures perform a particularly important function. They provide the example of a historical black figure who is not the simple, passive victim of colonisation. They are deployed, therefore, to complicate simplistic ideals about a straight-forward brutality of the colonial frontier and to suggest a more complicated alternative. This may be a product of contemporary Australians feeling compelled to expunge their guilt over the past, as Jane Lydon suggests. She suspects *The Tracker* is a

vision of colonialism as many sympathetic viewers of our time would like to see it: the bad whites are punished, the well-meaning whites are educated about the power of Aboriginal culture, and the noble Aborigine is freed to return to his ancestral land. (140)

Indeed, trackers are at risk of being over-romanticised by filmmakers and used to soften the racist tone of the nation's history. Langton observes that initially, Aboriginal trackers were portrayed as incapable of fully adjusting to civilisation then later these inferior qualities

were “revised in a form of romantic racism that gave value to these traits” (“Out From” 57). However, when the noble indigene also murders, betrays and is tormented by his internal tug-of-war of loyalties, they enable a broader range of signifiers. The trope signals alternative possibilities of intersubjectivity on the frontier, and of more intricate settler-indigenous relations.

The white characters in *The Tracker* do not match the complexity of The Tracker, and at no point are the whites more obviously “bad whites” than in the first massacre scene. The Follower is the only white character to be disturbed afterwards, while the others display a cool detachment. The callousness of the killings determines, as Lydon points out, that spectator sympathies lie firmly with the Aboriginal victims. The Tracker’s response also firms the allegiance between the viewer and the Aboriginal characters as he functions as the empathetic conduit. He stands to the side, powerless and emotional, leaving the accompanying soundtrack lyrics to speak for him: “They’re my people, my people, my people.” Perhaps unwittingly, the film’s slant on Aboriginal massacres means it speaks directly to debates that have periodically surfaced in Australian public discourse since the early 1990s, termed the “history wars,” about how historical events should be interpreted and remembered.

The history wars were (re)ignited in 2000 by Keith Windschuttle, who claimed that along with other “fabrications” of history, “the mass killing of Aborigines was neither as widespread nor as common a feature of the expanding pastoral frontier in the nineteenth and early twentieth century as historians have claimed” (19). Responses and counter-responses by Reynolds, Lyndall Ryan and others disputed the veracity of this and others of Windschuttle’s claims, and all debated the relevance of the comments to contemporary indigenous realities. The debates extended beyond academia into broader political and cultural domains, and were essentially polemically divided along political and ideological lines, between those on the neo-conservative right (denying the extent and frequency of massacres) and the progressive left (arguing for the recognition and acknowledgement of massacres). In December 2009 the debates re-surfaced and engaged directly with cinematic interpretations of history. Extracts appeared in the national press of the third volume of Windschuttle’s *Fabrications of Aboriginal History* outlining his accusations of misrepresentation of truth in Phillip Noyce’s *Rabbit Proof Fence*. This triggered defensive responses from the filmmakers (Owens 7) as well as the author of the book on which the film is based, Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (Perpitch 7).

At the core of the debates about feature film's role in telling history is the murky relationship between truth and fiction. Questions arise about fiction's relationship with truth in general, and about the problems of retelling Australian history "truthfully" in particular. Not dissimilar to the way that oral history has struggled to find a place in history annals, fictionalised accounts of historical events do not typically constitute conventional domains of Western historical records. While Windschuttle sees this as an indictment of fiction, proponents of fictional storytelling consider this in reverse, that is, that fiction brings to light the shortcomings of conventional history methodologies. Referring to non-Western cultures and practices of oral history, Dipesh Chakrabarty explains: "there are voices from the other side which say 'Your methods are simply not good enough for my history. The methods by which you write history, those very methods, falsify my history'" (Attwood and Chakrabarty 201). Chakrabarty also uses the example of Tony Birch, Aboriginal poet, novelist and academic, who writes poetry in order to express more "accurate" versions of history than he could do otherwise (Attwood and Chakrabarty 202). Anthropologist Basil Sansom's work demonstrates additional limitations of orthodox Western practices in Aboriginal domains. For instance, he describes the different cultural conceptions of history between "traditional" Aborigines and non-Aboriginal people, and explains how Aboriginal "conventions that enjoin the editing of history" may result in the expunging of particular, unwelcome, elements of the past and replacement with new versions, ones that are more consistent with the "formula," "always was always will be" (160). A similar discord was noted more recently by Australian and American historians who journeyed around the North of Australia in search of new ways of "doing" Aboriginal history, but discovered deep incongruities in the values and understandings of history between Aborigines and non-Aborigines (*Frontier Conversation*). These different cultural particularities highlight some of the constraints of conventional historical methods that fictional storytelling is well-placed to address.

Jean Baudrillard celebrates the fact that whilst mythology might be rejected by the history annals, it is permitted and celebrated on-screen: "Myth, chased from the real by the violence of history, finds refuge in cinema" (43). Belinda Smail also claims that cinema allows what is otherwise unrepresentable to become representable (32). In the Australian context, Tiziana Ferrero-Regis believes the function of cinema is to address "contested stories related to the colonial treatment of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders" (104), that is, to explore conflicting accounts. *The Tracker*'s position on truth,

and that of cinematic historical dramas in general, is perhaps thus best understood using Naomi Jacobs' eloquent explanation, that "fiction tells its truths slantwise" (*The Character* 195). *The Tracker* explores a range of possibilities of the past, through its inclusion of an "unrepresentable" intermix of violence and beauty, of frontier mythologies and of its depictions of settlers and indigenous people treatment of each other. *The Tracker* is not the voice of frontier truth, but neither is it a work of fantastical whimsy. Its relationship with truth is more complicated. This film, and other Reconciliation Cinema besides, moves about in the interstices of these two extremes and renders the distinction between truth and fiction arbitrary. It sits alongside other ways of doing history, and contributes to a collection of "truths" that constitute history as a whole: objective and subjective accounts, history that is drawn from written records, oral history, myths, memories, and conversations.

Bain Attwood reminds us that the truths of the past are always constructed through its narration and re-telling. He states: "there is always a difference between what happened in the past and what was and is narrated later ... history is not the past, but always the past represented and re-presented" ("Learning" 188). As such, historical films re-present previously mediated versions of events. The events are in turn re-organised and further explained at the point of the spectator-screen encounter and, moreover, in post-screening discussions that might occur and filmic discourses that develop around the film. This filmic manifestation of Jürgen Habermas' discursive truth (35-38) rests on the proposition that truth is determined not by a single voice, but by multiple negotiating voices. In Reconciliation Cinema the discursive construction of truth is enabled by on and off screen intersubjective encounters, and also in the dialogue that takes place between active spectators. Discursive truth is a concept familiar in other arenas in which reconciliation is deployed; the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), for instance, sought to establish "narrative", "social, or dialogue truth" (Kiss 74). Elizabeth Kiss explains that the Commission sought stories and personal interpretations of events that occurred during the apartheid period "in an effort to develop as complete a picture as possible of past injustices" (74) and with the overall aim of facilitating reconciliation based on highly subjective and multifarious understandings of past events.

Another related, important consideration in reconciliation discourse in Australia is the relationship between the events of the past with present-day inequities between black and white Australians: the aftermath of colonisation. The effectiveness of reconciliation is

commonly thought to be contingent on “coming to terms” with the past, exemplified in Aden Ridgeway’s statement: “An Australian never challenged by reconciliation is one who never knows the truth of the past and will never know the meaning of the future” (17) (see also Maddison; Clendinnen). The relationship between the past and the present is a long-held area of interest in cinema also. Leger Grindon, for example, argues that:

From the earliest days of their artistic practice, filmmakers have engaged in the centuries-old tradition of grappling with the present by writing about the past ... a means by which the cinema associates past events with contemporary issues that it seeks to explain, justify, or exalt. (1)

Scholarly opinions differ on just how effectively *The Tracker* draws connections between the past and the present. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis read the film as a direct comment on the present, through its exploration of an “ethics of friendship” and recognition of indigenous “custodial obligation and belonging” (*After Mabo* 14, 17, 16). Lydon, on the other hand, believes that “the film’s otherworldly aspects [Coad’s paintings, the lack of dialogue, the elegiac quality of Archie Roach’s voice, the use of slow motion, and the archetypal characters] conspire to create a sense of myth, timelessness, universality” (139), and thus render it irrelevant to contemporary situations. She also contends that narrative closure effects a distancing of the present from the past: “When the lights come up the viewer returns to the ‘real’ world, leaving the filmic version very concretely behind” (141). I suggest that one way that *The Tracker* does make a direct association between *The Tracker*’s past and present-day realities is through the use of the soundtrack.

Aboriginal singer/songwriter Archie Roach works as a conduit between the (cinematic) frontier and present-day settler-indigenous relations. Gary Gillard suggests Roach’s songs are “arguably just as important to the intention of the film as if they were sung onscreen as Paul Kelly and Kelton Pell do in [*One Night the Moon*]” (118). The significance of the music to the film is indicated also by Roach’s live performance of the soundtrack at the film’s premiere in Adelaide. Moreover, the soundtrack won an ARIA award for Best Original Soundtrack Album in 2002. The music works to establish a

connection between past and present in two key ways. The first is through using the lyrics to verbalise the links. For example, towards the end of the film Roach sings:

You have taken my land
and I can only return when there is contrition ...
I still long for my country,
I still remember the spirit that was in my land,
But I can only forgive when there is contrition.
And we at last face my history.

Evoking rights-based and symbolic dimensions of reconciliation—forced dispossession, land rights and the call for a formal apology—the song is an overt statement of beliefs about the ongoing impacts of colonisation. The music brings the frontier into contact with the present because Roach makes this statement to spectators, and not the historical characters in the film.

Roach is a high-profile musician who tours widely and at the time of writing has released six albums. He is described as a “well-known stolen generations narrator” (Attwood, “Learning”) and, together with his recently deceased partner Ruby Hunter, has been a key contributor to the “public bank of popular and sought after Aboriginal history” (Attwood, “Telling” 51-53). Roach functions as an additional contemporary, living presence in the film. His public persona as a member of the Stolen Generations situates the on-screen frontier violence, as well as the friendships, in the context of this more recent narrative.

Murdering, Moralising Misfits in *The Proposition*

The Proposition raises similar issues to *The Tracker* about history, truth and reconciliation. Hillcoat’s Western also looks back at early contact history with a sensitivity to the multifaceted nature of cross-cultural relations, and an eye on the potential this might have on the present. From the opening shoot-out to the final massacre nine days later, murder, injury, rape and other such brutalities are the chief concerns of *The Proposition*. Like in *The Tracker*, violence runs rampant on this frontier and is perpetrated by both black and white. Charlie encounters multiple bodies that have been speared to death on his quest to

find and kill his brother, who we are told has committed many violent murders. Spearing is common. Overseer Mr Fletcher (David Wenham) recalls, “Dan O’Riley had so many spears in him that he resembled your good old garden-variety English hedgehog” and Charlie takes one in the chest (figure 3). In quick response the spearer’s face is shot off, in a graphic display that does not spare the horror (figure 4). Much violence occurs at the police station, where Aborigines are held in chains, abused and later shot by the police; Mikey is flogged to near death; and Arthur stomps on Sergeant Lawrence’s (Robert Morgan) head repeatedly until he kills him. Hatred and bigotry saturate the film, and motivate almost every act of violence. Aborigines are termed “black bastards” by the police, and by gang member Sam Stoa (Tom Budge). Sam’s disdain for Aborigines is matched by that of the Bounty Hunter’s, Jellon Lamb (John Hurt), who also considers the Irish to be equally inferior, exemplified by his rhetorical question: “But what is an Irishman but a nigger turned inside out?”



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

This frontier is godless. The landscape, typical of Australian frontier cinema (O’Regan, *Australian* 209), is hot, harsh and profane. The town and its surrounds are dry and exposed and the remote hideout of the gang is set amid rocky treeless outcrops where the Bounty Hunter states “no one, not even the blacks, will go” implying it is too savage even for savages. Soothing images of a Creator’s nature—lush pastures or cool gorges—are absent. *The Proposition* exemplifies instead Ross Gibson’s picture of the Australian natural environment that he claims “is a notion with its genesis in the ancient legends of the ‘hellish antipodes’” (*South* 66). The Bounty Hunter explains to Charlie that he used to pray before coming to Australia, but since arriving “in this beleaguered land,” he claims, “the God in me just seemed to evaporate.” He then proposes a toast to “God, who has forgotten us.” Film theorist Dave Hoskin, however, sees a God in *The Proposition* more suited to the locale, one of fire and brimstone:

Rather than simply being a harsh environment, both the prison of *Ghosts* [Nick Cave and John Hillcoat's first collaboration] and the Outback of *The Proposition* are literally full of the damned. These aren't films about redemption; they're about suffering and judgment from on high. (24)

Nonetheless, the frontier is not only a hell on earth, and there is more to *The Proposition* than just Godlessness and violence. This frontier too is one where love, family, beauty and tenderness are also its features.

Similar to de Heer's *Tracker*, poetry and music are used to interrupt frontier violence, complicate bigotry and create complex subjectivities. The sadistic Burns gang are also poets, and their romantic musings are frequently accompanied by majestic sunsets, touching the harsh landscape with warm colours. Their violent acts are often performed in conjunction with poetry recitations. In one instance the Bounty Hunter and Arthur both recite the nineteenth-century English poet George Burrow as the Bounty Hunter dies: "Life is very sweet brother, who would wish to die" they softly say before the Bounty Hunter, who has already been shot by Two-Bob, is then gutted by Arthur. Arthur's language is particularly eloquent, and frequently lyrical. Toward the climax of the film he delivers his own lines of poetry:

Love, love is the key, love and family.
For what are night and day the sun the moon the stars, without love
and those you love around you?
What could be more hollow than to die alone unloved?

Music is used with a similarly disruptive effect. In a scene weirdly redolent of an English parlour recital, Sam sings the Irish ballad "Peggy Gordon" to the group of outlaws in a voice that, in Arthur's words, could "shame a nightingale." He too has the physical lightness of a bird. However, cut-aways to either Mikey screaming while being flogged by the police, close-ups of the blood on the cat-of-nine-tails, or to onlookers fainting or walking away in disgust interrupt Sam's eloquent performance. Late in the film "Peggy Gordon" again is deployed to bring beauty and violence smacking up against each other.

During the Burns' attack on the Stanley's home, while Sam tries to rape Martha and the battered Captain Stanley is forced to watch, Arthur requests the song. The brutal rape jars against Sam's heavenly voice and at once augments his monstrosity, whilst simultaneously obfuscating the evil intent of the act. The nightingale-rapist is indeed a bizarre figure.

Furthermore, Edenic places punctuate the otherwise profane landscape; for example, the Stanley homestead and its surrounding gardens create a haven from brutality. The homestead epitomises English gentility: an English-style rose garden, fine china, paintings on the walls and even a black servant, Tobey (Rodney Boschman). Hoskin notes the peaceful relief that this setting provides from what he sees as the film's over emphasis on the harshness of the environment: "Most pleasingly, [Hillcoat] manages to contrast the grittiness of the sand and rocks with the garden of roses that Stanley builds as an oasis for his wife to live within" (27). At home, Stanley and his wife Martha (Emily Watson) fashion themselves as appropriate, genteel occupants. Martha dresses in immaculate and formal garb, the couple speak to each other gently and politely and a tinkering piano soundtrack introduces the scenes in their home. Occasionally Martha and Stanley feign a cockney accent in conversation—for example, "I made 'em with me own fair hands"—to indicate etiquette's inherently performative nature.

In a delicate and intimate scene in the Stanley home, sandwiched between two of the most brutal in the film (Mikey's flogging and the Burns' attack on the Police), there is a particularly poignant reprieve from the horror of *The Proposition's* frontier. Pale-skinned Martha lies in a deep bath and recounts a tender dream to her husband. Close-ups of the back of her neck, with her fine hair tied in a loose bun, are accompanied by the sound of drips of water falling from her fingers. While she examines her elegant and dainty hands she recalls a dream in which she holds the unborn baby of her murdered friend; however, the elegant Christmas meal that follows is the beginning of the violation of this temporary oasis. The tree is decorated, presents wrapped, and Martha and Stanley are dressed in their finery for a roast meal at a lavishly set table. As soon as they sit to eat Arthur and Sam burst through the door, bringing with them all manner of terrors from the wildness that hitherto lay beyond the homestead.

Similar to the way the film oscillates between violence and beauty, the characters in *The Proposition* also swing chaotically between loyalty to and betrayal of their families, colleagues and lovers. This tense interplay of faithfulness and treachery creates an underlying uncertainty and unpredictability in every allegiance, because everyone is

capable of abandoning or re-aligning loyalties at any point. For instance, Charlie, who initially rode with Arthur in the gang, then deceives him when he makes the deal with Stanley. However family loyalties prevent him from killing Arthur. This is only until Arthur's unforgivable acts of brutality in the closing scene, however, and then Charlie turns for the final time against his brother. Loyalties and betrayals weave unpredictably throughout the police force. Captain Stanley initially strikes a deal with Charlie, and he later reneges upon his promise. Stanley is betrayed by his colleagues: Sergeant Lawrence, whom Stanley considers a "fucking snake," gossips to his workmates about the secret details of the proposition, which jeopardises Stanley's plan and ruins his career. Yet despite this, Stanley remains loyal to the police corps (confirmed when he agrees to Fletcher's demand to slaughter a group of blacks despite his disinclination). At home too, Stanley's apparently steadfast relationship with Martha develops cracks around the edges as she temporarily switches her allegiance away from Stanley to Fletcher, in support of Mikey's flogging.

While Two-Bob is for the most part a committed member of the Burns Gang he, like Charlie, breaks his ties when outrageous violence is perpetrated late in the film. Two-Bob refuses to shoot the policemen during Mikey's rescue (prompting Sam to call him a "fuckin' yellow bastard") and instead leaves with Charlie. Together they slowly bury Mikey under rocks—an act that captures their shared sense of futility—and it appears momentarily that these two will join forces. However, Two-Bob then accuses Charlie of causing the gang's demise and rides off alone. There is no loyalty either between Two-Bob and Jacko, as perhaps might be expected on the basis of shared culture, or victimhood. In a scene where Sergeant Lawrence mistakes him for Jacko, Two-Bob makes their differences clear: he states firmly, "you got the wrong fuckin' black man." It then becomes apparent that, only moments before, he has murdered Jacko. In a callous move he throws his knife at Jacko's dead body and states, "here's ya knife back ya dog," reiterating that he considers Jacko a traitorous collaborator, and not his kin. Unlike *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* does not celebrate the tracking skills of Aboriginal troopers but uses the trope to signal a dark side of this historical figure—a betrayer of Aborigines. Despite the outlaw's predilection for violence, Two-Bob is constructed as Jacko's moral superior. Yet while loyalty is prized in this film, it is frequently elusive.

The consequence of the unreliable and unpredictable collaborations on *The Proposition*'s frontier is that the enemy is not always easy to identify. Importantly, the evil

characters cannot be distinguished by racial stereotypes—race is irrelevant. This loyalty/disloyalty dialectic undermines the classic divisions of the Western frontier, where settlers fight against resistant Indians, and its equivalent incarnations in Australian colonial history. Instead, both settler and indigene vary allegiances on grounds more moral than racial.

The film establishes strong associations between Godlessness, bigotry, violence, and hatred and the “uncivilised” nature of the frontier. Central to *The Proposition* is the idea that the colonial project is a doomed quest to civilise the inhabitants, black and white; thus, it is a counter-story to the “myth of frontier history as civilising progress” (Collins, “History” 281). In the opening scene Captain Stanley is established as an impossible champion for this quest. After he presents his proposition to Charlie, the uncomfortable, perspiring Stanley leaves the interrogation table to look out through the window at a searing, bleached landscape (figure 5). From his point of view the camera pans slowly left to right, passing Jacko, and Stanley asks rhetorically: “Australia. What fresh hell is this?” He then proclaims to Charlie and the viewer, “Make no mistake, it will be done, I will civilise this land,” a proclamation that he later repeats to his fellow settlers as he rides into town, and which proves to be fruitless. The Bounty Hunter is of similar mind. He is a well-read and widely-travelled man of “no little education” who nonetheless finds the Darwinian notion that Aborigines evolved from the same origins as white men laughable. Both men hold a firm belief in their own superiority.



Fig. 5

Nevertheless, the boundaries between the civilised and uncivilised are paper-thin. Just as Officer Dunn (Bryan Proberts) literally shoots his toes off on Stanley’s porch, the civilising project is figuratively shot in the foot as he and his colleagues display decidedly uncivilised behaviours. Their bigotry, for example, demeans them. The well-dressed,

effeminate Mr Fletcher demands the barbaric slaughter of six innocent blacks and states without remorse, “If you have to kill one make sure you bloody well kill them all.” The officers bind six captured Aboriginal men in heavy chains and before the questions have begun Sergeant Lawrence (Robert Morgan)—“an ignorant thug with the moral fortitude of a snake” according to Stanley—leaps onto one man’s back, holds a gun to his head and yells abuse at him. He later remarks with disgust to his colleagues that, “the black bastards are running all over us.” Any attempts at displays of white superiority are shortly after declared preposterous. For example, there is no semblance between the settlers’ imaginings of Aborigines as inferior beings and the reality of the Aboriginal characters. For example, the Aboriginal men taken in for questioning, made vulnerable and powerless by heavy chains and poor English, nevertheless tell a story about Arthur Burns that develops into a tale to mock and humiliate Stanley, and simultaneously exposes their underlying quiet cleverness. The two other Aboriginal characters are also intelligent and capable: Two-Bob explains to Sam the meaning of the word “misanthrope” and Queenie (Leah Purcell), who lives with the Burns gang, saves Charlie’s life using healing skills. With deliberate irony designed to demonstrate its preposterousness, Queenie, Two-Bob and even the Stanley’s servant Tobey display a greater civility than the majority of the white characters.

The Proposition follows the Western genre convention of the morality tale. Although betrayal threatens most of the friendships, an ethical standard also exists and good ultimately prevails over evil. For instance, the victors (those left alive) are the more faithful and morally upstanding of the motley crew: Stanley, Martha, Charlie and Two-Bob. Overall, the most faithful alliances are between the Aborigines and the misfit settlers, and these are generally the more agreeable characters, such as the endearing anti-heroes Charlie and Stanley and the abused Two-Bob. In this way a subtle, subterranean sense of moral rightness steers the film toward the direction of ethical redemption, which also serves to undercut the power of the violence and hatred.

Exploring indigenous experiences of the frontier this film also, like *The Tracker*, engages with the history wars debates, and the film was embroiled in arguments about fiction’s right to re-tell the past. *The Proposition* was criticised for its misrepresentation of historical truth. Carol Hart derogatorily refers to the “meagre research” undertaken in pre-production. Felicity Collins identifies a parallel between these types of criticisms of *The Proposition* and former Prime Minister John Howard’s stated concern that “an objective record of achievement [in Australian history] has been replaced by a fragmented stew”

("History" 276). Collins considers *The Proposition* as an allegorical text, reading the inauthentic "historical" photos at the beginning and end of the film as evidence of "the film's allegorical practice of supplementing colonial iconography with an additional meaning" ("History" 283). Echoing Attwood and Chakrabarty, she argues that "allegorical modes of historical fiction have the capacity to produce new forms of public memory and subjectivity that conventional historiography fails to recognise" ("History" 277). She draws on Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory as a counter image to the myth of history-as-progress to argue that film does not represent the historical record, rather supplements it. The "truth" of historical events is verified, she states, intertextually through correspondences between film and archival and scholarly historiography ("History" 284), and not by an attempt to represent history per se. As is the case with *The Tracker*, therefore, as a work of fiction *The Proposition* is under no obligation to re-present the truth; instead it undertakes a deliberate re-visioning, which broadens, rather than fragments, historical truth.

The film, as part of a collection of mechanisms through which to understand history, also broadens our understandings of the present. Nonetheless, as is the case for *The Tracker*, opinions differ as to *The Proposition*'s capacity to generate meaningful connections between the past and the present. Although Collins claims that when viewed as historical allegory the film has the potential to "transform national identity" ("History" 284-5), Adrian Martin, applying Gaston Bachelard's notion of the "vertical instant" in poetry, bemoans what he sees in recent Australian historical films (26-27). Citing *Picnic and Hanging Rock* and *Beneath Clouds* as examples, he explains there was a time when "it seemed impossible for us to look at the land without sensing or reading the traces of phantoms, crime, genocide, the dead" and but claims such a critical interest in the past has waned, and is entirely absent in *The Proposition* (26). However, just as *The Tracker* deployed Roach and his music, *The Proposition* also strategically uses music and musicians to make an inextricable link between its frontier and modern Australia.

In *The Proposition* the persona and lyrics of the film's screenwriter Nick Cave provide the means for making these connections. Cave is a well-known identity in the Australian music industry, and internationally. Less political than Roach's, Cave's music is more philosophy than activism. Music is used periodically for the functional purpose of explaining the narrative and illuminating the character's thoughts in *The Proposition*, as well as to create particular moods and ambiance. In her otherwise quite scathing account of the film, Hart concedes that the centrality of the soundtrack means it "achieves what a good

soundtrack should: it participates in the narrative action of the film.” Cave’s lyrics emphasise the film’s message of violence and landscape interconnection; in fact, through song the landscape expresses its agony. In *The Rider Song*, for instance, which occurs intermittently throughout the film, the elements plead with the rider to lay down his gun:

‘Here,’ said the rider and took up his gun
‘No,’ said the stars to the moon in the sky
‘No,’ said the trees that started to moan
‘No,’ said the dust that blunted its eyes
‘Yes,’ said the rider as white as a bone

Late in the film when the visual violence is over, the soundtrack’s rider also responds to the earth’s pleas: “‘Yes’ said the rider and put down his gun.”

According to Hoskin, “Cave’s music has always demonstrated a gift for characterization and atmospherics,” and is used to this effect in *The Proposition* (24). His signature style saturates *The Proposition*. As Adrian Danks notes, “There is no mistaking the script’s origins, its combination of tones, American, Australian and almost Classical influences and motivations, totally in keeping with such Cave compositions as ‘Tupelo’ and ‘The Mercy Seat’ and much of the *Murder Ballads* and *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus* (2004) albums” (119). As Cave is a strong musical and philosophical presence in this film, *The Proposition* is also undeniably contemporary.

These two reconciliation films, *The Tracker* and *The Proposition*, together start to build a picture of a frontier constituted by an intricate enmeshment of characters, ethics, ideologies and behaviours. The third film in this trilogy of reconciliation Westerns, *Red Hill*, develops this sense further. Strong themes of violence and brutality are again punctuated by instances of kindness, and underpinned by a longing for a more hopeful past.

A New Generation of Righteous Avengers in *Red Hill*

Red Hill has a typical Western plot. One man, Jimmy Conway (figure 6), seeks revenge for atrocities committed against him and his family in the past. The hero, Cooper, is a clean-cut “cowboy” who has recently arrived in town. Unlike his new neighbours, Cooper has a strong sense of morality, truth and justice, and a cowboy belief in the triumph of good over

evil. *Red Hill* speaks back to classical pioneer legends through the inversion of the standard race binary: the white Red Hill townsfolk personify evil, whereas Cooper and the indigenous Conway are the representatives of all things good. In this film horrendous events of the past—unjust and seeped in racist ignorance—are countered by the actions of a handful of righteous, enlightened individuals who break the norm by being kind to each other.

The bulk of this film's 93 minutes is dedicated to Conway's systematic murdering of all the men who were responsible for his wrongful imprisonment that took place some years prior. *Red Hill*'s unrelenting violence has caused critics to draw comparisons with this film and those of the Coen Brothers, particularly *No Country for Old Men* in which a psychopathic killer murders with a ruthless disregard for his actions (see French "Red Hill"; Clarke, "Red Hill"; Elley; Buckmaster, "Red Hill"). Conway has escaped from gaol and has headed straight to the town of Red Hill to extract revenge, "bringing hell with him," as predicted by Old Bill, the policeman in charge of Red Hill station. Not speaking, he simply shoots to torture and to kill. He displays the eerie calm of a cinematic psychopath throughout the film; for instance he eats dessert while his victims moan in near-death agony, and he ignores the desperate pleas for clemency from frightened, cowering men who claim to be concerned for their children. For the most part Conway kills with guns but, consistent with the overall temporal mishmash that constitutes this film, he also uses spears and even a boomerang toward the end.



Fig. 6

Conway's capacity for violence is heightened by a strong intertextual connection between *Red Hill* and the 1978 Fred Schepisi historical feature film *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. Tom E. Lewis had his first acting role in *The Chant*, playing Jimmy Blacksmith, a young Aboriginal man who massacres the owners of the property where he

lives with his wife. Lewis' career-starting film is most memorable for the disturbing massacre scene, in which Blacksmith, assisted by his cousin Mort (Freddy Reynolds), hacks the women and children to death with an axe. Reynolds states that audiences at the time were greatly confronted by the murders, particularly as a black man was murdering innocent whites, and that this was the cause for the film's box office failure and the lack of films about "racial issues" over the ensuing 20 years (*Chant* 59). The similarities between *Red Hill* and *The Chant* are not only in the lead actors and the protagonist's first names. Both are also set on a fictitious frontier; Blacksmith—like Conway—has a severely disfigured face caused by an injury inflicted by the police; and both killers are motivated by their experiences of racist mistreatment. The clear connections between Lewis' two Jimmys brings to the minds of those spectators who are familiar with *The Chant* the brutal violence of that film, and instils an expectation of a repeat performance by the next incarnation.

Equalling Conway's capacity for violence are the old-guard police and their team of vigilantes. Very early the film establishes Old Bill as a man unafraid to shoot to kill, by constructing him in opposition to the pacifist Cooper. Cooper, on the morning of his first day, is not even able to find his gun, much less shoot it. In conversation with Old Bill it is revealed that in the past Cooper has chosen not to fire his gun, and then required counselling after being shot himself by the "strung-out kid" whom he spared. Old Bill is incredulous and judgemental: "You couldn't pull the trigger? ... A kid, with a gun." When Cooper protests, "Maybe he needed help, not a bullet" Old Bill dismisses this with practical logic: "We would be having a different conversation if you were dead." For Old Bill shooting is a practical necessity of police work. When he hears Conway has escaped he assembles a team of vigilantes who are heavily armed and on a mission to kill. Old Bill instructs "No one leaves this room without a weapon ... Shoot to kill." The violence is clearly racially motivated as the target is Conway, the "black bastard."

Foremost of the counterbalancing elements in this film that collectively soften the impact of the violence, is a gentle, loving relationship between Cooper and his heavily pregnant and physically vulnerable wife (Claire Van Der Boom). The couple have moved to the country so she can manage her blood pressure, as their first baby has previously miscarried. Cooper's sensitivity to his wife signals his capacity to be caring and kind, which equips him to approach Conway with a believable spirit of understanding, rather than fear and hatred that permeates the town. *Red Hill* also interrupts the violence formatively, by way of stylised homage to the classic Western. Widescreen shots of the empty, still

landscape celebrates the beauty of the Australian outback. Moreover, most of the horror takes place at night during a storm, which means the daytime is for the most part peaceful. A passive old horse, Bess (figure 7), lives in the front yard of the Police station, conjuring the quaint ideal of a “one horse town.” The use of twangy, country music by Charlie Parr adds a quaint, unthreatening atmosphere, and complements the comic-book style depiction of the town. The shops are almost two-dimensional and devoid of advertising, and their minimalist signs such as “Barber Shop”, “Golden Age Motel”, “Butcher” and “Cafe” evoke an old-world romanticism. In comparison to the dominating violence of the film these peaceful elements are minor, but have an undermining effect nonetheless.



Fig. 7

The moments of passivity and gentleness allows particular meanings about the relationship between truth and fiction to be generated that a straightforward, gratuitous revenge narrative might not. The highly stylised mise-en-scene, for instance, creates an interesting dialectic that blurs the boundaries between the historical fact and cinematic imaginings. Although *Red Hill* uses Western genre tropes, it does not do so with the intention of reconstructing a realistic Australian frontier. Rather, classic Hollywood Western signifiers intermix with modern day motifs; for instance, alongside the wide-open lands are bitumen roads; while some men ride horses, others drive cars; the “cowboys” wear modern police uniforms and communicate via mobile phones. The only “Indian” in the film is a plastic Aborigine on display at the town’s information centre. A postmodern hyperreality results, a simulacrum like that proposed by Baudrillard, that effectively “threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’. The ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (3). Modern characters “playing” the Western frontier at a different time in Australia’s history opens up the possibilities of signification. The surety of past realities and present-day circumstances are all called into question.

A mythical black panther—rumoured to be roaming *Red Hill* at the same time as Conway is wreaking havoc—makes drawing any truths from this narrative even more elusive. According to Gleeson (Cliff Ellen), legend has it that the panther is in the area as a result of its forbears' escape from a circus in the 1800s. Similar myths circulate in Australian rural legend, so much so that Julie Rigg refers to this as a “well entrenched Australian rural myth” (“*Red Hill*”). Some reviewers interpret the panther as a metaphor for a mystical indigenous presence in the outback. For example, Simon Foster writes: “a strange sequence involving the appearance of a mythological panther, whilst dreamily effective, both overstates and convolutes Jimmy’s connection to the land” and another reviewer claims: “The symbolism of this mysterious black beast gives the film an almost otherworldly mysticism, representing an omnipotent dark justice that watches over the land” (Buckmaster, “*Red Hill*”). However, as Old Bill rightly points out, “This is Australia, not bloody Africa” and the panther is an odd image in the Australian outback. Rather than overstating Jimmy’s connection to the land, as Foster suggests, it muddies the picture of just who and what belongs in an Australian space. The closing credits are interrupted by a shot of the animated panther overlooking the land from on high, suggesting that Gleeson, and not Old Bill, was right. Mythology certainly looms large in *Red Hill*, and the hyperreality moves this film a step away from frontier realities.

Red Hill collapses the truth/reality dichotomy further using a reverse logic also. Into the hyperreality of the stylised mise-en-scene and wandering Disney-style beast the film inserts an entirely realistic race-based premise for revenge. Towards the end of the film Cooper discovers, via Gleeson, that Conway had objected to a railway line being built to the town because it would interfere with a sacred Aboriginal burial site. As revenge for obstructing a piece of infrastructure that was considered much-needed, Old Bill and his cronies took Jimmy’s pregnant wife, raped and killed her, burned down his house, and accused him of the murder. Contemporary viewers may find Conway’s situation familiar, as Aboriginal sacred areas have often been embroiled in arguments over the merits of urban development. For example, at the time of *Red Hill*’s release Tasmanian Aborigines were protesting the building of a bridge over the Jordan River Levee, part of a new highway, for fear it would damage a site of significance to Aboriginal people (“Jordan River”). The film’s highly realistic premise, however, triggers markedly unrealistic reactions in the men of *Red Hill* and, especially when combined with the comic-book feel of the film, this means that the film displays little interest in establishing any singular truth of Australian frontier

relations. Too unreal to be a threat, perhaps, this film has attracted none of the criticism afforded *The Tracker* and *The Proposition* with regards to its veracity, or otherwise. Lydon's argument about the distancing effect of stylised cinematic (that she applies to *The Tracker*) applies most readily to *Red Hill*—the simple shopfronts and postmodern pastiche, for example, quickly undermine the elements of verisimilitude.

Red Hill also is permeated by the longing for the triumph of good over evil that drives *The Tracker* and *The Proposition*. The evils of pre-Cooper Red Hill are abolished soon after his arrival. There are concerns amongst the locals of Red Hill that the town is stuck in the past and as a consequence is dying. Cooper walks past empty shops on his way into town, and an early scene depicts a meeting in the Town Hall at which concerned locals discuss ways to bring life to the town. One local, Martha, states: "Instead of living in the past this town ought to be looking toward new revenue streams." Old Bill represents the opposing view and, addressing the crowd in a booming voice, states: "Our forefathers didn't sacrifice their blood sweat and tears so a bunch of wankers can come here and sip fucking pinot." Cooper, the "city boy," is symbolic of the change that Red Hill is anticipating. Via Old Bill the past is aligned with ignorance and racism, and the old and their outdated attitudes are on the way out. Old Bill claims to own the town, and to make the rules. However his days of wielding power are over by the close of the film. Although just before his death he yells at Cooper "You're not the law in this town, this is my town, my town!" this is no longer the case. Old Bill has been replaced with a new breed of policeman, and all the evil townsfolk have been obliterated. Like *The Tracker* and *The Proposition*, bigotry does not survive on this cinematic frontier.

As such, we are left with the feeling that the only future for Red Hill is via the aims and ideals of reconciliation: negotiation and collaboration. Cooper and Conway, allies from the beginning of the film, are at odds with the old guard police and represent what is morally right. Conway, for example, respects Cooper's pacifism: when Cooper lays down his gun on first meeting Conway and opts for reason over violence his life is spared in return. The film employs poignant close ups of Conway and Cooper to encourage a sense of knowing and understanding between the two. Significantly, the only words that Conway speaks at the end of the film are to establish a further, personal connection between himself and Cooper: he tells him his wife was also having a boy (figure 8). Jimmy then dies in a Christ-like position, arms outstretched as he falls dramatically to the ground. His

resurrection comes through Cooper's son, a replacement for his own, and is a highly symbolic sign of hope for a reconciled nation.



Fig. 8

Conclusion

These postcolonial Westerns are enmeshed with debates about history telling, truth and the relationship of the past with the present. *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* all contribute directly to debates also about the extent to which the construction of convoluted and intricate pasts bear directly on the here-and-now. They imagine the Australian frontier as a place where racial violence, hatred and ugliness were if not matched, then at least partially countered, by non-violence, love and beauty. Amid the cruelty and brutality is also a contesting nostalgic sense of camaraderie and cross-cultural understanding. The Western provides opportunity for violence and nostalgia to co-exist on-screen. Whilst not typical Westerns, neither are these typical Australian nostalgia films, described by O'Regan as films that were concerned with aesthetics and atmosphere and the avoidance of conflict, common to the mid-1970s to mid-1980s (e.g., *Breaker Morant*, *Caddie*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *My Brilliant Career*) (196-97). They do, however, look back with an atmosphere and aesthetics that generate a sense of longing, but what is desired is a nuanced and complex past.

The characters in these films, black and white, are capable of both terrible brutality and gentle sensitivity. No single frontier truth emerges from these films. Rather, they contribute to a range of memories, stories and scholarly work that constitute Australian colonial history. They explore alternatives to the traditional colonial dichotomy of the powerful police and the Aboriginal victims. For example, *The Tracker* installs subversiveness and power into the ambiguous tracker figure, who outsmarts the seemingly

all-powerful policeman. In *The Proposition* a complex interplay of loyalties and disloyalties sees an Aboriginal trooper killed on suspicion of treachery by an Aboriginal member of a gang of outlaws. In *Red Hill* the racist, murdering police are replaced with a knowledgeable and sensitive officer who seeks to right past injustices committed against Aboriginal people. These representations of settler-indigenous relations between police, troopers and outlaws lead to a picture of the frontier as a place of multifarious possibilities for cross-cultural relations.

Similarly, all three films include elements of beauty that complicate their depictions of brutality. In *The Tracker* close ups, slow motion sequences and a poetic soundtrack softens the racial violence. *The Proposition* constructs murders, outlaws and police as appreciators of poetry, music and fine china, and *Red Hill* displays a gentleness and sensitivity between Cooper and his wife that is in sharp contrast to the violent rape of Conway's pregnant wife. What results is not one version of early colonisation, but many versions from many perspectives that highlight the ambivalence of history, its multiple possible meanings and the multi-layered subjectivities of its inhabitants, black and white. Attwood suggests:

In much of the telling of the stolen generations narrative, the attacks upon it, and the enormous debate that has followed, simplistic histories of colonialism in Australia have been advanced. This has severely limited the prospects for historical understanding among and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and has undermined an opportunity for bringing about change. ("Learning" 184)

These films, however, circumvent constructing the Australian frontier as a place of simple incessant violence, and also its opposite, an idyllic haven. Rather, these are convoluted frontiers which create opportunities for new understandings of both the past and the present.

Screening the past is, by necessity, a contemporary engagement with events, issues and ideologies of preceding eras. *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* each use present-day musicians and modern cinematic techniques to remind the viewer that these films are expressions of contemporary knowledges and sensibilities. Despite concerns held

by politicians and historians about fiction's ability to engender serious viewer engagement with the issues at stake in the films, this chapter demonstrates how fictive explorations of the past not only reveal the nuances and ambivalences of historical cross-cultural relations, but also reveals the possibilities for their manifestation in the present. Martin suggests that a nuanced interpretation of the past provides an ideal forum for a debate about reconciliation because any potentially conflicting (in this case, frontier) values are viewed, "not as a contest (victor take all), but rather as an uneasy but dynamic truce, a hybrid formation of the past and present, forever changing places between living and dead, nature and culture" (26-27). This chapter highlights how re-visioning the past in *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* does just that. Each film bespeaks a desire to re-work the past with an ear to contemporary arguments in reconciliation discourses. The postcolonial longing in these three films hears the echoes of intricate and contesting past camaraderie between settlers and indigenes, whilst anchoring their stories firmly in the present. As much as they despair past events, *The Tracker*, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill* also generate hopefulness for settler-indigenous relations in the present and future.

Chapter Two

Picturing a Golden Age

Australian Rules

September

Beneath Clouds

It is 1968, rural Western Australia. As we glide along an undulating bitumen road we see up ahead, from a low camera angle, a school bus moving smoothly along the same route. Periodically a smattering of roadside trees filters the sunlight, but for the most part open fields of wheat flank the roadsides and stretch out to the horizon creating a grand and golden vista. The music that has so far accompanied us quietly now swells as we reach the bus, and in the next moment we are inside with a handsome fair-haired teenager wearing a yellow school uniform. He is drawing a boxer in a sketchpad. Another cut takes us back outside again, now with a view from the front of the bus that is just as magnificent. This mesmerising piece of cinema—the opening of *September* (2007)—is an experience of tranquillity and promise, and pays homage to the notion of a golden age of youth. As we move through the landscape it is as though we are heading toward an unknown but inviting future.

September is in many ways a typical coming-of-age film. It captures adolescents on the cusp of their awareness of the greater world around them, just before they have to take on responsibilities and decide on who they will be as adults. Leaving (a generally idyllic) childhood and transitioning to adulthood provides the ideal framework for drama. Often this is a tumultuous period characterised by strained friendships, intergenerational conflicts, the clashing of old and new ideologies and competing ethics. Young protagonists inevitably find that their optimistic and romantic ideals about the world conflict with the disillusioned, hardened and cynical opinions of the adults around them. Since the 1970s Australian cinema has embraced the coming-of-age film (Caputo 13). Themes favoured by the genre include schoolyard politics, alcohol and drug use, and dealing with out-of-touch parents. John Duigan's *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987) and *Flirting* (1991) perhaps typify the Australian expression of the genre; Duigan's loveable, slightly gawky protagonist, Danny

Ember (Noah Taylor), wrestles with his teenage sexual urges and existential angst as he negotiates his life on the periphery of the mainstream.

While these issues might hold little interest for, or relevance to, many adult viewers, the coming-of-age genre is also often a forum for exploring weightier, “grown-up” issues. Social problems associated with immigration and multiculturalism, for example, are central to *Looking for Alibrandi* (2000) and *Head On* (1998). Many coming-of-age films also grapple with race relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians: a seminal example is *Walkabout* (1971) and others include *Storm Boy* (1976), *Yolngu Boy* (2000), *September*, *Australian Rules* (2002), *Beneath Clouds* (2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *Bran Nue Dae* (2009) and the confronting *Samson and Delilah* (2009). I leave these last four films for discussions of a different nature later in this thesis and in this chapter I look closely at three recent Reconciliation Films from this list—*September*, *Australian Rules* and *Beneath Clouds*. Each of these is concerned with the role of cross-cultural friendships in the transition from child to adult. The protagonists all teeter on the precipice of adult life, and are moulded by their intimate white/black friendships. These close relationships, I propose, are highly influential on the choices they make about which attitudes and behaviours will constitute their own adult lives. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis interpret three Australian coming-of-age films (*Looking for Alibrandi*, *Head On* and *Beneath Clouds*) as expressions of a teenage desire to escape their shameful colonial history (154). They see the young protagonists as “subjects of shame,” living in an era of “post-Mabo trauma” (168). I diverge from Collins and Davis and read the adolescents in *September*, *Australian Rules* and *Beneath Clouds* as representatives of hope: the hope that lies in the belief of a golden age of youth. As coming-of-age films are frequently the “promise of better things to come for the whole nation” (Caputo 13), the choices these youths make are thus highly symbolic for a reconciling nation.

A common feature of coming-of-age narratives is that the young people eventually face a moral crisis and are called upon to decide on which values and ethics they will uphold as they move into adulthood. In *September*, *Australian Rules* and *Beneath Clouds* young people hold utopian ideals about equality, justice and fairness, which are called into question when their friendships are threatened. Common to all three films is a respectful, intimate and collaborative friendship between two indigenous and non-indigenous young characters, each of whom are temporarily isolated from the dysfunction, aggression and racism that concern the adult world. Their idealistic notions about the future are contrary to

the persistent messages they hear from those around them. Their idealism, however, is not completely abandoned as the young people reach adulthood. Instead, they compromise: although their childlike behaviours cease their ethical sensibilities and optimism remains. At the heart of these films is a belief in the value of utopian visions for personal, and national, reconciliation.

Golden Youth: Desirable Change Agents

September tells the story of two teenage friends, Ed Anderson (Xavier Samuel) and Paddy Parker (Clarence John Ryan) (figure 1) on the verge of adulthood. Set in the Western Australian wheat-belt at the time when the Federal Pastoral Industry Award was extended to include indigenous workers, *September* is a feature film debut by Tropfest (a national short film competition) winner Peter Carstairs. The film was produced by the Tropfest Feature Fund and the Movie Network Channels, and was chosen for screening at the Melbourne, Berlin, Rome and Toronto International Film Festivals during 2007-2008.

The narrative takes place over the month leading up to the arrival of Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe¹ to their small town, due in September. Non-indigenous Ed is in line to inherit the family farm from his father Rick (Kieran Darcy-Smith), and Paddy is the son of the Aboriginal farm worker Michael (Kelton Pell). Paddy and his family live on Ed's property, in a modest house down the hill from the Anderson's farmhouse. Each day Ed takes the bus to school while Paddy stays and works on the farm with Rick and Michael. However, after school the two boys meet at the bus stop and walk or run the long driveway home. Later they practice boxing, their shared passion, in a homemade ring in the paddock.



Fig. 1

¹ Jimmy Sharman's Troupe of Aboriginal boxers toured Australian country towns from 1911 until 1971. People from the local town would pay to go a round with the visiting boxers.

The dialogue in *September* is constrained and the shots are long and lingering. It is a visually stunning film; the characters are commonly shot in close up against a vast blue sky with only an occasional white cloud passing by. Emotive, orchestral music comprises the soundtrack—peppered with haunting percussion. Stylistically, the film exudes gentleness and beauty, and these are the qualities that also define the boys' relationship. Despite the clear hierarchy of their families on the farm, the two youths are physical, social and intellectual equals. In the boxing ring, for instance, isolated from the racial divisions outside of the ropes, Ed and Paddy share the set of gloves between them and match each other's skills. Visually, the composition augments the equality between them. The boys are often positioned centrally in the frame, with the linear wheat belt horizon dissecting the shots into a neat top and bottom, creating a balanced composition. The symmetrical framing combines also with steady camera work, which enhances the equanimity further.

Sport connects the two central characters in *Australian Rules* also, in this case Australian Rules football. Released five years earlier, *Australian Rules*—directed by Paul Goldman and based on Phillip Gwynne's first novel, *Deadly, Unna?*—also received critical acclaim when it screened at the Adelaide Film Festival and at the Melbourne and Sundance Film Festivals in 2002. It was nominated for six Australian Film Institute awards in the same year and the screenplay was also listed for the 2002 Humanitas Prize. Like *September*, the coming-of-age narrative firstly establishes the strength of the friendship between two young men: non-Aboriginal footballer/poet Gary "Blacky" Black (Nathan Phillips) and Aboriginal football star Dumby Red (Luke Carroll) (figure 2). Both play on the local junior football team. After games they walk leisurely into town together, and during the stroll Blacky constructs fantasies about Dumby's love life with famous women, at Dumby's request. Blacky tells stories about the "indigenous love machine" and his encounters. The boy's families live in separate parts of town: Dumby lives at the "mish," the Aboriginal community outside of the small town of Prospect Bay, and Blacky lives in Prospect Bay with his parents and siblings. Nonetheless, the boys' socio-economic status is similar: neither is wealthy. When Dumby is shot and killed part way through the film a second cross-cultural friendship becomes the focus of the film, that between Blacky and Dumby's sister Clarence (Lisa Flanagan).



Fig. 2

In the adolescent pause before adulthood the relationships between the young people in both *September* and *Australian Rules*—Ed and Paddy, Dumby, Clarence and Blacky—are effortless. Relaxed and at ease with each other, in *September* the boys box congenially, or throw a ball against the wall to each other without need for instruction. Long slow scenes in which the two lie on the top of a water tank as the evening comes, and talk, read and smoke, are unhurried and relaxed. In *Australian Rules* the camaraderie between Dumby and Blacky is evident in the language they use with each other, which indicates an emotional connection. As well as constructing verbose poetic fantasies, both speak to each other in blackfella vernacular (“deadly” and “nukkin ya” are part of their everyday conversation), to the frustration of their teammates. For example, at one stage Pickles (Tom Budge) sneers at Blacky: “Nukkin’ ya, fuckin’ ya! Christ you’re even talkin’ like one of them.” In the pivotal scene when Blacky and Clarence start their relationship they too intertwine language and affection. This time, it is Clarence’s turn to create a fantasy for Blackie:

- Clarence: Gary Black, the supernova of seduction, has the gorgeous Clarence under his cosmic spell. “You’re gorgeous,” he whispers.
- Blacky: You’re gorgeous.
- Clarence: “You’re my first, my last, and my everything.”
- Blacky: You’re my first, my last, my everything.
- Clarence The supernova of soulful seduction kisses gorgeous Clarence. A long lingering luscious kiss [they kiss].

The mutual ease between the young characters brings a sense of normality and naturalness to their friendships. As such the films assure the viewer that these naïve ways of interacting are also ethically correct ways of behaving.

To generate this particular sensibility both films draw upon established associations between childhood, adolescence and notions of innocence and purity. Since at least the seventeenth century Western thinking has considered the “innocence of childhood” an “essential concept” (Ariès 108). Philippe Ariès observes this conceptual development in the representation of children in art and literature, noting that young people have been depicted as either angels or similar religious beings, or naked (33), and as such are bestowed with holiness, or associated with a pristine, natural and uninhibited state of being. In the cultural arenas of the arts, much hope is invested in this purity of youth. Ariès notes that in every period of history, childhood, youth or adolescence has been a “privileged age” and in European literature since the early 1900s youth have given “the impression of secretly possessing new values capable of reviving an aged and sclerosed society” (28-29). Such a belief in the capacity of innocence and purity in young people to restore dysfunction is an undercurrent of *Australian Rules* and *September*.

More specifically, the moral purity of the friendships is the proposed key to improving black and white relations on a larger scale. For instance, Francesca Davidson states that *September* “leaves one feeling pleasantly optimistic about the possibilities of human friendships” (13), and Dave Palmer and Garry Gillard observe that the hope in *Australian Rules* “exists in the figures of Blacky and Clarence, young people intertwined in a relationship of love and compassion” (83). They see in this relationship “a hint of how white Australians might overcome their cultural poverty and find comfort and redemption with Indigenous Australians (83). Thus Blacky and Clarence’s intimacy is a source of hope for the whole reconciling nation.

However, in these intercultural intimacies race is a lurking, disturbing presence. In the portrayal of innocent, desirable youth, race adds a risky connotation between the desirable youth and the idealised Aboriginal primitive. Such association can lock an Aboriginal character into a perpetual state of the desirable Other, and they lose equitable status with his/her non-indigenous companion. There are clear ideological links between the primitive child (Ariès 116) and the primitive indigene (Maley 21; Torgovnick, *Primitive* 4). Naivety and innocence, as well as notions of moral integrity and the power to be socially transformative are common to both cinema’s golden youth and the Aboriginal

primitive Other. Cinematic representations of Aboriginal people have frequently comprised the conflation of the child and the primitive. Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke observe that in many Australian films Aboriginal people have typically been depicted as “non-adult” (38) and as such inferior to non-indigenous characters that have the capacity to mature. Aborigines are, under these conditions, always children. Although depicted as lesser beings, paradoxically they are also highly desirable, exhibiting “that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision” (Bhabha 67). Andrew Zielinski considers “lure of the exotic other or primitive ‘other’” to have been the key code of cinematic Aboriginal representation (113). In these ways ideological divisions between the “civilised” non-indigenous person and the “primitive” Aboriginal person share also the adult/child and impure/pure binary constructions.

A noteworthy cinematic example of this conflation is in the seminal Australian coming-of-age film *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg). *Walkabout* follows the journey of a lost white child (Lucas John Roeg) and his adolescent sister (Jenny Agutter) through hostile desert, until their eventual return to the city. They meet an adolescent Aboriginal boy (David Gulpilil) who is on “walkabout” as part of his initiation to adulthood, and who becomes their guide, desert tamer and companion, albeit with limited communication. The film is still praised for its portrayal of Aboriginal subjectivity, through its central character: “*Walkabout* is still striking today but must have been remarkably bold in the climate of its time – contrasting Aboriginal and Western perspectives on an equal plane” (Kelly). Nonetheless, I contend that the “civilised” white children stand in stark contrast to the “uncivilised” Aborigine and the Aboriginal boy’s primitive way of life is presented as highly desirable, to both the white children and the viewer. The film’s opening montages establish the white children as inhabitants of an urban, modern environment full of appliances and stifling English etiquette. When they become lost in the desert, however, these things are revealed to be useless and it is the Aboriginal boy who, with no clothes or English manners, finds food and water where there appears to be none, and saves the children. He functions as “a primitive heroic figure in a strange and mythical land” (Pike 8); and furthermore, a highly desirable Other.

During the film the white children start to shed their clothes and conventions and experience a corresponding increase in their sense of happiness and freedom. They reach a near-utopia when the young girl swims naked in a rock-pool, while the Aboriginal boy hunts, to a soundtrack of loud romantic music. The final scene reinforces his status as an

idealised desirable being. In this scene the girl is now an adult and while she listens to her dull husband talk about his work she has a flashback of the rock-pool. At this point, however, her memory has added images of the Aboriginal boy swimming naked with her, both smiling and carefree. In the feature commentary on the *Walkabout* DVD Jenny Agutter claims that without the rock-pool scenes, “there would be nothing to look back on and regret.” Her regret, a “European romantic longing for an ideal primitive past” (Collins and Davis, *After Mabo* 143), is a sentiment evident in many Australian films. Disrobing, as the young people do in *Walkabout*, continues to be a popular way to symbolise this longing. In recent cinema, both black and white shed their clothing to signal their longing for a different, more pure and earth-based past. For example, servant Tobey (Rodney Boschman) removes his shoes before leaving the doomed Stanley homestead in *The Proposition*; The Tracker (David Gulpilil) sheds his trooper uniform to ride off to his country at the close of *The Tracker*; and the parodic new-age copper (Peter Phelps) in *Stone Bros.* pursues his search for his own Aboriginal identity by walking naked into the desert. As well, young Nullah (Brandon Walters) hands his shoes to Lady Ashley (Nicole Kidman) to go walkabout with his Grandfather (David Gulpilil) in *Australia*. This cinematic code signals a utopic primitive Aboriginal life, both natural and spiritual, which contrasts against the soulless dystopia of urban, modern, white Australia.

September and *Australian Rules* are not free of these established and problematic racial codes. The archetypal desirable innocent youth and the Aboriginal primitive inform the main characters. The simplicity of the young characters’ approach to each other and to life in general, for example, is a desirable attribute in all of them. Their attractiveness to viewers is in their youth and naivety. Nonetheless, despite its potential to be otherwise, the primitive Other is not overt in either film. This is because any civilised/uncivilised dualisms are overridden by the deliberate construction of intellectual and emotional equality between the young characters. Both films use alternate, new, representational codes to allow the Aboriginal characters a greater degree of subjectivity, and facilitate inter-cultural exchanges on seemingly equitable personal grounds. One of these codes is articulate communication. For example, although the *Walkabout* boy has a relatively large amount of dialogue, none is subtitled and the non-indigenous characters and the viewer can only understand him at a very superficial and simplistic level. Paddy, Dumby and Clarence, however, are all robust conversationalists, and all speak in English. Parity exists between the white and black characters’ capacity to convey their thoughts and opinions.

A shared sense of dislocation from their parents enhances the equity among the young characters. The young innocents stand out against the more knowledgeable but flawed adults. Hierarchical power divisions, cross-cultural conflicts, and personal and institutional racism constitute, for the most part, the adult world in both these films. There are racist behaviours amongst some of the young characters' peers, but these are peripheral to the protagonists and bear little consequence to the story. For the most part, Ed, Paddy, Blacky, Dumby and Clarence are unaware of the troubles around them. They echo Marcia Langton's observation of non-Aboriginal Australian youth who, she states, are practically unaware of the enduring legacy of colonisation ("Correspondence" 79). In *September* the trigger for racial tension amongst the adults is the Federal Pastoral Industry Award. Michael learns that he and Paddy are entitled to a paid wage, which Rick says he cannot afford, and as a result hitherto silent concerns about inequities begin to be spoken.

The Award, extended in 1968 to entitle Aboriginal farm hands the same wage as non-Aboriginal farmhands, resulted in many Aboriginal people relocating to towns and cities as numerous farm owners were either unable or unwilling to pay (National Museum). In the film, the two farm families are a microcosm of broader social divisions on the issue. The strain reaches breaking point when Michael directly asks Rick about his new entitlements and Rick declares that he has no option other than to "let him go." The legislation is the film's means for alerting viewers to the influence of dispossession and segregation on the construction of Aboriginal poverty, and the inequitable levels of autonomy that existed between black and white at the time. Although initially in *September* these are the concerns of the adults, nevertheless the viewer knows that Ed and Paddy are also unwittingly affected by their external environment. For instance, while Ed plays with sunlight through his fingers at the bus stop, Paddy makes his little brother's breakfast; Ed has an education, but Paddy works on the farm; and when they go to watch Lionel Rose in the cinema their seats are segregated. But Ed and Paddy remain blissfully unaware, in a state of (primitive) innocence.

The adult conflicts are more overt in *Australian Rules* than in *September*, and confrontation is an ever-present and powerful force in this film. Palmer and Gillard describe Prospect Bay as "a hotbed of racism where drunken non-Indigenous men demean Aboriginality in one bar while Indigenous men socialise in another" (81). *Australian Rules* references existing situations that reflect racial tension in Australia, which adds credibility to the fictional violence and hatred on-screen. For example, Pickles calls to attention the

breadth of problems associated with Aboriginal deaths in custody—as documented in the 1996 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission report *Indigenous Deaths in Custody 1989-1996*—when he says to Blacky, “That Pretty, he should be locked back up in the big house, he might hang himself with any luck.” In another scene a newspaper clipping of past right-wing federal politician Pauline Hanson is glimpsed under a pile of maggots. Hanson is emblematic of racist politics in Australia, in part a result of her claim that Aborigines enjoyed more privileges than non-Aborigines (Hanson). The majority of non-Aboriginal adults in *Australian Rules* are overtly racist. During the football Grand Final, for example, racist taunts proliferate and after the game Blacky’s Dad (Simon Westaway) and his mates refer to Dumby as the “little black prick” and mumble their disapproval of his and Blacky’s friendship. At the Premiership award night the guest presenter attempts to make a speech about football being the level playing ground, and starts to say, “it doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are...” but is interrupted by Dumby’s outspoken and angry cousin Pretty (Tony Briggs) at the back of the hall, who claps slowly and calls out: “More Gunya bullshit.” Pretty’s cynicism highlights not only the discord between idealistic rhetoric and the reality of the fractured town, but also augments the incongruity of the worlds of the young people and the adult world where they are heading.

Like in *September*, the adults’ dysfunction and violence contrasts with the respect and kindness exhibited by the central young characters. However, as is inevitable in all coming-of-age narratives, the young characters’ immunity to their hostile environs starts to lessen as they transition into adulthood. Coming-of-age in *September* and *Australian Rules* is a time when the idealism, innocence and romanticism of the golden age of youth comes directly into contact with the adverse realities of adult life. The youths’ relationships start to become eroded by external events, and by their own increased awareness of their surrounds. In *September* a few small changes in the situation initially damage Ed and Paddy’s friendship. First is the arrival of a new girl, and unwitting femme fatale, Amelia (Mia Wasikowska). Amelia moves onto the neighbouring farm, catches the bus to school and is in the same class as Ed. Ed is captivated. He misses boxing practice with Paddy because he is with her, and a long, slow shot of Paddy standing alone in the ring, his back to camera as he stares out across the empty paddock waiting, captures the abandonment he feels. Secondly, Paddy starts having to work longer hours on the farm. Instead of being able to meet Ed when his bus arrives at the gate, Rick keeps him working, which means they

spend less time together in the spaces of their idyllic youth: the driveway, the boxing ring and the top of the water tank.

Their friendship is completely ruptured, however, when Ed fails to defend Paddy against a wrongful accusation of loitering around Amelia's house in the middle of the night. When Ed suggests a midnight excursion to Amelia's, Paddy only reluctantly agrees. When they arrive at Amelia's house her father comes out to see what the noise is and Ed flees, leaving Paddy as the outraged man starts to bash him. Ed never owns up to his involvement and Paddy does not tell either. It is a shameless betrayal by Ed, and one would think unforgivable. A series of changes are triggered by this event: Rick tells Ed he has to stop spending time with Paddy; Paddy refuses to keep working on the farm; and the boxing between the two young men becomes angry. Visually, the sky darkens or disappears from shot, and the landscape narrows and loses its aesthetic significance and signals instead impending conflicts.

Blacky, Dumby and Clarence are also unable to remain detached from the conflicts that surround them, and eventually there is a severe and final end to their innocence. In the week preceding the Grand Final tensions within the football team escalate, before erupting on the Premiership award night. Dumby, who by all accounts is a certain for "Best on Ground," is bypassed and instead the coach's son, a non-Aboriginal boy, takes the trophy. The snub is interpreted as racist and Dumby leaves in a rage with Pretty. Meanwhile Blacky and Clarence are becoming increasingly more physically and emotionally intimate. The three young people then experience the violence of Blacky's father, Bob. He verbally abuses Clarence, beats Blacky when he finds his son in bed with her, and kills Dumby during a botched break-in at the football clubrooms. Coinciding as it does with Clarence and Blacky's now sexual relationship, Bob's violence is a warning against the dangers of pursuing adult intercultural intimacy. In an earlier conversation, Blacky asks the scruffy but wise old maggot collector, Darcy (Martin Vaughan), if white boys can have a girlfriend from the mish. Darcy tells him the town's philosophy: "whites go with mish girls when the pub is closed, they've got a belly full of grog and a stiff dick, but you won't see them walking down the jetty the next day holding hands." Bob's extreme reaction confirms Darcy's opinion.

These cinematic transitions to adulthood reveal a dilemma embedded in the notion of youth as a golden age. When young, the qualities of innocence and purity are admirable and even desirable, but as an adult they signify immaturity and ignorance. In both films the

adults accept the young peoples' friendships with each other, albeit grudgingly, but they expect, and demand, the behaviours to stop as they become older. The adults tolerate innocence only to a point, but as the youth age innocence is considered to be a problem. This may stem from what Anneke Meyer suggests is an adult need to protect young people from their own vulnerability:

The discourse of the innocent child, which emerged with Romanticism, constructs children as inherently virtuous, pure, angelic and innocent. This innocence makes children immature, ignorant, weak and vulnerable, and creates a need for protection. (87)

In both films three fathers step in to protect their children from what they perceive to be their weaknesses, that is, their cross-cultural intimacy. Rick tells Ed not to associate with Paddy; Michael gives silent support for Paddy's moves to break away from the farm; and Bob demands that Blacky chose to align himself either with him or with his Aboriginal friends after the shooting. This "protection" bespeaks the social rules concerning intercultural relations for adults, which are different to those for children. The message is nonetheless delivered with regret: egalitarian relationships are child's play and hierarchical distinctions and conflicts are adult norms.

Golden Youth: Troubling Outsiders?

In *September* and *Australian Rules* the young characters contest adult intercultural normality by retaining their childhood ability to move back and forth across the physical, social and epistemological borders that exist in the adult worlds around them—playing the role of "troubling outsiders." Stuart Hall contends that there is always someone who does not fit within the boundaries of racial descriptors, someone who sits outside of their racial category and as such, "trouble[s] the dreams of those who are comfortable inside" (*Race*). In *September* this is poignantly illustrated in a scene when both families ride into town in the truck. Ed's family sits in the front of the truck and Paddy's in the back on the tray; Ed and Paddy, however, stand together in between. The same compositional techniques are employed In *Australian Rules*. In the change rooms the football team sit divided between

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players, but Blacky and Dumby sit with each other, between the two groups (figure 3).



Fig. 3

Blacky also traverses the segregated areas of the pub and through the hole in the wall between the rooms he talks with both black and white drinkers. Thus these young people occupy not only physical but also metaphorical postcolonial interstitial spaces. Such spaces “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1-2), thus the youths, or more precisely their friendships, destabilise fixed hierarchies and open up the possibilities for new modes of interaction.

Rick and Michael are unsure how to react to Ed and Paddy’s passive rebellion against established conditions on the farm. Paddy refuses to keep working, and instead leaves to join the Jimmy Sharman Boxing Troupe when it finally arrives. Although it is left open, the film suggests that Ed too will choose a different path to his father. Periodically in the film the extant racial inequities are justified by adults with the line, “It’s just the way it is;” however, this passive acquiescence is not for Ed and Paddy. Similarly, in *Australian Rules* the wise maggot collector’s advice to Blacky against marrying a black girl relies on the idea that, “it’s not the done thing.” Rejecting this shaky logic, Blacky and Clarence instead plan to leave the town so they can continue to be together.

What is being challenged is not only adult despondency. The youths also take issue with the ideology that informs their parent’s attitudes: biological determinism. Through the young people, the films explore the impacts of a belief that racial characteristics render Aborigines inferior to non-Aborigines in order to repudiate such an idea. The youths, who are depicted as having more social and moral insight than the adults in these films, accept

that racial categories are socially constructed and situational, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain: “Racial categories are not natural but constructs, not absolutes but relative, situational, even narrative categories, engendered by historical processes of differentiation” (*Unthinking* 19). *Australian Rules* sends an overt message that biological determinism is antediluvian, and a belief adhered to by ignorant thugs alone. It associates this belief with other undesirable characteristics to create intensely unlikable, unredeemable characters, subscribing to the view that: “Racism often travels in gangs, accompanied by its buddies sexism, classism and homophobia” (Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking* 22). The most extreme example is Bob, the most blatantly racist character in the film who is also an unintelligent, violent, misogynist rapist. Bob is almost a caricature of a working-class Australian male, and as a result appears too extreme to be plausible; as Brian McFarlane observes of racist characters in Australian cinema in general: “those who behave in deplorably racist ways are sometimes too crudely drawn for dramatic subtlety” (“Back Tracking” 65). Nevertheless, the film sends a loud ideological message. Smart and mobile, Clarence and Blacky traverse the barriers that Bob wants to retain, and their actions render those boundaries arbitrary and collapsible.

Whereas the adults in the films justify the existence of cultural inequities because of unavoidable differences, the youths instead focus on the similarities between themselves. The cultural differences so prominent between the young people in *Walkabout* are absent in these films, and instead they are each alike in temperament, physicality, interests and abilities. In *September*, Ed and Paddy both have easy going demeanors, are physically healthy and beautiful, and, although dialogue is sparse, when they converse they are both equally articulate. Both live in nuclear families, are learning to drive and share a passion for boxing. The three young people in *Australian Rules* are all interested in football, and are intelligent, insightful and love words and language.

To augment this further, class and social inequities between the different families are played down in both films. Class divisions between Dumby, Clarence and Blacky in *Australian Rules* are noticeably absent. Dumby and Clarence’s homes are not pictured, nor much of the “mish” at all which, in effect, conceals their living conditions and any visual evidence of wealth or poverty. However, viewer awareness of the existing conditions of poverty in many Aboriginal communities in Australia inform the spectator experience; poor living conditions are frequently raised in the media and have been depicted in earlier films, such as *The Fringe Dwellers* and *Dead Heart*. Indigenous poverty may be assumed, but it is

not the most significant feature of the film. In contrast, Blacky's low socio-economic status is foregrounded—he lives in a ramshackle cement sheet shack-like dwelling, crowded by his large family. Consequently, Blacky, Dumby and Clarence are not markedly different to each other in respect to class. Although Ed's family in *September* has property and income and Paddy's are unpaid laborers, the differences are subtle. The Andersons have modest material possessions and they struggle to pay the farm accounts. There are no conventional indicators of poverty among the unpaid family either, such as shabby clothing or the physical signs of an inadequate diet.

Although the emphasis on the protagonists' similarities on the one hand undermines determinist ideas of difference, it does raise a troubling question. Are the youths similar in the sense that they all represent the dynamism of identity afforded them by virtue of their youth, or is their characterisation an expression of assimilationist ideals, where Aborigines passively succumb to hegemonic norms? In other words, in the optimistic postcolonial interstitial space are the Aboriginal characters simply more like whites than blacks? If the latter is so, then the film makes a problematic suggestion that youth is a golden age because it is a time when young Aboriginal people are able and willing to act like whites. Anna Daly reads *Australian Rules* as an experiment in attempting to depict Aboriginal Australia "without stripping blackfellas of agency," but she is not convinced of its success. Her concerns harbour fears about the subsumption of Aboriginality, of cultural difference, that has roots in Australia's official assimilation period. The Federal Government assimilation policy (introduced informally in the 1930s and formally in the 1950s) anticipated that, over time, "all persons of aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do" (Jonas and Langton 31). These concerns are echoed in criticisms of the emphasis by Australia's formal reconciliation process on the quest for a "united-nation" (see for example Short; Gunstone) in which difference is all but subsumed in the quest for national unity.

However, if Paddy, Clarence and Dumby are simply acting white, then Blacky and Ed are simply acting black, as indeed the adults in the film suspect; nevertheless, there is much more going on. The two non-indigenous boys struggle against the racism and mediocrity that surrounds them, and neither hold positions of power in white arenas. They resist adult norms, and by challenging the status quo they reject hegemonic values. Importantly also, whilst cultural and class differences between Ed, Paddy, Dumby, Blacky and Clarence are downplayed in the film, they are not completely erased. Ed and Paddy spend

their days in distinctly dissimilar activities, and separate residential areas divide Blacky, Dumby and Clarence. Langton proposes that:

It is the challenge for settler Australians ... of recognising the value in the differences between our cultures and societies in such a way that everyone can own the civil society we share and, if you like, the 'national identity' we yearn for with an equal cause and an equal commitment. This challenge goes under the label of "Reconciliation." ("Correspondence" 81)

The adults in *September* and *Australian Rules* are well aware of the social differences between indigenous and non-indigenous and it is the hierarchical nature of these that the young people resist. Through their friendships they create new fluid identities for themselves that resist being confined to set cultural boundaries and instead play with sameness and difference. Cross-cultural intersubjectivities allow for new notions of selfhood, and new possibilities for reconciliation.

Searching for a Golden Future

The two young protagonists in *Beneath Clouds* take a journey of a different sort. *Beneath Clouds* follows the mostly on-foot road trip of two young Aboriginal people, Lena (Danielle Hall) and Vaughn (Damien Pitt), whose futures are as uncertain as those of Paddy, Ed, Blacky and Clarence. However, they leave childhoods that are far less utopian—their upbringings have been marred by violence, crime and dysfunction. While Ed, Paddy, Blacky and Clarence seek to retain the golden aura of their youth, Lena and Vaughn want to shake off the past for a more optimistic future. Nonetheless, Lena and Vaughn also act as troubling outsiders, challenging outmoded beliefs and stereotypes held by those around them. Regardless of the differences in their childhoods, all of the protagonists in these three films struggle to resist adult expectations for their futures.

Beneath Clouds is also a debut feature film and received a number of 2002 Australian Film Institute awards: for Cinematography, Best Newcomer (Danielle Pitt) and Best Director (Ivan Sen). It also received the Audience Prize at the Festival of Antipodean Cinema and screened at numerous other International festivals, including Sundance and

Berlin. Stylistically, *Beneath Clouds* has much in common with *September*: open spaces, vast blue skies, minimal dialogue and an attention to beauty. However, in this film the beauty of the landscape is interrupted by power lines and towers, silos, heavy trucks and petrol stations. Unlike the young people growing up on the Western Australian wheat belt, Lena lives in dismal conditions. Her Aboriginal mother (Judy Duncan) and stepfather (Kevin Pitt) are both alcoholics who neglect her, and her younger brother (Mundurra Weldon) is already in trouble with the police. Her teenage friend Ty (Jenna Lee Connors) is pregnant, and Lena fears a similar future for herself unless she leaves the town. Lena is possibly already pregnant: a number of times she vomits when she smells particular foods. Her absent father is Irish (she bears his light complexion) and after an argument with her inebriated mother Lena leaves home in search for him.

On the road she meets Vaughn, who has just escaped from a juvenile detention centre in the back of a milk van. His mother is dying and he is trying to reach her house to see her. The two reluctantly start to travel together, walking and hitchhiking through the countryside. Initially they treat each other with distrust. Vaughn assumes by Lena's fair skin and blonde hair that she is non-indigenous, and for the most part of the film she allows him to believe this. She slants the truth of her heritage to deliberately mislead him: "I'm from Ireland ... Over near England," she tells him. Her Celtic pendant and traditional Irish Claddagh ring complement her chosen identity, and enable her to better perform the role of an Irish Australian. Consequently, for all but the last 15 minutes of the story Vaughn believes Lena to be white and treats her accordingly.

Vaughn's dark skin makes him a cinematically recognisable Aborigine. He is an angry young man, whose life has been a series of clashes with whites in authority, and his peers. When caught stealing cars he was shot by police, and in the detention centre the non-Aboriginal detention officers bully him and he fights with the non-indigenous inmates. His view is that white people are dishonest neo-colonists – "the war ain't over" he says – and Lena is not spared his ire. Scathingly, he chastises her for being privileged, for example he says, "It's alright for you, you're white," and, "Don't you tell me what it's like because you don't fuckin' know." He presumes she considers herself superior to him, and asks her, "You think I'm dumb don't you?" Vaughn's opinions of Lena are ultimately irrational and unconvincing however, because Lena and the viewer know that her life has been one far from privileged, and also that she is not "white" in the sense that Vaughn imagines. Consequently, his comments appear preposterous. For Collins and Davis, Lena is motivated

to remain silent about her Aboriginality to be able to reject the “injuries of shame” she inherits from her Aboriginality (*Cinema After Mabo* 167). Her deception is also, however, a strategic device that enables her, and the film, to critique simplistic assumptions about both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people. She literally acts white to expose the falsities and obstructionist nature of stereotypes and prejudices that Vaughn expresses.

During their journey Lena plays the part of a sceptical, provocative non-Aboriginal person. Lena responds to Vaughn’s aforementioned goading comments with retorts such as, “Is that right?” or “You’re not the only one to have a shit life Vaughn.” In one scene she and Vaughn argue about non-Aboriginal sacred sites and Lena tells Vaughn she knows about them because she “read it in a book.” Vaughn states with disbelief and cynicism: “I wouldn’t believe everything you read, it’s all written by whitefellas anyway.” She retorts, “Not all whitefellas are the same” which leads them into an argument about contact history:

Vaughn: Don’t make no difference where they come from, they’re all
 fuckin’ white and they all took our land.
Lena: Youse were the ones who gave it up.
Vaughn: We didn’t give it up, it was all them diseases and shit they
 brought in, that’s what fucked us up.

In this brief exchange the two take familiar sides in a polarised debate about the causes of Aboriginal dispossession—land was either stolen by whites bearing disease and “shit” like alcohol, or else blacks were acquiescing passives, giving up their land. Lena continues to challenge Vaughn, attempting to expose him as a hypocrite:

Lena: How do you know?
Vaughn: I just know.
Lena: You know because you read it in a book that’s why.

Not only does Lena expose Vaughn’s duplicity (having told her earlier she should not believe what she reads), she also highlights the complicated nature of postcolonial identities in Australia. She challenges Vaughn to acknowledge the complexity of his contemporary Aboriginal identity. Her concealed black identity is a safety device that enables both

characters to be boldly provocative; however, should Lena confess her Aboriginality to Vaughn their criticisms of each other would be nullified.

Emboldened, she goes further, turning his prejudices against him. She tells him he will never have a car, never get a job, and always be in trouble with the police, “like all of them.” Her comments are all the more powerful because the future she foretells for Vaughn could be just as easily her own. By participating in the discourse of stereotypical constructions of Aboriginal youth she challenges not only Vaughn but also herself to tread a different path. Another reason she can mount such a contest is because of her capacity to create her own identity as both black and/or white; as such she exemplifies Greg McCarthy’s claim that, “by combining identities a subject can recognise the strength in both and thereby resist the claims of a superior identity (white) over another (black)” (22).

In hiding her Aboriginality Lena tests Vaughn’s capacity to overcome his own prejudices and to be friends with her as a white person. He eventually passes this test. Despite their arguments they continue to travel with each other, running from an angry farmer and avoiding the police as they go. Although they continue to speak the rhetoric and perform as expected in a hierarchically divided society, they also begin to enact its alternative: equitable interculturalism. By the time Vaughn discovers Lena has Aboriginal heritage—revealed in the back of a car by an older Aboriginal woman who is not misled by her looks—they have established an intimate friendship. Before the fuller picture of Lena’s identity has been revealed, however, the stereotypes they had ascribed each other have been exposed as falsehoods as they have come to know each other. Through their performance of a cross-cultural relationship they reveal that prejudices are artificial, surmountable barriers which can be overcome through friendship.

Like *September* and *Australian Rules*, the film suggests that a cross-cultural friendship has other positive benefits. A key scene in *Beneath Clouds* exemplifies this idea. A white, wealthy man (Arthur Dignam) picks up the two hitchhikers in his expensive, luxurious car (that oozes the benefits of colonisation). Knowing Vaughn’s attitude toward and experience with non-Aboriginal people creates immediate anxiety for the viewer. It seems inevitable that the driver will say or do something to confirm Vaughn’s opinions and he will explode; however, the unexpected happens. The trip is mostly silent, apart from when the driver turns on the radio to hear the rugby at which point he and Vaughn offer each other a barely detectable smile to signal their mutual appreciation. This car, and the rich white driver gives Vaughn ample cause to be bitter, and yet Lena and Vaughn fall to

sleep. It is “the closest thing in the film to a moment of peace” (Walsh 11). The driver takes them to his gate where they wake, nod and smile their thanks (figures 4 and 5), and leave to continue their journey.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

The significance of this scene lies in its gentle nothingness; that is, in the fact that neither black nor white characters question or challenge one another. Renay Walker reads the non-Aboriginal driver's actions as a silent apology. Writing during the Howard Government era, at a time when calls for a formal apology to the Stolen Generations were being rejected, she states:

One can't help but feel that [the] Dignam [character] is reaching out to Aboriginal people in a way that Prime Minister Howard is yet to—by saying sorry on behalf of a nation and asking for forgiveness ... It appears to be enough to acknowledge their situation out on the open road, and we share in their understanding of each other along the way. (Walker 14-15)

However acknowledging and understanding is not the same as apologising and this scene is not an apology but a suggestion of another way that reconciliation might manifest: as non-judgmental co-habitation. It pictures the possibility of an end to constantly interrogating stereotypes, making assumptions and categorising people.

The peace is short-lived, however, and the road trip that started as a slow-moving journey through the countryside escalates into a fierce and fearful chase as they near the city, travelling by this time in the back of Vaughn's mates' car. The police catch up to them and harass and physically assault Vaughn, and all the men then retaliate with violence.

Leaving the police lying by the side of the road, the others flee in their car. At his insistence, his mates deliver Vaughn and Lena to his mother's house. They arrive too late, however, and the only remaining sign of his mother is her blood stains on the bed. He reacts angrily, rejecting Lena's sympathetic gestures. She leaves the house, but Vaughn quickly realises he was foolish to dismiss her, and he runs to the train station and catches her before she boards the train. Like Ed and Paddy, and Blacky and Clarence, they decide that most important thing is their friendship. Vaughn and Lena forgive each other with an empathetic gaze and silent embrace (figures 6 and 7), their most intimate moment in the film.



Fig. 6

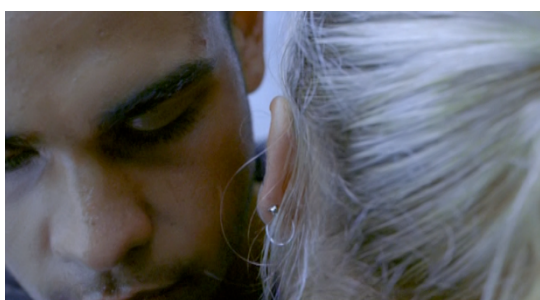


Fig. 7

Although Lena boards the train while Vaughn remains on the platform, it is an optimistic ending. The viewer is left with the sense that what each has discovered about themselves and each other will be a positive influence on their adult lives.

Conclusion: The Nation's Coming-of-Age

The resolutions in *Beneath Clouds*, *September* and *Australian Rules* are key messages of hope that these films offer a reconciling nation. In *September*, Ed and Paddy wait until the last minute to make up with each other. Paddy leaves the farm on foot, with his bag packed in readiness to join the boxing troupe. By this stage he and Ed are no longer speaking. He passes Ed on the road and both are silent. Ed realises, however, what is happening and after a moment's soul searching back at the house he gets the car, overcomes his inability to drive, and leaves to pick up Paddy. In the car there is a quiet and gentle reconciliation between the two. Ed offers an awkward teenage apology and Paddy indicates his forgiveness. When they say goodbye outside of the car they initially shake hands,

performing it would appear their new roles of grown men. However they then hug each other, and it's a heartfelt, emotion-filled moment, reminding the viewer how close they have been as children (figures 8 and 9). They then go their separate ways, into their adult lives.



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

As Blacky and Dumby's friendship ends in death, resolution is symbolic only and takes place at Dumby's funeral. Blacky makes a choice unusual for a non-Aboriginal Prospect Bay resident: to attend the funeral. He is initially viewed with suspicion—his father is, after all, Dumby's killer. However, Clarence ignores the animosity toward him and welcomes him to the ceremony, opening the way for others to do the same. In the final scene Clarence and Blacky vow to continue their relationship, despite the pressures on them to stop seeing each other from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. They make their plans while they are entwined in the water under the pier (figure 10). Reminiscent of a scene in another film in which young, "natural" love was at odds with the external world, *Blue Lagoon* (1980)—in which the central young characters also spent much time discovering themselves in water—Blacky and Clarence's resolution is the cheesiest of the three films. Nonetheless, hope for change lies in their resolve to continue their intimacy into their adult lives.



Fig. 10

The young characters capacity to trouble adult conventions is in part due to their ability to reconcile their ruptured relations as they come-of-age. If their arguments were left unresolved, or if they abandoned the peaceful equality they experienced as adolescents to become anger and bitter, then the outcomes would be considerably bleaker. The overall impression, I conclude, is that Ed and Paddy, Clarence and Blacky, Lena and Vaughn will each be wiser and act more justly than their parents and the other adult characters as a direct result of their friendships. Optimistic friendships between unlikely companions are the basis of this cinematic rendition of reconciliation. The implication is that if adults were to act likewise, then many of the problems encountered by the nation's reconciliation process might be more readily addressed. These three films invite us to consider reconciliation as a national coming-of-age.

These are, however, fairly tale endings—utopian fantasies that befit the fictional coming-of-age genre. Can such resolutions have any impact in a nation in which inequities between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples frequently have dire and traumatic outcomes? Leela Gandhi claims that a move toward utopianism is a necessary one for societies, and one that is enabled by a politics of friendship (a concept she borrows from Jacques Derrida). For Gandhi, the value of utopianism lies in what she sees as the essential components of such effective friendships: principally, an awareness of one's own insufficiencies, and the ability to make friends with unknown and dissimilar others. What follows then, she claims, is "genuine cosmopolitanism" (19-20). Gandhi's theory resonates in these three films, and in their suggestions that utopian cross-cultural friendships are a genuine expression of reconciliation. The loving relationships are innovative, passive and hopeful acts of cooperation, the "key to moving beyond our current dysfunction" (Palmer and Gillard 83) and the source of Davidson's aforementioned optimism about the possibilities of friendships (13). Although racism and indigenous disadvantage, and lack of

opportunities and self-autonomy are ever-present impediments to the actualisation of utopia in these films, adulthood nonetheless has potential for a different reality.

Chapter Three

Screening Power

Black and White

Lucky Miles

Black and White (2002) and *Lucky Miles* (2007) are at first glance two very dissimilar films. *Black and White* is an intense courtroom drama set in 1959 and based on the life of Rupert Max Stuart, an indigenous man who was convicted of the rape and murder of a young girl and sentenced to hang. *Lucky Miles* tells the story of a group of refugees who arrive in Australia by boat in 1990 and land on a remote part of the Western Australian coastline. A laid-back team of three Army Reservists, two Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, are responsible for finding the missing men. The former is a gripping historical drama and the latter a contemporary “road movie without a road” (McFarlane, “A Road” 22). Nevertheless, despite these differences *Black and White* and *Lucky Miles* share a common focus: both films explore the impacts of power distribution in formal institutional settings. In particular, the films examine the impacts that structured power relations have on settler-indigenous interculturalism. In *Black and White* the 1950s judicial system is a monolithic racist institution, which blatantly discriminates on racial grounds and perpetuates inequitable power relations between non-indigenous and indigenous people. *Lucky Miles*, in contrast, envisions the 1990s Army Reserves as an institution that promotes an equitable distribution of power, which in turn fosters respectful cross-cultural relations. The implications for reconciliation of these two divergent examples of power relations are manifold.

Both films are suggestive of a two-way relationship between personal and structural experiences of interculturalism. Healthy cross-cultural relationships are shown to positively influence the racist structures of an institution and, vice versa, deliberately egalitarian structural measures result in equitable intercultural working environment. In both films, cross-cultural friendships—between a lawyer and his client in *Black and White*, and three co-workers in *Lucky Miles*—are formed by, and also inform, the principles and ideologies of the institutions within which they occur. The two protagonists in *Black and White*, the

non-Aboriginal lawyer and Aboriginal defendant, are pitted against the racist structures of the justice system. The system assists the wealthy, educated, white Australians to wield power over those it considers innocent and ignorant. *Lucky Miles* depicts the friendships between the three Army Reservists as a product of the postracial environment in which they work, where racial identities and cultural differences are of little consequence to the workplace operations. Whereas in *Black and White* the two lead characters are at odds with the system's approach to interculturalism, *Lucky Miles* imagines the three reservists as beneficiaries of the discrimination-free policies of the Army Reserve Unit.

Both films illuminate a number of issues at stake for formal interculturalism. These fictions explore issues of institutional and personal racism, structured power hierarchies, the impact of multiculturalism and the implications of a postracial working environment. As such, they engage with much of the rhetoric of reconciliation discourses in Australia—institutional, political and personal. Via an examination of the portrayals of cross-cultural friendships in the two institutional settings, this chapter demonstrates how the films' depictions of power, cultural identity and institutional structures reimagine an equitable Australia.

A 1950s Judicial Dystopia

Black and White is informed by an established cinematic tradition of courtroom dramas, including classics such as *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) and *Kramer vs Kramer* (1979). It follows the basic narrative structure of the genre—a crime is committed, someone is accused, a trial is held and a verdict given. It also adheres to genre conventions of characterisation and modes of representation that dictate that an underdog lawyer will defend a (most likely) innocent client who is struggling for justice. This dedicated, yet maverick, lawyer is equipped with a social conscience and sense of conviction that motivates their battles against the outdated structures and ideologies of a judicial system. Men who are disinterested in poor and marginalised clients dominate the system, and they are interested only in maintaining their own positions of wealth and power.

Black and White is a realist drama that reconstructs the case against Stuart (David Ngoombujarra) in South Australia, during 1958-1960. Stuart is an Arrente man who, in the film, is discriminated against and victimised at the time of his arrest and throughout the police interrogation and formal court proceedings. The film opens with a reference to the

crime committed—soft and hazy images bathed in warm orange light of a young child playing on the beach and then running towards a cave. A fast-paced sequence of short scenes follows, accompanying the opening credits. Men search the beach by torchlight, looking for her body, then (to fast and loud music) a cut-away from the beach to police cars, from a low angle, with sirens blazing and headlights beaming directly into the camera. They speed into a campground where an unsuspecting Stuart is relieving himself in the bushes. The angry and abusive police shout, “get ‘im!” and throw him into a police car. He is then interrogated in a dimly lit and crowded police station. Stuart sits alone, silent and shaking, and while the music continues with growing urgency a “confession” is dictated to him. This opening creates an expectation of a traumatic and racist ride to justice, and in its first few minutes establishes that this will be a harsh critique of the 1950s Australian justice system.

Throughout the film the police interrogation room is periodically revisited, as flashbacks piece together Stuart’s alleged movements on the afternoon of the crime. For the most part these scenes show Stuart naked, sweating and surrounded by jeering, angry police officers. The police physically abuse him, calling him a “black mongrel,” and threaten to cut him with a razor blade and to beat him. Camera work and editing augments his vulnerability. A series of shot-reverse-shots that alternate between eye-level close-ups of Stuart and low-angle shots of a police officer accentuate the power discrepancies between the black and white men.

The court process contrasts Stuart’s lowly position with the extreme wealth, privilege and power of the judicial system’s representatives. It does this through the repeated association between power and material wealth on the one hand, and disempowerment and poverty on the other. For example, Stuart is a poorly paid itinerant carnival worker with minimal personal belongings and no property. The prosecuting lawyer Chamberlain (Charles Dance), however, lives in luxury with his expensively dressed and stereotypically discontented wife (Heather Mitchell). Shots of Stuart in a bare cell (figure 1) are juxtaposed with images of Chamberlain in the opulent lawyer’s lounge (figure 2), which is richly coloured, filled with plush furniture and gold-framed paintings, and occupied by well-fed older white men. These visual cues are consolidated with complementary dialogue. After Stuart shamefully reveals the story of his drunkenness and failed boxing career to his solicitor, Chamberlain and his cronies smugly discuss the prosecution’s sure path to victory, and the career advancements they expect will follow.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Material wealth correlates with bigotry in this film. Racism typifies the attitudes of the judicial representatives who are, on the whole, patronising and paternalistic toward Stuart. In a conversation between Chamberlain and a colleague, Chamberlain explains that the high court will agree to hear Stuart's case only out of benevolence for the member of a doomed race. He states:

Stuart is Aboriginal. Even though he is scum, he is part of a vanishing race. One of society's few gestures of kindness toward a people whose way of life we have destroyed.

This exchange foregrounds the subterranean imperialist ideologies that inform *Black and White's* 1950s judicial system.

The court is Anglocentric, inflexible and incongruous with Stuart's Aboriginal beliefs and cultural norms. For example, during the proceedings it becomes evident to Stuart's solicitor, David O'Sullivan (Robert Carlyle), that he has withheld vital information about his whereabouts at the time of the girl's disappearance. Stuart's credibility is damaged when it appears that he has purposefully misled the court; however, an Arrente-speaking priest, Tom Dixon (Colin Friels), uncovers the truth. Stuart had been with a prostitute at the time and is silent about the details because he feels shamed. His reluctance to tell the truth is thus attributed to cultural sensibilities (to do with the complex notion of shame) that are misunderstood, or not acknowledged, by the court. The film paints the court at fault for this miscommunication, and not Stuart, owing to its incapacity to recognise Arrente cultural beliefs and behaviours.

O’Sullivan, although assisted by his legal partner Helen Devaney (Kerry Fox), is the key driver behind Stuart receiving a stay of execution, and eventually a gaol sentence. O’Sullivan is the typical maverick lawyer of the courtroom drama, who finds himself alienated from his colleagues as he refuses to adhere to the conventions of hierarchy and status around him. He displays commitment and integrity as he slowly develops a trusting, mutually respectful relationship with Stuart. Over time, this professional relationship becomes a caring friendship (figure 3). Chamberlain voices concerns about O’Sullivan and Devaney blurring the boundaries between personal and professional relationships—“those two have made it personal”—and in doing so signals the potential power that such an alliance might have to effect change. O’Sullivan’s dedication to Stuart opens the way for other like-minded non-indigenous Australians to join the fight against impeding injustice. In addition to Father Dixon, anthropologist Ted Strehlow (Petru Gheorghiu) and a young Rupert Murdoch (Ben Mendelsohn) become involved, sharing concerns that they have about the “anxieties” surrounding the case. They are convinced a miscarriage of justice is imminent and so offer their assistance to O’Sullivan. In opposition to the white Australians that Chamberlain represents, these characters are emblematic of non-indigenous people who understand and are committed to equity. These values are ultimately rewarded in the film, in the overturning of Stuart’s initial sentence to hang.



Fig. 3

A David and Goliath battle ensues, between O’Sullivan, Stuart and their supporters on the one hand and the powerful justice system on the other. Although O’Sullivan pronounces the Australian judicial system classist rather than racist—“not only antiquated, it is against the poor and people who can’t defend themselves”—Stuart’s Aboriginality undoubtedly prevents him from defending himself against the excesses of judicial privilege

and wealth, racist attitudes and cultural insensitivities of the system. The entire system is antithetical to cross-cultural collaboration.

Black and White was released in 2002, a year of heightened cinematic awareness of indigenous issues. It is part of broader discourses about the gross differences in indigenous and non-indigenous Australians' rates of contact with the justice system, and the negative consequences for indigenous people. In 1991 a Royal Commission was held to investigate the high numbers of deaths of Aboriginal people in the custody of gaols, police stations and juvenile detention centres during the period 1980-1989 (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody [RCIADIC]) and found Aborigines were overrepresented during that period. The trend continues. In 2007 indigenous people represented only 2.5% of the total population, but 24% of the prison population (AIHW, *Health* 13-14). A House of Representatives review of indigenous youth in the criminal justice system, *Doing Time*, released 20 years after the RCIADIC, found that overrepresentation of Aboriginal juveniles and young adults had worsened, not improved (ix).

The reasons for disproportionate levels of incarceration are manifold and well documented, and include cultural and social factors related to violence and criminal behaviours. However, the recommendations from the 2011 Government review, *Doing Time*, indicate that the justice system's failure to accommodate Aboriginal cultural factors continues to be a contributing factor. For example, the review recommends improving interpreting and legal services for indigenous people, cultural awareness training for police, alternative sentencing options, increasing the level of Aboriginal representation in the police force and the instigation of an Indigenous Law and Justice Advisory Body (xxvi–xxx). This indicates that the problems encountered by Stuart in 1959 are not entirely foreign to many indigenous people today.

A key contributing factor to the failure of the justice system is undoubtedly the systemic racism entrenched in its agentic institutions. Institutional racism, also referred to as structural or systematic racism, is “a pattern of distribution of social goods, including power, which regularly and systematically advantages some ethnic groups and disadvantages others” (Pettman 7). This form of racism operates through legislation and Government and organisational policies, and may be evident in, for example, the education system, in health delivery or judicial system. However, institutional racism is not only facilitated by structural modes of disadvantage but is also maintained by individuals working in institutions who “hold expectations and beliefs which influence how they do

their jobs, and how these institutions affect other people” (Pettman 7). Australia’s reconciliation process encompasses racism at institutional levels. For example, the non-government organisation that replaced the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991, Reconciliation Australia (RA), has an “Action Plan Program” which is an educational and practical program for businesses, government agencies, sporting codes, schools and hospitals. The aim is to “help build positive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people” (RA), and workplaces are the starting point.

There are, however, three significant miscarriages of justice that have occurred since the Stuart case that demonstrate that the judicial system continues to be dogged by systemic racism. The first is the case of Aboriginal woman Robyn Bela Kina who was sentenced to life imprisonment in the late 1980s for the murder of her partner. She was later acquitted when it became evident that in the initial case she had been “substantially deterred from communicating effectively” with her legal representatives (Pringle 14). The poor communication was attributed to personal and psychological factors, but also cultural factors which prevented her from being able to disclose to her non-Aboriginal lawyers the extent of the abuse she had received from her husband, and thus the provocation for her criminal act (Pringle 14). As in the Stuart case, lawyers and court representatives did not recognise that the communication difficulties Kina was experiencing were related to particular cultural sensibilities; subsequently, these were not accommodated throughout the proceedings to ensure she received a just hearing.

The second example, from 2008, as retold by lawyer Debbie Kilroy (in the radio broadcast “Women’s Prisons”), concerns a young Aboriginal inmate who was charged with the assault of correction officers in an Australian prison. However, the girl claimed that she had been pinned down by two officers and stomped on by a third, and that when she reported the incident no action had been taken. According to Kilroy (who acted as the defence for the girl) during the case closed circuit television footage was found to have gone missing, police reports were inconsistent and there was evidence that the officers had “fixed” their statements. The girl was eventually found to be not guilty and the judge’s account of the police investigation and the prosecution case was, in Kilroy’s words, “scathing.” This incident has uncanny resemblances to *Black and White*: in both film and real life, extreme misuses of power within the judicial system were exposed by the determination of a committed lawyer, and justice was eventually obtained for the victim defendant.

A similar case, but with a more tragic outcome, provides the final example. In Western Australia in 2009 an Aboriginal man, Mr Ward, was found unconscious in the back of a transport van after a 300-kilometre journey from a holding cell in a small town to the Kalgoorlie Regional Prison and died shortly afterwards. He had been arrested for driving under the influence and denied bail by a Justice of the Peace (JP) prior to his transportation. On national television the “untrained” JP admitted that in the ten-minute bail hearing he conducted the morning of the transfer he had not considered Mr Ward’s community connections or circumstances, as is legally required. He stated that he saw only that “he was an Aboriginal in a very drunken state, or very groggy state” and added, “that’s all I knew him as” (qtd. in “Who Killed”). His comments reveal that there was not a thorough, objective assessment made of the situation. In addition, the public report stated that one of the transport guards had been previously suspended from a supervisory position because he had reportedly participated in “racial slurs directed at prisoners.” This suggests that the mistreatment of Mr Ward was racially based, and provides further evidence of a continuing culture of discrimination against Aboriginal people within areas of Australia’s contemporary judicial system.

Former High Court Justice Michael Kirby concurs. In his analysis of *Black and White* he considers the positive impact that the Stuart case might have on the judicial system. He states:

For the lawyer, the importance of the [Stuart] case is that it displays a legal system of decades ago that was put to the test in the trial of an illiterate Aboriginal Australian and was revealed as seriously deficient in important respects. Equally intriguing are the lessons that the film suggests concerning the improvements that have occurred in the administration of justice in the intervening years. (196)

Kirby claims that laws and practices are overall less discriminatory now than in 1959, and supports his view with reference to the establishment of Aboriginal Legal Services, access to legal aid and professional representation, improvements in the rules for obtaining confessions, and improved protection from incompetent counsel (206-09). However, as the film does, Kirby contends that formal improvements in the system are not sufficient alone to deliver justice; he too stresses the importance of personality and conviction. He considers

this not to be a shortfall in the system, but a legitimate and vital feature of the judicial process. He warns: “When lawyers forget the mission of justice ... and when we celebrate law devoid of justice, we run the risk that we ourselves sanction serious wrongs and become part of the problem” (211). Kirby alludes to the chicken-and-egg interplay between personal expressions of reconciliation and the institutional structures that guide people’s interactions. *Black and White* celebrates the capacity of individuals to overturn institutional discrimination by challenging extant racist ideologies. In doing so it gives prominence to the interconnection between some personal elements of reconciliation (feelings, attitudes and actions) and formalised institutional interactivity.

Black and White has been criticised for portraying cross-cultural power relations in a way that belies complex realities. In her review of the film, Sylvia Huntington observes a lack of nuance in the settler-indigenous interactions and a corresponding overemphasis on polarised dualisms of right and wrong, and good and bad. She states that in Stuart’s story “you couldn’t get better material by which to examine the history of relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians,” however feels that *Black and White* circumvents this for the sake of straightforward characters. She adds:

In this film there are only ‘goodies and baddies’ and there’s very little sign of the greys of ignorance, fear, good intentions, self-deception, indifference, cowardice, faith in god, the major players in the ugly chapters of our past. (44)

She also claims that the depiction of the non-Aboriginal collaborators as Stuart’s saviours means that the film circumvents a real critique of justice (46). Similarly, Jane Lydon is sceptical that establishing a dichotomy between O’Sullivan and his supporters on one hand and the prosecution on the other can be of benefit to contemporary understandings of the issues at stake. She states: “The real flaws of the defence case are never given the same status as those in the prosecution’s” and believes that as a result “the bigotries of only fifty years ago are made to seem simpler, cruder, and therefore more distant than they really are” (144). These criticisms point to broader arguments about polemical interpretations of Australian history in reconciliation discourses (discussed in detail in Chapter One of this thesis). *Black and White* is open to the same critiques that are levelled at other one-sided interpretations of Australia’s past, the “black armband” or “whitewashed” representations.

Nevertheless, I contend that the film generates some ambivalence around the facts of the case, in an attempt to make Stuart's struggle against racism more convincing. Whilst O'Sullivan is quick to draw attention to evidence of injustice, the film also tries to set up the possibility of Stuart's guilt. For instance, conflicting versions of the events leading to his conviction, imagined in a series of flashbacks, re-tell the original accounts in such a way as to muddy the picture. Chamberlain also raises doubts about Stuart's honesty in a way that cannot be easily dismissed. Although Chamberlain is almost a caricature of the evil rich white man, toward the end of the film he makes a convincing case for Stuart's guilt. He reconstructs the events applying a reverse logic to O'Sullivan, drawing upon evidence from the trial in such a way that creates a picture of Stuart as a drunk and angry rapist. However, Chamberlain's cause is weakened because by this time he is established as a corrupt, heartless representative of a bigoted system and spectator sympathies lie firmly with Stuart. Although Chamberlain denies he is racist—"When I look at Stuart I don't see a man with a black skin, I see a man with a black heart"—he has been shown to be otherwise, and thus is an untrustworthy interpreter of events.

The appearance of the real Rupert Max Stuart at the end of the film, perhaps inadvertently and somewhat ironically, raises uncertainty about his innocence. As the final credits play the elderly Stuart drives along the road and he states, ambiguously: "Some people think I'm guilty and some don't. Some people think Elvis Presley is still alive and most of us think he is dead and gone." This riddle has no hint of an emphatic plea for audience sympathy, or defence of his innocence, but is a matter-of-fact statement. Perhaps having served 14 years in gaol for rape and murder has left Stuart unenthusiastic about defending his innocence, for this actual Stuart bears little relation to the emotional, passionate character we have met in the film. The real Stuart has the additional effect of demonstrating him to be capable of forgiveness, two elements that Michael Phillips in his analysis of the theological foundations of reconciliation considers "central" to the concept (116). This Stuart, years after the court proceedings, appears to carry no bitterness toward non-indigenous Australians for the discrimination he experienced, and this adds another level of humanity, and thus credibility, to the story.

Furthermore, Stuart's living presence makes the viewer aware that people involved in this trial are still alive, which brings a contemporary reality to the film.¹ The present-day Stuart also makes a direct statement about reconciliation in *Interviews: Black and White*, the documentary extra that accompanies the DVD release of the film, and he expresses his belief in its importance:

I try, I'm thinking now if we can really get together, if the Maoris can do it and the New Guineas can do it, so can we. Why should we be 100 years behind all the time? Let's get together, be honest with one another and fight for the land together, and share the land.

Stuart's appeal for reconciliation is a powerful cinematic moment, made all the more so because of the trauma he has suffered. It also further demonstrates the intricacies of the relationships between institutional power structures and the attitudes of individuals.

The Army Reserves: A Utopian Ideal

If *Black and White*'s 1950s judicial system is a cross-cultural battleground then the Army Reserves in *Lucky Miles* is its institutional opposite. Whereas O'Sullivan and Stuart's relationship highlights the racism of the system, the camaraderie in *Lucky Miles* is an idealistic imagining of the endpoint of reconciliation in Australian workplaces. Power is equally distributed between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, personally and professionally.

Set in a remote coastal and desert region, *Lucky Miles* is a mix of road movie, indigenous comedy and multicultural outback adventure. The film draws on stories told by refugees about their arrival in Australia and touches upon many of the issues for asylum seekers arriving by boat. After a brief opening scene set in Phnom Penh eighteen years earlier, two groups of Iraqi and Cambodian asylum seekers are dropped on a beach by Indonesian smugglers and incorrectly advised that a bus will arrive and take them to Perth. They are left to find their way in what appears to be a largely uninhabited desert. Not long after, the boat catches fire and the smugglers swim ashore to also find their way to the city.

¹ The appearance of the real life women upon whom the lead characters in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* are based at the close of that film has a similar effect.

One of the Indonesian smugglers eventually joins the only two remaining asylum seekers who have avoided being taken into custody. Three concurrent stories run through the film. The first follows the team of two asylum seekers and one smuggler as they search for ways to get to Perth, and the second follows the other two Indonesian smugglers, who are wandering lost. The third story is the narrative element that makes this a Reconciliation text. It follows the cross-cultural team of Army Reservists who are charged with finding the lost refugees. These three groups circulate around each other through the Western Australian outback and only come in contact with each other near the close of the film, when the search ends.

When we first see the Reservists it is approximately eight minutes into the film and, shot from a height, they are kicking an Australian Football League (AFL) football to each other. They are passing time, in open desert with their Army jeep nearby. The combination of these three recognisable cinematic tropes—AFL football, wide-open desert and Army jeep—makes this scene unmistakably Australian and as such differentiates them from displaced asylum seekers in earlier scenes. A series of close and medium shots then highlights the physical features of each character, to deliberately visually identify each man as either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Tom (Sean Mununggurr) is a dark-skinned Aborigine, Plank (Don Hany) is a white Australian of what appears to be Anglo heritage,² and Sergeant O'Shane (Glen Shea) is Aboriginal but with a lighter skin colour than Tom (figure 4). The differing racial indicators are counterposed by an undeniable easiness between the three Reservists (casually kicking a football), which indicates that their racial differences are not an obstacle to their camaraderie. Ironically, it is precisely because race is seemingly insignificant in this film that makes it worthy of scholarly interest.



Fig. 4

² Hany's presence ironically reveals the unreliability of physical indicators of race on screen. Hany's parents are from Iraq and Hungary, and in the SBS television series *East West 101* he plays a detective who is alienated from his peers because he is of Arabic background and Muslim.

Having established the different identities of the three Reservists and a sense of their friendship in this initial scene, we then discover that the power distribution in their working relationship appears to be entirely equitable. For example, while kicking the football O'Shane receives a request through the two-way radio to search for signs of a boat off the coast. Although O'Shane is the more senior officer of the three, he does not give orders to Tom or Plank, rather all three toss around ideas about the quickest route. Each is respectful of the other's knowledge of the region and of their suggestions. A similar representational strategy is used in *Lantana* (2001). Prominent Aboriginal actor Leah Purcell plays the role of Police Officer Claudia Weiss, who works alongside her companions with equal skill and responsibilities. She suffers the similar relationship traumas to the other characters; all the while no mention is made of her Aboriginality. Similarly, *Beneath Hill 60* (2010) re-imagines a World War One team of Army miners, or "tunnellers," that includes the young Aborigine, Billy Bacon (Mark Coles Smith) or "Streaky." Streaky is a member of a team of men who are concerned only about war and pay no attention to his cultural heritage. In all three instances cross-cultural equity has a notable postracial sensibility.

A relaxed reggae soundtrack accompanies the *Lucky Miles* Reservists' departure from their football game, adding a complementary, laid back element. Throughout the search the Reservists' work vehicle doubles as a mobile lounge room, and they are frequently filmed from within this shared, intimate space. Their conversations are a mix of professional and personal topics. For example, while scanning the coastline for signs of the boat, Plank discusses their instructions with the Commanding Officer (C.O.) via a two-way radio while the three men also discuss possible fishing opportunities that might arise from the impending command:

Plank (on two-way):	Visibility is good, but there's no sign of any boats ... nothing unusual.
Radio operator:	OK, hold on, over.
Plank (to Reservists):	Sergeant O'Shane! There's good crayfish just north of here this time of year.
Tom:	Up at Cool Rock.

O'Shane: (pauses) Let's wait, see what the C.O. wants.
 Radio Operator: You there Plank? ... Lieutenant Geoffrey wants
 you to head north and keep looking, over.
 Plank: OK, over and out.
 O'Shane: Show us these crayfish then.

In the next shot of the Reservists they are eating crayfish off the jeep bonnet. There are similar instances showing this work-friendship synergy throughout the film, which convince the viewer that they are both colleagues and friends. There is only one instance when Tom is angry with the other two for their incompetence (when Plank leaves the handbrake off the jeep and it rolls into a waterhole); even still, instead of continuing an argument instead they start fixing the problem.

The film gives the impression that amicable relations such as this are commonplace between non-Aborigines and Aborigines in Australia, that is, that the behaviours of Plank, Tom and O'Shane are typical, by adding an example of cross-cultural co-existence. In one scene Stan (Jack Orszaczky) and Evie (Lillian Crombie) sit silently alongside each other in a small and unpretentious kitchen, opposite an Indonesian smuggler, Abdu (Arif Hidayat), has been abandoned by his companion, Muluk (Sawing Jabo). Evie has served Abdu jelly and cream. While the setting evokes everyday Australian country life, Stan is non-Aboriginal and Evie is Aboriginal. In a later conversation the Reservists speak of the two in an unremarkable tone, a signal of broad community acceptance of co-habitation and the normalisation of cross-cultural intimacy. This is significant because this has not always been acceptable in Australia. The separation of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples was regulated under various Aboriginal Protection Acts across Australia until as late as the 1960s, and other Reconciliation Cinema focuses on the negative community attitudes toward cross-cultural habitation, for example, *Australian Rules* (2002), *Serenades* (2001) and *Australia* (2008). Stan and Evie's life, however, does mirror a contemporary domestic reality. Data from the 2006 census shows that 77% of partnered Aboriginal people in remote areas live with a non-indigenous person, and 88% in cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], *Australian Social 1*). Whilst co-habitation is not a guarantor of harmony, these figures nonetheless indicate a high degree of co-existence in the domestic sphere.

The presence of the asylum seekers further normalises interculturalism in *Lucky Miles*. Whilst the Aboriginal Reservists are relaxed and confident with each other and with

their surrounds, the asylum seekers are like aliens on a strange planet. They are ignorant about the size of the country, and about distances and directions to travel. They argue with each other about where to go and what to do. The Iranians are particularly dysfunctional, and at one point Yousiff (Rodney Afif) is almost murdered by one of the others when they fight about historical political differences. David Field's violent film *The Combination* (2009) creates a similar scenario, through the portrayal of the contemporary Lebanese community in Sydney. In this film the lead character, John (George Basha) takes a job in a Boxing Gym after his release from prison. The gym owner, Wesley (Tony Ryan) is Aboriginal, and a calm sensible friend and mentor to John. He appears successful and wise as he preaches and practices non-violence. As such, he stands on a higher rung of the moral ladder than the second-generation Lebanese immigrants in the film who are involved in all manner of corrupt, illegal and violent activities.

The asylum seekers in *Lucky Miles* are further disadvantaged, as it is they who are the victims of mistreatment and not the Aborigines. This is inferred rather than shown explicitly. When five of the six lost Cambodian refugees arrive at a pub in the desert they ask for a bus to Perth. Off-screen, while the men have a drink, the publican notifies the police. The arrival of the police van is shot from the point of view of one of the refugees, Arun (Kenneth Moraleda), who at that moment is filling his drink bottle around the side of the pub. The police emerge from the van in slow motion and walk toward the back to open the doors. Still in slow motion, the shot changes to a close up on the keys in their hands and guns in holsters, establishing their power and hinting at what fate awaits the refugees. The shot then cuts again to the point of view from the back of the van as, at normal speed, the police prepare to place the last man inside. A close up shot of the heavy bar and bolt system on a strong meshed door reinforces the strength of the law, followed by a glimpse of the men squashed in together as the door is momentarily opened. The van then speeds off, churning up the dusty road. This scene calls to mind a real life event from 2004, when five refugees who had been transported between detention centres on a seven-hour journey in the back of a van were mistreated. According to the inquiry that followed, complaints were made by the transportees of inhuman and humiliating treatment toward them by the transport guards, and of mistreatment including inadequate medical treatment, no food, limited water and no toilet or rest stops on the journey (Hamburger 4). The previous example of Mr Ward, who died in similar circumstances five years after this incident (and two years after *Lucky Miles* was released), demonstrates that parallels exist between the

mistreatment of refugees and Aborigines outside of the film. However, in *Lucky Miles* the Aboriginal characters are far removed from any threat of racism or physical mistreatment.

Lucky Miles re-imagines the power relationship between non-indigenous and indigenous people that was established by colonisation and dispossession and creates a new hierarchy of dominance in Australia. In *Black and White* Aborigines are the least powerful people in Australia, however in *Lucky Miles* the asylum seekers take that position. Reflecting the director's belief that "when cultures come in contact with each other there are losers as well as winners" (qtd. in McFarlane, "A Road Movie" 22), this postcolonial version of contact proposes new winners and losers. The re-visioned power structure is cleverly captured in the scene when the Reservists and lost men finally meet. In a wide shot the characters appear almost two-dimensional as they approach each other, stopping almost equidistant from the centre of the screen. Tom and Youssif face each other, and O'Shane and Plank stand behind on one side, and Youssif's companion Ramelan (Srisard Sacdpraseuth) behind him on the other (figure 5). The composition evokes illustrations of British contact with indigenous peoples, in which each appear cautiously separated from each other, for example, the drawing by an unknown artist of Captain Cook meeting Tasmanian Aborigines circa 1804 below (figure 6).



Fig. 5

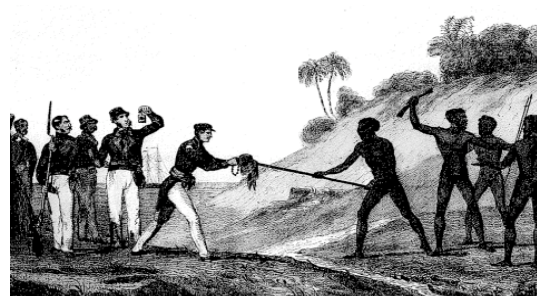


Fig. 6

At this moment an exhausted Youssif, with his hands in the air in a gesture of surrender, recites his well-rehearsed request for asylum to Tom. There is a deliberate irony in this scene. The British claim to possession of Australia was made without a treaty of agreement with the indigenous inhabitants. As Henry Reynolds explains, instead a combination of International Law determinants and attitudes of the time meant that possession of a new land could be taken without the agreement of people who displayed no evidence of political sovereignty or land tenure (*The Law* 12-15). However, in *Lucky Miles* the authority of the

original inhabitants in this case is acknowledged and upheld by the new arrivals, who ask their permission to come and live in Australia. This is a comical yet poignant re-write of contact that imagines what might have been.

Lucky Miles highlights how new arrivals to the nation bring a range of issues to bear on reconciliation debates, as people with no ancestral link to Australia's colonial past. However, there are different schools of thought on what level of engagement with reconciliation issues might be expected of recent settlers. Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs, for example, suggest "certain sectors of non-indigenous Australia are drawn into the emotional work of reconciliation more so than others" owing to the differing levels of guilt and responsibility that each may feel (202). Whereas Dipesh Chakrabarty states:

We now live in an Australia in which the Aboriginal, the descendant of the European Settler, and the post-war immigrant are all present. Reconciliation—the acknowledgment of the special rights and situations of the First People—has to involve us all. It is not something that happens simply between the blacks and the whites.
(13)

Lucky Miles engages with this interesting dilemma for Australia: how to achieve reconciliation as a multicultural nation.

Multiculturalism, Postracism and Reconciliation

Australia is a culturally diverse nation: a multicultural nation. The Federal Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship oversees a "Diverse Australia Program" to educate Australians about the benefits of living in a culturally diverse society. The program aims—to encourage "respect," "fair treatment" and a "sense of belonging"—imply a political willingness to accept and value cultural diversity. Whilst there are similarities, there are also tensions between the aims and ideals of multiculturalism and reconciliation. In some ways, multiculturalism creates an environment that is conducive to reconciliation. As already mentioned, *Lucky Miles* uses the newer groups of settlers in such a way that hints at past settler-indigenous power imbalances. In 1992, then Prime Minister Paul Keating drew upon the example of successful multiculturalism as proof that the situation

for indigenous Australians might be improved. In the Redfern Park Speech he asked, “Isn’t it reasonable to say that if we can build up a prosperous and remarkably harmonious multicultural society in Australia, surely we can find just solutions to the problems which beset the first Australians?” (63). Another way in which a reconciliation and multicultural agenda might be mutually beneficial is in the way in which co-habitation of multiple cultures renders neo-colonial divisions of power implausible. As Kay Anderson explains: “[a]cknowledging that diverse ethnicities are collectively, albeit differently, inserted in the fields of power and fantasy out of which (ex-British) nations are made, removes the subject/object relation of racialised thought” (388). Without a sole “object” group there can be no subject/object dichotomy, and thus no means for simplified racial discrimination. Queenie Chan concurs, and also sees a multicultural nation as an opportunity for indigenous resistance not only to white colonial dominance, but also to new forms of discrimination that may result from a multicultural context. She states that a multicultural environment creates the opportunity for a “postnational and postcolonial multicultural identity” to emerge in which indigenous and multicultural confrontation takes place, and challenges “not only the colonial but also the multicultural formations of white Australian dominance” (121, 126).

Nonetheless, there are a number of ways in which multiculturalism also complicates the reconciliation process in Australia. For one, it excludes indigenous Australians. Margarita Metzernath, for instance, notes that:

for Indigenous Australians, multicultural policies may be seen as a long history of being treated as non-citizens in their own country, subject to laws and structures that have been overly imposed from an outside dominant culture. (13)

The “Diverse Australia Program” proves Metzernath’s argument, as it is aimed specifically at immigrant groups and not indigenous peoples. Anderson describes how “institutional and epistemological barriers” prevent intersections between constructed social groups of “settler,” “migrant” and “indigenous” (381). Just as the Reservists and asylum seekers in *Lucky Miles* for the most part of the film occupy different physical and temporal spaces, Australian social and political arenas regularly differentiate between indigenous and ethnic zones.

Despite the rhetoric of multiculturalism that promotes and accepts differences, it is evident that in some instances the opposite occurs and diversity is suppressed, or subsumed. This is due in part to limitations being placed on the type and extent of differences that are tolerated. Elizabeth Povinelli argues that multiculturalism has become “a new form of national monoculturalism” and that it seeks to diffuse and divert “liberation struggles in late modern liberal democracies” (580-81). Differences that are acceptable are only those that are consistent with a desired national image. *Lucky Miles* makes an interesting contribution to these debates. While on the one hand the asylum seekers are constructed as culturally different to settled Australians, similarities between them are also highlighted. For example, Youssif repeatedly announces that he is a “qualified structural engineer” and Cambodian Arun (Kenneth Moreleda) has an Australian father. The film downplays any distinct cultural particularities amongst the men, especially those that may cause “collective anxieties,” for example, about what Anderson refers to as the “unwanted penetration” of Australia’s borders by people arriving in boats (382). References to Islam or un-democratic political systems, for example, are absent. In their study of the representation of Hazara (Afghanistan) refugees in two Australian television documentaries, Debbie Rodan and Cheryl Lange observed a similar phenomenon. In these documentaries the core elements of Australian culture, such as being family oriented and inclusive, were privileged over any cultural differences of the participants (153). The shared humanism of the characters in cross-cultural relationships in *Lucky Miles* exists alongside those elements that also mark people as different, thus implying that a multicultural nation might also be a harmonious intermingling of sameness and difference.

Striking a balance in the emphasis on sameness or difference has long been a controversial topic in reconciliation discourses. When sameness is foregrounded, it often raises suspicions of a ruse for assimilationist ideologies. Frank Brennan explains:

Reconciliation can be used to paper over the differences, pretending the worst is all behind us, acting as if there is now a level playing field, and silencing the advocates for justice who might be upsetting the existing power and resource sharing arrangements. (27)

On the flip side, promoting difference creates fears of division. By the time the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation concluded its project, issues perceived as divisive, that is those

to do with sovereignty, a treaty or indigenous justice (elements Andrew Gunstone considers “substantive”) were absent from the then Howard Government’s political agenda (Gunstone 4, 41-44). Former chair of the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) during this period, Gatjil Djerrkura, remarked:

Let me be clear. The Prime Minister [Howard] has long refused to accept the fundamental difference of Aboriginal people in our community ... He has always rejected any suggestion of Indigenous autonomy and self-determination. (qtd. in Clarke, *Larrpan* 265)

Many academics and commentators concur with Djerrkura’s assessment (see Gunstone; Maddison; Moran; Reynolds, “A Crossroads”; Short).

Anything culturally unique to the Aboriginal characters in *Lucky Miles* is very subtle, especially in comparison to those made evident through the culturally shocked newly arrived asylum seeker characters. Most apparent are the three Reservists’ likenesses. For instance, all are comfortable in the outback, have tracking skills and an innate ability to fish and play football. Furthermore, the three characters share knowledges that have in the past been attributed to either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people. For example, although Tom’s character is more physically typical of the cinematic tracker figure (as seen in for example *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Tracker*), both he and Plank “track” the asylum seekers. The risk with foregrounding similarities, however, is that the film will be read as having an assimilationist agenda. The Aboriginal characters embracing of the Army, a non-indigenous institution that demands conformity reinforces this message also. Tom and O’Shane both wear the uniform and follow the rules. Their ease in the institution is not due to the Army’s accommodation of any cultural obligations. In *Last Ride* (2009) two indigenous characters (Kelton Pell and Mick Coulthard) are similarly relaxed about the demands of the Parks and Wildlife Service where they work as rangers. In this film the men also wear the obligatory Parks uniform, as they combine their Aboriginal cultural obligations to protect land with a means of employment. Povinelli, observing a general lack of willingness amongst institutions to accommodate diversity, states:

the state apparatuses, as well as its law, principles of governance, and national attitudes, need merely be adjusted to accommodate others;

they do not need to experience the fundamental alterity of ... indigenous discourses, desires and practices or their potentially radical challenge to the nation and its core institutions and values such as “democracy” and the “common law.” (581)

While Tom and O’Shane might differ from Plank, it is only as far as the structure of the Army permits. If, for example, they were outspoken antagonistic activists, who were more interested in championing for sovereignty than doing their duty as border control agents, they would no doubt be dismissed.

Gooder and Jacobs question whether the depiction of unproblematic coexistence, such as we see in *Lucky Miles*, *Last Ride*, *Lantana* and *Beneath Hill 60*, is helpful in reconciliation discourse: “We might ask whether a situation such as this ... is actually a little *too* postcolonial? ... Does this mark the beginning of reconciled co-existence, or inaugurate a more penetrating stage of occupation?” (213). The unease about a postcolonial imagining which erases cultural differences and avoids dissent stems from the problematic inference that the history and legacy of colonisation might likewise be easily erased. Representations of characters that downplay or ignore culture may be “too postcolonial” perhaps because postracialism and assimilation are so easily conflated; in this situation the unnamed white Australian retains power, despite appearances to the contrary. Therefore, the postracial sentiment of *Lucky Miles* threatens the idea that harmonious relations between the Reservists are indicative of the desirable endpoint of reconciliation, as I earlier claimed. The characters’ acculturated identities may be too close to cultural obliteration and/or assimilation to be reconciliatory.

However, *Lucky Miles*’ depiction of the Army Reserves is similar to the reality experienced by Reservists who patrol the Kimberly and Northern Territory coastlines as part of Norforce (The North West Mobile Force). Norforce members are indigenous and non-indigenous and consider themselves, once they are all wearing the green uniform, to be one big family (Marks 25). Journalist Kathy Marks spent time with Norforce in 2011 and describes an equitable working environment that is almost identical to that in *Lucky Miles*. A non-indigenous member, Bob Terms, explained to her that prior to working alongside Aboriginal people he was the type of man who could have been described as a “white racist prick” but now thinks it completely normal to be interacting formally and informally (qtd.

in Marks 26). Marks concludes that this Army unit could well be a blueprint for how reconciliation might be enacted (26).

“Conformity” to institutional norms and expectations need not only be the by-product of assimilation. It can also be a subversive act, akin to that of mimicry. Homi Bhabha’s colonial mimic is “a reformed, recognisable Other ... a subject of difference which is almost the same but not quite” (122). Tom and O’Shane are clearly Aboriginal in their physical characteristics, as are the understated Aboriginal characters in *Lantana* and *Beneath Hill 60*, and as such are the visual Other to the colonial Anglo-Australian subjects in the narratives. Yet Tom and O’Shane act out roles that are recognisable as belonging to a white Australian institution, the Army. As such, their a tension exists in their identities—they are loyal Army Reservists and yet also potentially members of a sovereign indigenous state—with the capacity to conform or rebel, or indeed perform any manner of behaviours between these extremes. As Bhabha states, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (123). In *Lucky Miles*, *Lantana* and *Beneath Hill 60* there is no hint of a threat of confrontation by the Aboriginal characters; yet, neither do these characters appear as downtrodden colonised peoples. Their ambivalence means there is no clear indication that they are either a continuing threat to ongoing imperialist endeavours, or that they blindly accept the dominance of the hegemony.

Placing little or no emphasis on cultural difference in films could also be a positive indication of cinema’s (less sinister) desire to imagine what a nation may look like were ethnicity irrelevant. Moreover, postracialism is a means for sidestepping stereotypical portrayals of Aborigines and allowing the space to experiment with new strategies of representation. In *Lucky Miles: A Documentary*, a featurette that accompanies the *Lucky Miles* DVD, Don Hany (who plays Plank and also directs the documentary) argues that it is because of the fact that the men are “three Reservists trying to find these lost boat people, as opposed to two Aborigines and a white guy” that they are able to avoid “the issues that they would normally have to deal with in society.” That is to say, the homogeneity of the Army allows the Aboriginal men the freedom to participate in alternative discourses to those that concern only Aborigines; in this case it is asylum seeker discourses. The same occurs for characters Claudia Weiss, Billy Bacon and Wesley, who participate in narratives that are concerned with matters other than those pertaining exclusively to Aboriginal people. This shifts the focus away from their own identity, and enables the characters and

the films to transition away from the predictable narratives of colonialism or resistance, toward original and diverse stories of coexistence.

This is not to say that *Lucky Miles* does not encounter difficulties in treading this new ground of representation. At times there is an obvious awkwardness in representing the relationships between the three Reservists. In its ambitious attempt to portray egalitarianism, dynamic identity and a sense of similarity between the men, all at once, *Lucky Miles* reverts to some established essentialist cinematic modes of representation. Tom is simultaneously traditional and modern, but is often presented so using cliché and stereotype. For instance, there is a tendency for the Reservists to be overly reverential toward Tom. This is seen when Tom and Plank both count the asylum seeker's footprints in the sand, but whereas Tom counts correctly, Plank makes a mistake. Plank excuses his error by saying "it was dark," but it was dark for Tom also. In another example Sergeant O'Shane makes a comical attempt at tracking. He makes a considered assessment of the obvious—"fire, biscuit packet; they camped here"—and it is left to Tom to provide the less evident details of who, when and what went on. Tom is constructed as the genuine, or authentic, Aboriginal tracker, a role that the others are ultimately incapable of achieving. This may be an attempt to compensate for historical inequalities, but over-reverence for Tom has a counter-effect. These hints of noble savagery in Tom's character obstruct the film's quest to develop characters with a full subjectivity.

A similar awkwardness is apparent when Tom makes references to colonisation and its destructive aftermath. When the Reservists encounter a hut that has been destroyed accidentally by the asylum seekers, Plank says, "Boat people my arse ... well these are the kung fu fire walking type." Tom corrects him with: "this is Captain Cook." It is said in jest and without malice, but alerts the viewer to an indigenous opinion of the devastation caused by colonisation. However, in the context of the film's focus on cross-cultural equality his remarks appear misplaced. It particularly lacks potency because Tom makes the comment to two other legacies of Captain Cook's arrival, O'Shane and Plank, who are his friends. They, and the friendships, are emblematic of postcolonial creation rather than destruction and this results in a jarring moment in the film.

Lucky Miles' discomfort with expressing Tom's cultural identity is most apparent, however, when it falls back on the old "lens cap" joke from the 1980s. The joke is intended to dispel false notions of static Aboriginality and it follows a set pattern: an Aboriginal person makes a remark that could be interpreted as evidence of his/her supernatural powers;

a non-Aboriginal person responds with a reverential question or comment that indicates their admiration for the Aboriginal person's profound mysticism; the Aboriginal person replies with a statement that reveals that there is no mysticism involved, rather the non-Aborigine has been misled by their own romanticised notions of traditional Aboriginality. A memorable example is in *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) when the Aboriginal character Neville Bell (David Gulpilil) tells American Sue Charlton (Linda Kozlowski) she cannot take his photo. She apologises and says she understands it will take his spirit away, and Neville responds: "No, you've got the lens cap on." The *Lucky Miles* version of this tired joke starts with Tom listening to the radio through headphones, whilst cleaning his teeth. The camera frames his face in the side-view mirror of the jeep and the audience hears what he does, a muffled weather report. He announces, "it's going to be 49 degrees today." Plank asks "how do you know that?" with genuine intrigue. Tom replies, "it was on the radio," in a tone of incredulity—how does any one know what the weather will be? In this moment Plank is constructed as the romanticising white, out of touch with modern indigeneity. But this construction is inconsistent with the portrayal of Plank's character, and his established friendship with Tom. The joke is out of step with the film's otherwise progressive depiction of non-indigenous-indigenous relations.

These weaknesses undermine the film's hopeful messages about power, multiculturalism and postracism. As Nicholas Thomas states, the use of essentialisms "frequently seem[s] to do more to recapitulate than subvert the privileged status and presumed domination of the discourses that are investigated" (3). Nonetheless, in accommodating calls for the acceptance of cultural uniqueness alongside equality, the film exemplifies the difficulties encountered in broader reconciliation discourses also. As such, the film is perhaps an idealistic but credible reflection of the types of problems encountered by Australia more widely, as institutions grapple with the problems of how to acknowledge and accommodate difference whilst pursuing and maintaining an agenda that enhances equity.

Conclusion

Although *Black and White* and *Lucky Miles* present opposing pictures of power distribution between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, in two different institutions and at different points of time, they nonetheless deliver similar messages about the significance and impacts of

structured inequities. The 1950s judicial system is overwhelmingly corrupt and interested only in maintaining the interests of the rich and powerful, and the poor and marginalised are powerless victims. The Army Reserve unit, at the other end of the continuum, is almost a utopian work environment. Both films, however, highlight the debilitating effects of discrimination, and offer counter-ideas about the work that a discrimination-free workplace might do. Both also insist that there is an important interplay between institutional structures and personal interactions. In *Black and White* O'Sullivan and Stuart's friendship is a battle against an unjust system, and the Army Reserve unit in *Lucky Miles* enables the mutually respectful relationship between the three Reservists.

Black and White shows emphatically that people have been denied justice through a misuse of power within the justice system. Stuart's struggle is against the power of the justice system, which renders him non-human and inconsequential, a member of a doomed race. The film's picture of structurally entrenched power is a strong statement about a system's capacity to render indigenous people powerless. Stuart's case functions as a salient historical example of how systemic racism has played a part in increasing the numbers of indigenous people being gaoled. Kirby recommends that "[e]very judge, lawyer and law student should see *Black and White* and reflect on its lessons" (198). Reading the film alongside the current situation of an overrepresentation of indigenous people in courts and prisons suggest that systemic racism was and still is a feature of Australia's judicial system.

Lucky Miles poses a challenge for white Australian hegemonic dominance using a reverse strategy to that of *Black and White*. The film presents an idyllic vision of a reconciled nation that is devoid of colonially derived power-struggles. The characters cooperate and work together with little serious angst and much mutual benefit. By imagining Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal colleagues sharing a workspace equitably, power inequities are rendered passé.

This scenario is assisted by the arrival of new groups of settlers—asylum seekers—who replace indigenous people on the bottom of the social, economic and political stratum. Power hierarchies are reinvented as a division between old (indigenous and non-indigenous) and new Australians. In telling a narrative about asylum seekers and indigenous people, *Lucky Miles* also signals there is another complicating element that needs to be considered by a reconciling nation. That is, in a nation that considers itself multicultural, what relevance might a reconciliation agenda have to those who have no

direct connection with Australia's past acts of colonisation? It looks for answers to the question: can a nation be simultaneously multicultural and reconciling?

The ease with which the Aboriginal Reservists fit into the Army structures raises questions about the ideologies informing a postracial environment, a space which subsumes or disallows undesirable differences. If a postracial setting is a mask for a contemporary form of assimilation, then it is not the reconciliation utopia that it may appear. Nonetheless, *Lucky Miles*, like *Lantana*, *The Combination* and *Beneath Hill 60*, leave aside issues that are traditionally the domain of indigenous characters on-screen. They create a space where three Reservists are just that, three Reservists, and adds a new voice to the gamut of films that inform the nation's social imagining. Its engagement with postracialism particularly allows viewers the chance to entertain one possibility of an Australia in which race-related issues have been reconciled.

Chapter Four

Dancing with the Daughter of Mother Earth

Serenades

Jindabyne

Call Me Mum

He was really interested when I told him she used to try and make me wash myself everyday, and use deodorant. Do I stink or what? Anyway, he said it's a similar relationship as "genderslide." He's got a name there.

Warren, recalling his documentary interview in *Call Me Mum*

When young Torres Strait Islander Warren (Dayne Christian) describes his relationship with his mother as a "genderslide" (above) in Margot Nash's 2006 film *Call Me Mum* he makes a symbolic faux pas. He misquotes a journalist who, when questioning Warren about his experiences of being raised by a white woman, refers to the removal of Aboriginal children from their birth mothers as an act of genocide. Warren's mispronunciation is also an apt descriptor of the particular slant of this Stolen Generations narrative, because *Call Me Mum* is less interested in debates about Government-sanctioned genocide and more in understanding the depth and complexities of the experiences of mothers and children who were involved in the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their birth families. Through foregrounding women's experiences of interculturalism, this film and other recent Australian cinema like it insist that the impacts of gender and family be considered in debates about reconciliation. Just as a landslide might create a geological reconfiguration of the natural space, I suggest that films like *Call Me Mum* have the potential to trigger a genderslide that unsettles the cultural, social, political and personal landscapes of reconciliation.

In one of only a handful of texts on the representation of Aboriginal women on screen—a fact itself indicative of perhaps both a minimal screen presence of these women and limited scholarly interest—Karen Jennings in *Sites of Difference: Cinematic Representations of Aboriginality and Gender* identifies a tendency within Australian

cinema to represent women as either conflated with nature (24), as “other” and “different” (24), and/or with no sense of a “lived culture” (24). That is to say, cinema has frequently conflated indigenous, woman and nature, which has resulted in a recognisable cinematic trope of the female primitive Other, a figure that I term the “daughter of mother earth.” An early example is *Jedda* (Ngarla Kunoth/Rosalie Monks) from Chauvel’s 1955 film of the same name. *Jedda*, a drama about racial identity, assimilation and cultural continuation, was significant at the time for its use of lead Aboriginal actors and for being the first Australian film made in colour. *Jedda* is torn between the teachings of her adopted white Christian family and her Aboriginal culture. She has an innate calling to go “walkabout” and an inexplicable longing to be with the traditional “wild” man Marbuk (Robert Tudawali); however, *Jedda* meets a tragic death when she succumbs to her “natural” desires. Another example is Manganinnie (Mawayul Yuningu), the lead in John Honey’s 1980 film *Manganinnie*. Possibly the last of her tribe, she is living in the Van Diemen’s Land bush at the time of the Black War.¹ Despite the massacre of her family, she is dignified and protective of the lost white child Joanna, who unexpectedly is in need of her care. Manganinnie is most often shot in close-up, wearing animal skins and carrying fire, and this deliberate, “romantic and individualist representation” (Jennings 29) locks her into a representation of primitiveness.

The stereotypical daughter of mother earth (hereon referred to as the daughter/s) has particular narrative and allegorical functions. This calm, wise indigenous woman hold an ancient dignity and strength that Jackie Huggins argues was characteristic of pre-contact Aboriginal women, and which continues to be held by women in post-contact Australia despite their victimisation and oppression throughout colonisation (“Theories” 9). The daughter periodically asserts her moral righteousness to counterbalance the misplaced or futile anger displayed by other (male) characters. To borrow *Jedda*’s tag line, she is “Eve in Ebony.” While occasionally she is a lead character, more often she is only in crucial, redemptive situations (such as funerals) as for example in the closing scenes of *Jindabyne* and *Australian Rules*. Her innate earth-based spirituality and sexuality and endless capacity for forgiveness and tolerance means, however, that these on-screen women can only be implausible.

¹ The Black War was to a period of intense fighting between Aborigines and settlers in Tasmania from 1823-1834, during which time many Aborigines were killed. For a detailed discussion on the debates about the Black War massacres see Ryan, ““Hard Evidence.””

Notwithstanding the endurance of primitivist tropes vis-à-vis Aboriginal women on-screen, there has been an increased incidence of richer and more nuanced representations of Aboriginal women since the 1970s. Representations of contemporary, urban Aboriginal women were scarce in films until the 1970s (Jennings 44), a time when cinema began foregrounding female political discourses (Jennings 57) and feminism began to engage with race debates (Saunders 157). While the increased screen presence of dynamic Aboriginal women is attributed by some to a rise in the numbers of indigenous women filmmakers, particularly in documentary (see Langton, “Grounded” 44; Hickling-Hudson; and Jennings), a variety of directors have contributed to this collection. Films that tell stories from Aboriginal women’s perspectives and/or depict more complex female subjectivities have been made by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women and men, including Tracey Moffatt’s *Night Cries* (1990), *Jindalee Lady* (1992) by Brian Syron, *Jindabyne* (2006) by Ray Lawrence, and Nash’s earlier nuanced critique of the interplay between gender and settler-indigenous race relations, *Vacant Possession* (1995). Adding to this list is Rachel Perkins’ groundbreaking film *Radiance* (1999), the story of three estranged Aboriginal sisters who come together in their family home after their mother dies; whilst they are together they confront their past demons. Perkins uses the family as a framework to highlight some nasty social and psychological domestic problems, including incest and rape. Beck Cole’s first feature film *Here I Am* (2011) demonstrates that the trend is continuing.

In this chapter I look at three films that harness the daughter trope in ways that intermix issues of gender and reconciliation: *Serenades* (2001), *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum*. Common to each is an exploration of interactions between women, their partners, friends and families, and a story told from a woman’s point of view. Each is, however, divergent in style and genre. *Serenades* is a historical drama, aesthetically referential of an Arabian romantic epic, whereas *Jindabyne* is typical of director Ray Lawrence’s signature style—focussed on the intimate, troubled concerns of contemporary middle-aged Australians—that he established in his earlier moody film *Lantana* (2001). *Call Me Mum* is a highly stylised and theatrical interweaving of four monologues, in which the characters speak directly to the viewer from three different locations: an aeroplane interior, a stylised 1950s home and a hospital room.

In my close reading of these three films I ask what do these intersubjective encounters between women, their partners, children, families and friends mean for

reconciliation? I propose that each film's exploration of gender-related issues, within the contexts of broader debates about black/white relations, demonstrates a variety of ways that cross-cultural relationships are fractured along gender fault lines. Before I look at each film, however, I start with a brief discussion about how issues pertaining to women and race have been approached and expressed historically in anthropology, feminism and cinema. This broader historical context is beneficial in understanding the dramatic potential of each of these three films.

Anthropology, Feminism and the Cinematic Gaze.

The inadequate portrayals of Aboriginal women in cinema cannot be disassociated from the history of women being overlooked in anthropological scholarship, or from the tendency in past feminist discourse to neglect issues of race. Anthropological studies that centre on Aboriginal women prior to the 1970s are scarce. Diane Bell notes three exceptions to the male-dominated domain: Phyllis Kaberry in the 1930s; Catherine Berndt in the 1950s; and Catherine Ellis working in the 1960s (40, 229). Theories as to the disproportionate lack of scholarly interest in Aboriginal women are manifold. At the heart of the debates is a suspicion that biodeterminist ideas about women and the activities they undertook, their thoughts and beliefs, deemed them of lesser importance than men, and therefore of little importance to researchers (Choo 79; Cheater, "She was" 67). Christine Cheater, observing this to be a consistent finding of much feminist criticism of anthropology, states that:

Reassessing past anthropological representations of women simply highlighted the in-built misogyny of the discipline. Perceptions of the place women occupied in society were influenced by both gender biases within the discipline and by gender practices in culture under observation. ("She was" 67)

Jennifer Debenham offers another explanation, based on Baldwin Spencer's and Frank Gillen's early Australian ethnographic film work. She claims these two men missed the complexity of Aboriginal societies because the scientific framework they subscribed to "narrowed their field of vision and prevented them from listening and seeing" others, including women (439). In the cases when women were included in early anthropological

research, gender divisions between anthropologists and Aboriginal women were thought to skew the ethnographic constructions that resulted: the analysis was corrupted by the mediating and misunderstanding “male gaze” (Choo 79; Langton, “Grounded” 46). The correlations with cinema are obvious, as Karen Jennings explains: “Many of [anthropology’s] insights into ... cultural codes are equally relevant to filmic representations which derive from similar ideological bases” (12). Feminist film theory during the 1980s was particularly interested in the notion of the male gaze, and scholars argued that both screen content and spectator experience were instruments of patriarchy (see Kaplan; Mulvey).

Feminism in Australia in the 1980s and 90s was much criticised for its blindness to the impact that race and racism has on Aboriginal women. Ann Curthoys identifies two key facets to this criticism; the first, she states, is that Australian feminists’ demands were reflecting “the particular concerns of white, Anglo-Celtic, Australian-born women” (25), and consequently excluding Aboriginal women. The second was that Aboriginal women felt that the anti-male flavour of the movement was “generally out of place” with their own experiences and “they felt greater solidarity with their own men than with European-Australian women proclaiming universal sisterhood” (26). Feminism was culturally irrelevant to Aboriginal women in this sense. Huggins and Curthoys respectively point out that an additional problem for Aboriginal women, which was that white Australian feminism was reluctant to acknowledge women’s involvement in the mistreatment of Aboriginal women during colonisation and in its aftermath (“Contemporary” 71; 27). The blame lay with men only. This view has shifted in more recent times as scholars have sought to find ways to redress these shortcomings (e.g., Huggins, “A Contemporary” 72; Curthoys 28).

Nonetheless, in the discourses of marginalisation and minority groups, the terms “race” and “gender” are still frequently coupled together. This is partly owing to their shared adjectival functions—both are descriptors of discrete groups of people— but more importantly, they are both useful signifiers of conceptual “sites of difference” and “sites of power” (Jennings 76) in which Aborigines and women are the victims of hegemonic oppression. Despite these correspondences however Aboriginal women are influenced by race in ways that white Australian women are not. Huggins contends that contemporary Aboriginal women are far more likely to be discriminated against because they are black than because they are women (“A Contemporary” 70). Moreover, some scholars contend

that black women have been subsumed by the notion of the universal woman (Broom 266; Saunders 157), which eradicates cultural differences and ignores the impacts of race.

With the range of difficulties that arise from the intersection of race and gender in mind, I now look at the ways *Serenades*, *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum* are influenced by and speak to these debates in their functions as works of Reconciliation Cinema.

Jila: Devoted Daughter

Serenades is set in the 1890s, in an exoticised remote Australia. The opening scenes show a parched landscape, camels, lush rugs, and colourful turbans in shimmering heat. To a soundtrack of traditional Arabian music, the film evokes romantic cinema epics such as *Lawrence of Arabia* and the well-known plot of a Sheik Romance, in which a woman is swept off her feet by a cruel yet handsome, dark-skinned, turban-wearing Prince from a far-off land. However, early in *Serenades* is a hint that something more sinister is afoot. An opening text describes how during the 1800s Islamic Afghan cameleers travelled to central and northern regions trading supplies, and adds an ominous warning that: “No women were permitted to accompany them to Australia.”

Serenades follows the life of Jila (Alice Haines), who was conceived as a result of her Aboriginal grandfather’s (David Gulpilil) loss at cards. Her grandfather grants an Afghan cameleer Mohammad (Sinisa Copic) a night with his daughter Wanga (Franchesca Cubillo) as payment for his debts. The short sex scene typifies the film’s one-dimensional depiction of Muslim men: rough, domineering and disrespectful. The story jumps ahead seven years to when Jila is a carefree young girl, living with her mother and grandfather on the outskirts of a Lutheran mission. Her mother soon dies, however, and Jila moves onto the mission. Here she and the Pastor’s son Johan (Aden Young) begin their friendship, which is later to become doomed cross-cultural love affair.

Whilst she is still a child Jila’s father takes her from the mission to live with him in an Islamic community. Her move to the Ghantown is an act of collaboration between two of the film’s most misogynist men. Mohammad approaches the Lutheran Pastor, Pastor Hoffman (Billie Brown), with a deal:

I give you back part of my wages if we can come to an agreement. I want to take Jila away from here to live with me. I am her father.

You could bring her here to the mission and next time I come I could take her away with me.

The Pastor initially refuses, professing that he cannot take a child from her mother, an argument that Mohammad refutes by replying: “In my culture the child belongs to the father.” His remark reveals that his concern for Jila is motivated more by cultural and religious obligations than by parental love. The Pastor quickly changes his mind, however, when Mohammad agrees to deliver pork for Christmas. Jila is traded in return. Then, to further demonstrate the oppressiveness of Islam, Jila is forced to convert to the faith by repeating her father’s prayer of allegiance, at his insistence.

The film cuts ahead another 10 years, to when Jila is a young woman living under the oppressive patriarchy of the Ghantown. Didactic dialogue contains blatant messages about the lowly position of Muslim women. For example, Jila is forbidden to sing. In one scene she loiters around a group of men who are singing and playing music, and the men yell at her to leave. Her father then accuses her of wanting to be looked at by strange men. Jila defends herself by saying, “I just wanted to listen to the music,” but Mohammad retorts: “You can listen to the music from the women’s tent.” Life for Muslim women, it suggests, is one of silence and segregation. Jila is also chastised for staring into men’s eyes “like a wild animal,” and entering a mosque. Moreover, the film proposes that a father only values his Muslim daughter in accordance with her bride price. When Johan arrives at Ghantown to find Jila, she is already promised against her will to a very old man who has offered a high price for her. Whilst her father approves of the union, he uses the situation to assert his absolute authority. In a rage he tells her: “You will marry whoever I say. If I say marry a monkey you will say ‘where do I get the bananas?’”

In a radio interview director Mojgan Khadem stated she borrowed heavily from Christine Stevens’ historical accounts of the period in *Tin Mosques and Ghantowns* and *White Man’s Dreaming (Exotic)*. However, despite both her attention to research and the aesthetic promise of an epic romantic fantasy, a powerful ideological agenda drives *Serenades* and ultimately makes it unconvincing. *Serenades* attempts a feminist critique of the treatment of women under Islamic law; however, depicting men so grotesquely sexist that they become caricatures undermines the film’s critique. It is not only Muslim men but men in general who are under attack. The Christian men are portrayed as similarly insensitive and misogynistic. For example, when Jila, at her wedding, attempts to poison

herself she mistakenly poisons her new husband, and so she flees to the mission for help. Rather than offering protection, however, Pastor Hoffman is outraged and instead curses her for being a “wretched black, neither Christian or Muslim.” He also warns Johan to keep away from her because she is possessed by the devil and will devour his soul. When it was released in 2001 *Serenades* received overwhelmingly negative reviews (see Phillips, “A Little-Known; Guy; Keller, “*Serenades*”; Urban, “*Serenades*”; Stratton). While some of this criticism has been attributed to viewer’s being confronted by Khadem’s strong convictions and her willingness to “tackle heavy themes” (Rathmell-Stiels 80), the dogmatic anti-male ideology is a major contributor to its failure.

Johan is the only hope that men might behave differently toward women, and to a certain extent he delivers (at least the film leaves open the possibility that he will renounce his father’s brand of Christianity). However, in a feeble attempt to pacify Jila after his father’s outburst he says they can never marry because “it would never be allowed.” It is at this point that the viewer is reminded that Jila is also Aboriginal, as this is the obstacle to which Johan refers. Possibly this is why Jila too remembers that she has Aboriginal heritage and, for reasons unclear, from this moment she transforms from oppressed Islamic bride (figure 1) to stereotypical daughter of mother earth (figure 2). She rides her camel into the desert and whilst alone there she performs a dance to signify her rejection of the patriarchal constraints imposed upon her by both Islam and Christianity.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The invocation of the daughter trope in *Serenades* evokes an arcane Aboriginal identity. In the opening scenes also, when Jila is a child, the film depicts Aboriginality in a similar way: Aboriginal spirituality is symbolised by a mystical and mysterious sacred tree. When a branch of this tree is chopped down for use in Christmas decorations Wanga becomes ill and eventually dies. Pastor Hoffman claims that she is another victim of

influenza that is killing many Aboriginal people. His rational, scientific explanation relegates the spiritual cause of her death (via the tree) to the realm of indecipherable indigenous mythology. Jila visits the same tree on her way to the desert, and from it draws her strength to perform her final dance, which is as similarly mystical, and indeed bizarre.

Jila is able to perform the final dance because as a daughter of mother earth she harnesses supernatural and supposedly indigenous skills and knowledges, which were hitherto unknown to her. She is able to make herself a string skirt in moments (a process that normally takes days to firstly make the string and then the skirt); inexplicably finds a large amount of white ochre with which to paint herself; and performs ritualised movements in the middle of a ceremonial ground that she is painted with a pan-indigenous design. The dance, however, is a disconcerting conglomeration of traditional Aboriginal dancing, the Arabian Dance of the Seven Veils and a typical Madonna 1980s music video clip.

Serenades is the first feature film by Iranian born filmmaker Khadem, who as a young refugee moved with her family to Australia to escape religious persecution. Her film anthology consists predominantly of documentaries about the Baha'i religion, which reflects her personal history and philosophical leanings. The final dance in *Serenades* echoes Khadem's idealistic and romantic ideas:

The Aboriginal culture is rich in a timeless wisdom that they have missed out on; ... The sooner we get back into it as a whole nation, the better off we would be; we could be leaders with the help of Aboriginal people. I really believe this, I'm not just saying this as a Utopian idea ... Women are the practical backbone of the earth. I think they can inspire their men whom they love to be at the forefront of peace or at the forefront of war. (qtd. in Honegger 112)

Khadem acknowledged that it was difficult for her to speak to actual Aboriginal women in her research for the film because she found: "often they are incredibly shy and it takes time before they open up and trust you enough to actually let you know a little about the reality of their thoughts and emotions" (qtd. in *Exotic*). This may account for the delimiting depictions of Aboriginality that we see in the film.

Felicity Collins and Therese Davis argue that Jila's dance is a positive display of the rejection of patriarchy, which is facilitated by autochthonous female links to the earth (*Cinema After Mabo* 89). They also read the film as speaking-back to texts that have locked Aboriginality in the past and out of modernity, and the dance as both a symbolic celebration of the continuation and dynamism of Aboriginal culture and display of personal achievement by a strong woman (89). However, by making the autochthonous links between Jila and the land the film achieves the opposite. Jila, less human than divine, appears not as a contemporary dynamic woman but as an exotic, animalistic and romanticised daughter. The exoticised "Arabian" landscape and film's didactic tone work to augment this image. Her role is to simply provide an indigenous stamp of authenticity on an anti-male diatribe. Herein lies the (unintended) negative consequence of Khadem's attempt at the depiction of a positive female Aboriginal woman. As a conflation of Aboriginal, woman and nature Jila is alienated from the rational world and rendered passé. When she retreats back into the earth, the misogyny that she has exposed is ultimately left unchallenged.

Ironically, an earth-based indigenous spirituality granted by the privilege of gender does not liberate the female character, but binds her more tightly as the stereotyped primitive Other. At least two earlier Australian films have attempted to depict a "positive" Aboriginal woman with similar negative results. Tom Cowan's *Journey Among Women* (1977) uses the daughter trope with similar feminist intent as *Serenades*. In this film, a group of escaped convict women meet an Aboriginal woman (Lilian Crombie) who effects their transformation to a "natural" wild form of themselves, which is in effect another expression of the primitive Other. *Jindalee Lady* also attempts a feminist critique through the deployment of the daughter trope. In this film Lauren (Lydia Miller), the protagonist, battles sexism and racism as she tries to integrate ancient Aboriginal culture into her modern life as a fashion designer. At every opportunity Lauren, her colleagues and family deliver blatant messages about how her cultural background is congruous with her modern lifestyle, but when Lauren's baby dies her friend explains the death as the "old people calling him back" because "they need him." The film is decidedly clichéd and essentialist: instead of championing a complex and dynamic female Aboriginal identity, it too preaches romanticised notions of earth-based spirituality.

Nevertheless, there is something of unintended relevance to a reconciling nation in *Serenades*. By seemingly having no alternative but to remove herself from mainstream

1890s life, and to revert to the romanticised image of Aboriginal womanhood, Khadem unwittingly signals the lack of options available to Aboriginal women to express a complex identity. This is similar to a deleted scene from *Jedda* (as described by Barbara Creed in “Breeding Out”) in which Jedda is bashed by a group of Aboriginal women when she returns from a taboo corroboree. Sarah McMahon runs out to her and the two women have an emotional tête-à-tête and Jedda complains she does not understand her own culture. She also confesses to loving her room and dresses, and says she is ashamed for wanting to know about her Aboriginal culture. Sarah admonishes her for these feelings (“Breeding Out” 226). It would appear that this gendered interstitial space, where Aboriginal women can love both corroborees and dresses, is unattainable. In *Serenades* a dynamic identity is equally as elusive for Jila, as she fails to move across or beyond the tightly bounded cultural and gender arenas. Ironically, although the devoted daughter is a misplaced fantasy Jila plays an important role in exposing the mythology of its opposite: the dynamic, hybridised identity who moves without constraint within an elusive “utopian” postcolonial third space (Brosch) traversing race and gender boundaries.

Carmel and Claire: Dissident Daughters

Although *Jindabyne* is based on a short story by Raymond Carver, “So Much Water So Close to Home,” director Ray Lawrence adapts the text with much poetic license. He migrates the story to Australia and adds the complicating element of cross-cultural relations into the narrative. *Jindabyne* is the second Australian incarnation of “So Much Water:” the first was by musician Paul Kelly in the song “Everything’s Turning to White” (and Kelly later wrote some of the music for Lawrence’s film). *Jindabyne* screened at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2006 and was released in Australia in July of that year. It went on to screen in 26 countries during 2006-07.

In *Jindabyne* four men prepare for a fishing trip on a remote and beautiful river: “a hidden river in a hidden valley.” Not long after they arrive, however, they discover the naked body of a dead girl whom they (and the viewer) ascertain has been murdered. Rather than reporting the incident, and interrupting their weekend, the men continue to fish and notify the police when they walk out a day later. Prioritising fishing over reporting the murder becomes a source of conflict between the fishermen and their female partners, and the critical decision around which the whole narrative rotates. When the dead girl, Susan

O'Connor (Tatea Riley), is identified as Aboriginal the dilemma becomes not only about how the men treated the woman, but about how they treat Aboriginal women in particular.

The film inserts an additional intercultural layer in the story. Amongst the friendship group of the main characters one of the fishermen, Rocco (Stelios Yiakmis), is partnered with Carmel (Leah Purcell), an Aboriginal woman. Carmel is a primary school teacher, and teaches some of the fishermen's children and grandchildren. Early in the film the group of friends are having a pre-fishing pub meal and Carmel briefly leaves the table and goes to talk amiably with two Aboriginal men—the flags on their jackets confirm their identity—before returning back to her friends. Her movement between the two tables not only establishes her indigenous identity, but also symbolises the ease with which she moves between the town's white and black communities. Even without this diegetic signifier Australian viewers may already be familiar with Leah Purcell as an Aboriginal actor, writer and director of film and theatre productions including stage plays *Bran Nue Dae* (1993), *Box the Pony* (1997-2000), *Black Chicks Talking* (2002-03) and with her numerous television appearances.

Purcell has played many indigenous roles and been involved in indigenous-themed productions, however, she has also been in productions where her indigeneity is of no bearing on the character or narrative, for example, in Lawrence's *Lantana* and the stage plays *The Vagina Monologues* (2002-04) and *The Marriage of Figaro* (1998-2000). As Carmel, however, her indigeneity is pivotal for a number of reasons. On a practical level she acts as a mediator between the white and black communities, passing information back and forth between Aboriginal and white communities. However, more critically, through her feisty relations with Rocco and one of the other lead female characters, Claire (Laura Linney), Carmel re-configures the Daughter of Mother Earth trope: Jila, she is not. Although Carmel periodically informs her non-indigenous friends about cultural sensibilities, and how to behave respectfully, she is not at all romantic or mystical about these facts; new-age, mysterious spirituality is the interest of a non-indigenous character, Melissa (Alice Gardner), who mixes it with her own knowledge of Aboriginal mythologies. Carmel's matter-of-factness is exemplified in a scene in which she arrives at Claire's house in a fierce temper (figures 3 and 4), brought about by Claire's trip to the morgue to view Susan's body, and chastises her for her ignorance of correct cultural practices around death and bodies. Performing the role of a dissident rather than devoted Daughter enables Carmel

to actively confront the issues in the film of race and gender intersection, and to highlight multiple challenges for black/white relations.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Carmel is the first to raise the fact that Susan was black, and thus to verbalise the racial component in the ethical dilemma at the centre of the narrative. Quietly, outside of the police station, she says to Rocco: “They’re saying she’s a blackfella.” Carmel’s interest in Susan’s Aboriginality is on the one level personal—in a small place like Jindabyne it is likely she will know the family. Her concern also situates this incident in a broader context of a history of abuse of Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginal men in Australia. In her paper “Reconstructing Gender and ‘Race’ Relations after the Frontier” Jennifer Baker documents evidence of widespread abuse and murder of Aboriginal women in the early colony. Jackie Huggins also suggests the same when she claims that part of what contributed to tensions between Aboriginal women and white Australian feminists was that while white women were demanding to be sexually active, black women wanted to be able to say “no” (“Contemporary” 71). Susan, raped, and left naked and dead in a river is representative of the many Aboriginal women who have been similarly abused throughout Australia’s contact history.

In their heated exchange, Carmel tells Claire that “shit happened, like it always does,” referring to the way Susan was treated. In this seemingly dismissive statement Carmel raises an important issue about past and present indifference to the abuse of indigenous women. Indeed, Rocco tries to play down the significance of Susan’s indigeneity and appears genuinely surprised when Carmel implies that it matters. Rocco’s lack of concern is symbolic of the apathy of the wider (white) community. His attitude has historical precedence: Baker suggests that on the Australian frontier abuse was accepted as normal behaviour (75). In one interview Lawrence sought to refute the suggestion that *Jindabyne* is a primarily a commentary on black/white relations, by contending that “It

wasn't so much that [Susan, the dead woman] was Aboriginal, it was that she was a woman. And when you think about it, there is a sexual component to them discovering a woman's body. There's no escaping it" (qtd. in Cordaiy, "Man, Woman" 149). However, whilst Lawrence downplays *Jindabyne*'s engagement with race relations, the characters in the film are continuously negotiating the impact that Susan's Aboriginality has on the event.

The film encourages the mistreatment of black women to be considered within the broader context of black/white relations also. However, it is not Carmel who demands its importance be recognised, but Claire. During the aforementioned confrontation between Carmel and Claire over Claire's visit to the morgue, the two women argue about whether it is appropriate for Claire to be involved with the O'Connor family in the aftermath of the murder. Claire defends her involvement firstly by explaining that she needs to understand for herself what happened on the river. She then makes it about more than herself:

Claire: Well, then I have to face it and not walk away.

Carmel: Claire, this isn't about you.

Claire: It's about all of us, isn't it Carmel?
I mean, who are we?"

Claire's question is left unanswered and the film cuts to a single bird in a vast blue sky. At this moment Susan's murder shifts into a much broader context than Carmel has previously allowed. Claire pushes the incident out beyond the boundaries of Susan's family and the Aboriginal community into the wide-open domains of Australia's reconciliation process. Who are we as a nation, the film asks, if we cannot confront the violence being perpetrated against Aboriginal women?

Just as the film sets up the deep divisions between black and white Australians, it also attempts to collapse them. It does this most effectively through drawing multiple similarities between Claire and Carmel. The two women do not spend the whole film arguing; on the contrary, they socialise amicably together. They are in many ways alike: they read similar magazines and like the same music; are intelligent, capable and yet periodically irrational and temperamental; and have an inbuilt moral compass that makes them quick to identify right and wrong. The film also portrays more of Claire and Carmel's relationship than it does Carmel's and Susan's Aboriginal relatives. Most of Carmel's

interactions with Susan's family take place off-screen, so although the viewer knows a little of how Claire feels about Carmel there is less indication of how she is regarded by the Aboriginal community.

Moreover, both women are substantially flawed and this augments their commonalities. Carmel, for instance, undermines her status as cultural mediator by her own ambivalence toward the liaison role. She does not always speak up on cultural matters when given the opportunity, and often this job is left to Claire or Melissa. Although she is angry and critical of the fishermen and the white women, she does not actively intervene to mend relations between them and Susan's relatives, instead she observes and criticises from the sidelines. At the final memorial service she stands neither with Claire or the men, nor with Susan's relatives, but by herself, appearing uneasy with the different groups of mourners. The comfortable mediator from the opening scenes has disappeared and instead she appears a more isolated, solitary woman. When Tom (Sean Rees-Wemyss) was born Claire suffered postnatal depression and left the family for the first 18 months of Tom's life—behaviour that haunts her repeatedly throughout the film. Claire and the viewer know also that she is pregnant again and thus potentially on the cusp of another episode. Her judgemental mother-in-law (Betty Lucas) is the voice of disapproving societal opinions on such behaviour in the film. Claire and Carmel are bound together by failed mothering. Carmel does not have any children, and consequently, neither she nor Claire embodies the fertile, nurturing daughter trope. However what results instead from the shared connections between these characters is a more nuanced and complicated expression of both gender and Aboriginality.

The film further accentuates commonalities between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples through establishing visual and narrative corollaries between Claire and the dead woman, Susan. For example, when Stuart returns home from the fishing trip he finds Claire lying face down on the bed, positioned identically to Susan's body in the river. Just as he touched the dead body, he touches Claire. Later, the killer (Chris Hayward) follows Claire driving on a deserted road, and she experiences similar fears to Susan when she was in the same situation. These moments of correlation function symbolically to suggest some of the shared human experiences that might transcend culture—the very basics of human existence: sleep, sex, and death.

Jindabyne is widely read by critics and academics as a metaphor for the nation's formal reconciliation process (see McFarlane, "Location"; McFarlane, "Six Degrees";

Ryan, "On the Treatment"; Galvin; Kennedy; Strange; Rundle). Released at height of the History Wars and amid controversy over the Howard Government's refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations as recommended by the *Bringing Them Home* Report in 1997 (250-51), reviews and scholarly criticism of the film have generally focussed on the symbolism of the fishermen's reluctance to acknowledge their culpability. The final memorial service is highly symbolic of a collective apology. Susan mobilises her husband and the other fishermen and their partners to attend the service, which they do, reluctantly and belatedly. During the service Carmel offers to take Tom through the smoke, an Aboriginal cleansing ceremony, to prevent the spirits from "attaching to him." In the film this is also a symbolic act of bridging and inclusivity. In this scene white and black mourn and self-reflect, and the fishermen have the chance to apologise.

Little critical attention has been paid to Claire's bumbling attempts to reconcile with Susan's family, which are also pointedly allegorical but less redemptive. The ways in which she seeks to make amends correspond with much of non-Aboriginal Australia's attempts at reconciliation. Claire makes a well-intentioned, yet naïve pursuit of the O'Connor family, in which she seeks not only redemption for Stuart's immoral actions, but also the loftier task of building a racist-free community. In her ambitious quest she tries to fund-raise for the family without negotiation with them, and when they reject her money she delivers it to a church with which they have no association. She denies the family any agency, and constructs them as helpless victims. Not only misguided and gauche, her attitude is patronising and passé in contemporary Australia. The O'Connor family's reaction to Claire's visit—they close the door to her and her children—bespeaks the insufferability they feel about her naïve beliefs that guide her actions. The door is closed on Claire's face not only because she is family of the disgraced man, but also because she is emblematic of a long history of white Australian racism. Other well-intentioned but misguided actions in the film are met with similar responses. For example, when Rocco attempts a defence of Aboriginal spiritual beliefs on Carmel's behalf (by punching Stuart) she is unappreciative; instead she angrily tells him that she can look after herself, and drives off furiously. Likewise, when Stuart apologises to Susan's father at the funeral his response is to throw dirt against Stuart's arm and to spit disdainfully on the ground before him. Forgiveness is hard earned by the whites in *Jindabyne*. Restoring the chasm that the murder of an Aboriginal woman has uncovered in the Jindabyne town will take considerably more effort than fundraising and words of apology.

Flo and Kate: Disruptive Daughters

In *Call Me Mum* Warren and his foster mum, non-indigenous Kate (Catherine McClements), are flying to see Warren's unwell Torres Strait Islander birth-mother Flo (Vicki Saylor) on his 18th birthday. Due to his multiple disabilities, on becoming an adult Warren is being returned to institutional care against Kate's wishes, and she is hoping to enlist Flo's help to prevent this from occurring. They are also en route to Kate's deeply conservative and disapproving parents, Dellmay (Lynette Curran) and Keith (Ross Thompson) at the family home, "Dellkeith." Each character tells part of the story in turn, from their perspective, which fills in the backstory to the trip and builds an intriguing picture of a diverse and unconventional extended family. Adding to a collection of cinematic fictions that draw upon actual accounts of indigenous children being placed into either institutional or foster care as a result of official Government policy (*Rabbit-Proof Fence* [2002], *Australia* [2008] and *Blessed* [2009]), *Call Me Mum* focuses on the experiences of three women in Warren's life—his birth mother, foster mother and foster grandmother—and, to use Laleen Jayamanne's turn of phrase, pays "feminist attention to the mother/daughter dyad" (*Toward Cinema* 8).

Warren's disabilities (he is blind and mildly brain damaged) result from an injury sustained as a baby when his drunken father Albert "chucked him away" off the veranda. Soon after the incident Flo placed Warren into an institution for disabled children, "Cherrymead," and then moved away. Warren remained there until the age of five at which time he was fostered by Kate, who was at the time a Cherrymead nurse, just before he was due to be transferred to "Woodbrooke" institution (also called "the state loony bin" or "the tip" by Kate) and has lived with her and her female partner ever since. Both Flo and Kate have been, by their own admission, terrible mothers.

Bad mothering is a key motif of Stolen Generations narratives. Although there are stories of love in these accounts, of caring homes and institutions, these are not the stories that have formed the metanarrative of the history of forced removals of children. Rather, what has emerged as popular understanding of the national Stolen Generations narrative is a shameful tale of widespread abuse, neglect and poor parenting (see Attwood, "Learning"). Indeed, the perception that Aboriginal women were incapable of being loving, nurturing parents was an ideological force behind policy decisions of the time (Jacobs,

White Mother 121-25). Humanitarian logic claimed that Aboriginal children needed to be “rescued” from their dire situation (Jacobs, *White Mother* 40). A pivotal Stolen Generations text is the *Bringing Them Home* Report that documents the experiences of 535 indigenous people who were raised in institutions or white foster homes. The Report states that many children were told that their parents did not love them or want them (Wilson 134), that many of the letters by parents to their children were not passed on (Wilson 133) or were censored (Wilson 134), and that children were told that their parents were of undesirable character, in some cases a prostitute, an alcoholic (Wilson 136) or just stupid (Wilson 135). Terrible black mothers are only some of the players that constitute the Stolen Generations narrative, for there are also dreadful white mothers and their institutional substitutes, who are equally cruel. Non-Aboriginal parenting is frequently recalled as being at best unloving and at worst abusive. For example, one entry in *Bringing Them Home* states: “There was no food, nothing. We was all huddled up in a room ... like a little puppy-dog ... on the floor ... Sometimes at night time we’d cry with hunger, no food” (Wilson 138). Many entries in *Bringing Them Home* are characterised by neglect, severely violent punishments and of sexual abuse by staff and foster parents.

In *Call Me Mum* Flo, Kate and Dellmay each represent those complicit in the nation’s mistreatment of Aboriginal children. For the entire film Flo lies in her hospital bed, oscillating between dread and excitement about the imminent visit (figure 5), and filled with regret and a sense of failure for not being able to raise her son.



Fig. 5

Flo paints a picture of her younger self in a very unflattering light. She admits she drank a lot and was very promiscuous, ran away from her family and, more critically, lied about how Warren sustained his injuries. The events leading to his brain damage she has kept secret for life. The cinema becomes the site of Flo’s confession:

I can't tell [Warren] what really happened, I've never told anyone ... that awful night ... Albert was out the front of the pub watching me drinking and flirting with those whitefellas ... that manager, he hit Albert with a stick he always carried, and down Albert went and knocked him right out.

She then describes how Albert's children then carried him home, but she "stayed on drinking" and arrived home just in time to see Albert throw Warren off the veranda in a rage. She heard a crack, and saw Warren lying still and quiet on the ground. She recalls in tears:

I didn't call the police, I didn't call the doctor. I didn't want Albert to go to gaol, he's never done anything like this before. Later on I picked him up but still no noise, no sound. So I think he's asleep so I just put him on his bed and he just lay there for a couple of days.

While alerting viewers to a range of compounding social factors that contributed to the traumatic event—chiefly poverty and racism—Flo's tearful admission that her drunkenness and neglect contributed to Warren's long term disabilities is a deeply ambivalent moment: moving yet confronting. This is not the behaviour of a cinematic daughter of mother earth, but a woman living a highly dysfunctional life: a very bad mother, indeed.

Kate, once a nurse, is by no means Florence Nightingale. When she and Warren walk onto the plane she is obviously extremely angry and disgusted with him: "Oh Jesus, look at him. He looks like shit and he pongs like it too," she complains, before ordering a whiskey to calm herself down (figure 6).

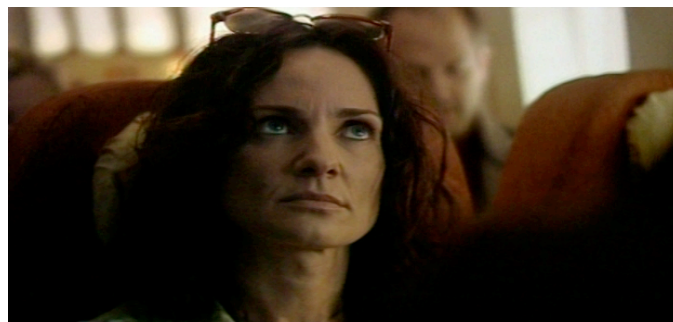


Fig. 6

A heavy drinker, disillusioned and foul mouthed, Kate is as harshly self-critical as Flo. She refers to herself as a “psycho bitch” and periodically chastises herself for sounding “white” and “so violent.” In her eyes, raising Warren has not been an act of angelic self-sacrifice, but an emotional nightmare. Later, speaking to herself, she reveals it is a loveless relationship: “You hate him, and he does not love you,” then sneers to camera, “Oh yes, Warren hates me, and he’s ashamed of me in front of his mates ... He looks at me and he sees the enemy.”

Dellmay, the third shocking mother in the film, is a highly clichéd symbol of 1950s gendered domesticity, and is an unashamed racist and homophobe (figure 7).



Fig. 7

Dellmay is bitterly disappointed in Kate and disapproves of her sexuality and of fostering Warren. Apart from a brief admission that she felt a surge of love at birth, she recalls a cold relationship from then on. Instead of a friend for life, in Kate she had a “fiend for life.” Anticipating Kate’s return, she makes clear her sense of Anglo-superiority when she states coldly: “If she thinks she can just waltz back in here, limping for sympathy, dragging that coloured lad along and with him all the misery, ugliness and filth of the world ...” For Warren, she has prepared a camp bed under the house, as she is horrified by the thought of getting too close to him, and wishes instead that Kate had left him at Woodbrooke.

Just prior to the trip Warren has been the subject of a television documentary in which he has told a fictional and unflattering story of his life with Kate, “similar as genderslide.” To the interviewer he has described a life of Western imposition and culturally insensitive mistreatment. As well as claiming he was forced into cleanliness and to use deodorant, he adds that they had no food or money. Dellmay has seen the documentary and, unbeknown to Kate, Warren or Flo, has made arrangements for Warren

to be re-institutionalised on their arrival. She sees herself upholding the dying values of civilisation and expresses attitudes that are, for contemporary audiences, overtly naïve and inhumane. There will be no help offered to Kate to keep Warren; rather, Dellmay is intent on causing more destruction to her and Kate's family. Dellmay's character is not developed beyond an extreme caricature, and throughout the film she remains essentially a one-dimensional exemplar of ignorance and intolerance. Flo and Kate, however, both reveal much more nuanced subjectivities, and they become highly conflicted characters who have a deep love for Warren as well as respect for and fear of each other.

Despite Kate's insistence that she is a failed mother, she counters this image with stories that signal a less straightforward reality. For instance Kate was determined to foster Warren because she was horrified of the treatment he received in Cherrymead: "He just screamed and screamed when he first arrived at Cherrymead ... clinically blind, profoundly retarded, brain damaged, dangerous, 'wild man of Borneo' Matron said" and is certain that life will be even worse at Woodbrooke. Convinced that "even a fuck up like me is better than the tip," she went to great lengths to make the fostering of Warren happen. She married her gay flatmate, and periodically pretended to be a happy, domestic, heterosexual family for Tiffany, a visiting bureaucrat with the power to make the decision. Her memories of Warren as a young child show Kate to be a loving, caring mother. She recalls fondly how she massaged his legs and took him to heated baths so he could swim around in his rubber ducky until he was able to walk: considered "a miracle." She tells the story of their trip to the Easter Show where Warren enjoyed the Dodgem Cars so much so that he laughed until he wet himself. The experience has had a lasting positive effect on her that she has not forgotten. In between her rants about the lack of love between them, Kate muses: "I've never laughed like that in my life. He taught me joy, I owe him big time." Although on the one hand she feels that she has become cold and unfeeling, on the other she acknowledges the deep emotional connection she feels with her son: "I feel what Warren is feeling like a phantom limb." Despite the initial angry moments suggesting otherwise, Kate reveals herself to be a deeply complex parent who has been both terrible and brilliant at raising a challenging child.

In her first monologue, Flo remembers the affection she felt for Warren the last time she saw him; she recalls how he stopped crying and moaning when he heard her do the "family whistle" and smelt her hand. This stands out as a peaceful moment in what has otherwise been a life of hardship. Adopted out as a child, Flo struggled to be accepted

because of her mixed Torres Strait Islander and white heritage. As an adult she has lived in poverty and endured poor health. In a gentle, almost resigned voice, she tells of the time she witnessed her husband being bashed for breaking the Protection Act, and of how some of her babies died due to the racist neglect of medical staff. However, there is no bitterness in her accounts and, with a hint of the daughter of mother earth trope, Flo remains forgiving and understanding towards others. She is especially sympathetic toward Kate, whom she considers came to her child's aid with the strength and capabilities to raise him well. Flo might easily consider Kate a thoughtless white woman, blindly carrying out discriminatory Government policy as do the white women in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* or *Australia*. However, to the contrary, Flo plans to adopt Kate into her family as a sister, "Islander-style," and to share her son with her in traditional Torres Strait fashion.

Warren's voice further ensures that the film is not a simple tale of a wicked foster mother. Rather than hearing horror stories about his birth mother, as did many of the *Bringing Them Home* contributors, Warren was told that he was loved but was sent away for health reasons. The viewer is led to believe that the traumatic life that he relates for the documentary journalist is not the reality ("Kate makes really good spaghetti Bolognese") but is instead a case of Warren responding to the romantic ideals of the interviewer. He tells him he can recall an idyllic Rousseau-inspired childhood prior to his removal—of hula-hula performances around the campfire—which was outrageously interrupted by Kate, whom he states chased him ferociously in a Dodgem Car when he tried to escape. The scenario is ludicrous, but nonetheless contributes to the complexity of his cross-cultural family life, as well as flagging the problem of media-fuelled perceptions about the fostering of indigenous children.

Nash points out in more than one interview that the film's multifarious voices, subject positions and truths—which are often in contestation with each other—is what differentiates this film from typical Stolen Generations testimony and fiction (see Barber; Collins, "Transforming" 52). For example, she states:

Different and conflicting voices get a space to speak in this film ...
everybody is flawed in this film ... it isn't about good white people
and bad black people or bad white people and good black people.
(qtd. in Barber)

In Flo and Kate's convoluted interplay of contesting emotions is a resistance to stereotypical notions of white and black mothers, and a challenge to simplistic cinematic, and other, representations of family life.

Call Me Mum further distances itself from typical Stolen Generations testimony through the inversion of a scene from the quintessential cinematic film text of this genre, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. As Warren is being driven away from Dellkeith in the back of Tiffany's car, he calls through the back window "Mummy, Mummy, Mummy," as did the three young girls in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as they were driven away from Jigalong. Whereas the young girls were calling to their hysterical birth mothers, Warren is calling out to his foster mother. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* there is no moral dilemma for the viewers as the film's message is clear—the young girls should be able to stay with their loving biological mothers. The moral message is more ambivalent in *Call Me Mum*, however, because Warren is being taken not from his birth family, but from the woman who has already replaced his biological mother.

Call Me Mum is not a lone voice. Other recent cinema also insists on a complex reading of parent/child relations at the time of Aboriginal child removal policies. In Warwick Thornton's 2009 documentary *Rosalie's Journey*, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks (who when younger played Jedda) recalls the kindness she felt during her childhood at St Theresa's Christian mission. One of the five concurrent stories in Ana Kokkinos' feature *Blessed* also depicts cross-cultural foster/adoption in a way that complicates the foster mother/child relationship. In *Blessed* the story of an indigenous boy James Parker (Wayne Blair) is told retrospectively from the perspectives of both James as an adult and his dead non-indigenous foster mother (Monica Maughan). With sensitivity to the multiple interpretations of childhood events that subjective memory generates, the film shows that James and his foster mother have been unable to express their love for each other, which has resulted in a lonely and unhappy adult existence for them both.

A Sorry Situation

An integral part of the Stolen Generations narrative is the call for and delivery of a formal national apology to those taken from their birth families, delivered in Federal Parliament on 13 February 2008. The apology was recommended in the *Bringing Them Home Report* but resisted by key political representatives throughout the life of the Howard Government. In

keeping with its approach of building complexity around issues of family relations, *Call Me Mum* poses questions to viewers about what such an apology might entail. It queries who should apologise to whom, and for what, and ultimately creates a murky dilemma. For example, Flo's confession makes it impossible for the viewer to lay blame at her feet, or at Kate's or even Albert's, for Warren's injuries and subsequent institutionalisation. The inconsistent picture of family life drawn by Kate—her deep love and burning hatred for Warren; her respect for Flo and anger at her for leaving Warren at Cherrymead; her disbelief that at the age of 19 she had the capacity to take on Warren's care; and her determination not to see him back in an institution—means that she is not an easy scapegoat for the reason behind Warren's removal either.

The final section of *Call Me Mum* is entirely dedicated to exploring what it means to apologise in a situation when families have been seemingly irreparably fractured and damaged. Each character gives voice to the multifarious constituting elements of the broader debates around a national apology. The range of voices and subject positions represent not only the mothers and children involved in the Stolen Generations, but also the gamut of public reactions to the *Bringing Them Home* report on its release and during the Howard Government's long-running refusal to formally apologise. Kate's parents predictably align with the protesting voices of the time. Kate's father Keith, an eccentric returned-serviceman, dons his Army hat, calls upon the spirit of "Aussie Aussie Aussie Oi Oi Oi", and delivers a very sarcastic pro-assimilationist rant. With tongue-firmly-in-cheek he apologises for the fact that so many people died "stopping the Japanese from liberating the Indigenous people of Australia," that "we" came instead of the Dutch, French or Portuguese, and that:

decent middleclass families committed wholesale assimilationist genocide by adopting indigenous kiddies rather than spending their money on household appliances and leaving them to die of syphilis and leprosy in some outback hovel; that we put darkies in custody when all they ever did was murder, rape assault, sell drugs, starve their children ... ; that we embarked on culturally automotive [sic] policies like immunisation, free schooling ... free petrol sniffing, free airfares, 3 free jap-built cars per humpy per grog-soaked person

per grog-soaked year; ... that the Prime Minister will not apologise for something we never did – and if we did we'd do it again.

After Keith lists his absurdist neo-colonial statement of beliefs, Dellmay then explains why she refuses to apologise. “No, no, I’m not going to apologise,” she states, for holding onto old values, or for contacting children’s services about having Warren re-institutionalised, because “this is unauthorised reconciliation across state lines.” Keith and Dellmay’s irrational and ill-informed reasonings are the dialogue of anti-apologist caricatures. Nonetheless, their ranting captures the “active resistance” (Collins, “Proper” 51) to a formal apology, and the extremist sense of the argument.

Kate does not state the case in favour of an apology per se, but instead offers her own that is wholly heartfelt and personal. She directs her statement to Flo and Warren, and she apologises for her inadequate mothering, being afraid of Flo, not understanding “islander adoption” and not being able to let Warren go with Flo “just yet.” She apologises for many well-intentioned but badly executed mistakes that she has made whilst raising Warren. She insists, however (with reference to a long lasting battery brand), that “I am still his guardian and I will never leave my post. I am the every ready, Everyready.” She makes no apology for being a white parent raising a black child and, in her words, for striving for the best possible life for Warren. Warren’s apology is equally personal, and includes being sorry for a range of things from the profound to the mundane. He is sorry for missing the years with Flo, for not remembering what her cooking is like, that she is sick, that he did not speak to his Dad, and for the poor quality of his tape recording that he is making to give to her. Overwhelmed by the enormity of possible reasons to be sorry, in the end he states he is “just sorry.” Evident in Kate and Warren is a confusion that stems from the emotions associated with their sorry situation.

When Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the formal Apology to the Stolen Generations it was a momentous occasion in the Australian Parliament, and heralded as a milestone for a stalled political reconciliation process. It was also greeted enthusiastically by many members of the Australian public (see Sharkey). Although the Apology has been criticised for delivering little in terms of practical improvements for indigenous people (see Morton; Gordon; Dodson, “Many Gaps”), as Isabelle Auguste points out, “The Apology was nonetheless significant—if not for everyone, it was at least, and importantly, meaningful for those Stolen Children and the families who were waiting for some

acknowledgement of what had occurred” (321). *Call Me Mum*’s scrutiny of cross-cultural makes a national apology appear to have little function as anything other than a symbolic act, and not be the panacea for the enormous impacts that child-removal has had on those involved. A formal statement cannot hope to address the breadth and variety of causes, events and outcomes that constitute the experiences of the characters in this film.

Kate’s and Warren’s apologies bring to attention the enormous extent of the traumas and losses felt by disrupted families, and echo the impacts that are documented in *Bringing Them Home*, essentially, in Jane Lydon’s words, a “multitude of sad stories about wrecked lives” (147). In one of Kate’s more prosaic outbursts she captures the hopelessness of her situation. Speaking about Warren she states emphatically: “All I know is he was fucked over then and he is being fucked over now and I’m still trying to fix the fuck up and I’m still fucked up myself.” However more than simply reflecting the negative outcome of child removal policies, the film draws to attention the widespread instances of family breakdown across cultural groupings. The dysfunctional family lives of all of the characters in *Call Me Mum* attest to the film’s strong indictment of idyllic notions of family, both non-indigenous and indigenous.

Flo’s family life has been a series of disruptions and rejections. She was born a Torres Strait Islander; her mother was from Mer and her father was a white man. She was adopted by a Malayan family as a child when her mother gave someone a Wauri shell, as is cultural practice in the Torres Strait. This symbolic act means the receiver becomes the giver’s “Wauri Tebud.” This is, as Flo explains, “like you become family.” However, Flo felt neither Islander nor Malay, as the Malays called her a dirty Islander and the Islanders call her an outcast. When she later married Albert, a “full Islander,” she claims it was considered she married beneath her social status. She tells the viewer that Albert felt inferior to her because, unlike Flo, he was subject to the Protection Act that amongst other things legislated that he had to ask permission to marry: an act that shamed him. The film paints a grim picture of Flo and Albert’s life at the time of Warren’s injury, and soon after the family broke up: “Took off down South and went our separate ways. The boys joined the navy and the girls got married.” Flo made a new life there for herself. The extent of the family fracturing culminates in Flo’s story of Albert’s death and funeral. Albert died an alcoholic in Port Hedland, but there was not enough money to take him home to be buried in the Torres Strait.

A year after *Call Me Mum* was released, a report of a Government inquiry into the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, *Ampe Akelyernaemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred* also entered the public domain. The report concluded that many indigenous people in remote areas of Australia were being badly affected by poverty and alcoholism, echoing Flo's accounts. It found that child abuse was widespread, and most likely caused by the "breakdown of Aboriginal culture," and closely related to the cumulative effect of "poor health, alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing, and a general disempowerment" (12, 6). Partly enabled by the disturbing image of the suffering Aboriginal child (Hinkson 230) *Little Children* triggered a dramatic and controversial political reaction, which involved the then Howard federal Government declaring a National Emergency and introducing a raft of measures known as the Northern Territory Emergency Response, or the NT Intervention. Interventions were widespread, and included: providing more police to remote communities; bans on alcohol and pornography; additional child-protection workers; compulsory income management of Government Support incomes; childhood health checks; school breakfasts; and the introduction of 5-year leases on Aboriginal townships. Because the target group for the Interventions was specifically, and only, indigenous Australians, the Emergency Response required the suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975). Subsequent Labor federal governments, elected since 2007, have continued with many of the controversial intervention measures under the new policy label, "Stronger Futures," but with modifications that allowed the *Racial Discrimination Act* to be reinstated in 2010. Consequently, the release of *Call Me Mum* came at the beginning of what was to become a period of heightened public awareness of and sensitivity to indigenous poverty and its destructive effects on family.

Call Me Mum, however, does not suggest that indigenous family breakdown is a national emergency. Just as the film is an unconventional Stolen Generations tale, it is equally an unconventional story of indigenous family dysfunction, as it insists that relationship dysfunction is something experienced by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians alike. For instance, just as Flo feels rejected from her own scattered family, so too does Kate: Kate has not been home to her parents for many years. Warren also feels some ambivalence about Kate's capacity to be a mother; he doesn't know how Flo can start calling Kate mum, as she has started to, or how Kate can really be considered his mum, when she stole him. Dellmay also, the quintessential Anglo-settler in the film, recalls an

unhappy childhood as an Irish child—the black Irish, she states, were the “niggers of Europe”—and a miserable marriage, which has left her feeling “frozen inside.” By drawing on the likenesses of circumstance and of emotional trauma across the characters, Nash brings to mind the collaborative work of Huggins, Kay Saunders and Isabel Tarrago, who examine their own mother’s lives in rural Australia in the 1930s and 40s and demonstrate the shared commonalities between these black and white women in times of hardship.

Call Me Mum is deeply cynical of any idealised notions of family resilience in the face of trauma. At its close, happy families are relegated to the realm of fantasy while fractured families take the central place in the film’s reality. As she nears death, Flo’s dreams of re-uniting with Warren and of cementing family bonds with Kate become almost hallucinatory. Her hospital room becomes progressively more like a tropical paradise, as the light turns to muted pinks and purples, and she is surrounded by lush plants and is dressed in a floral Islander Mary dress with a frangipani in her hair. She plans a romantic meeting: “I’ll give her this [shell] and make her my Wauri Tebud. We’ll be sisters then and I’ll give her my boy properly after all these years. And we will both be called Mum. She’ll call me Mum and I’ll call her Mum.” Her final monologue ends as she stares out the window and visualises the sea, full of boats and people fishing, while she sings an Islander song. Like Flo, Warren has an underlying positive sense of his Islander heritage. He has recently re-named himself AAD, “Albert after Dad,” and talks about his “happy-go-lucky” Islander “blood memory”. However, his and Flo’s Islander sensitivities are not enough to ensure they will be able to live together in a happy family unit. While Flo and Warren dream, the decidedly pragmatic Dellmay makes a phone call to Tiffany and shortly after Warren is whisked away in the back of the car against his, Kate’s and Flo’s desires.

Unlike the moral tale of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in which the young girls make their way back to Jigalong, in *Call Me Mum* there is no just triumph of indigenous family values over the heartlessness of non-indigenous bureaucracy. At the narrative level this film delivers a very unhappy ever after. However, the film does much more besides. Via its three troubled mothers this film subverts the cinematic daughter of mother earth trope and unsettles conventional Stolen Generations narratives. Along the way it deconstructs the nature of what it means to apologise, and demonstrates how a filmic reality of a traumatised cross-cultural family provides insight into the personal and emotional impacts of policies and politics. This cinematic genderslide boldly shifts the metaphorical ground that lies

beneath idyllic notions of the family and challenges viewers to instead find hope in the exposé of the imperfect alternatives.

Conclusion

Serenades diverges from *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum* in its uncritical deployment of the daughter of mother earth trope. Whereas *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum* set out to disrupt clichéd constructions of Aboriginal women, *Serenades* deliberately uses the trope to reinforce its messages about the imposition of religious-coded patriarchy on Aboriginal women. Ironically, the retreat into passé feminist ideology robs Jila of her credibility, and the film can be only of little relevance to contemporary debates about black/white relations. Nonetheless, within the tension between these different representations lies a poignant message about the role of intersubjectivity on-screen and its relationship to reconciliation.

Jila exists in isolation from those around her. She has no meaningful interactions with men or women during the film, but instead moves about as if in an invisible bubble. She floats through the film, hovering at a distance alongside the adoring Johan, his abusive father, the Muslim women enclosed in servitude, her lively younger brother, tyrannical father and lecherous husband-to-be. The film makes no opportunity to develop her character in relation to others; consequently, her identity is unconvincing. In *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum* however, where cross-cultural intersubjectivity is the means for the construction of identities, the outcome is the reverse. The issues that are of concern to the women in these films (and their families) are also of importance and relevance to broader contemporary discourses in the reconciliation landscape. *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum* constantly explore the similarities and differences between the lead characters—Carmel and Claire, Kate and Flo—in ways that are of importance to a reconciling nation. By highlighting sameness and difference between the women *Jindabyne* and *Call Me Mum*, contingent as they are on cultural circumstances, engage with the problematic interpretation of reconciliation as a nationalist project. The effect is both the creation of complex and divergent identities among women, and an accentuation of the intricacies and implications of race/gender nexuses. *Call Me Mum*, *Jindabyne* and *Serenades* draw viewer attention to the scars on Australia's intercultural landscapes that are caused by gender inequalities, violence against women and fractured family relations. While the principal concern of reconciliation is the restoration of race relations, this cinematic genderslide that is triggered

by the restless and disruptive daughters of mother earth remind us that gender is also a competing factor.

Chapter Five

Respecting Yourself

Boxing Day

Samson and Delilah

Our vision is for an Australia that recognises and respects the special place, culture, rights and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Reconciliation Australia

Respect v 1. Regard with deference or esteem 2a. avoid interfering with or harming, b. treat with consideration, c. refrain from offending (a person, feelings etc).

The Australian Oxford Dictionary

The most confronting of the films that comprise Reconciliation Cinema are those that depict a deep dysfunction affecting Aboriginal families and communities. This chapter looks at two such films, realist dramas *Samson and Delilah* (2009) and *Boxing Day* (2007) and explores how such disturbing images might further reconciliation. Indigenous poverty and suffering has been a sporadic theme in Australian feature film culture, past and present—for example in *Jedda* (1955), *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986), *Dead Heart* (1996), *The Tracker* (2001), *Serenades* (2001), *Australian Rules* (2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *Beneath Clouds* (2002) and *September* (2007). Whilst *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* continue with this tradition, they also deliver something unique. In these two films there is little to no emphasis placed on the external causes of poverty, or on finding solutions that are beyond the realm of individual attitudes and actions. Instead they suggest that an individual's resolve, determination and action is the route of escape from poverty and from the crime, drug and alcohol misuse, violence and abuse that are closely associated. Furthermore, in these films the key to individual resolve is respect for oneself.

In the remote, neglected Aboriginal community where *Samson and Delilah* begins, there is rubbish everywhere, rusting abandoned car bodies and an insistent ringing phone that is never answered. It seems that no one is motivated or energetic enough to rectify the dire conditions of the town; moreover, daily life is monotonous. Delilah's (Marissa Gibson) daily routine involves administering her grandmother's (Mitjili Gibson) medication; pushing her in her wheelchair to the medical clinic and an empty church; preparing her meals; and painting for the commercial art market. With similar banality, each day Samson (Rowan McNamara) wakes; sniffs petrol; tries unsuccessfully to join in his brother's Veranda Band; then wheels himself around aimlessly until after dark in a discarded wheelchair. *Boxing Day* paints an equally desperate picture in suburban Adelaide. Drug and alcohol dependency, child abuse, domestic violence and/or prostitution have left this family bitter and (almost) emotionally spent. Chris (Richard Green), an Aboriginal ex-criminal on home-detention, and his visiting ex-partner Donna (Tammy Anderson) are, for most of the film, poised to erupt in anger. Their gruesome situation means a heightened tension is sustained throughout the film: violence is always only barely contained.

Respect is an intangible and woolly term, with much room for individual interpretation. What does it mean, for example, to "regard with esteem" or to "refrain from offending" another individual? In addition, respect does not only concern the treatment of others, but is applied to one's attitude to oneself, as self-respect. Respect has been an important component of formal reconciliation in Australia since its beginnings in 1991, with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR). As mentioned previously, the Council's stated vision was for "A united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all" (*Final*). The Council's final report and its supporting documents that outlined the future direction for reconciliation in Australia, produced at the conclusion of its ten year life, also called for respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culture and rights (*Final; Roadmap*). This plea forms the basis for the current mission statement (the first epigraph to this chapter) of the non-Government body that replaced CAR, Reconciliation Australia. Not only in formal reconciliation processes, but in the arenas where informal reconciliation take place, respect is also a central motif. At the heart

of many social and cultural expressions of reconciliation, in literature, theatre and visual arts, is an interest in the ways that cross-cultural respect plays out.¹

Boxing Day and *Samson and Delilah* are also interested in respect. Neither film, however, adopts the position that CAR and Reconciliation Australia take with regards to the importance of collective respect for “culture” and “peoples.” Instead, they raise some issues that highlight the problematic nature of communal respect. There are two specific questions asked by these films. First, how is respect possible when people, black and white, are socially and personally destructive? And second, can a nation genuinely respect the “place, culture, rights and contribution” of Aboriginal people in situations when Aboriginal people demonstrate little or no cultural piety? Through explorations of dysfunction—its manifestations and impacts, and the possible solutions—particular ideas about how respect might be effective in alleviating indigenous poverty and dysfunction are evident. Neither film disagrees with the centrality of respect to the concept of reconciliation, nor to its place in Australia’s more structured reconciliation process; indeed, this chapter demonstrates that the opposite is the case. However, both approach dysfunction from individualist, postcultural positions and insist that respect is not a right to be demanded of others, but a privilege that is earned and granted by individuals for each other. Self-respect, in these films, plays an important part in earning the respect of others. Both films construct a situation where there is an ostensible absence of respect (among both black and white, and for self and others) only to then reveal the presence and power of quiet, self-respecting and respectful individuals who act as catalysts for personal and community change.

Poverty On and Off the Screen

In *Boxing Day* Chris receives a number of visitors to his house on the eponymous day. Collectively, his guests build a grim picture of suburbia. The first arrival, Owen (Stuart Clarke) is an ex-criminal with a history of alcoholism, illicit drug use and dealing. He tries to talk Chris into (re)using drugs and ridicules him when he declines (figure 1). He has arrived unannounced to ask Chris for his help with a stash of stolen goods, tempting him to

¹ See, for example reconciliation literary fictions *That Deadman Dance* (Scott), *Jasper Jones* (Silvey), *The Roving Party* (Wilson), and *Legacy* (Behrendt). For a detailed discussion about the theatre’s participation in reconciliation since the 1990s see Gilbert. Since 1988, Contemporary Art Quarterly *Artlink* has periodically dedicated an issue to indigenous art, covering a range of political, social and economic topics that contribute to understandings of reconciliation (see Britton; Browning).

restart his criminal activities. As the film progresses family members arrive and a store of past and present traumas are revealed. Donna, her daughter Brooke (Misty Sparrow) (figure 2) and new boyfriend Dave (Syd Brisbane) have been invited for lunch and they arrive before Owen has left. The lunch is a failure. During heated arguments we discover that in the past Donna has been abused by Chris, as well as his brother and their mates, and forced into prostitution. Owen recognises Dave as a convicted paedophile, from his time in prison, and as the film progresses we discover that Dave has been sexually abusing Brooke. Donna and Chris are completely distraught, and in hysteria and with fierce anger they hold Dave in the bath and threaten to kill him. Eventually they let him go, but with Chris' promise that he will find and kill him if it transpires that Brooke has been irreparably harmed.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The characters in *Samson and Delilah* are facing similarly disturbing issues, but the context of remote Australia brings its own particular problems. Samson's petrol sniffing addiction, for example, is unrelenting. In the opening scene he slowly starts his day by picking up a tin of petrol from beside his bed and inhaling the fumes. The hopelessness of his addiction is enhanced through ironic juxtaposition with the soundtrack, as Charlie Pride sings optimistically, "I'll have a sunshiny day, every day that I live." Physical violence appears commonplace and unexceptional in this community. For instance, Samson and his frustrated brother fight about who can use the guitar and they belt each other severely with a metal bar (figure 3). When Delilah's grandmother suddenly dies the older women beat Delilah as punishment for what they consider to be her fault (figure 4).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

When Delilah and Samson run away to Alice Springs and squat under the Todd River Bridge more disheartening, violent and demoralising events follow, and push the picture of disadvantage to an extreme. They cannot afford food and the public water tap from which they obtain drinking water is disabled; Delilah is abducted and (we assume) raped by a carload of young men; then she too starts petrol sniffing. Subsequently Delilah is almost killed by a car and she disappears for an unspecified time. Both the abduction and accident happen immediately behind an oblivious Samson, who is walking ahead in a vapour-stupor, unaware of what is happening a few steps back. In these scenes, when the sound muffles and the film speed slows, the viewer is drawn into the dulled interior of Samson's head and into the bleak hopelessness of the situation. While Delilah is absent, Samson, who by this time has chemical burns around his mouth from sniffing, retreats under his blanket, beneath the bridge with a bottle of petrol.

Boxing Day and *Samson and Delilah* are concerned not only with fictitious subjects, but also with the off-screen realities of poverty and disadvantage. There are many intersections between the narratives of *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* and the reality for many indigenous people in Australia. In Australia, high rates of almost all statistical indicators of poverty show evidence of extent and negative impacts of poverty on Aboriginal people. Petrol sniffing, for example, is less likely to be a result of cultural factors than low socio-economic disadvantage (d'Abbs and MacLean xii). Petrol sniffing misuse—otherwise known as volatile substances misuse (Dept. of Health and Ageing, *Volatile*)—is most commonly a problem for “young people from poor (often indigenous minority) groups” and usage peaks in males in the 12-14 year old age group (d'Abbs and MacLean xii, 9). Moreover, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey 2004-5* found 28% of the indigenous population in non-remote areas self-reported they used illicit drugs in the 12 months prior to the survey: this entails primarily cannabis, amphetamines and non-medical analgesic use (47).

These figures compare to 13% of the non-indigenous population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2007 *National* 39). Although alcohol use follows similar patterns for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the incidence of high-risk alcohol consumption is higher for adult Aboriginal males than non-Aboriginal males (ABS, *National* 45-46). One of the negative effects of this is alcohol-related hospital admissions for Aboriginal men and women, which occur at higher rates than for non-Aboriginal people, across all ages (Milward 3). In their analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data, Don Weatherburn and colleagues suggest that economic and social disadvantage contribute to the frequency and incidence of indigenous arrests, and alcohol and illicit drug use are the strongest correlates (317-18).

High-risk drug use and alcohol consumption have a demonstrable correspondence with many anti-social behaviours, including domestic violence, and result in poorer individual health and in family breakdown (Milward 1). In her study of the impacts of alcohol on the health and social situations of Victorian Aboriginal people, Karen Milward found that indigenous women in that state are “five times more likely to call police to attend a family violence incident and 16 times more likely to seek support from the integrated family violence service system than non-Indigenous women” (1). Levels of child abuse or neglect are higher for indigenous children also. In the period of 2007-08 indigenous children across Australia were 7 times more likely than non-indigenous children to be on care and protection orders and 9 times more likely to be in out-of-home care (AIHW, *Child Protection* 50, 63). Although generally highest in states with a higher urban Aboriginal population (Victoria and New South Wales), these figures are similar across all locations in Australia.

This is an ugly side to modern Australia that *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* bring to attention. Nonetheless, the way the characters are affected by and then deal with poverty and dysfunction has much to offer broader discussions about reconciliation: in particular, the means for addressing these gross inequities.

Lone Players

In *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* the main protagonists demonstrate how self-respect and respect for others can act as an enabler to overcoming poverty and dysfunction. Chris and Delilah (in *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* respectively) function as exemplars of

how a positive sense of one's self enables choices to be made against destructive behaviours. These characters are (for the most part) quiet, polite and respectful of others, and act as counterpoints to the violence around them.

Chris lives in a quiet neighbourhood of neat brick houses and orderly front yards. Inside, in the opening ten minutes of *Boxing Day*, he meticulously tidies the house in preparation for the visitors. He washes dishes, wipes benches, cleans the table and fastidiously smooths the bedcovers: he creates a starkly clean, neat environment. Not only does he attend to his living space in this way, Chris treats his own body with great respect. He refuses the alcohol that Owen brings, stops Owen from smoking inside and then declines his offer of drugs. When Owen asks incredulously, "You turn up drugs?" Chris reveals the effort taken to reach that point: "I've been around a long time ... Ten years I've been trying to give up that shit." In Tom Redwood words, Chris has decided that self-destruction is "no longer an option" ("Not Pulling" 22). Chris' manner towards his visitors on Boxing Day augments the respectability of his character: he is polite and friendly with the Corrections Officer (Catriona Haddon) who stays for a cup of tea, and loving and gentle with Brooke.

In a tender scene, shortly before the film's dramatic climax, Chris and Brooke talk with each other in the backyard. In their conversation Chris reveals that he has promised her grandmother that he will look after Brooke and her (future) children. He tells her he believes that her biological father, his brother, is now "in the wind and the trees" and in her heart. Although the conversation is for the most part in English, it is interspersed with Aboriginal language (untranslated), used only on one other occasion in the film, when Donna and family arrive for lunch. The use of language and the revelation of his promise not only draw attention to Chris' Aboriginality, but also provides some reasoning for his upstanding behaviour, making it all the more credible. Furthermore, in the film Chris and Dave function as an opposing dualism to augment Chris' moral status. In what is also an inversion of class stereotypes, Dave, the quintessential respectable Australian—a white, employed, middle-class, well-presented family man with straight teeth—is a paedophile living a deceitful double life. While Chris, with tattoos and shaved head, looks the part of a working-class criminal, it is he who has more moral integrity and strength of character.

Similarly Delilah, despite the banality of her life, the squalor of her living conditions and the violence around her, is a calm, composed and sensible presence in *Samson and Delilah*. She takes the responsibility of caring for her grandmother seriously;

for instance, while Samson mooches around outside the shop, she buys groceries and does the cooking. She appears wise for her years also when she initially ignores Samson's childish advances and eventually throws his bedding out of her yard. She loses her composure only twice, fleetingly, during the film—once following her abduction, and then late in the film when she realises the enormity of the task of caring for Samson. She recovers quickly, and one of these recovery moments is the most optimistic point in *Samson and Delilah*, and the turning point in the film. It occurs when she makes a surprise reappearance after being hit by a car. Given the force of the impact and her unexplained absence it is not unreasonable to suspect, as Samson does, that she is dead. When she reappears it is night and the bright lights of the car behind create a silhouette, and an emotive music track provides the only sound. Initially it is unclear if she is real or an apparition (figure 5); however, as the scene continues it becomes apparent that she is injured but alive, and has come to save Samson. Dressed in white, with hoodie up, she is an angelic figure (figure 6).

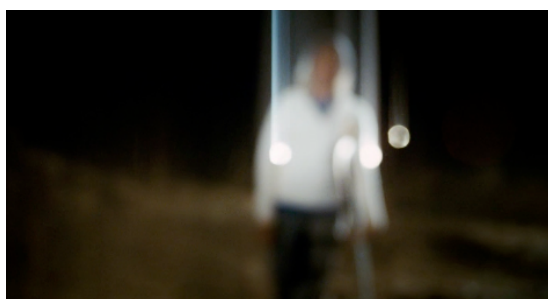


Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Only a short time after being abused, hungry and destitute, Delilah takes on the responsibility of recovering her life and that of Samson also. While Samson is carried to the car by his brother (who has come with Delilah), Delilah signals her re-found resolve by emptying the petrol onto the ground and throwing the bottle away. When they then make a brief return to the community, she answers the incessantly ringing phone: a strong symbol of her intention not to conform to despondency. She drives to an outstation, bathes Samson, hunts kangaroo to feed them both, hauls firewood and recommences painting—all with her leg in a brace. Her physical and emotional strength is matched by her psychological and emotional resilience, and signals the hope for a different future. Charlie Pride segues to the film's credits singing about the positive prospects that little money but much love and

commitment will bring in “All I Have to Offer You is Me,” and cements the messages about individual choices that are communicated by *Samson and Delilah*.

The end of the family drama in *Boxing Day* come about because Chris is able to maintain his self-assuredness and his resolve to resist self-destruction. After he has forced Dave from the house (and circumvented further disaster by resisting killing him), Brooke sits with Chris on the couch, hands him a present and says quietly, “Merry Christmas Dad.” They stay there, affectionately entwined, as the camera leaves the room and the film closes (figure 7). Despite the desperateness of their situation, the actions and behaviours of the central characters, combined with strategic music and editing techniques, generate a sense of optimism that weakens the otherwise despondent tone of both *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day*. Bespeaking an ideology of individualism, hope stems from Chris and Delilah’s abilities to take control over their situation, regardless of how dire the circumstances.



Fig. 7

To suggest there is a degree of freedom and choice for Aboriginal Australians living in poverty and dysfunction is, however, controversial. Describing this as the film’s “sharpest moral provocation,” Redwood contends that when *Boxing Day* asks “How to improve oneself everyday, not for others, but for one’s own sense of dignity?” the film takes a position in favour of individualism: “a person can always choose to change, and that this choice is their fundamental right” (“Not Pulling” 26). Warwick Thornton, the director of *Samson and Delilah*, has a similar view: “They’re our problems and we need to solve them” (qtd. in Bodey, “Tough Love” 19). Other Reconciliation Cinema also approaches their explorations of issues associated with indigenous poverty from similarly liberalist perspectives. *Yolngu Boy* (2000), *Beneath Clouds*, *Blessed* (2009), *The Combination* (2009), *Blacktown* (2005) (Stenders’ earlier film) and Khoa Do’s *Footy Legends* (2006) are

also films about dysfunction that take a similar position on individual choice. In each, one or more Aboriginal characters take actions to improve their own situation, and that of the community they live in. For example, in *Blacktown* Tony (Tony Ryan) is an ex-criminal who, not dissimilarly to Chris, struggles with unemployment, drug use and living in a low-socio-economic suburb. Tony “a black fella on a white bus” is a mini moral crusader. Ex-criminal, ex-drug addict and former alcoholic, he saves a woman, Nikki (Nikki Owen), from a violent attacker in a car park and then punishes her ex-lover for having an affair as a married man (without the involvement of the police). He and Nikki fall in love, he charms her conservative mother, and the two marry. One cannot help but think that if everyone were like Tony, Blacktown would be the ideal place to live. In *Footy Legends* a group of poor, largely unemployed men from a multi-cultural inner-city suburb put a mammoth effort into winning a football match. Their win, brought about by the determination of individuals, has a raft of positive flow-on effects for the men involved and their community.

The risk with liberalist messages about individual choice is that it opens the way for the blame for indigenous disadvantage to be placed at the feet of Aborigines alone. The impact of dispossession, racism, trauma and ongoing discrimination at the hand of non-indigenous Australians can be discounted. If individuals are responsible for their own situation, then whites are potentially absolved of any involvement in causing or perpetuating indigenous inequality. Whilst *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* advocate individual action as a means to overcome poverty, they are not, however, films that pardon whites or ignore the role of colonialism and its aftermath in contemporary problems: the messages are far more complicated. Rather, they add tenor to a range of voices in the debates about the causes of and solutions to persistent Aboriginal disadvantage.

Causes and Solutions

Disadvantage in remote Aboriginal communities is frequently an issue of concern in public and political arenas in Australia. Concerns reached a frenzy in 2007 following the release of a Government inquiry report on sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, *Ampe Akelyernaemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred* (discussed in Chapter Four). The measures contained in the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) that followed were aimed at addressing widespread community dysfunction, which helped to

fuel a picture of extensive community breakdown in remote Aboriginal communities. The Rudd Government, elected in 2007, not only continued with many of the intervention measures under “Stronger Futures,” but also commenced the multifaceted strategy “Closing the Gap,” to address disadvantage. “Closing the Gap” uses the quantitative measurement of the life expectancy at birth for indigenous and non-indigenous Australians as a benchmark indicator of widespread indigenous disadvantage, and ultimately aims to decrease the “gap” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal life-expectancy statistics. “Closing the Gap” is the core policy in the current formal Reconciliation strategy. Non-government body Reconciliation Australia also uses the language of gap closure in its strategic plan for 2010-2015, and talks of improving outcomes for Aboriginal people and using measurable outcomes (*Strategic Plan*). Likewise, the 2010 report on the “Closing the Gap” program uses the established rhetoric of Reconciliation, including a nod to respect: “Mutual responsibility and respect is core to our approach to closing the gap” (2). In these ways, reconciliation, Government policy and poverty and disadvantage are intertwined.

In concert with *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah*, some Aboriginal leaders and spokespeople consider individual action to be the key to rectifying Aboriginal disadvantage. For example, lawyer and activist Noel Pearson, director of The Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, when speaking at the Brisbane Writers Festival in 2009 suggested that

social progress is the sum total of many thousands of individual progress. You have lots of individual progress, you have social progress. You have social progress, you have social justice. (“Noel Pearson”)

In the same speech Pearson uses the metaphor of a staircase to explain that individuals only ascend one or two steps at a time. He thus implores the nation:

Stop dreaming that social justice is about one day, some beautiful person in government is going to invent the forklift [instead of climbing a staircase] that has hitherto not arrived ... [W]e from the liberal left, have long harboured ... vague hopes that one day we're going to hear the diesel engine kick over and a suitably ...

sympathetic government is going to mobilise the means of mass uplift. (“Noel Pearson”)

In many ways, the approach to indigenous disadvantage that Pearson, *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day* take is a direct challenge to Government measures, such as the intervention and “Closing the Gap.” Whilst some Aboriginal people have welcomed the NTER and “Stronger Futures” (see Bess Price qtd. in Rintoul; Langton, “Trapped”), there is also widespread opposition. Much of the concern stems from a lack of individual power afforded to those people who are subject to the reforms. For instance, around the time of the intervention Garraway Yunupingu, the former head of the Northern Land Council and community leader in North East Arnhem Land, reportedly walked the streets of his community and encouraged people to return to their homelands and families. Yunupingu decided: “Waiting for Canberra to save their children was a mistake” (qtd. in Murdoch, “Missionaries”). More dramatically, the whole community of Ampilatwatja moved their town out of the jurisdiction of the NTER to avoid Government intervention (Murdoch, “Outcast” 1). As in *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah*, individuals in these instances took it upon themselves to act in ways that Government could or did not.

In April 2012 the Yolngu Makarr Dhuni (Yolngu Nations Assembly) released a statement rejecting the “Stronger Futures” Bill, and called upon all Australians to act with respect for “ourselves, our land, our laws and our language.” The Assembly evidently consider “Stronger Futures” to be at its heart a disrespectful policy, and appealed to individuals to act on the principles of respect. Given the centrality of respect to reconciliation, the Assembly touch upon a discord between the principles of reconciliation and their enactment. Anthropologist Peter Sutton agrees, and states reconciliation should be left alone by Government “because it politicises and collectivises the very things that need to be dealt with by Australians as individuals” (209).²

In *Samson and Delilah* Government organisations and their representatives are made conspicuous by their absence. Police are seen only fleetingly, and the hospital in which Delilah recovers is entirely off-screen. No teachers or welfare officers monitor the whereabouts of Samson or Delilah, as might be expected. Moreover, Samson is saved not by a social worker or the police, but by family, and he is taken to an Aboriginal homeland

² For similar arguments see also Dodson, “Annual” and Grattan, “Introduction” 5.

rather than a rehabilitation centre for recovery. In *Boxing Day*, one Government representative, the corrections officer, is a part of Chris' recovery, but she appears as an odd figure in the film. She is pleasant and respectful, and has obviously been helpful to Chris in the past, but on Boxing Day she is deliberately shielded from the horror unfolding in his house. As she sits in the kitchen drinking tea with Chris (figure 9), in the bathroom Donna is holding a gun to Dave's head. She appears redundant in the light of Chris' problems, which are far beyond her scope of practice, or her capability.



Fig. 9

The current federal Labour Gillard Government displays a more Pearsonian/Yolngu Makarr Dhuni attitude in its reconciliation rhetoric, if not in its practice. They insist on less distinction between Government-led and individual-driven measures than in 2000. For instance, the report on the progress of “Closing the Gap” in 2010 states: “Meeting the challenge of closing the gap cannot be done by Governments alone. Indigenous communities must take responsibility for their futures too if we are to see real and sustainable change” (*Closing 2*). This liberalist tone of the current formal reconciliation strategy makes it appear quite congruous with individualism. Its shortcomings notwithstanding, Government intervention speaks of the principles of self-directed outcomes for Aboriginal people, even though in practise it may play out differently.

While the importance of the individual is made clear in *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day*, the films are more ambivalent about the value of another component of formal and informal reconciliation in Australia: the symbolic. Two years following the apology, and shortly after *Samson and Delilah*'s release, public opinions were divided about how practical and symbolic reconciliation measures should be prioritised. For example, one newspaper editorial bemoaned practical focus of the 2010 “Closing the Gap” report:

The contrast with the 2008 speech is striking, and somewhat troubling. Laden with statistics and stripped of past insights into the ‘cold, confronting, uncomfortable truth’ of everything that led to this point, the Closing the Gap statement is more a bureaucratic ticking of boxes for the six targets eliminating indigenous disadvantage. (“Reconciliation Loses Heart” 6)

Mick Dodson, Director of the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at the Australian National University, notes with disappointment the difference between the sentiment of the national apology, which was “about healing and reconciliation”, and that of the “Closing the Gap” policy. Dodson states the policy risks reducing Aboriginal people to “mere points on a trend line” rather than reflecting a commitment to principles of reconciliation and indigenous rights (“Many Gaps” 7). In contrast, at the same time a debate emerged about the importance of fiscal compensation to address the ongoing impact on people whose parents had grown up away from their families (see Gordon 4).

Marcia Langton is highly critical of a soft reconciliation agenda that ignores the need to act on dysfunction. In an argument that is highly critical of NT Intervention detractors she belittles the reconciliation agenda for offering a sort of pathetic “kindness” to Aboriginal people and states:

I believe that those opposed to the [NT] intervention are morally and politically wrong. I fear they represent the small, comfortable white clique in the Territory whose cars bear stickers declaring ‘I fish and I drink and I vote’ and the ‘big men’ in Aboriginal communities who harvest votes for their Labor mates. (“Trapped” 152)

She blames the high levels of dysfunction in Aboriginal communities—where she states people are “trapped in nightmarish conditions from which escape seems unlikely”—to the flow of “illicit drugs, other addictive substances and pornography” into Aboriginal communities that has occurred since the 1970s (“Trapped” 159, 154). There is little place for symbolism in Langton’s vision for an effective reconciliation process.

Boxing Day and *Samson and Delilah* do not construct symbolic and practical

measures as mutually exclusive elements of reconciliation. It appears unlikely that the characters would be effected by demonstrative acts of solidarity such as bridge-walks or Government apologies, as there is little correlation between these affective acts and their daily realities. Furthermore, in *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day* the characters have little spare time or energy to devote to any activities beyond their immediate practical concerns. However, although the ostensible focus of these films is on practical impacts of poverty and discrimination, they are also deeply concerned with the emotive elements that comprise reconciliation. The issues they deal with are unquestionably moving—trauma, isolation, pain and healing—and demand an emotional response from viewers. Herein lies a correlation between film-watching and symbolic gestures toward restoration of cross-cultural relations in Australia: the emotive response. Despite the filmic content being overtly practical, it is delivered in ways that invite an emotional response from the viewer, in similar ways as do symbolic gestures of those who participate. For example, following the Rudd Government apology to the Stolen Generation in February 2008 (a year prior to the release of *Samson and Delilah*) Ronan Sharkey interviewed some of those present and their reactions were heartfelt and positive: “I feel that today has started within myself healing, that I have carried from my Grandmother;” “Now I know that a lot of things in my family are going to be better, be improved;” “I felt the significance of the day is something that is going to stay with me for a long time;” and “It makes me feel better [about being Aboriginal] already” (qtd. in Sharkey).

The dysfunction and poverty in both *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* invites not only an emotive response, but also encourages viewers to question the effectiveness of practical Government interventions past and present. On watching *Samson and Delilah* one critic was prompted to write:

In the wake of the seemingly growing divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (where the intervention is the most present cultural memory), one can't help placing *Samson and Delilah* in the context of the political realities of Indigenous life. (Isaacs 16)

The film also generated discussion about the failure of past Government policies, in particular self-determination. Rosemary Neill claims that *Samson and Delilah* alerts

viewers to the “biggest public policy failure of the past four decades: the fact that many indigenous people’s lives have deteriorated sharply during an era more radically enlightened than the one (the assimilation period) that preceded it” (6). Philip Batty, co-founder of the Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) and past director of the National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, contends that Thornton’s politically aware filmmaking differentiates him from other CAAMA filmmakers who, he observes, promote “Aboriginal self-determination on one hand, while turning a blind eye to the communal horrors that surrounded them on the other” (167). What results is an important ambiguity that prevents the film from being either a liberalist dismissal of the impact of white colonisation, or a misplaced romanticisation of contemporary Aboriginal life.

Boxing Day and *Samson and Delilah* create the possibility that in postcolonial reconciling Australia the emotional, symbolic and practical might be intricately interconnected. They echo Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs’ contention:

Postcolonization will just as likely entail altering colonized/colonizer subjectivities (how people are seen and how they see themselves) as it will entail altering who has access to what. Indeed, material reparation often as not proceeds only when certain (conventionally racialized and hierarchical) assumptions held about colonized and colonizer are changed. (201)

“Postcolonization” could be substituted by “reconciliation” in this quotation and have the same effect. Reconciliation in these films concerns “how people are seen and see themselves,” that is, about self-respect and gaining respect from others, and simultaneously “who has access to what.” Specifically, reconciliation entails the movement of individuals out of poverty.

Realism, Realities and Respect

On-screen portrayals of dysfunction form a legitimate, yet challenging, part of the cultural, political and public discourses of postcolonial reconciliation. *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day* contribute to debates not only via the depiction of Aboriginal dysfunction—that merge the personal, political and social—but also by exploring notions of the value of

individual self-respect and respect for others based on attributes and character. An examination of the extra-textual contexts of both these films reveals that an individualist understanding of respect characterises the off-screen culture that surrounds these two films. That is, the critical reception, marketing and promotion of the films advocates for an appreciation of individual self-worth and respect for self and others, in ways that encourage existent understandings of respect away from collective ideas of peoples and culture and towards individual attributes.

Neither the marketing nor reviewing of *Boxing Day* or *Samson and Delilah* emphasises either films' indigenous content or context. Rather, attention is drawn to the films' universal appeal, much of which relies upon audience familiarity with the particular genres. *Boxing Day* is a mix of a number of recognisable genres. Alex Munt locates the film in the category of "thriller-melodrama hybrid" (a term he borrows from screenwriting theorist, Ken Dancyger) but it can also be categorised as a family drama, or "suburban siege" film (Stenders qtd. in Maddox). When asked by an interviewer if *Boxing Day* was a metaphor for Australia, Stenders tellingly replied, "The film is not a metaphor for this country, it's about the nature of family" (qtd. in Redwood, "Not Pulling" 22). His insistence that the film is primarily a study of family relations is supported by the marketing synopsis on the International Movie Data Base, written by producer Kristian Molliere:

Boxing Day documents the minute by minute events across the course of an afternoon in the life of Chris Sykes—a recovering alcoholic and estranged father. Living alone on home detention, Chris is preparing Christmas lunch for his family when an old friend turns up at his doorstep and reveals a disturbing truth. When his daughter, his wife and her new boyfriend finally arrive, the situation slowly and inevitably escalates and we are drawn into the compelling story of a desperate father who finally exposes the dark and disturbing secret that has torn his family apart.

Co-writer and lead actor Richard Green supports this sentiment. He states, "It is not my story, but the part that is my life in the anguish. And it's not just an Aboriginal story too –

it's universal" (qtd. in Stenders 4), and thus diverts viewers away from any specifically Aboriginal aspects in the film that his own indigeneity encourages.

Promotion for *Samson and Delilah*, like *Boxing Day*, also de-emphasises the indigenous specifics of the film and instead focuses on its appeal as a teenage love story. Producer Beck Cole writes:

Samson and Delilah's world is small—an isolated community in the Central Australian desert. When tragedy strikes they turn their backs on home and embark on a journey of survival. Lost, unwanted and alone they discover that life isn't always fair, but love never judges.

Publicity for the film and early reviews also emphasised the romantic element of the story. For instance, the film's tag line is "True Love," and newspaper headlines at the time captured the love theme: "Five Stars a Happy Beginning to Indigenous Love Story" (Bodey), and "Tough Love" (Bodey). Thornton reiterated that the film was primarily a love story in more than one interview (see Buckmaster, "Interview"; Redwood, "On Making"; Daley 15) and Cole, also the director of the "Making of *Samson and Delilah*" documentary, states it was Thornton's intention to make a "love story that people want to watch" and not a political film (qtd. in Bodey, "Five Stars" 3).

On the one hand, it is easy to imagine how downplaying the specific Aboriginal context of the characters' situations might make the films more accessible to a range of people—both indigenous and non-indigenous, as well as Australian and overseas audiences. At the time of *Boxing Day*'s release, commentators and critics respected that the film appealed to all manner of viewers, and stated, for example, "Chris ... represents one aspect of the contemporary experience of indigenous Australians, but also broils with all the pain, joy and depth of humanity" (Kroenert, "Quality" 31), and "Originality, universal relevance, emotional intuition ... constitute the cornerstones of Kriv Stenders' artistic motivations" (Redwood, "Not Pulling" 24). Similar remarks typify *Samson and Delilah* reviews. Matt Ravier, for example, praises the film for depicting disaffected youth and the "poverty, exploitation and drug use" they encounter "in a language we can all understand," and Noel Purdon asks, "what white kid couldn't identify with the sense of boredom and aimlessness which invites a temporary paradise?" The specific circumstances of the indigenous characters are made more accessible via the recognisable genre conventions and

the “preferred reading” (Haywood 189) codes they carry. As Therese Davis states, *Samson and Delilah* “uses the framework of the love story to create a community-centred Aboriginal perspective that can involve wider audiences in these social issues” (“Love and Social Marginality”). When couched in the context of a romance, indigenous petrol-sniffing is an impediment on the path to true love rather than another indicator of indigenous disadvantage. In a suburban family drama, dealing with child abuse is a test of family strength and loyalty rather than simply addressing a symptom of Aboriginal dysfunction.

However, the universal appeal of the films also serves another function. It invites critique of *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* in mainstream critical arenas, and not only in the niche of indigenous film festivals and awards. *Boxing Day* is the second feature film by director Kriv Stenders and was funded in most part by the Adelaide Film Festival Investment Fund. It first screened at the Adelaide Festival in 2007. *Boxing Day* received multiple awards: Best Director and Best Actor (Richard Green) at the Inside Film Awards in 2007, and Best Actor award (Richard Green) and a Jury’s Special Mention at the Festival International Nouveau Cinema, Montreal, in the same year. Stenders also received the Australian Screen Directors Guild’s “Director Finder” award in 2007. *Boxing Day* screened at a number of International Film Festivals, and although it achieved significant critical acclaim in Australia the film screened for only four weeks in an inner-city suburban cinema in Melbourne; therefore, DVD viewership notwithstanding, its public reception was small. Stenders’ slightly unconventional and experimental method of filmmaking has earned him the reputation of a director who “flouts the clichés imposed by conventional production methods” (Redwood, “Not Pulling” 22). Stenders explains: “It’s all about trying to tell stories in new and refreshing ways” (qtd. in Redwood, “Not Pulling” 22). Stenders has since gone on to make much more conventional and commercially successful films, *Lucky Country* (2009) and *Red Dog* (2011), which have significantly raised his public profile as a director.

Samson and Delilah is writer, cinematographer and director Warwick Thornton’s first feature. Thornton had previously made a number of fiction and documentary short films. The film was funded by multiple sources, including the Indigenous Branch of Screen Australia, Adelaide Film Festival Fund, NSW Film and Television Office, Northern Territory Film Office and the Australian Broadcasting Commission. In 2009 the film screened in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival and won the Camera

d'Or, and received a standing ovation at the Adelaide Film Festival Premiere. It also screened at the Toronto, Zurich, Munich, London and Telluride Film Festivals, and was shortlisted for the 2009 Academy Awards Best Foreign Language Film. In contrast to *Boxing Day*, the film's critical acclaim was matched by its public reception in Australia, where the box office figures (over \$3 million dollars) made it one of the highest earning Australian films in the three preceding years. The film also screened to public audiences in many other countries, which caused at least one reviewer at the time to suggest it was "possibly becoming our most famous film" (Blundell).

My intention is not to imply a hierarchy wherein the mainstream film and festival circuit is of higher value than indigenous-specific film events (such as the Deadly Awards, or the International Indigenous Film Festival), but to draw attention to the widespread appreciation for the quality of both these films for a different reason. Indigenous forums counterbalance an industry with a history of excluding Aborigines on and off-screen. They have also raised the general profile of Aboriginal artists, and increased awareness of Aboriginal stories and realities. However, the attention received by *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* in a broader critical circle where the films compete with those from other countries and from non-indigenous Australia, is indicative of a certain type of respect. That is, respect is for the filmmakers' talents, regardless of their cultural heritage or allegiance.

Although they differ generically, *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* have in common a particular cinematic style. Both employ techniques of realist filmmaking to tell their stories. Because they experiment with class-based cinema that is concerned with the minutiae of everyday life, Stenders and Thornton draw comparisons with established and renowned European and American realist filmmakers. Two of Stenders' films, *Blacktown* and *Boxing Day*, have been likened to the innovative works of the Danish digital cinema movement, Dogme95, and himself to director Lars Von Trier (Munt). Stenders has also been compared to British directors Ken Loach and Mike Leigh (Maddox), as well as John Cassavetes (Shaw, "Lucky" 64), Russian long-take director Alexander Sokurov (Redwood, "Not Pulling" 24; Shaw, "Lucky" 62) and Andrei Tarkovsky and Alfred Hitchcock for similar reasons (Redwood, "Not Pulling" 25; Shaw, "Lucky" 62). He is likened to Steven Soderberg for his use of confined sets, or "spatial containment," and James Cameron for his "scriptment" approach to screenwriting (Munt). This is an experimental technique in which story beats and sample dialogue are provided for the actors, but scope is left for

improvisation (Stenders 4). Thornton's filmmaking was thought to mirror "the strategies of the great Italian neo-realist filmmakers of the 1940s" (Isaacs 15) and one reviewer noted the "European sensitivity" of *Samson and Delilah* (Pomeranz, "Samson"). Thornton is likened to Robert Bresson, Abbas Kiarostami and even Jacques Tati (Redwood, "Said in Silence" 28). These comparisons, generally favourable, shift the focus away from the trauma and dysfunction of the narratives (and all this infers) towards the films as works of art, and in Stenders and Thornton as cinematic artists.

Both Thornton and Stenders are indeed accomplished cinematographers and directors. Thornton was an award-winning short film director prior to making *Samson and Delilah*, and won at the Berlin Film Festival in 2005 and 2007 and Stenders' first two features, *The Illustrated Family Doctor* (2005) and *Blacktown* were critically applauded (if not big earners at the box office). Stenders' and Thornton's journeys to success echo those of the characters in their films. Just as the characters use their personal strength to overcome a series of personal obstacles, both directors also required a large degree of determination to make their films. Stenders "will" triumphed over his microbudget (Shaw, "Lucky" 62) and Thornton took control over almost all aspects of production of *Samson and Delilah*, in the style of the "grand notions of film auteurism" (Isaacs 12). Thornton's individual achievement is particularly poignant, as his achievements as an Aboriginal director defy the odds that indigenous poverty statistics signify.

Realist films, in general terms, depict the "social and economic circumstances within which particular echelons of society (usually the working and middle classes) find themselves" (Hayward 357). They create the illusion that we are watching the "real" world. As well as in communist documentaries, the roots of social realism lay in European cinema, in particular British Free Cinema and later New Wave, Italian Neo-Realism and the Cinéma-Vérité of France. Realism, or "'naturalism' ... film as social action" has long been a feature of Australian cinema (O'Regan, *Australian* 204) and *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day*, along with *Blacktown*, *Dead Heart* and *The Combination*, add to this tradition. An Australian Realist Film Unit (RFU) ran from the 1930s until 1960. However, it was closely tied to the Communist Party of Australia, and when eventually they withdrew their funding support—because the RFU was reportedly resistant to showing "socialist" realism as opposed to "social" realism (Harant 38)—it ended. The Realist Film Association resulted, which in turn sparked the establishment of many film societies throughout Australia.

Employing a range of realist methods increases the narrative authenticity in *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah*. As Bruce Isaacs observes, “From the opening shot [of *Samson and Delilah*] the viewer feels that they are getting the story first-hand, in a fictional narrative imbued with a degree of authenticity rare in contemporary cinema” (12). Realism is achieved partly through the use of non-professional actors, who make the characters more believable. Stenders and Thornton deliberately chose non-professionals who were “willing to bring aspects of their real lives and personalities to the roles ... playing themselves, but with a mask on” (Stenders 5). In the *Boxing Day* audio commentary, Stenders and Molliere state they were attracted to Misty Sparrow for her lack of “eyebrow acting,” and Catriona Haddon was chosen because in real life she works as a parole officer. Thornton states that he deliberately chose two young people to play Samson and Delilah from remote communities rather than a large city, so that they could deliver “stuff I could not teach or rehearse or mould” (qtd. in Bodey, “Tough Love” 19). The actors’ pasts, Thornton contends, are more crucial than their abilities to perform the characters:

They were first time actors, but what they were bringing was their communities and that journey they had taken in their own lives, which they could bring to the screen. That was more important than if they had acted before. (qtd. in de Bruyn 24)

Non-professional actors generate a particularly affective emotional experience for the audience. For instance, the “stuff” that Thornton saw in Gibson and McNamara, according to Bodey, is “incredibly powerful” (19), and Purdon found their performances emotionally “raw and real.” Similarly, of Richard Green’s performance in *Boxing Day* Redwood states “Green’s Chris is a *real* man. He exists” (emphasis added, “Not Pulling” 26), and another reviewer could “feel the pain and plight of those trying to repair their lives” (Hurst). Audiences are encouraged to believe that these characters are not simply acting, but are bringing their own reality to the screen.

A real-time portrayal of events heightens the verisimilitude of these films also. In *Samson and Delilah* the story is told at walking pace and “life rhythms” are established from the beginning of the film, a stylistic device that “recalls the best aspects of cinema realism” (Isaacs 14-15). Although both films are slow moving and depict routine daily activities that border on being tedious, real-time storytelling is strictly adhered to in *Boxing*

Day: the viewer watches events unfold over the 82 minutes in real time. Although the screenplay reportedly took years to develop, the shooting took place in only three weeks and Stenders shot the entire film three times, the first two shootings served as “drafts” for the final version (Stenders 6-7). The film consists of a series of ten-minute takes with only twelve cuts, seamlessly edited, throughout the entire length of the film, which makes it stylistically redolent of Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* or Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*. In his seminal work on the aesthetics of cinema and its relationship to the real, André Bazin celebrates the long take for its ability to depict the real more convincingly than montage. In reference to a scene in Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* in which Nanook waits in real-time to catch a seal, Bazin asks: “Will anyone deny that it is thereby much more moving than a montage by attraction?” (27).

The lifelike soundscapes in both films enhance the verisimilitude also. In *Boxing Day* Stenders’ “Altman-esque” (Shaw, “*Lucky*” 62) use of sound is used to heighten awareness of the suburban setting. The background noises, such as birds in the yard, are deliberately heard as if the listener were hearing them from Chris’ perspective (as explained by Stenders in voiceover on the Audio Commentary available on the DVD), so we experience his environment as he does. The effect is an augmentation of the naturalism of the film. Dialogue is sparse in *Samson and Delilah* and instead the characters regularly communicate by sign language. The quietness means the viewer understands the film not via verbal cues, but through a more experiential unfolding of the film’s meanings: “The absence of dialogue allows the audience to appreciate the environment, to live the experiences of the characters vicariously rather than be told second-hand” (Isaacs 14). This strategic silence, combined with authenticity of character and temporality, cements the realistic qualities of the film.

The strong reality that is created in both these two films has a particular impact on a reconciling nation. In the same way that Olivia Khoo observes a “multicultural realism” (145) at work in Australian cinema, which she suggests functions to enable the ideals of multiculturalism to be sustained in public and cultural arenas, *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* engage with a “reconciliation realism” to similar effect. However, unlike the enabling influence that Khoo observes of the multicultural version, this filmic reconciliation realism challenges and unsettles many of the central ideals of reconciliation, including respect. The reality of life in an indigenous community is not at all a comfort for viewers of these films. Nevertheless, these realistic depictions are appreciated and,

importantly, respected by audiences, critics and judges. The high cultural value of these films indicates a desire for issues of indigenous poverty and dysfunction to be approached with honesty, regardless of how confronting these may be.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how depiction of dysfunction in *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* generates questions about valuing and respecting people on cultural grounds alone. It shows how the films question whether respect without reference to individuals behaviours or attitudes will indeed benefit reconciliation. While Reconciliation Australia calls for respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' special place, culture and rights, these two films champion the value of individual attributes and skills, particularly ethical behaviour, compassion and resilience. Overcoming Aboriginal disadvantage is achieved through the characters' own personal strengths, which enables them to not only change their own situations but also others. Strength of character come regardless of the causes of their poverty and dire predicaments, and is not necessarily sensitive to race or culture. Notwithstanding that *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* attest to Aboriginal cultural continuity, the correlations between the fortunes of the on-screen characters and those of the filmmakers suggests a postcultural sensibility, which is common to other Reconciliation Cinema also (see Chapter Three).

On-screen Aboriginal disadvantage and dysfunction adds to Australia's reconciliation narrative also by building a complicated, ambivalent reconciling social imaginary. Dysfunction—front and centre in both *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah*—is a major constituent of indigenous realities, and as such is an indictment on efforts toward reconciliation to date. While these filmic slants on disadvantage are shocking, this information would not be new to many viewers. People living in Australia, and beyond, have been frequently alerted to poor living conditions and disproportionate levels of abuse and violence via a myriad of sources, such as Government reports, public rallies, bridge-walks, and in literature and cinema. Neither are these images at odds with some political, social and academic discourses on reconciliation. The current process of reconciliation is heavily concerned with statistics about gaps in life expectancy, incarceration rates and high levels of child abuse, amongst other indicators of poverty.

Thus a challenge for reconciliation that comes via the deliberate and inadvertent displays of individualism in the textual and extra-textual environs of *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day*; more so than the actual depictions of adversity. Individualism, as it is played out in these films, challenges a blinkered respect for culture, and poses questions about what might be an appropriate form of government intervention to address dysfunction. Self-determination, the Northern Territory Emergency Response and the “Stronger Futures” strategy are called to scrutiny by these two films. *Boxing Day* and *Samson and Delilah* display an ambivalence typical of Reconciliation Cinema. They are simultaneously postcultural and indigenous, universal and specific, personal and political, and emotional and practical, and thus contribute to the new conditions for cross-cultural interactions that constitute the reconciliation process.

Chapter Six

Collaborative Decolonisation

Rabbit-Proof Fence

Yolngu Boy

Ten Canoes

Feature filmmaking is a highly collaborative process and, as such, it creates multifarious opportunities for cross-cultural interactivity. Combinations of indigenous and non-indigenous practitioners contribute to almost all of the feature films that are the subjects of this thesis, and the variations of these collaborative partnerships are numerous. For example, Aboriginal directors and co-directors Ivan Sen, Warwick Thornton, Richard J. Frankland, Rachel Perkins and Peter Djigirr work with non-indigenous producers, writers and editors. Non-indigenous director and writer Kriv Stenders teamed with indigenous co-writer Richard Green on *Boxing Day* (2007), and indigenous cultural advisors/consultants/coordinators were engaged to make *The Proposition* (2005) and *Australia* (2008). In *Australian Rules* (2002), *Serenades* (2001), *Call Me Mum* (2008) and *September* (2007)—films that were directed, written and produced by non-indigenous filmmakers—indigenous lead actors provided input during the production phase. In addition, there are collaborations between funding bodies, drama coaches, community consultants and language consultants in much of Reconciliation Cinema. This chapter focuses on the off-screen environment of filmmaking, and examines the significance of cross-cultural collaboration for the process of reconciliation.

This chapter examines in detail three films that each represents a variant of indigenous/non-indigenous collaborative filmmaking. The first, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) was directed by non-indigenous Australian Phillip Noyce but is an adaptation of Aboriginal author Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara's book of her mother's life *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), and Noyce consulted with Pilkington Garimara on the screenplay. The producers of the second film, *Yolngu Boy* (2000), are prominent Aboriginal leaders and spokesmen, Gallarrwuy and Mandawuy Yunupingu, and they worked together with non-indigenous director Stephen Johnson to create this film. The third film, *Ten Canoes* (2006),

is co-directed by non-indigenous director Rolf de Heer and Ramingining Aboriginal local Peter Djigirr, and writing credits are given to de Heer and “The People of Ramingining.”

Collaborative cinema not only comprises a significant part of Australian Reconciliation Cinema, but collaborative projects contribute to Fourth Cinema from other nations also (Columpar xiii). I make this point because collaborative projects are not always considered to be legitimate Fourth or Indigenous films. In her recent book, *Decolonizing the Lens of Power: Indigenous Films in North America*, for example, Kerstin Knopf defines indigenous films as those that are “made by Indigenous people (i.e. necessarily the director or producer and, ideally, also the scriptwriter)” and she excludes “films made by non-Indigenous people based on Indigenous scripts or Indigenous content” (xxii-iii). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam take this a step further, and argue that an indigenous film is one in which “the producers are themselves the receivers, along with neighbouring communities and, occasionally, distant cultural institutions or festivals such as the Native American film festivals” (*Unthinking* 34). As such, they argue, collaborative films do not “necessarily” form part of the indigenous media movement (*Unthinking* 37).

At the core of debates about the place of collaborative film in Fourth Cinema is the issue of indigenous creative control. Collaboration does not guarantee indigenous creative control. Shohat and Stam claim that indigenous control guarantees that certain topics will be raised, those which have not typically been the concern of non-indigenous filmmakers, such as “territorial claims, symbiotic links to nature, and active resistance to colonial incursions” (*Unthinking* 37). They contend also that indigenous peoples use media specifically for anti-colonial purposes, such as resisting displacement and deterioration and “cultural annihilation” (*Unthinking* 35). Knopf is adamant about the importance of indigenous control to achieve anti-colonial ends: “Needless to say, the creation of anticolonialist media requires Indigenous filmmakers to have control over film production, and, if possible, over distribution and broadcast as well” (18). She argues also that control facilitates the decolonising of cinema itself, long considered to be a colonising tool, and that the “objectifying and surveiling gaze” (Knopf 7) that is held to be a feature of past Western ethnographic and fiction cinema can be turned on those who were previously in control, the non-indigenous filmmakers. Anne Hickling-Hudson agrees, and states that it is only a “black reality from a conscious black perspective” that will increase the dignity, diversity and humanity, as well as “articulate logic and positiveness” in on-screen representations. Similarly, Jill Sargent claims that increased Aboriginal involvement

tackles racism and increases diversity in representations (3). When Warwick Thornton stated after making *Samson and Delilah* “I really like to try to make white people obsolete. I want the issues to come from us and I want the answers to come from us” (qtd. in Stephanoff 121), he demonstrated his belief also in the importance of indigenous controlled cinema, and also contextualised this argument within Australian feature film culture. This is despite *Samson and Delilah* being a cross-culturally collaborative project.

In recent years there has been a surge of indigenous cinema on Australian screens and television that fits the criteria outlined above, that is, in which creative control rests with the indigenous filmmaker. For the most part these are short fiction and documentary films that have been commissioned and/or financed by the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and Screen Australia’s Indigenous Department. In addition, independent company Blackfella Films, established in 1992, has produced numerous documentaries and dramas for festivals and television, including the *First Australians* series. This is a global trend, and is resulting not only an increase in quantity of indigenous films, but in quality of the production also. Rachel Perkins—one of the curators of the Australian Message Sticks Festival which started in 2001 and screens four days of indigenous films from all over the world—notes how the quality of the drama and documentaries over the festival’s years of operation has enhanced since its beginnings (qtd. in Swift, “Message” 40). Increased indigenous involvement in cinema over recent decades means not only are more indigenous stories being told on screen (Columpar 23), but in Australia it means also that an increased number of diverse Australian stories are being told, including those from indigenous perspectives.

One key function of indigenous or Fourth Cinema is to do the work of decolonisation. Decolonising cinema “chiefly involves raising Indigenous voices and creating self-controlled media in the process of asserting Indigenous identity, cultural values, and historical and contemporary experiences” (Knopf 17). Linda Tuhiwai Smith, an indigenous researcher, claims that the work of decolonisation occurs when representation of indigenous peoples by indigenous peoples “is about countering the dominant society’s image of indigenous peoples, their lifestyles and belief systems” (151). She adds two other important constituents: firstly, that the films suggest solutions to problems in indigenous communities; and secondly, that they expose the complexities of indigenous identities (151). These films are also expected to contest “the grand Western narratives of Indigenous history, ethnography and sociology” and seek emancipation from the conventions of

Hollywood narratives (Knopf 17, 63). This picture of decolonising cinema is in many ways consistent with Corinn Columpar's description of Fourth Cinema: to foreground indigenous perspectives and experiences, and importantly to divest the central indigenous characters "from a representational logic in which they can only ever function as two-dimensional savage (be it noble or not), ethnographic specimen, or absolute other" (xii). Nonetheless, the absence of total indigenous control over a film does not preclude a collaborative production from doing the work of decolonisation. Collaborative films, I argue, can achieve the goals expected of indigenous cinema. In this chapter I use the examples of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* to demonstrate how each, in differing ways, challenges indigenous and non-indigenous stereotypes and perceptions about indigeneity, contests the grand narratives of Australia's colonial history and its postcolonial present and creates new alternatives to colonial discourses.

Moreover, whilst these three films contribute to decolonisation, they are also deeply concerned with the ethics and principles of reconciliation, and thus have an additional function. Decolonisation and reconciliation can sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside each other, as they are in many ways incongruous concepts. There is, for instance, a deep ideological divide underpinning the two projects: decolonisation tends toward separatism and self-determination, whereas reconciliation seeks a more universalist and communitarian endpoint. Nonetheless, what is evident in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* is that decolonisation is not the exclusive domain of indigenous-controlled films, and neither is all collaborative cinema interested in subsuming indigenous voices for the purpose of increasing the power of the hegemony, as is implied by its detractors. Rather, these are collaborative productions that engage with the ideals of both decolonisation and reconciliation.

Cross-cultural filmmaking is not new. Ethnographic filmmaking, or visual anthropology, has a history of collaborations between filmmaker and subject, in which the camera is handed over from non-indigenous to indigenous peoples. Sol Worth and John Adair taught filmmaking and editing skills to a group of Navajo Native Americans in the 1960s who then made films about themselves. Richard Chalfen, in the foreword to the revised edition of the seminal work about this visual anthropology project *Through Navajo Eyes: An Exploration in Film Communication and Anthropology* (Chalfen was a research assistant on the original 1972 project), argues this particular work was groundbreaking because it was "anything but a familiar practice" to enable/allow indigenous peoples to film

themselves (“Foreword” xix), and also because their work has influenced much similar filmmaking since. Chalfen lists a range of collaborative ethnographic visual projects—including Walpiri peoples’ use of media in Yuendumu, observed and documented by Eric Michaels in the 1980s—and details the many ways in which collaborations might occur in the process of making films. Shohat and Stan also document a range of films from the 1960s and 70s in which non-indigenous filmmakers around the world abandon their “elitism” in favour of allowing indigenous subjects to speak for themselves (*Unthinking* 34).

The type of reconciliation that is evident in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* is inclusive of some of the principles and manifestations of decolonisation. However, these films are not texts that eradicate “colonial encounters and their postcolonial legacy, but ... texts that unsettle and contest, that empower and initiate debate” (Turcotte 8). Thus the type of decolonising that they are interested in is redolent more of anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose’s “recuperative” decolonisation (23). Recuperative decolonisation, Bird Rose contends, is a moral project that “seeks glimpses of illumination, and aims towards engagement and disclosure,” is centred on connectivity (rather than separatism) and aims for “the unmaking of the regimes of violence that promote the disconnection of moral accountability from time and place” (24, 214). She suggests that given there are no pre-existing models that demonstrate how the process of decolonisation or its endpoint will manifest for settler nations, the practices are by necessity dialogical and dynamic (24). A. Dirk Moses claims that some contemporary indigenous voices of dissent (specifically Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson in Australia) are also challenging the traditional language of decolonisation. He observes that while political discourses are commonly “suffused by the grammar of cultural distinctiveness, anti-imperial resistance and liberation” (11), these new voices place an alternative emphasis on the importance of self-critique and humanism, and “are seeking to replace the language of authenticity with practices of sincerity ... [to replace] the language of unchanging racial substance with that of becoming” (25). It is within this realm of negotiated, inclusive and dynamic decolonisation and reconciliation discourses that the contributions of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* are situated.

Team Jigalong



Fig. 1

Rabbit-Proof Fence tells the story of three young girls, sisters Molly (Everlyn Sampi), Daisy (Tianna Sansbury) and their cousin Gracie (Laura Monaghan), who are taken from their families at Jigalong to live at the Moore River Settlement, an institution for “half-caste” children (figure 1). Director/producer Phillip Noyce is not an indigenous Australian, nor (so far as is evident in the public record) is the film’s screen writer/producer Christine Olsen, but they worked collaboratively with the author of the book on which the film is based, Pilkington Garimara. Set in the 1930s, the film is based on Pilkington Garimara’s mother’s (Molly’s) real-life escape with her sister and cousin from Moore River, and their long journey back to Jigalong throughout which they used the rabbit-proof fence as their guide. This historical drama, told from the perspective of Molly, is deeply personal and emotionally charged. It was received at the time as both heart-wrenching and inspiring. Reviewers described it as an “uplifting drama that highlights—and overcomes—that racist [Aborigines Act] policy” (Russell); and “an absorbing, moving and heart warming story to be savoured and enjoyed. A story of determination and courage” (Keller).

There are many ways that *Rabbit-Proof Fence* operates effectively as a decolonising text. The film is part of the Stolen Generations collection of narratives, a large body of written and visual work which details the personal impacts of Australia’s assimilation policy on Aboriginal people who were removed from their families and raised in institutional or non-indigenous foster care. In its telling of an Aboriginal women’s story the film brings to public attention an event that is a part of Australian history that has been previously little known, and as such not a part of the nation’s social imaginary. Re-telling Pilkington Garimara’s story from Molly’s viewpoint makes it all the more convincing. Moreover, indigenous and non-indigenous viewers are encouraged to empathise with Molly

not only through the narrative point of view, but also through strategic camera work, sound and voice over. Emily Potter and Kay Schaffer describe Molly's first meeting with Mr Neville to illustrate these techniques: Neville's hands and face dominate the shot, then he raises her smock to look closely at her skin. This technique is oft repeated to create a heightened audience affiliation with Molly. For example, en route to Moore River we initially view the interior of the train from Molly's position in a cage, and hear the deafening sounds of the engine as she would; then later, when we enter the bunk room it is at Molly's tentative walking pace, and we survey the sleepy occupants from her height and hear their whisperings as she does. In addition, using the real-life (and now much older) Molly for the voice-over to open and close the film, plus footage of Molly and Daisy themselves as the film's epilogue, positions the girls and the *Stolen Generations* reality firmly within our present-day experience. As such, the film attempts to decolonise this particular period of history by making an indigenous experience keenly felt by the viewer.

Moreover, the film is a collection of counter-images to cinematic stereotypes, including the barbarous savage and the victimised tracker—their opposites are the dignified and practical three young girls, and Gulpilil's cunning and ingenuous tracker. The film also contests the representation of Aboriginal women as neglectful and uncaring mothers, which was used to help justify the removal of Aboriginal children (as discussed in Chapter 4). The film's abduction scene is where this contestation is most notable. This is a highly emotional and effective garnering of audience sympathy toward the plight of indigenous mothers whose children were relocated to state care. In this scene Molly, Daisy and Gracie's mothers (Ningali Lawson; Sheryl Carter) are taken by surprise when the police car speeds into the ration depot area. For a tense moment no one reacts to its arrival. Then in an instant, initially in dramatic slow motion, the two women start to run towards the girls, screaming for them to run. The chase begins, and the music gets louder, the footage speeds up and the camera moves erratically, heightening the sense of panic as the distraught children are wrenched from their now hysterical mothers and forced into the back of the car. The women lie wailing on the ground as the policeman (Jason Clark) drives away, while Molly's grandmother (Myran Lawford) bashes a rock against her head as a violent expression of loss. The passionate and heart-felt love of the mothers is positioned in direct opposition to the cold, rational demeanour of the representatives of the law. The children's loving, crying, doting mothers are replaced by the detached, officious Mr Neville, and heartless, loveless legalities. Sympathy can only lie with the children and their grieving

mothers. The point is that the film delivers an effective, emotive indigenous voice, which draws attention to the personal impact of the historical events upon which the film is based.

Noyce acknowledges this story is highly political (Cordaiy, “The Truth” 129-30); nonetheless, the decolonising work it does (countering colonial history, challenging stereotypes and foregrounding indigenous experiences) might be despite of, rather than as a result of, any deliberate choices by Noyce as filmmaker. Indeed, at the time of the film’s release he sent a different messages: for example, he made clear he intended the film to be highly marketable. In one interview he discusses his strategic use of renowned actor Kenneth Branagh (as Neville) and internationally respected musician Peter Gabriel “to sell [the movie] around the world” (qtd. in Cordaiy, “The Truth” 127, 132). Noyce was aware of Ken G. Hall’s infamous remark made in the 1970s in response to the financial failure of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. Hall reportedly said word to the effect of: “Schepisi should have known that films about Aborigines are box office poison” (qtd. in O’Regan, *Australian* 59), and Noyce referred to this as a past “truism” in a press conference at the Taormina FilmFest (see Hoschka). His moving film about child abduction and a hard-fought family reunion turned out to be dream fodder for a director in search of career and box office success—the film grossed \$1,245,545 in its first week, was the highest grossing Australian film in 2002 and went on to earn \$16,217,411 at the box office worldwide. Indeed Noyce claimed that the film put to bed the idea that there was no money to be made from indigenous films (Noyce, “Diary”).

Directorial intent is of course only one of many factors that contribute to the type of meanings any film generates. However, an examination of Noyce’s motivations is important in the context of cross-cultural collaborations because non-indigenous artists have been involved in the exploitation of indigenous knowledges world over. The argument is that appropriation of Aboriginal cultural objects, stories or knowledge for personal gain prevents a collaborative film from being a decolonising text. Wendy Brady, expressing her outrage over the practice of non-indigenous people profiting from indigenous stories, states: “It is not acceptable that some ... people have ... [used] ... connections with us to advance careers or to create markets for their own writing” (28). Although Brady is referring to historians, her comments could just as easily be applied to filmmakers. Olivia Khoo identifies similar accusations made of “white multiculturalist” filmmakers, also suspected of appropriating ethnic content to maintain their own dominant social and economic positions (“Cinemas” 143).

Rabbit-Proof Fence works hard to successfully sidestep accusations of appropriation. The film acknowledges its widespread consultation with indigenous stakeholders, and clearly points to the original storyteller as the true owner. There are detailed credits that list a large number of people and bodies who contributed indigenous content and knowledges to the film: Pilkington Garimara as script consultant; the indigenous traditional owners of the area where filming took place (for granting permission); Ningali Lawford as Wanga Junka language consultant; the Jigalong community; the Kaurna Meyunna Association; and the Mannum Aboriginal Consultative Committee. Noyce also employed experienced actor, writer, performer and director Rachael Maza as the children's drama coach. Noyce reveals his feelings of inadequacy that led to the appointment: "I thought that as a white person, and as a white male, there was no way that I was going to be able to pull off or represent this black story of three black girls without the help of an Aboriginal woman" (qtd. in *Interviews: Rabbit*). On the one hand this is logical: Noyce would be no more able to represent the story of a Slovakian miner without appropriate assistance. Part of Maza's role was to assist the young actors in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to make a transition between their daily lives and the world of the film set—between their prior experiences and their new ones—and she acted as "mascot" and "mother" to the girls on set (*Interviews: Rabbit*). To fulfil this role successfully, her Aboriginality was important because it was reflective of her knowledge of and sensibility to culture; however, her acting experience was also of vital importance. Although Maza is indeed Aboriginal and female, as a highly educated, well-travelled Sydneysider, she is possibly as different to Everlyn Sampi as is Noyce.

In his analysis of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* Tony Hughes-D'aeth makes another interesting point on this matter, which complicates the picture further. He states that although Noyce could be accused of making a profit out of others' stories of misfortune, such a criticism could be made of many Hollywood genre filmmakers ("Which?"); indeed, Kevin Costner's award-winning *Dances with Wolves* is a case in point (see Thomas 182-83). Borrowing and changing stories is the nature of fiction cinema. While Noyce admits to taking "dramatic license" with Pilkington Garimara's story, he also states "we just didn't want to tell any big lies" (qtd. in Cordaiy, "The Truth" 130).

Nevertheless, although widespread consultation and the strong influence of the source text on the film ensures the filmmaking was collaborative, it did not stop Noyce from firmly controlling the mise-en-scene, ambience and tone of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. In

Following the Rabbit-Proof Fence (directed by Darlene Johnson), the documentary of the making of the film, Noyce is seen to be completely in charge. In casting, he determines what the child actors will look like and what qualities they bring to the screen, and during filming he is particularly instructive about what they do, the mood they should portray and the intricate details of where they will look. In a scene in the documentary two of the girls mockingly bow before him and Noyce jokes about being “obeyed” by them. In a serious moment, however, young Tianna Sansbury asks Noyce, “Do we have to listen to you?” to which he replies awkwardly, “Well you don’t have to, but you would be wise to” (qtd. in Johnson, *Follow*). Noyce willingly confesses to his “over-direction” of the girls, but he attributes it to their inexperience which dictated that he be much more instructive than he would be otherwise with trained actors (qtd. in Johnson, *Follow*). As a result Noyce’s voice is distinct throughout the film, possibly over and above the voices of its indigenous subjects. Helen Grace attributes Noyce’s strong presence not only to the non-professional actors—which meant, “*his* dialogue – or rather monologue perhaps ... dominates” (147)—but also detects his dominance through the camera work, privileging flight and dynamism in the scenes involving the girls and stagnation and rigidity for A.O. Neville (148). Noyce’s own agenda is thus in the mix with Molly’s and the other consultants, and determines how this story is delivered to audiences.

Concerns about the dominating influence of non-indigenous collaborators are not confined to cinema, but are evident in other arenas where collaborative projects occur, including research (see Tuhiwai Smith) and history (see Brady; Goodall, “Writing a Life”). For example, Brady argues that although Aboriginal people may be “perfectly able to articulate our history cogently and aptly it is still deemed necessary to have white mentors, patrons or interpreters.” She finds this not only paternalistic, but states it is evidence of a continuing colonial imperative, which she considers “most annoying.” However, it is in indigenous life-writing circles that debates about the appropriateness of non-indigenous mediators (co-writers, editors) are most active (see Watson; McDonell). Situated between indigenous author and publisher, a non-indigenous editor occupies a particularly awkward and fraught position. An editor must negotiate the differing and sometime contradictory expectations of publisher and author (McDonell 84), but also receives some benefits that do not always befall the authors, such as “financial reward ... academic kudos, improved promotional prospects, and access to grants” (McDonell 85), all of which bespeaks a disquieting inequity in participant rewards.

Noyce occupies a controversial space between the sites of the source and reception, in this case between Molly's story and the film's audience, similarly to life-history editors. However, given the multilayered nature of cinema production, the content of the original source material (Molly's story) is even more likely to be altered en route to the final product. Between Noyce and Molly stand also Olsen, Pilkington Garimara and her editor at University of Queensland Press. Moreover, editorial changes in post-production, and the demands of the distribution company and the conventions of mainstream cinema—which insist that the story be made recognisable and accessible (and marketable) to people unfamiliar with Molly's life—result in even further changes.

Noyce is not a novice at cross-cultural collaboration: he earned critical respect for his earlier collaborative film, *Backroads* (1981). According to Jill Sargent, this was the only film of the time to break from traditionally simplistic portrayals of issues of culture and skin colour, which she attributes to the “considerable Aboriginal influence” (4) on the film. Noyce's role might be best described as an interpreter. He translates an indigenous story to the realm of mainstream cinema, crossing a cultural divide. To use “interpreter” to describe this role is to suggest, as Robert Spencer does that it matters less who is telling the story, and more what the text reveals for the audience (79-80). Noyce's task is to interpret Pilkington Garimara's story for a mainstream cinema audience, and the potential of this retelling can only be unknowable. What is clear, however, is that the production of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* brings to the surface many issues that cross-cultural cooperation compels a reconciling nation to consider.

Yolngu Boys and the Balanda Production Team



Fig. 2

Like *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* is also a collaborative production that does the work of recuperative decolonisation. Although essentially a coming-of-age road movie, the story breaks with Australia's traditional settler-focus of these genres. The film follows the journey of three Yolngu youths on the run to seek help from an elder, Dawu (Nungki Yunupingu). They travel from their community by foot and canoe to Darwin, after having broken into and wreaked havoc in their local store and community centre. Along the way, as the film's tag line hints ("Three Lives, Two Laws, One Country"), each boy grapples with different challenges in their lives as they search to find their place in a world that is for them two colliding entities, modern Balanda and ancient Yolngu, "the oldest living culture on earth" (*Yolngu Boy*: Study). Milika (Nathan Daniels) is obsessed with his dream to play Australian Football League football and his friend Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui) wants to learn Yolngu law and the more traditional aspects of his culture, to which he attributes his sense of purpose. The two young men have been chosen to go through "ceremony" indicating that they are mature enough to learn Yolngu laws. The story draws heavily on specific cultural knowledges and traditions and ultimately sends a message of the importance of both. It is an anti-colonial portrayal of Yolngu culture, as it depicts a law that has resisted colonial and neo-colonial attempts to eradicate, or at best weaken, its authoritative status for North-East Arnhem Landers.

Although the Yunupingu brothers' exact level of influence on *Yolngu Boy* as the film's producers is unclear, it is possible to make some calculated assumptions. The Yunupingu name is readily associated with Aboriginal politics and a long history of negotiating with mining companies and lobbying for land rights in Arnhem Land. Individually the two men are well known as political activists, Mandawuy particularly as an advocate for bi-lingual education in Yirrkala and as lead-singer of the band Yothu Yindi, and Gallarrwuy as past-president of the Northern Land Council. Both are past recipients of Australian of the Year awards, and active participants in the not-for-profit Yothu Yindi Foundation. The Foundation, which aims to engender economic opportunities that are compatible with cultural strengthening and maintenance for Yolngu people, part financed the film. In addition to this extra-textual political activity that comes to bear on the film, Stephen Johnson states that the Yunupingus oversaw the legitimacy and cultural correctness of scenes that involved ceremony, men's camp and hunting, as well as advising about paint design and wardrobe (*Interviews: Behind*) This supports Leonie Rutherford's generalist observation of the role of indigenous producers, whom she says focus on "the

specificities of knowledges and ways of being particular to individual communities and kinship groups” (64). So it can be assumed that the Yunupingu brothers’ influence extends across the film’s political and cultural content to the minutiae of specific cultural practice details.

The film does not represent Yolngu culture as a romantic fantasy. The character of Borj (Sean Mumumggurr), the archetypal troubled teen and the most unsettled of the three characters, reveals some unsavoury aspects of Yolngu reality. He has been in gaol for stealing, he sniffs petrol, and yells at old women to give him smokes. Consequently, he is not chosen with his friends to go through ceremony. His family life is also a picture of dysfunction: his father is a “long-grass” alcoholic who had burnt the family house down and his mother has banned Borj from the home because of his negative influence on his siblings. When his father fails to recognise him toward the end of the film, Borj then completes the tragic picture by suiciding.

The film makes a clear causal association between the failure to respect and adhere to Yolngu law and an unhappy life and early death. Borj is disrespectful toward Yolngu culture throughout the film; for instance, when Lorrpu tries to reassure him that they are being protected by their crocodile totem, Baru, Borj asks: “Has he got smokes, I’m running out?” The irreverent Borj meets an untimely end, whereas the respectful Lorrpu—who refers to traditional cultural practices as the “right way”—is ultimately rewarded for his attitude toward culture. Lorrpu successfully heals Borj, hunts and provides food for the journey, and goes through the ceremony at the close of the film. Through Lorrpu, Yolngu culture gains a superior status to white, or Balanda, culture: Yolngu is more serious and reliable than the flippant, self-indulgent Balanda culture. This decolonising work is enhanced by the portrayal of the Baru spirit character (Mangatjay Yunupingu) as real and interventionist. Darren Jorgensen interprets Baru as an oppositional force to the “universalizing realism of Hollywood film” (150). Baru Dreaming is alive and well in *Yolngu Boy*’s modern day Arnhem Land. In these ways *Yolngu Boy* speaks back to the cinematic images that position Aboriginality as primitive and irrelevant to modernity, while simultaneously countering the stereotypes of Hollywood cinema.

As its collaborative structure suggests, *Yolngu Boy* is not solely the filmic child of its indigenous producers; importantly, non-indigenous director Stephen Johnson also exerts a significant influence. Johnson, like Noyce, controls much of the film’s look and style. For example, in the *On Location* short that accompanies the DVD he is seen demonstrating how

he would like some of the scenes to be played, including the more traditional dance movements, and giving directions for minute and specific details of performance. The major funding body, The Children's Television Foundation (CTF), also influences the final production. Rutherford claims the CTF subscribes to a humanist ideology which means their films generally advocate for the universal nature of youth and individual choice ("Negotiating Masculinities" 63). However, other funding bodies add their voices, specifically SBS Independent and the Australian Film Finance Corporation, as do other key crewmembers, for example, the writer (Chris Anastassiades), director of photography (Brad Shield) and editor (Ken Sallows). However, despite the multiple demands and expectations of this film by competing interests (indigenous and non-indigenous), the Yolngu voice is loud and clear.

Yolngu Boy also displays a distinct reconciliatory sensibility. It was clearly not intended for a Yolngu-only audience. Its adherence to the conventions of coming-of-age genre films, plus linear narrative and choice of English language over Yolngu Matha all indicate that a wider, non-indigenous audience was in mind. Thus the film has aimed to be inclusive rather than separatist. Both Stephen Johnson and Patricia Edgar indicate that *Yolngu Boy* adhered to industry recommended indigenous consultation practices (*Interviews: Behind*). Yolngu people were involved early on in the writing process: "The script was written on the ground, working with the people. The writer ... came up to Arnhem Land and spent time with the kids and the elders" (*Interviews: Behind*) and Johnson states the Yunupingu brothers were always on set when they were needed, to ensure the cultural correctness of any specifically Yolngu elements (*Interviews: Behind*). Johnson claims: "It is the first time that Yolngu and Balanda, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal have perhaps worked together so closely and so effectively on a feature film and in a sense got to tell a story that comes from the heart and soul of Aboriginal people themselves" (*Interviews: Behind*). *On Location* pays special attention to the collaborative nature of the production. For example, it opens with a quick montage that includes shots of Johnson and the three young actors doing hand-stacks, and later shows them sitting and talking together on the ground (figure 2). They come across as peers who enjoy an easy and collegial relationship.

Recommended indigenous consultation practices in the film industry are contained in Cultural Protocols. The protocols aim to ensure that indigenous stakeholders in collaborative projects are allowed adequate input and representations: that is, to keep the

potentially overpowering influence of filmmakers like Johnson and Noyce in check. In Australia, industry Cultural Protocols guide filmmakers in the use of indigenous content on screen, production negotiations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, and help to ensure that indigenous content is used in a respectful manner. Designed for use by non-indigenous filmmakers and producers, they are ethical guidelines as opposed to legal contracts. As Stephen Gray explains, protocols “describe levels of behaviour which indigenous people and communities expect of outsiders dealing with indigenous material” (24). They are not compulsory and people cannot be punished for non-compliance, but the furore over *Australian Rules* exemplifies the ramifications of inappropriate or insufficient consultation that might result when protocols are not adhered to. At the time of its release, a court injunction was sought to prevent *Australian Rules* from being screened (Dzenis 38; Daly) on the basis that the content was offensive to local Aboriginal people. At the time director Paul Goldman was heavily criticised for depicting a shooting incident in the film. The incident was based on an actual shooting and Goldman did not consult adequately with community members from the town involved.

Gray puts forward a case in favour of protocols being used to correct or counterbalance a long history of misrepresentation of Aboriginal people on screen. He argues that they facilitate “a marginalised indigenous viewpoint in an environment dominated by the strident voices of the creatively ‘free’” (25). Screen Australia’s guide reflects this sentiment, and author Terri Janke prefaces the guide by stating:

In the past ... Indigenous people have also seen filmmaking as exploitative. They are concerned, for example, that their cultural heritage may have been appropriated without proper consultation or sufficient acknowledgment, and that some productions made from a stereotypical perspective may demean Indigenous cultural beliefs. (4)

She claims that protocols facilitate respectful filmmaking, enhance the overall filmmaking experience and “encourage further collaborative opportunities between cultures” (4). Protocols are thus advocated as tools both for redressing past representational inadequacies and for providing a way forward for non-indigenous and indigenous peoples to produce images that are culturally appropriate.

Janke's 123 pages of detailed information range from the broad principles underpinning collaboration—that is, respecting culture, heritage and indigenous peoples—to the pragmatics of how and who to consult with and when. It contains sample checklists and information about past collaborative productions to assist filmmakers. While remaining essentially an ethical guide, the protocols also include a section on the legalities concerning intellectual property of images and stories. Although less detailed, the SBS Protocols *The Greater Perspective* (Bostock) contain like information. As such, these protocols are a filmmaker's equivalent of a Reconciliation Australia action plan. Action plans, "create meaningful relationships and sustainable opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians" (*Reconciliation Australia*). Cultural Protocols, therefore, are a form of structured reconciliation.

It is evident that not only did the *Yolngu Boy* filmmakers follow industry guidelines, but also met the legal requirements for filming in Arnhem Land which preclude filming on Aboriginal lands unless prior consent has been obtained from the owners (*Aboriginal Land Rights Act [Northern Territory]*). Although more sparing in her comments than Johnson, Edgar's remarks about the collaboration process in an interview suggest that following the protocols was not easy. She talks about the challenges they faced in ensuring the script was right, obtaining permission to film from various communities and gaining trust from the local people (*Interviews: Behind*). Listing the "challenges" signals that for Edgar the process was neither simple nor instantaneous, and also reveals there was a potential for causing offence.

Nevertheless, protocols alone cannot ensure that Australian collaborative filmmaking is either decolonising or reconciliatory. They can be problematic and do not necessarily ensure an outcome that suits all parties. Darlene Johnson, an advocate for protocols, having written her own for the production of her film *Stolen Generations*, acknowledges that despite the best intentions to make a film that reflects Aboriginal sensibilities and cultural specificities—for example with sensitivity to storytelling techniques and cultural understandings of time—there are still technical and other logistical constraints for filmmakers that cannot be overcome by use of protocols. She describes this in terms of a contest: "culture versus technique" (qtd. in Rutherford, "Negotiating Indigenous" 58). Using the example of her documentary film about David Gulpilil, *One Red Blood* (2002), she states that although she wanted to push the boundaries of conventional Western techniques she was constrained by documentary conventions,

audience expectations and the expectations of her non-indigenous collaborators (qtd. in Rutherford, “Negotiating Indigenous” 57). While for Johnson the guidelines are restricted by conventions, in other instances it is the guidelines themselves that create the limitations on creative filmmaking.

Indigenous filmmaker and historian Francis Peters-Little writes a scathing critique of SBS’ Cultural Protocols, highlighting a range of ways they limit filmmakers, actors, communities and Aboriginal representations. Gray discusses these and other criticisms of the industry Cultural Protocols, derived from people’s experiences working on collaborative fiction and documentary film projects, and he provides a useful summary of what people perceive the limitations to be. He identifies three areas of concern: pragmatics, ownership and freedom of expression. Gray states there are problems with consulting with Aboriginal people in all stages of the filmmaking process, because this is a very time-consuming pursuit (26). He claims that some filmmakers encounter disagreements during consultations that cause additional timeline problems (26), and Edgar’s comments about *Yolngu Boy* mentioned earlier attest to this concern.

Screen Australia’s guidelines contain a daunting list of suggestions for when and how to negotiate, spanning a wide selection of possible individuals and parties to include. To begin, the checklists propose seeking advice about the cultural issues that might require consultation, then consulting with appropriate individuals, agencies and communities during the initial research and project development phase (Janke 24), allowing time for people to comment about any adaptations to traditional knowledges—and seeking consent to do so—and then allowing time for those concerned to view the work prior to its release and to make necessary adjustments (Janke 25). Seeking specific information for cultural and intellectual property rights, restrictions on use of materials, language meanings, gender rules, sacredness of material (including sacredness implied by themes), sensitive contemporary issues and death protocols is also recommended (Janke 25, 36). An indigenous scriptwriter or consultant is suggested, and also that the script be assessed and that any comments incorporated, and then that the final version be endorsed by relevant representatives (Janke 28). Consultation topics also include the location choices, permits required and fees for contributors and custodians (Janke 36). Furthermore, cast and crew need to be briefed on protocols, cultural sensitivities and appropriate behaviours particular to the chosen region (Janke 36). Editing and post-production should also include indigenous input at rough-cut and fine-cut stages as well as marketing strategies being

discussed with the relevant people (Janke 42, 44). This comprehensive list seeks ideally to protect against any possible breaches of trust and of cultural integrity in a film, but also presents an overwhelmingly large workload for a filmmaking team.

Issues of ownership include the complicated nature of ascertaining whom to consult and on what, especially when it is unclear who holds the rights to narratives that involve both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Gray 26). In *Yolngu Boy* the cultural designs, ceremonies and other knowledges are easily identifiable as owned by the Yunupingu clan, a distinct group of people who are represented by the film's producers. Thus the dilemma of searching for appropriate owners in this case is removed. However, collaboration also sometimes muddies the waters of story ownership, and makes it less clear who should be involved in the negotiation process. Darlene Johnson considers both director and subject, upon whose story the film is based, to be shared owners (qtd. in Rutherford, "Negotiating Indigenous" 59). Phillip Gwynne, in his defence against criticism over his film *Australian Rules*, claimed that as a non-indigenous Australian he had a right to explore what he saw as a shared history of black and white Australians (Dzenis 38). Gray too uses this film as an example, and claims that the distress over the portrayal of events in the film sprang from grief rather than a betrayal of traditional or "sacred/secret" cultural knowledges (26). Thus, not only is there potential for confusion over who should be consulted, but the boundaries of where and when specific cultural knowledge begins and ends can also be unclear in postcolonial Australia.

Anxieties over freedom of expression—Gray's third category of criticisms—derive from an argument that the artist, in this case the non-indigenous filmmaker, is stifled by protocols that give indigenous peoples the capacity to veto the use of certain images (27). The central concern is that, unlike in other fiction filmmaking, artistic merit and creative license becomes a lesser priority to portraying the "truth," when representing indigenous cultures. Janke's consultation with filmmakers who have used protocols to guide their negotiations with indigenous peoples found an overwhelming majority thought that "better" films resulted (5). Truthfulness, it would appear, equates with "better" in this context.

This raises the question, however, about who determines what a "truthful" representation of Aboriginality is, and whether there is scope for self-critique in the determination of such images, as Moses articulates, which might prevent identity rigidity. There is no question that an increase in Aboriginal involvement in Australian cinema has changed the manner of indigenous and non-indigenous representation on-screen for the

better. There are, however flaws in an argument that states this can be achieved only through indigenous-controlled images. Peters-Little articulates some of the problems with this assumption. She states:

The notion that Aboriginal filmmakers possess a certain connection to truth and instant rapport with any Aboriginal community and capture the core of their history, politics, culture, personal relationships and social interactions without offending or misrepresenting anyone is presumptuous to say the least. ... Aboriginal filmmakers while they share in something that is essentially Aboriginal by necessity or nature does not guarantee that they make stronger, more accurate or beneficial films for the Aboriginal community or individual than non-Aboriginal filmmakers.

Ten years prior to these comments by Peters-Little, Marcia Langton raised similar concerns: “There is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make ‘better’ representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives ‘greater’ understanding” (*Well I* 27). She considers this belief to be based on racist assumptions of a monocultural, static, simple Aboriginality (*Well I* 27).

Darlene Johnson argues the importance of Aboriginal control over Aboriginal images and stories using social-determinist rationale. She believes, for example, that David Gulpilil approached her to make a documentary about his life because her Aboriginality meant she would be able to “work culturally” with him, and make a film with “Aboriginal sensibilities” (qtd. in Rutherford, “Negotiating Indigenous” 61). She states it is important for a filmmaker to know and understand Aboriginal culture in order to make an indigenous film. She explains:

It’s not so much who you are, but that intercultural experience ... that knowledge base. I find that it is an obstacle, not having a knowledge or an awareness about a sensibility that is so in antithesis to your own ... I’m told that even in the case of camera operators, it’s better that they can have this objectivity, but with an Aboriginal

content that is such a complex cultural system, surely being familiar with the way it works, codes of behaviour, attitudes, cultural beliefs, it would inform the film-making approach much better. Because otherwise you're shooting in the dark a bit. (qtd. in Rutherford, "Negotiating Indigenous" 61)

However, what of the situation when vetoed images are at odds with those desired by the director, writer, and importantly also the subjects, black or white (see Peters-Little)? Protocols risk becoming a form of censorship, if images are vetoed to an extent that only those that are deemed politically correct, or truthful, make it onto the screen, and not also those that might challenge these representations. As Margaret McDonnell observes, when political correctness is culturally situated in this way it "can also be a form of censorship, especially if it stands in the way of open communication" (87).

Concerns about the outcomes of Aboriginal vetoing of images makes a case for collaborative cinema. In co-operative film productions, Langton argues, "the individuals involved will test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as the responses are processed, to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other" (*Well I* 35). This is consistent with Langton's suggestion that Aboriginality is not fixed or settled, but rather something that arises from intercultural dialogue (*Well I* 31). What is required for this to work, however, is equal agency between the non-indigenous and indigenous participants in the filmmaking process. Whilst protocols aim to create this situation, they need to do so whilst accommodating artistic merit, creativity, self-critique and dynamism, all of which are threatened by rigid guidelines.

This tension appears to be successfully negotiated in *Yolngu Boy* through the establishment of trusting personal relationships amongst the crew and community. Stephen Johnson has collaborated with Mandawuy and Gallarrwuy Yunupingu professionally for a long time on music videos, and they are friends. These relationships are central to the success of this collaborative project. Edgar declares that Johnson was able to "achieve the impossible" owing to the goodwill of all involved. Johnson states: "In my experience having worked with [the Yunupingu brothers] for a long, long time doing many video clips and documentary and what have you, we have a great working relationship" (qtd. in *Interviews: Behind*). Not only do the Yunupingus trust Johnson to make a suitable and successful film, he too trusts their abilities as producers: "They have a very good sense of

how the camera works and how things need to take shape” (qtd. in *Interviews: Behind*). Strong personal relationships and mutual respect are apparent in other successful cross-cultural collaborative projects also: between Kriv Stenders and co-writer Richard Green, Phillip Noyce and Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara and, as will be discussed, Rolf de Heer and co-producer Peter Djigirr and actor David Gulpilil. Although he states he wants to make whites obsolete, Thornton chooses a crew of people that he can have a beer with and take home to his mother (qtd. in Daley 16), black or white, which bespeaks his belief in the importance of good personal relations for a production team.

However, paying due attention to consultation guidelines has also been beneficial for *Yolngu Boy*. Johnson describes the support he received from Arnhem Land communities during the casting process as overwhelming:

The energy and the enthusiasm we received in all the communities was exceptional, and also the support from a lot of the elders and the parents of the young people. They were very keen to get them involved in the project because they could see it was a very real story, it was a story about the problems and difficulties that their young people were facing. (*Interviews: Behind*)

The thorough negotiation process that took place throughout the production of *Yolngu Boy* is an exemplar of complex reconciliation at work. The decolonising work of *Yolngu Boy* occurs as a result of both protocol adherence and good will; therefore the production, which has at its heart trusting cross-cultural relationships, incorporates both structural and the personal expressions of reconciliation.

De Heer, Djigirr and the Ramingining Filmmakers



Fig. 3

Rolf de Heer is a critically acclaimed non-indigenous Australian filmmaker with a distinguished oeuvre. Peter Djigirr is a first-time indigenous director from Ramingining and in the documentary about the making of *Ten Canoes*—*The Balanda and the Bark Canoe* (2006)—it is evident that his role as co-director evolved during the pre-production phase as de Heer realised that he was pivotal to organising and overseeing the Yolngu-specific elements of the film. In this documentary De Heer explains: “Over the weeks to come I begin to absolutely rely on Djigirr, to such an extent that he will become the co-director of the film” (*Balanda*). *Ten Canoes* shows a deep concern for situating the knowledges and practices of Djigirr’s community on screen.

Ten Canoes (figure 3) is the first feature length Australian film to be made in an Aboriginal language (variably reported as both or either Mandalpingu and Ganalbingu). English language sub-titles are used, and the voice over narrative is also in English to accommodate a wider audience. In non-English speaking countries the voice over and sub-titles are in the national language and dubbing is avoided (Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 17). In this regard the film differs from both *Yolngu Boy* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in which the characters speak in English. It also marks a significant shift in Australian cinema, and is a decidedly decolonising moment in feature cinema culture.

There are many other ways besides giving prominence to an Aboriginal language that *Ten Canoes* contributes to the decolonising work of Reconciliation Cinema. It is strongly motivated by Yolngu people’s desire to reinvigorate and maintain traditional cultural practices and knowledges. Peter Djigirr considers the film to be a revival film, re-invigorating a law that he sees as at risk of being superseded by too much contact with Balanda law, and iterates that, “we don’t want to lose our culture” (qtd. in *Interviews: Ten*).

It is instructive in the ways of goose-egg hunting, marriage laws, hunting practices, canoe building, swamp habitation and makaratta (Yolngu law), although there was some criticism that some of the Yolngu content was depicted inaccurately.¹ The film also, like *Yolngu Boy*, encourages the notion of wrong and right ways of living, based on adherence to cultural laws. According to the narrator (David Gulpilil), Mingylulu (Peter Mingylulu) tells the story to Dayindi (Jaime Gulpilil) and the film (and narrator) tells the story to the viewer so that each can learn to live the “proper way.” The narrator also comments that “our people learn by watching” principally to explain why Dayindi watches how to make canoes. However, his statement has a dual purpose, that is, to encourage a spirit of learning in non-indigenous viewers.

Furthermore, the voice of the narrator re-positions the non-indigenous viewer not as the “discoverer” of indigenous culture and knowledges, but as pupils being instructed: “It is important that we are being *told* these things, rather than suffering the illusion that we are simply discovering them by ourselves” (Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 14-15). This is a result not only of the power of the narrator, but also of the authority of David Gulpilil himself. As a well-known actor—perhaps *the* quintessential Australian Aboriginal actor—he acts as translator of Ramingining knowledges for outsider audiences. The short films that accompany the DVD complement the feature film’s educative feel. Without subtitles or translation, the films are documentary-style visual records of how-to-make bark canoes, aimed at non-Mandalpingu/Ganalbingu viewers, and they are highly instructive in presentation and content. Although they are intended to demonstrate Yolngu knowledge and skill for Balanda audiences, they also serve to capture cinematically these skills as instruction for younger Yolngu people.

Although these short films are ethnographic in style, *Ten Canoes* itself speaks back in a decidedly counter-language to typical ethnographic images—photography in particular. It infuses anthropologist Donald Thomson’s photographs from the 1930s (which provided the inspiration for the film) with life, meaning and subjectivity. Throughout the film the actors assume the positions of the photographic subjects, and the shot pauses before movement, colour and sound bring the images to life. The film is both a dialectical

¹ Anthropologist Louise Hamby recounts a conversation she had with a senior man from Garinygirr, a Ramingining outstation, Jimmy Burinyila, who is critical of the scenes depicting fighting, killing, wife stealing and the witch doctor. He is also concerned that portrayals of hunting and gathering and marriage are misleading and do not accurately reflect the reality of “Thomson Time” (Hamby, “A Question” 124-5).

engagement with Thompson's images and with more recent and fictional cinematic representations of Aboriginal people. D. Bruno Starrs observes:

In *Ten Canoes* the 'magpie goose people' of Arnhem Land are portrayed as empowered and in control of their language, their culture and their lives, rather than conforming to the usual media presentation of Aborigines as victims of colonial aggression, disrespect and maltreatment. ("Sound" 18)

Interestingly, originally the film was going to depict white people massacring Aborigines (Hamby, "Thomson" 128). Such images would re-imagine power and control in ways quite differently to how they appear in the released version of *Ten Canoes*. Gulpilil's first suggestion to de Heer was that they make a cowboy film (*Interviews: Ten*), which would have been quite a different film again. It too, however, would also function to re-imagine Aboriginality in ways unlike cinema past.

The casting process is also a part of the film's overall decolonising project. The actors were not chosen by merit, but according to their kin relationship to the people in Thomson's original photos. De Heer and Djigirr's accommodation of kin-based casting is more commonly found in documentary media projects—an example is the seminal 1982 Yanyuwa film *Two Laws*—and was the method of choice in indigenous-controlled local media projects in Yuendumu (Michaels 10-11). This method "goes against the Western practices of casting, including the role of the director as the person who makes the final decision about the cast and the use of factors such as appearance and talent when he/she decides who will be cast" (Davis, "Working"). It is also very different to the casting processes undertaken by Noyce and Johnson, for instance, who scoured the countryside searching for the suitable actors.

Indigenous storytelling is the dominant narrative mode in *Ten Canoes*, and the narrator advises the viewer at the beginning of the film to be prepared for a story unlike any with which they are familiar. A Yolngu rather than Balanda worldview permeates the narrative, which, significantly, is shown to be part of the past and the present. Past and present times merge through the intersection of the Dreaming with Thomson's photographs. A sense of continuous or cyclical time is heightened by the film's interplay between black and white and colour, and corresponding formal and free camera styles.

Therese Davis considers this approach decidedly indigenous, and states it is unlikely to be found in a “non-Yolngu” film (“Working”). The narrative style also reinforces the idea that the story is not European. *Ten Canoes* tells the Yolngu story in a way that more closely resembles the Yolngu way of storytelling, something de Heer explains as “cascading repetition” (qtd. in Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 17), which involves reinforcing certain points, repeating them slowly and discarding particular elements throughout the story to its end point. During the film both the narrator and the actors anticipate audience impatience with the many layers and tangents of the story, and the narrator warns that “the stories of our people are very old, sometimes they take a long time to tell, days even.” He later cheekily states that he knows the viewer is keen to hear the end of the story. This signals not only a difference to Western narratives in general, but mainstream Western cinematic narratives in particular, which are generally linear and follow recognisable and established genre conventions. Nevertheless, the many tropes that are recognisable to modern Australian audiences found within the film make it less strange than it might otherwise be; for example, fart and penis jokes and themes of lust and greed have contemporary resonance. This guarantees a broader reception beyond only those familiar with the non-linear narrative structure.

Like *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Yolngu Boy*, although this film does the work of decolonising both Australian cinema and a colonial mindset, it does so without being exclusively controlled by the indigenous people of Ramingining. De Heer was pivotal to its production and he has a strong influence on the project’s final appearance. Hamby draws attention to de Heer’s control over the aesthetics, and she notes that he occasionally ignored or overlooked some of the details in Thomson’s photos that were not consistent with his own ideas for how the film might look (“Thomson” 135). Davis makes similar observations and attributes this to de Heer’s problematic desire to maintain what he considered to be cultural purity and “the myth of Yolngu special and temporal isolation” (“Remembering” 9). It is commonly suggested that the impetus for the film was David Gulpilil’s insistence that de Heer make a film in Ramingining based on Thomson’s photo depicting men hunting magpie geese in ten canoes (see Hiatt 70; Hamby, “A Question” 128-129; Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 13; Starrs, “From One” 2-3). However, there is more to the decision. De Heer had been wondering why there had been a period with no or few feature films dealing with indigenous issues since the “golden summer” of 2002, which included the release of his earlier film with Gulpilil, *The Tracker*, and he wanted to address this

silence (*Interviews: Ten*). He had envisaged making a film in Arnhem Land in a local language and about a Yolngu story prior to Gulpilil presenting him with the photo (*Interviews: Ten*). If a decidedly decolonising film such as this can emerge out of the mind of a non-indigenous director who then later negotiates with the indigenous people concerned, it makes a strong case for the capacity of collaborative film.

This is not to say that de Heer's significant input into the film makes it anything less than intensely collaborative—far from it. Just as he and Gulpilil both developed the idea for the film, and the Ramingining residents negotiated the casting, so too the script development was a process of community negotiation. De Heer explains that during the writing period he considered that the “main thing was talking to the community as much as I could. All along the way I'd say, ‘What about this? What about this’ And that's really how it worked” (qtd. in Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 15). He does not claim the story as his own, nor does he see himself as a translator as such. To describe the directorial style he adopted in this situation he uses the terms “mechanism” or “mouthpiece” (qtd. in Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 16), or a “film-expert facilitator” (de Heer, “Personal”).² Just as the relationship between Johnson and the Yunupingu brothers was characterised by deep trust, so too is that of de Heer and the Ramingining community. De Heer had been travelling to the community for two years prior to the commencement of shooting (de Heer, “Personal”) and states: “because I had been coming back so often and because I had always done precisely what I said I was going to do—I had never let anybody down or anything—there was an immense trust” (qtd. in Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 15). Davis notes that *The Balanda* reassures us that de Heer was not engaged in appropriating indigenous knowledges for his own gain, but rather that “the making of this film involved the work of *reappropriation* and cultural *adaptation*” (“Working”).

Another non-indigenous collaborator intricately involved in the making of *Ten Canoes*, via his legacy, is Donald Thomson. Thomson lived in Arnhem Land and worked as an anthropologist between 1935-37 and 1942-43. During these times he took over 2500 ethnographic photographs, plus “natural history photographs” and collected objects that now compose the Thomson collection, held in Museum Victoria (Hamby, “Thomson” 127-8). Photographs and objects from this collection have travelled back to Ramingining as part

² De Heer also uses the example of his earlier film about a woman with cerebral palsy: “In a way it's no different to doing *Dance Me To My Song*. You don't need somebody with cerebral palsy to direct that film” (qtd. in Walsh, “Ten Canoes” 16).

of an Australian Research Council Linkages Project “Anthropological and Aboriginal Perspectives on the Donald Thomson Collection: Material Culture, Collecting and Identity” (Hamby, “Thomson” 135). Work on this project, prior to the film’s production, identified the names of the canoeists, and had collected material objects that were then taken to Ramingining to assist with the costume designs (Hamby, “Thomson” 135). De Heer and the members of the Ramingining community relied heavily on these photos and objects. Thomson’s photos functioned as the source of historical accuracy and were used to confirm that de Heer’s direction throughout the film was in keeping with the “reality” as recorded by Thomson. For instance, de Heer realises that the boats are being built in a non-Arafura swamp style, as they differ slightly in appearance from the photos (*Interviews: Ten*). He voices his concern with the trepidation of someone reluctant to be a neo-coloniser, but the boat builders, unperturbed, change the style to correspond with the photos.

As the photos carry more authority than de Heer, he uses them to “get things done,” or to obtain agreement over degrees of verisimilitude (Hamby, “Thomson” 129). Thomson is held in high regard in Ramingining; in fact, in de Heer’s words he is “revered” (qtd. in *Interviews: Ten*). When the filmmakers were trying to get community support for the film they evoke Thompson and argued that “this balanda [de Heer] is following in Dr Thompson’s footsteps” (qtd. in *Interviews: Ten*). Although Hamby feels that Thomson is not sufficiently acknowledged in the film (“Thompson” 145), anthropologist L.R. Hiatt considers *Ten Canoes* to be a celebration of Thomson and his achievements. He believes that the film will become a “lasting memorial” to Thomson’s “gifts as a photographer and anthropologist” (72). Thomson is emblematic of the multifaceted and ambiguous nature of collaboration. Ironically perhaps, this non-indigenous, deceased anthropologist acts as a connection to close the gaps between orality and cultural knowledges on the one hand, and visual representation and public imagery on the other: between the distant, pre-contact past and the postcolonial present. Thus the film functions both to decolonise the present and to indicate the nature of contemporary reconciliation also.

The people of Ramingining make use of Thomson’s photographs and de Heer’s filmmaking skills and make a film with an outcome that suits (almost) all stakeholders. In the process of asserting themselves in these two traditionally non-indigenous mediums, photography and film, they requite the notion of Aboriginal people as the passive objects of the (neo)colonial gaze. Not only does this film diverge from the historical practices of colonial mis-representation, it also challenges the idea that indigenous people are passive in

the presence of non-indigenous filmmakers. The reappropriation of Thomson's images refutes Knopf's claim that "Colonialist ideas and principles, via discourse practices, enter subaltern minds and influence their mind-set, ideas about their own cultures, and understanding of power-relations" (27). Anthropologist Maureen Fuary encountered a similar phenomenon in Torres Strait Islanders' engagement with a 1941 middlebrow novel *The Drums of Mer*, by non-Torres Strait Islander Ion Idriess. Rather than being suppressed by the Idriess' romanticised images, she claims instead the Merians, through "active reading and representation" of the book, use it as a point of historical reference, a source of pride (drawn from its sensual portrayals of beauty and strength in the characters) and a tool to construct self-identity. Thompson's photos could, as Knopf fears, influence negatively the minds of Yolngu people about their own culture. However, this is to deny the people of Ramingining any agency in the reading of the photos. As *Ten Canoes* demonstrates, "subaltern" minds make their own decisions about what and who informs their cultural identities; moreover, sometimes it is in ways that surprise those looking on.

Additional creative projects were kick-started by *Ten Canoes* that have not involved Rolf de Heer. Eight spin-off *Canoes*, named progressively *Eleven Canoes*, *Twelve Canoes* and so on, have been instigated by Ramingining community members and the projects are as divergent as they are numerous. For example, the *Twelve Canoes* website and DVD presents information about Ramingining Yolngu culture, and aims to "paint a compelling portrait of the people, history, culture and place of the Yolngu people whose homeland is the Arafura swamp" (Lewis 2). The site contains videos, an art gallery and encyclopaedic information and arose out of a realisation that *Ten Canoes* was not going to be able to incorporate all the ideas that Yolngu people wanted in the film, so more space was needed (Lewis 4). Interestingly, the original idea for the site was to present the information "connected in a lattice-like framework" to depict the Yolngu understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. However, this was changed in the light of the positive reception of *Ten Canoes*. As a result "The proposed lattice format ... was superseded by a plan to use the emotional capabilities of cinema and have audiences as individuals connect with the material in a cinema-like way on their computer screen" (Lewis 4). In this project ethnographic cultural maintenance merges with contemporary cinematic modalities.

In contrast, *Eleven Canoes* is a documentary-making project by young people from Ramingining. Having learnt filmmaking skills the youths then produced their own short films, which vary from being educational and ethnographic in style—such as the talking-

head documentaries about string-bag making (“Arnhem Weaving”) and mud dolls (“Youthu Youthu” or “Dolly Dolly”)—to more experimental and purely visual, such as the dialogue-free “It’s a Drag.” There is no evidence of corrupt subaltern minds in this work either. To the contrary, these projects demonstrate some of the many ways indigenous peoples use media to suit their own myriad purposes.

Modern indigenous media use, collaboratively or exclusively, is not always for the explicit purposes of maintaining culture, nor even does it necessarily have to be always decolonising. *Ten Canoes* does not speak back to colonial images in a voice of resistance and anger. The film is not outraged by Thomson’s images, or frustrated by de Heer’s powerful position as director. Nor does it seek to be a work of non-fiction, but incorporates elements of fact and fiction into its production. The Ramingining embracement of film is a complex celebration of both cultural continuity, adaptation and contemporary identities. Melinda Hinkson observes that since Eric Michaels work on Warlpiri media in the mid-1980s, media use has shifted from being a means of maintaining unique cultural practices to function instead as a method of enabling interculturalism. She states Warlpiri people “may be engaging in many things, but cultural maintenance would appear to be low order among them” (163). Instead, Hinkson claims, they desire to “reach outwards, to engage with persons, objects, images across the intercultural divide” (163): demonstrating a shift that is redolent of the principles of both reconciliation and decolonisation.

Conclusion

In collaborative film productions decolonisation and reconciliation are less competitive than they are complementary. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* contest grand colonial narratives through the deliberate use of indigenous point of view, and broaden notions of indigeneity through the construction of complex Aboriginal subjectivities. The films reject the ethnographic gaze of anthropology, and assert control over what and who is represented and how. Indigenous people write scripts and screenplays and determine the specifics of which cultural practices are portrayed and how they appear. These three collaborative projects are each involved in the work of decolonisation, bringing in Edward Said’s words, “hidden or suppressed accounts” (vi) of the nation’s metanarrative to the screen. To varying degrees they are each told from perspectives that have been

largely absent in past Australian films, which means they have, consequently, contributed to a social imaginary that unsettles the privileged ideals of the hegemony.

However, although they contain these elements typical to decolonising cinema, they also grapple with how this type of cinema might function in a reconciling settler-nation. The collaborative production process, which necessitates cross-cultural negotiation on a myriad of levels, means these films participate in a perhaps less obvious but arguably more ambitious decolonising project, one that facilitates intercultural cooperation, accommodates cultural diversities within the cinematic space and is, in essence, cooperative in nature. From the examples of these three films, it can be concluded that trust is a key feature of a successful collaborative project. Whilst the use of Cultural Protocols might be in many ways problematic, they provide a structure for non-indigenous filmmakers to avoid slipping into traps of mis-representation, appropriation and subaltern silencing that have dogged the industry in the past. However, the collaborative space is not genre-prescriptive, nor does it preclude a merging of fact and fiction, or from the presentation of negotiated identities. It allows for a mix of indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives and storytelling modes. The rigidity of us-and-them identity distinctions, upon which many arguments for decolonising indigenous cinema depend, are by necessity made more fluid through the process of negotiation. There is space for hybrid, nuanced and ambivalent identities in shared arenas, and correspondingly, these give rise to more complex on-screen subjectivities.

Collaborative filmmaking in Australian cinema is the model of choice for some filmmakers—for the makers of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes*—and in these instances results in examples of decolonising cinema that are more redolent of Bird Rose’s “recuperative decolonisation” in their dynamism and efforts toward inter-culturalism than they are to Knopf’s style of indigenous decolonising cinema. This is not to suggest, however, that a hierarchy exists in Reconciliation Cinema, which places collaborative projects above those exclusively controlled by indigenous people. As this chapter has demonstrated, cinematic collaboration is not the panacea for indigenous inequities or poor cross-cultural relations in Australia. The risks of inter-cultural misunderstandings and offence are heightened, even with the use of protocols, and competing and sometimes conflicting demands that exist between funding bodies, directors, producers, editors and audiences (to name but some of film’s stakeholders) may result in an end product that does not satisfy all those involved. Anachronistic ideas about race and

culture can still be found amid collaborative ventures and, most importantly, collaborative projects are only truly collaborative (and thus decolonising and reconciliatory) if indigenous input is afforded sufficient space alongside non-indigenous agendas, and this is not always a guarantee. Flaws notwithstanding, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes* demonstrate that Australian cross-cultural filmmaking brings much that is worthy of consideration to a reconciling nation.

Chapter Seven

Pop Reconciliation

Bran Nue Dae

Australia

Stone Bros.

Richard J. Frankland tells how he overheard an older man at the launch of his film *Stone Bros.* say: “this film will do more for reconciliation than any ‘bloody politician’” (“Director’s Statement”). Frankland, who wrote and directed the film, admits he is not so confident that *Stone Bros.* can have such an enormous influence, but hopes it will at least “open a few doors” (“Director’s Statement”). *Stone Bros.* (2009) and two other mainstream works of Reconciliation Cinema, *Australia* (2008) and *Bran Nue Dae* (2010), do indeed open doors that allow spectator engagement with indigenous/settler relations in new and unique ways. These three films use established popular entertainment genres—the stoner comedy, melodrama and musical respectively—as the unusual means for telling stories about relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people. This chapter explores the relationships between popular cinema, indigenous content and reception, to demonstrate how, as the viewer overheard by Frankland claims, entertaining films contribute positively to the processes of reconciliation in Australia. I argue that *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.* directly engage with issues that lie at the heart of reconciliation through the intermix of indigenous stories with popular musical, melodrama and comedic conventions.

Cross-cultural relations have not typically been the subject of Australian entertainment cinema such as this, as pointed out by indigenous actor and star of Rachel Perkin’s *Bran Nue Dae*, Deborah Mailman: “To see us fellas on screen dancing, moving, singing, laughing. I think that is something which is quite unique in our film history” (*Making of Interviews: Bran Nue Dae*). *Bran Nue Dae* is the first Aboriginal musical and *Stone Bros.* the first Aboriginal stoner comedy to be released as films in Australia. *Australia* is the first indigenous-themed melodrama. Stories dealing with indigenous issues have traditionally been told in more serious formats and with more sombre characterisations: the genres of choice have been almost exclusively drama or documentary. This is still largely the case. Recently, Australian cinema concerned with indigenous/settler

relations has been described as a “traumatised space of public memory” (Collins and Davis, *Cinema After Mabo* 10). Moreover, there is an established belief within the industry that indigenous content is not entertaining. Perkins states, “There’s a huge perception that Aboriginal stuff is only interesting to Aboriginal people, and that it’s boring” (qtd. in Ginsburg 91). If the idea that films about Aborigines are “box office poison” is well established in Australian cinema culture (as discussed in chapter 6) then it follows that an Aboriginal musical, or Aboriginal comedy, is an oxymoron.

Not only have entertainment genres eschewed indigenous stories, Australian national cinema in general, like national cinema worldwide, has avoided entertainment genres. It has been more concerned with a respect for realism (Gibson, “Formative” 52), and with the “dark and despairing” (Enker 225) than it has with experimenting with Hollywood-style light entertainment pieces. Film scholars regularly point to the few exceptions to this pattern in Australian screen history, such as the *Mad Max* trilogy (1970s-80s), *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and the low-budget bawdy comedies of the 1970s, including films by Tim Burstall and Bruce Beresford (see Dermody and Jacka; McFarlane, “Genres” 79; Murray 40-41, 737-79; Gibson, “Formative” 56; Adams 63, 67). In 2008 the President of the Screen Producers Association of Australia publically described Australian films as depressing and the “cultural equivalent of ethnic cleansing” (qtd. in Bodey, “Culture Wars”). However, an increasing number of transnational films, aimed at both Australian and global popular markets, have been made in recent years (McFarlane, “Genres” 80; McFarlane, “Groupings” 95), which are lighter in tone, and more interested in gaining broader audience appeal. Pam Cook calls this “the rise of the popular art film” (“Transnational” 25). They include a string of westerns (*The Proposition* [2005], *Red Hill* [2010], *Ned Kelly* [2003]) and a resurgence of comedies (e.g., *Three Dollars* [2005], *The Square* [2008], *Strange Bedfellows* [2004], *Kenny* [2006]). Not light, but a selection of popular horror films such as *Wolf Creek* [2005], *Snowtown* [2011] and *Van Diemen’s Land* [2009]) are credited with bringing this “oft maligned genre out of the cold into the warmth of the mainstream” (Swift, “In Genre” 10). *Stone Bros.*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Australia* are a part of this cultural shift to the embracement of genre filmmaking, but they are also unique by virtue of the indigenous stories that they bring to the realm of the popular.

The term “popular cinema” is often associated with “genre” Hollywood filmmaking (Bordwell and Thompson 108), however I use the term more broadly to refer to films aimed at audiences seeking entertainment and escapism rather than education or confrontation.

Despite Australian cinema's reluctance to embrace entertainment genres, cinema has long been considered an escape from reality, in Australia and globally. According to Kate Bowles, reception studies as early as the 1920s demonstrate that viewers go to films seeking to escape from the everyday (84). Recent social research involving Australian film-goers concurs. A study commissioned by the Australian Film Finance Corporation found that the majority of participants preferred to see films that were not too serious and did not force them to think deeply about issues (Berenyi 30).

Popular cinema films are generally large budget and commercially viable—typically the cinema of big, mainstream audiences. *Australia* is all of this. Directed by Baz Luhrmann, it was released to much public attention. At the time of writing, it is the second highest grossing film in Australia after *Crocodile Dundee*. The film combines the epic, western, and melodrama genres, and internationally renowned Australian actors Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman ensure its star appeal. Its production was also of epic proportions. It had a large budget (approximately \$146 million), used an array of expensive equipment—space cams, cable cams, helicopters, 18 metre high towers, cranes (Turk)—and employed an enormous studio crew. It was accompanied by a marketing campaign of equal magnitude. Before its release, Fox Australia crowed: “We are putting together the biggest and boldest marketing campaign for a film ever, and are confident it will work fantastically” (qtd. in Turk). In addition, as its production was part-funded by the Australian Tourism Authority a deal was made for mini *Australia* films to be pre-released. These adverts not only aimed to attract travellers to Australia, but had a dual purpose of marketing the film.

Bran Nue Dae was also a commercially successful film. After screening at the Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) in 2009 it was released around Australia in the following year. It won the Audience Award at MIFF, and grossed approximately \$7.7 million (from a budget of \$6.5 million). The film is based on a stage musical written by Jimmy Chi and his band Kuckles in the late 1980s which played in Broome initially then toured Australia during the 1990s to thrilled, enthusiastic audiences (*Making of Interviews: Bran Nue Dae*; Bibby vii). Like *Australia*, the cast includes a list of crowd-drawing actors: “Its broad appeal is assured with a cast including Deborah Mailman, Geoffrey Rush, Jessica Mauboy and Missy Higgins” (Bodey, “Adjust” 19). When the film travelled with the National Film and Sound Archive regional tour in 2010 it attracted record crowds and was covered on commercial television (“Record Crowds”). It also screened to audiences at the

Toronto, Sundance, Berlin and Dubai Film Festivals.

While box office success is a common feature, it is by no means the defining feature of “popular” cinema. More important to the classification is not commercial viability but that the film has a certain appeal. Popular films are “people-centred” (Firth 553), undemanding and enjoyable. They are not concerned with depicting realism, but instead prioritise aesthetics—ambience, colour, music—and storytelling: overall, they participate in the broader cultural “organization of pleasure” (Frith 554). *Bran Nue Dae*, *Australia* and *Stone Bros.* meet most, if not all, of these criteria. For example, reviewers described *Bran Nue Dae* as “a bright, bouncy and busy ball of fluff” (Paatsch), a “crowdpleaser” (Urban, “*Bran Nue Dae*”), “pure escapist entertainment” (Kroenert, “Celebrating” 23), and as a “feel-good” film (Swift, “A Place” 18). Many reviewers appreciated *Australia* for its attention to fantasy, spectacle and audience pleasure (see Chen; Morgenstern; PejkoVIC; Rogers). Frankland’s feature *Stone Bros.* screened in limited screenings around Australia, and as such did not receive the same audience or media attention as *Australia*, nor *Bran Nue Dae*. However, on the whole reviewers concurred with its marketing claim of being a feel-good “bromance” that had broad appeal. For example, Sandra Hall thought *Stone Bros.* “blessedly free” of sluggish earnestness and others described it as the antithesis of harrowing, angry or overtly political films gone before—“as far from *Samson and Delilah* as you can get” (Pomeranz, “*Stone Bros.*”) and “the lunatic twin of Phil Noyce’s seminal *Backroads* (Hessey, “*Stone Bros.*”).

In addition, popular cinema is characterised by sets of recognisable features, that is, the “loose set of recurring elements relating to plots and attitudes and the look of films” (McFarlane, “Genres” 79). The established conventions of the melodrama, musical and stoner comedy in turn encourage particular, predictable readings and responses to the films. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson explain: “At the back of our minds whenever we watch a film, these categories shape what we expect to see and hear. They guide our reactions. They press us to make sense of a movie in certain ways” (126). Therefore, audiences come to a musical, melodrama or comedy with specific expectations regarding both the on-screen content and their own viewing experience, regardless of whether the subject matter might be slightly atypical, as is the case in *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.*

Music and comedy are two key modes of expression in *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.*. Each film uses singing and song, music, joking and laughter differently,

and with different effects, but all with a similar light-heartedness. This approach, plus an audience familiarity with entertainment cinema, facilitates optimistic and affirming encounters between spectator and screen. Thus, these three films enable viewers to have a positive cross-cultural experience, which is itself an expression of reconciliation.

Song and Dance

Through a mix of song and dialogue *Bran Nue Dae* tells the story of Willie (Rocky McKenzie), a love-struck Aboriginal teenager living in Broome in the late 1960s, who is being encouraged by his mother (Ningali Lawford-Wolf) and teacher (Geoffrey Rush) into the Catholic priesthood. The film begins with him leaving his love-interest Rosie (Jessica Mauboy) to return to boarding school in Perth where he soon finds himself in trouble. He subsequently runs away and a chance encounter in the city with his lost Uncle Tadpole (Ernie Dingo) is the catalyst for the two to embark on a return trip home to Broome. Hippies Annie (Missy Higgins) and Slippery (Tom Budge) are tricked into joining them as their unwitting drivers, and on the journey they each encounter and overcome a series of minor hurdles—arrest, the breakdown of the hippies’ kombi van and being shot at by an irate shop keeper (Magda Szubanski)—although these are less to do with self-discovery than creating comedic moments. When they reach Broome a chain of revelations about unexpected shared parentages and unlikely relations amongst the characters creates a happy and reconciliatory denouement to close the film.

The stylistically diverse thirteen musical numbers in *Bran Nue Dae* range from harmonious church singing, lustful dance numbers (with suggestive euphemisms such as “plugging holes”), sorrowful love ballads and dreamy recollections of idyllic tropical homelands. Although covering a range of musical styles, each has a light, romantic and optimistic tone. There is heavy use of satire, including in the most well known song from the original stage-play, “Nothing I would rather be (than to be an Aborigine),” which is sung twice during the film, once as the closing all-cast song and dance number. Even the one serious, political song in the film, “Listen to the News,” has its message mollified by being beautifully sung in harmony, and accompanied by the gentle visual images of Willie’s dream in which it occurs. The musical numbers are in keeping with the aesthetics of the movie, which also have a playful tone. Visually, *Bran Nue Dae* adheres to the tradition of cinema musicals, which are “brightly lit, to set off the cheerful costumes and

sets and to keep the choreography of the dance numbers clearly visible” (Bordwell and Thompson 125). The colours of the landscape and costuming in *Bran Nue Dae* are vivid and the camera is frequently placed to foreground facial expressions and movement. This synergy between the music and visuals augments the overall light-heartedness of the film.

Although the music is overwhelmingly light and whimsical, this is not to say that the lyrics are always superficial. “Nothing I Would Rather Be,” for example, raises controversial issues about land rights and mistreatment of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people:

There’s nothing I would rather be, than to be an Aborigine
And watch you take my precious land away.
For nothing gives me greater joy
than to watch you fill each girl and boy
With superficial existential shit.
Now you may think I’m cheeky, but I’d be satisfied
To rebuild your convict ships and sail you on the tide [...]
When I die I know I’ll be going up,
Cos you know that I’ve had my hell on earth.

Like the film does with “Listen to the News” however, these pointed messages are also softened by the playful mode with which they are delivered. Willie sings this song while tap-dancing in a brightly lit church surrounded by a chorus of yellow-shirt wearing, singing and dancing schoolboys (figure 1).

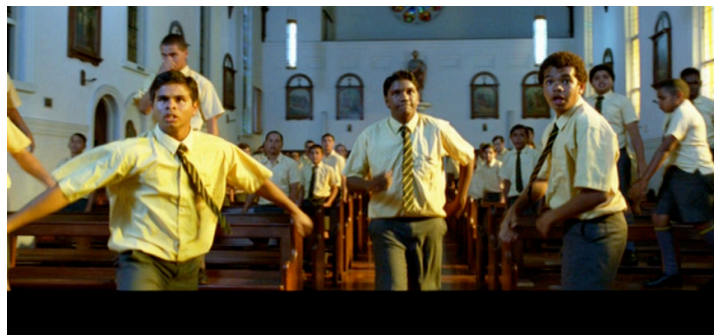


Fig. 1

Music and dance is used with this disarming effect throughout the film. Heavy messages

about the aftermath of colonisation, alienation from home, institutional racism, alcoholism and Aboriginal deaths in custody are raised in surprisingly non-confrontational songs.

The overall joyousness means that while the film alerts audiences to inequities and injustices, past and present, it allows no space or time for mournful reflection, or to wallow in white guilt. Rather, spectators are swept along, on the swift wings of optimism, to the next scene. Whilst alerted to the film's criticisms of postcolonial Australia viewers nevertheless remain engaged with rather than alienated from the story and from its messages. This is perhaps even more so for viewers of the "Sing-along" version of the DVD, released shortly following its screen release, who receive a direct invitation to participate.

As per the casting traditions of popular cinema, *Bran Nue Dae* chose well-known Australian actors Geoffrey Rush, Ernie Dingo, Deborah Mailman and Magda Szubanski to star in the film, as well as bringing to the screen emerging young singers and musicians, such as Jessica Mauboy and Dan Sultan. Combining established Australian cinema actors with emerging indigenous talent enables the latter access to a broader audience than they have had prior to the film. Mauboy, for example, is a commercially successful rhythm and blues and country singer and occasional mainstream pop musician. The film is a platform for Mauboy to demonstrate her multiple entertaining skills: she sings, dances and acts throughout the film. When Willie daydreams about Rosie it is in reference to Mauboy as she appears in her own video clips, as a sex goddess/angel hybrid. Mauboy's off-screen identity is thus highly interconnected with her on-screen presence. Her Aboriginality is a strong part of her identity as a singer, for example at the time of the film's release Mauboy's Facebook site drew attention to the "unique heritage" of her Timorese and Aboriginal parents, and in 2007 she was awarded Artist of the Year at the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Entertainment and Community awards, The Deadlys, held annually to celebrate Aboriginal achievement. Following *Bran Nue Dae* Mauboy went on to play a lead role in Wayne Blair's *The Sapphires* (2012), again in the role of an Aboriginal singer.

Bran Nue Dae also increases the profile of the Chookie Dancers from Gapuwiak in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, who make a cameo appearance. Their indigenised version of Zorba the Greek was initially a YouTube hit before they performed in festivals around the world. Through its mainstreaming of indigenous Australian musicians *Bran Nue Dae* also normalises contemporary Aboriginal performance: it is made less strange, less

“poisonous” to box office returns, and one of many elements that comprise the complex Australian postcolonial reality.

Robyn Kershaw, the film’s producer, sought to lessen the weirdness of the concept of a feel-good Aboriginal musical when she appealed to financiers. She explains:

The thing is with *Bran Nue Dae* there is nothing to compare it to, it’s not like you can say it is just like this film or this film. There was nothing in the Australian canon, the closest relative was more like Bollywood, or at the time *Hairspray*. I would say to financiers, “this is our *Hairspray*.” (*The Story of Bran Nue Dae*)

Once they heard the reference to the 2002 Broadway musical, and later popular film, some investors then understood what Kershaw was asking. Her example demonstrates how visual literacy of the musical, and popular cinema in general, can provide a framework to assist viewers, and in this case investors, to engage with the content that is new (and potentially confronting) to the genre. However, Kershaw adds that not all investors were convinced, and she thought “they were more concerned ... with how white Australia would respond to this story. That it was absolutely cutting edge in so many ways” (*The Story of Bran Nue Dae*) Investor concerns about the film’s reception is indicative not only of the rarity of Aboriginal musicals on screen, but also hints at a history of uncomfortable viewing experiences that have left spectators feeling uncomfortable or alienated. However, the use of music and musicians as escapist entertainment in *Bran Nue Dae* means a cross-cultural interconnectedness between on-screen characters and amongst viewers is preferred over their estrangement.

The diversity of musical numbers in *Bran Nue Dae* sends a strong message about the heterogeneity of Aboriginality. Broome is represented, through the musical collection, as a heterogeneous and contradictory town, made up of disparate peoples. Not long after Annie and Uncle Tadpole sing wistfully about the fish, rice and frangipanis that are waiting for them at home, Roxanne (Deborah Mailman)—“a proper Kimberley woman”—bursts through the doors of the Roebuck Hotel and joins in with the raunchy singing and dancing that is going on there. Simultaneously, just outside the pub, the local church congregation meet and sing songs with conviction about the importance of following the ways of Jesus. In *Bran Nue Dae* Aboriginality is not restricted to the romantic, but incorporates character

extremes ranging from the drunk and bawdy to the deeply pious. The film's tag line, "Going Home Never Felt This Good," we discover, is more than just the romantic, comforting idea of home, as a place of refuge and rest. Feeling "good" in Broome means a range of different things to different people.

The film is a much more sanitised, cleaner and kinder rendition of the original stage play. For example, Annie's full name in the stage musical was "Marijuana" Annie; Willie was kicked out of school rather than fleeing comically as he does in the film; unlike the stage musical there is no sex or nudity in the film; and the language is significantly toned down in Perkins' version. The scene in which Tadpole convinces Annie and Slippery to take him and Willie to Broome provides one striking example of how the original language has been cleaned up. In the stage version the conversation is as follows:

Tadpole: Don't you take me to fuckin' hospital. I don't go to no fuckin' hospital.

M. Annie: Where do you want to go then?

Tadpole: I wanna go to fuckin' Broome.

M. Annie: You wanta go to Broome?

Tadpole: Yeah me and this young fella here, we going to fuckin' Broome. You bastards gonna take us there or what?

(an exchange of introductions between the three takes place, then M. Annie remarks on Willie's good looks)

Tadpole: Oh you don't wanna trust him, that little bastard.
Hmph! Willy he bin fuckin' 'round here, he bin fuckin' 'round there, he bin fuckin' 'round everywhere, the little bastard. Well come on, you better help me up, I better jump inside. I wanna fuckin' go to Broome! Him too [pointing to Willie]. He wanna come to Broome too! (Chi and Kuckles 24)

In the film, however, the obscenities and insults are omitted:

Tadpole: I don't wanna go to hospital.

Annie: Where do you want to go to?

Tadpole: I wanna go to Broome!

The film then cuts immediately to the inside of the kombi van, en route to Broome, with Tadpole and Willy in the back and Annie staring at them with doe-eyed reverence from the front seat. The less-offensive language means the film avoids an R-rated classification (and thus ensures a wider audience), but importantly also, it takes the hostile edge off the dialogue. Slippery and Annie still appear as foolish and idealistic as they are in the stage musical, particularly in their anachronistic ideas about Aborigines, but Tadpole's benign treatment of the two renders their attitudes more amusing than harmful.

The original stage musical was not reviewed with the same reconciliatory language that championed the values of settler/indigenous relations as was the film. Rather, the music, comedy, hybridity and modernity were described as subversive and/or resistant (Duffy), or as fostering self-determination (Makeham). This does not mean, however, that resistance is not demonstrated in *Bran Nue Dae*, or that this film does not undertake the sort of cultural maintenance work that the stage musical was thought to be attending. For example, the singers and dancers in the "Listen to the News" number in the film, in which the ghost characters dance around the dreaming Willie, approached the scene as an opportunity for intergenerational cultural connection, and as a chance to pass on knowledge associated with the dance. The older and younger actors considered it important to dance together, and in particular to dance in traditional ways (*The Story of Bran Nue Dae*). Moreover, there is a cultural continuation of sorts being played out through generations of actors who have been in different incarnations of *Bran Nue Dae*: Pigrims and Bin Amats, amongst other well known Broome family names, are sprinkled through the credits of both stage and screen productions.

Bran Nue Dae wants to make a difference to viewers, but not at the expense of their entertainment. Perkins feels comfortable with using mainstream genre cinema for what she sees as the compatible purposes of telling stories, entertaining and delivering messages; moreover, she uses it deliberately to reach a wider audience than she might otherwise:

The reason I make indigenous works is to entertain, but also to give understanding and communication across the cultural divide. So I think it's good to have commercial leanings when you are doing an indigenous work because so often our work suffers from not being seen by enough people. So if you can give them things like "Oh it's

got Geoffrey Rush in it”, people go “wow maybe I will go and see that,” and “oh, it’s actually a film that’s got comedy and humour in it and it’s not going to depress me,” and that’s a good thing too ... I think I want the work to be seen and be enjoyed. I’m making a work for people, for everyday people who want to be moved ... We’re making films to be watched and enjoyed and that’s what I’m thinking about the audience in the end. (*The Story of Bran Nue Dae*)

Her attitude is reminiscent of Jimmy Chi’s, 20 years prior, who stated at the time: “I think my purpose in life is to bring about change through theatre, music and dance” (*The Story of Bran Nue Dae*). Luhrmann, also, in an interview on Australian television on the night of *Australia*’s premiere, talked about his passion to make a film that enabled him to personally explore Australia’s indigenous history but was also a “cinematic meal” that everyone wants to go to, which is for him the sweeping epic motion picture that is “entertaining, moving, enjoyable” (Luhrmann, “Interview”). His film also refuses to subscribe to the notion that indigenous stories have no place in popular cinema.

Australia, like its title suggests, tells an epic tale of colonial outback Australia. Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) travels from England to the Northern territory to encourage her land-owning husband to sell his cattle station. When she arrives she finds he has recently been killed, but she decides to stay and fulfil his plan to drive the cattle to Darwin, before selling the station. She is assisted, reluctantly at first, by the Drover (Hugh Jackman) (her love-interest), along with his co-worker Magaree (David Ngoombujarra), the quiet Goolaj (Angus Pilakui), her drunken accountant (Jack Thompson), and housekeeper Bandy (Lilian Crombie). The film’s main character Nullah (Brandon Walters), a young boy with an Aboriginal mother, Daisy (Ursula Yovich), and non-Aboriginal father, the film’s villain Fletcher (David Wenham), also joins them and this journey dominates the first half of the film. The droving team are watched over by Nullah’s grandfather (David Gulpilil) and they eventually outwit the villains, Fletcher and his boss, the neighbouring cattle baron King Carney (Bryan Brown). In the second half of the film, however, the heroes find themselves pitted against greater obstacles: Nullah is stolen away to a Mission settlement for “half-caste” children; the Drover leaves Lady Ashley after they have declared their love for each other; and Darwin is bombed by Japanese aircraft. However, in the predictable happy

ending Nullah, the Drover and Lady Ashley are reunited and return to their home at “Faraway Downs” to live happily ever after. Not only is this a tale of Lady Ashley’s personal transformation, and her romance with the Drover, it is also a story of reconciliation between settler and indigenous Australians.

Just as audience familiarity with musical conventions is used to heighten cultural connectivity in *Bran Nue Dae*, *Australia* uses predictable melodrama music motifs with similar effect. Melodrama, a “dramatic narrative in which musical accompaniment marks the emotional effects” (Elsaesser 374), means that much of the score (from various contributors) is at times full and loud—usually when accompanying herding cattle or slow-motion horse riding—at other times gentle, soft or romantic, for example when pulling at audience heartstrings in the scenes comprising of Lady Ashley and Nullah. The comedic scenes are accompanied by a hybrid of bluegrass, rockabilly and wobble-board (à la the iconic Rolf Harris), which enhances their silliness.

Music and singing are more complicated and potentially problematic in *Australia* than they are in the more innocuous *Bran Nue Dae*. Singing is used to evoke the magical and mystical in this film, and as such the film relies more heavily on a distinction between “traditional” Aboriginal songs and singing to do so. Nonetheless, after having established a polemic between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal song initially, the film then erodes the divide through a deliberate, progressive merger of the two styles. By the end of the film indigenous language songs and Aboriginal cultural meanings of singing are intertwined with Hollywood popular musical numbers, specifically with the well-known song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” made famous by Judy Garland in the 1939 Musical classic *The Wizard of Oz*. The metaphorical significance of this musical merging is that the blending that can/does occur between ostensibly oppositional musical styles is representational of the potential for interconnectivity between two seemingly disparate cultures—that is, it is a message about the possibilities of reconciliation, demonstrated through song and singing.

A progression of musical and narrative events leads to the ultimate merging of traditional Aboriginal music and “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Initially, the two styles are kept distinct. Singing in Aboriginal language(s) is heard predominantly when an atmosphere of mysticism, fear or grief is warranted. For example, Nullah and his grandfather King George (who is described in the film as a Gullipa, or magic man) frequently use singing in Aboriginal language(s) to enact supernatural powers. At the

beginning of the film Nullah explains to the viewer that his grandfather taught him how to “sing” a fish to be caught. Throughout the film he frequently tells Lady Ashley that he will “sing her to him,” ensuring they will meet again when separated. Nullah also associates singing with healing, and with making the land and the homestead healthy by singing Lady Ashley to Faraway Downs. Nullah takes magic seriously (unlike Roxanne in *Bran Nue Dae*, or the irreverent Charlie in *Stone Bros.*), as does his grandfather. King George stands at the top of cliffs and sings to protect the drovers, and to alert them and the viewer to danger. Nullah also sings down fear and evil spirits, and together they stop stampeding cattle with song. King George leads the drovers across the desert via ancient Dreaming songlines (tracks that, amongst other things, follow the movements of ancient beings and of human trade activities and are preserved and communicated through song). Despite the Drover’s explanation to his fellow travellers about the practical nature of how songlines work, this quick lesson is overshadowed by the overwhelmingly mystic nature of the event, because while the Drover is unquestionably the quintessential bushman, King George achieves what no other mortal can—safe passage across seemingly hostile desert.

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow” is initially used for less mysterious and less powerful purposes. The song is introduced into the film by Lady Ashley, who although she is “not good with children” sings the song to Nullah to console him when he is crying over the death of his mother. She starts to tell him the story of *The Wizard of Oz* and at his request sings a few muddled, tuneless bars of the song. Nullah immediately makes connections between the Hollywood story and Dreamtime stories: he likens the Wizard to a Gullipa like himself and King George; the rainbow to the Rainbow Serpent creation being; and associates the words from the song “dreams really do come true” to the truth of the Dreaming songs. He then makes a statement that firmly extracts the Dreaming songs from the ancient past and gives them a practical application in the contemporary environment: “Dreaming songs tell us to get the fat cheeky bulls onto the big bloody metal ship” he tells Lady Ashley.

When the droving begins, Flynn teaches Nullah how to play “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” on his harmonica and his preoccupation with the song grows. In the second half of the film Nullah, in black face, finds himself at the movies watching *The Wizard of Oz* where he hears Garland singing the song for the first time. It is at this point when the indigenous and non-indigenous music styles are at their seemingly most polemic: Nullah has been Nuggetted-up to be allowed in the cinema and thus appears visually more

Aboriginal than he has done otherwise, and “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” is being sung in its original and unmediated version. Ironically, here, when they are at their most distant, the two styles start to merge together and the boundaries between the Hollywood musical classic and the mysterious indigenous language singing start to collapse. As Nullah starts to appreciate the cultural and emotional currency of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” Lady Ashley begins to understand the way Nullah uses singing and music. When Nullah says he will sing her to him, instead of responding with a dismissive or patronising nod as she may have earlier, she tells him that she will be listening, and will hear him. “Singing” becomes a two-way activity and a means of generating cultural connectivity. At multiple points both indigenous and non-indigenous characters reiterate this idea. For instance, the non-indigenous and indigenous drovers all “sing” to the cattle to keep them calm; the word “foxtrot” is interchanged with “fox dance” by Nullah, the Drover and Lady Ashley in reference to the way Aboriginal Dreaming dances are named in English; and throughout the film snippets of “Waltzing Matilda,” a classic Australian ballad, are overlaid with the sound of clapsticks.

The complete point of musical synergy occurs when the Drover, reaching his heroic peak, rescues the Aboriginal children from the heavily bombed and still occupied Mission Island. Once safely on the rescue boat, in order to find the (presumed dead) Lady Ashley Nullah starts to play “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” on his harmonica whilst standing at the bow (figure 2). The other boys on the boat accompany him, but singing the words in an Aboriginal language to the familiar Hollywood tune. King George, from afar, over-sings instructions to Nullah, which reinforces his mystical power.



Fig. 2

Now indigenised, “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” is afforded the same mystical status as the indigenous music that Nullah used to stop the stampeding cattle earlier. Not only do

they make it safely to land but Nullah also finds (a resurrected) Lady Ashley waiting there for him. Their physical reunification occurs at the same moment as the unifying of the two song styles, making this an intense physical and musical trans-cultural moment.

The question then arises, what makes what Luhrmann does with music in *Australia* any different to the age-old practice of non-indigenous appropriation of Aboriginal culture for the purposes of making more interesting and exotic cinema? The answer lies in the removal of the essentialised mysticism of both Nullah's and King George's singing that the hybridisation of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" effects. This is a demonstration of cultural fluidity, as Nullah readily adapts the Hollywood song to fit with his cultural understandings of how music works and Lady Ashley also understands the new role the song plays. The film's message is of non-indigenous and indigenous cultural change and adaptation, which is at the core of Reconciliation Cinema's efforts to establish new conditions of cross-cultural negotiation.

Although Luhrmann sidesteps cultural appropriation in this regard, some may argue that he has compromised the uniqueness of Aboriginality to avoid upsetting viewers (Australian and international) with an unsettling confrontation of difference. Nonetheless, by focussing on cultural similarities at the expense of differences, he risks creating Aboriginal identities that merely "pass" as whites, rather than being truly dynamic Aboriginal subjectivities. A danger for any Australian film that uses entertainment genres to portray cross-cultural relations is that they also will perpetuate the sins of Hollywood that resulted in the cinematic construction of the marginalised, inferior black Other. These are the representations that Marcia Langton bemoans create images of Aboriginality that are "safe, distant distortions of an actual world of people who will not bring the neighbourhood real estate values down" (*Well I* 33) rather than complex subjectivities that might facilitate intersubjective cinematic dialogues. There is much scholarship that takes issue with the absence or mis-representation of race and culture in popular cinema (e.g., Knopf; Columpar; and Bernardi). Nevertheless, if Luhrmann were to exclude Aborigines from his picture of "Australia," or to marginalise Aborigines in a way that relegates people to performing only traditional songs and dances on the peripheries of the narrative, he would be denying both the dynamism of culture(s) and the breadth of cultural diversity Australia. He is in an awkward position.

Experimenting with music is an important part not only of *Australia*, but also of the contemporary cultural life of many Aboriginal communities. Mark Grose, co-director of Skinnyfish Music¹ explains:

Music is something that everyone understands. If you think of the Territory ... music is part of their everyday life in traditional ceremony and in every community that I know of they have a contemporary band, sometimes ... there's 8 or 9 bands. For whatever reason, those communities have a very strong desire to do something with music.

The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) have been recording, producing and distributing a range of Aboriginal music—traditional, contemporary and many hybridised versions of the both—since the early 1980s. The nature of much contemporary Aboriginal music is a stylistic mishmash. The Black Arm Band, created in 2006, is indicative of the diversity of music that is categorised broadly as Aboriginal. With the aim of being a “hub for the development and performance of Indigenous music in all its forms” (*The Black Arm Band*) they bring together a large number of stylistically diverse indigenous singers and performers—including Buuna Lawrie, Archie Roach, Dan Sultan, Ursula Yovich and Jimmy Little to name only a few. Aboriginal music is characterised by an interplay of styles (including pre-contact sounds of didgeridoo and clapsticks, and country, rock, and reggae) and languages (whole verses alternate from English to Aboriginal language, and individual words are substituted one for another) (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 231). The distinction between “tradition” or pre-contact music styles and “contemporary” Aboriginal music is in many ways a furphy, as Aboriginal music is demonstrated to have continually changed in ways that make such a binary false (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 16). In an interesting intertextual moment, and another example of musical interplay in broader cultural arenas, Ursula Yovich performed “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” at a memorial concert for the designer of the Sydney Opera House in 2009. Thus, *Bran Nue Dae* and

¹ Skinnyfish Music is a record label and distributor of Indigenous Music, based in Darwin NT. They aim not only to promote indigenous music broadly, but also to enable indigenous bands to be heard across remote communities.

Australia, as works of popular cinema with indigenous themes through their narrative and music, dispel the myth of cultural quarantining.

A Funny Thing Happened on my Way to the Cinema ...

To claim that a comedy film can contribute to the enormous and challenging process of reconciliation is nothing if not ambitious. It relies upon two key premises. The first is that comedy can draw attention to difficult and confronting issues that might otherwise be avoided or ignored, and the second is that it does so in an inclusive rather than alienating manner. The comedy in *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.* differs substantially, but in many ways has similar effects. In each, the comedy allows the film to make statements about confronting reconciliation issues, whilst engaging viewers in such a way that is itself an expression of the principles of reconciliation.

The humour in *Australia* is consistent with the conventions of melodrama, and also with the over-the-top postmodern camp that typifies Luhrmann's films (for example, *Strictly Ballroom* [1992], *Romeo + Juliet* [1996], *Moulin Rouge!* [2001]). Laleen Jayamanne described *Australia* adroitly as "a gender-bending, inner-city camp party" ("The Drover's" 132). The film is a tongue-in-cheek (re)presentation of the national myth of Australia as a land that was settled through great physical hardship, by strong, brave white men who pitted themselves against the elements—both natural and native. *Australia* is an irreverent settler narrative which foregrounds buffoonery, drunkenness, racism, ignorance and greed, and which also puts the often-marginalised figures, women and Aborigines, firmly into the national story. The film is an unapologetic fantastical telling of history: "Nothing could be less true ... Hardship, privation and dying remain a way of life on our unromantic frontier, where adventures are as scarce as trees on the Nullarbor Plain" (Conrad 32). Moreover, by portraying some Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relationships as racist and others as loving and respectful it presents a more complicated history of non-indigenous expansion into the outback (similar to the frontier narratives discussed in Chapter One). However, the principle way that the film is differentiated from the traditional battler-narrative is through its use of hyper-exaggerated parody. Lady Ashley, the Drover, Flynn and Fletcher are all overdone, cartoonish stereotypes of the English rose, Aussie cowboy, alcoholic and villain respectively. The publican, Ivan (Jakev Komen), and cattle baron King Carney add to the collection of inverted noble settlers, who are so grossly one-

dimensional that they cannot be taken seriously.

Despite the overall parodic nature of the film, the Aboriginal characters receive less sarcastic treatment than the white characters. Indeed, the main Aboriginal characters, Magaree, Nullah and his grandfather, are all treated with a seriousness that borders on idolatry. As such, there is a discord between the portrayal of dynamic Aboriginal subjectivity that is achieved through the film's strategic use of music and song, and the objectifying that results from this over-reverence for the Aboriginal characters. For instance, when Lady Ashley arrives in Darwin a slapstick fight breaks out and culminates in her undergarments being strewn outside amid the drooling, filthy pub-goers. Magaree, however, is aloof and removed from the immature settlers, and he is instead the sane voice that brings the Drover back to his senses to attend to Lady Ashley. Throughout the film Magaree acts as the Drover's conscience, his Jiminy Cricket. Apart from his child-like voice over, Nullah also is consistently mature and wise beyond his years. With adult perception he is able to grasp the importance of Lady Ashley's predicament, and understands how important it is to drive the cattle in order to save the station and to ensure that good triumphs over evil. He knows and disapproves of the corruption that surrounds him, including white men's abuse of his mother, the cattle thefts, and the untrue murder accusation against King George. Both he and King George also have supernatural skills that, although overblown in melodramatic style, signal a continuing presence of Aboriginal spirituality in post-contact Australia. What comes across, however, is an uncritical acceptance of an essentialised Aboriginality that is based on an innate spiritual knowledge and connection to land. While on the one hand a dynamic Nullah adapts the Hollywood musical number and reflects a complex postcolonial identity, on the other an essentialised Nullah is not permitted to be childish or flawed.

Unless, that is, viewers are meant to be laughing at Luhrmann's clichéd portrayals of a cattle-stopping child and King George standing one-legged in the sunset. Dean Ashendon thinks he can see Gulpilil almost winking at the audience ("Luhrmann") but another reviewer is unsure: "Either there's a huge inside joke at work in *Australia*, or else the movie is just corny and weird" (Braun). The difficulty is that whether these characters are intended to be comical or serious is unclear. The ambiguity of Luhrmann's comedy may be attributed to what Alan McKee identifies as a lack of historical reference points for such images for Australian viewers. Australia does not have a history of "mammy" images, for example, derogative representations of black Americans in the United States of America

which provide a referential base for contemporary portrayals (47). McKee claims that in Australia “there is in fact very little in the way of comic images of Aboriginality, rather, indigenous Aboriginal identity has been produced as a variety of quite solemn tropes” (50). There are exceptions of course, some comedy sketches on television, those noted by McKee (*Basically Black* and *Blackout*) (48), plus more recent series such as *The Mary G Show* and *Bush Mechanics*. McKee ponders whether Australia might have had a different history of representation if Jimmie Blacksmith or Gulpilil’s character in *Walkabout* were to trip or fall amusingly on their faces (53). Despite the dynamism afforded Aboriginal culture through the strategic use of music and singing, Luhrmann also contributes to Australian cinema’s collection of inhumanly noble and serious Aboriginal characters.

A second cause for confusion over *Australia*’s representations of Aboriginal characters is because Luhrmann poorly defines the differences between stereotypes and accurate and/or desirable portrayals of Aboriginality. If comedy only makes sense if the stereotypes are recognisable, then if not, “the representation would lack the plausibility necessary to explain it as ‘comic’” (McKee 53). The image of the highly spiritualised King George in *Australia*, for example, will only function comically if the audience recognises this image as an outdated, superficial cliché. Furthermore, contemporary audiences will be reluctant to laugh at King George unless they are sure that Aboriginal people are also laughing at such images—that is, if audiences are laughing “with” not “at” Aboriginal people. Germaine Greer suspects that Luhrmann is the only person who finds King George amusing:

Luhrmann has the temerity to use [Gulpilil] as a cigar-store Indian, standing on one leg, the other foot propped against his knee, silhouetted against the skyline, spear and spear-thrower in hand. To the few viewers who will know that this motif has been used repeatedly as a trade mark, it does seem that Luhrmann is making a tasteless joke.

Whether viewers laugh, cringe, or are outraged or offended may be determined by their genre literacy. If the whole film is approached as melodramatic comedy, it will be seen as a relief to serious cinematic representations. Canadian reviewer Liz Braun was swayed

toward just enjoying the film by her genre expectations. Although she was confused as to whether the film was a joke or just corny she states she “liked watching it enough to vote for the first interpretation.” Moreover, locating serious Aboriginal characters in a melodrama framework means they too, to a certain extent, become part of the larger laugh that *Australia* is having at traditional Australian settler-narratives.

Luhrmann’s reluctance to make the Aboriginal characters as self-parodic or overtly comedic as his non-Aboriginal ones is redolent of a broader contemporary cultural phenomenon: it is predominantly non-Aboriginal filmmakers who are hesitant to portray humorous indigenous subjects. Although *Ten Canoes* (2006) and *Yolngu Boy* (2000), both directed by non-indigenous directors, do include moments of self-ridicule and irreverent Aboriginal humour, these films are the exceptions rather than the rule. Bodey concurs:

Yet whatever the accomplishments of [*The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *The Fringe Dwellers* and *Backroads*] and later films as diverse as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Dead Heart*, and *The Tracker*, there remained a certain nobility and pretension to whitefellas telling blackfella stories. (“Adjust” 19)

We can add to this list also *Serenades* (2001), *Black and White* (2002), and *September* (2007). There are numerous possible reasons for this adherence to the representation of Aboriginal nobility tropes. One is the fear that issues of Aboriginal discrimination and inequity are too serious and important to be appropriate for a comedic setting, where they are at risk of belittling or trivialising Aboriginal culture. As it was, some viewers were disturbed that a story of the Aboriginal Stolen Generations was being told as a melodrama in *Australia*, claiming it was not possible to make a fairytale of the events (see Krips 46; Greer). The 1998 film by Roberto Benigni, *Life is Beautiful*, raised similar concerns over its light-hearted treatment of Jewish Holocaust victims (see Matthews). Ironically, as McKee and Langton respectively point out, the insistence on an “ineffable dignity” (53) of Aboriginal characters, and the “desperate need to stereotype Aboriginal victimhood” (“Why Greer”) is potentially obstructive to interculturalism and reconciliation. In contrast, Perkins and Frankland, both Aboriginal directors, are less reverential in their depictions of Aborigines, and their films contain countless blatant send-ups of cinematic stereotypes.

Opening with a playful animation of slapstick comedy involving a fluttering Angel

establishes the light-hearted tone that continues throughout *Bran Nue Dae*. None of the characters are taken seriously and it is littered with self-parody and light-hearted digs at essentialised notions of both black and white Australians. Uncle Tadpole systematically undermines stereotypes of the superior spiritual indigene: he tricks Annie and Slippery into taking him to Broome by playing on their well-intentioned but unrealistic admiration of Aboriginal people; when he “points the bone” at the disappearing kombi, which then immediately breaks down, he terrifies himself and humorously throws it away; and he is lewdly mocking of Willie’s infatuation with Rosie. None of this constitutes the (stereo)typical behaviour of a wise and noble Aboriginal elder. Other characters also engage in undermining a variety of stereotypical constructions of Aboriginality. The boys in the boarding school liken themselves to “starving blacks” to justify their midnight pilfering of the Cherry Ripe bars in the school fridge and Roxanne quips that “black magic” transported her into the kombi when in reality she climbed in when no one was looking. The film mocks non-indigenous new-age hippies, particularly for their views of Aborigines as quintessential spiritual gurus. Annie excuses Uncle Tadpole’s theft of sausages because she thinks that his motives are pure (“he just wants to feed us”) and she instructs Slippery that he too “must respect their ways” without imposing their Anglocentric values. However, Uncle Tadpole’s reactions to Annie’s earnest ideas—including raising his eyebrows in fright when she throws the map out of the window because they “don’t need a map because they have an Aboriginal elder”—gently ridicules her beliefs and paints her as naïve. The ludicrousness of the Aboriginal characters breathes life into the film, and they speak directly to solemn representations of Aboriginal people, past and present.

Bran Nue Dae still raises issues of Aboriginal disadvantage and inequity, but just as it does via the use of music, it uses comedy to do so without alienating viewers. Far from wishing to exclude viewers, Perkins aims to enhance audiences sense of national pride by making them feel connected with the characters and content of the film:

Bran Nue Dae for me, I hope, lights up people’s lives, and entertains them and uplifts them, and makes them proud to be indigenous, and makes them proud to be Australian, and [that] they have this indigenous culture they can share in if they are not indigenous. So I want it to uplift people and move people and make them laugh. (*The Story of Bran Nue Dae*)

Joking, comedy and laughing are common ways of making sense of the daily realities of poverty across Aboriginal communities. Just as Mark Grose identifies the widespread cultural practise of listening and playing to music, Frankland claims joking and laughing are similarly typical: “Wherever I have travelled amongst my mob, Aboriginal Australia, amidst all the tragedy I always hear and see laughing stories ... there is always laughing stories” (“Director’s Statement”). Cinema has been slow, it would appear, to participate in an established cultural response to hardship.

Of *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.*, the latter is the most deliberately comedic, and the trope of the solemn Aborigine is nowhere to be seen. The film follows the classic comedy structure where characters escape from a situation of rigid order, sojourn to a “natural” place, then return to what appears as a renewed and reformed social world (Payne, “Comedy” 137). With the stated purpose of returning a “special” stone to their home Eddie (Luke Carroll) sets out on a road trip to his home Kalgoorlie. His cousin Charlie (Leon Burchill) jumps in with him, to escape his girlfriend Rhonda (Rohanna Angus), who is outraged and despairing over Charlie’s slovenly behaviour. Along the way they pick up a pseudo Italian rock star Vinnie (Valentino Del Toro), and another cousin, indigenous transvestite Reggie/Regina (David Page). During the journey they wrestle with a possessed dog, contend with a large spider that is living in the car and smoke their way through approximately 180 marijuana joints. They deviate from their destination to visit another cousin at a Prison Farm (Heath Bergerson) where they encounter an idealistic and naïve “new age Copper” (Peter Phelps). They also attend a chaotic wedding, thanks to a dynamite-wielding uncle (David Kennedy), which eventually calms down, allowing Auntie Carol (Mark Bin Bakar) to croon humorously to the guests. These and other nonsensical incidents take place throughout the entire journey, until Charlie and Eddie eventually make it to Kalgoorlie to hand over the stones.

The humour is for the most part unsophisticated, adolescent and slapstick, and consists mainly of ridiculous behaviours that are the result of irresponsible drug use—in the tradition of other stoner comedies such as the Cheech and Chong or Harold and Kumar movies. Nonetheless, this film too raises many serious issues that deal with some especially awkward social topics, atypical to stoner-movies, such as skin colour, intra-cultural disputes, cultural survival, and cultural appropriation. Like *Bran Nue Dae* it takes particular issue with essentialised constructions of Aboriginality and uses humour to deliberately

undermine those portrayals.

The hidden purpose of the stones is one of the strongest ways this is achieved. The audience is unsure of the exact cultural significance of Eddie and Charlie's stones until well into *Stone Bros.*, but knows they are important because they are a symbolic link between the boys, their home and their culture. The viewer is encouraged to consider these stones as highly significant, sacred objects. Eddie is furious, for instance, when he finds that his stones are not in his jacket pocket as he thought, but in gaol. Charlie has given away Eddie's jacket, with the stones, to another cousin who was subsequently incarcerated. Eddie is further outraged when on arriving at the gaol to retrieve the stones he discovers they have since been sold to an anthropologist for public display. This misuse of the stones as objects for public consumption is a cinematic flag to a history of theft and commodification of indigenous artefacts and sacred objects—issues that still have currency in Australia.

The Central Land Council's Sacred Object Policy was formed in response to what the Council declares has been the removal of "literally thousands" of objects, which has resulted in "a profound and ongoing sense of sorrow for those robbed of their heritage" (Central). The policy provides guidelines for how objects should be treated when not in the care of the rightful owners: They should be treated "in a way that is consistent with Aboriginal Law" and "they must not be displayed to the public" (Central). Viewers are not afforded the time to wallow in the injustice of the inappropriate public display of the stones in *Stone Bros.*, however, because what follows is a farcical and irreverent rescue scene. To repatriate the stones Eddie and Charlie stage a break-in. The two pose as traditional dancers, with Vinnie as their manager and Regina as his heavily pregnant wife. While Regina distracts the museum attendant by breaking her waters, Eddie and Charlie smash the display glass to remove the stones. This is intentionally ridiculous: an implausible solution to a serious problem.

At the end of the film any remaining reverential notions concerning the stones that viewers may hold are fully dismissed. The stones are revealed to be significant to Eddie's family because of a pragmatic rather than spiritual function—they are a parenting ruse, designed to encourage young people to return home. No sooner have Eddie and Charlie returned the stones to their Uncle, than he gives their Auntie a knowing look, then passes the stones on to two younger boys who have jumped into Eddie's car, eager to leave home. He tells them the same as he told Eddie and Charlie, "These stones are real important cultural business and I'll give you a hoy when I need them." The joke is on the viewer who

adopts misguided and misinformed reverence for indigenous spiritual beliefs. It is also on Eddie and Charlie, who have also attached far more spiritual significance to the stones than their uncle.

Like in *Bran Nue Dae*, romantic new-age notions of Aboriginality are humorously taken to task in *Stone Bros*. The prison guard, Mark, gains his knowledge of Aboriginal culture from Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under*, a discredited best-selling memoir that is now more commonly recognised as a fictional appropriation (see Eustace). With saccharine sincerity, Mark claims solidarity with Eddie: "I know what that's like, I'm from Melbourne myself but my Dreaming is out here" (to which Pauly appropriately responds: "Oh Jesus"). Mark elaborates that he is from the Wild Big Eagle Dreaming and later, to close the film, sheds his clothes and dances off into the sunset, harnessing two stereotypical pan-indigenous motifs: spiritual connections with eagles and the act of disrobing. A recurring motif in Australian cinema, removing pieces of clothing signifies the rejection of modernity's materialism for the purity of traditional indigenous life. Both black and white perform disrobing; for example, the lost children in *Walkabout* (1971), Tobey in *The Proposition*, the Tracker's (2001) Tracker and young Nullah in *Australia*. Rather than choosing the nobler path and enlightening Mark, Eddie instead takes advantage of Mark's misplaced romanticisms to talk his way out of gaol. With a nod to *Jedda*, he tells Mark that if he releases him he will be able to save him from the "old people" who are going to kill him because he has slept with a woman from the wrong skin group. His explanation makes a mockery of Mark's *Mutant* ideas:

Those old people know everything, even when you don't think they know, they know. And special people like you, they know things about, even when you don't think they know what they know, you know? ... They are going to come here tonight and throw magic on you and you will die.

Stone Bros., through ridicule, questions the usefulness of fanciful ideas of indigeneity in contemporary Australia. Whereas *Australia* uses magic to infuse Nullah and his grandfather with a spiritual superiority, *Stone Bros.* questions the validity of this stereotype.

This is not to say that *Stone Bros.* belittles mysticism categorically: 'ooga-booga' magic is still a prominent feature of the film, and of the contemporary indigeneity it

constructs. For example, Charlie's disgruntled girlfriend Rhonda (Rohanna Angus) torments him throughout the film from afar, using her magic powers and a lock of his hair. The film eschews a totally anti-essentialist position. However, the Aboriginal mystic it creates is a complicated one. Rhonda is a nurse, and she wields her magic from semi-industrial suburbia. Personifying that which Lyn McCredden describes as the "contemporary sacred" in Australia, Rhonda shifts "the parameters of the sacred" (McCredden xi). Rhonda's powers are not used for noble or righteous purposes either; rather, they are used to express her frustration and anger. She is the antithesis of Nullah. Instead of steering of cattle away from cliffs, she possesses a dog and goes for her boyfriend's throat.

Humour, Frankland believes, is a means of highlighting the diversity of Aboriginality: "All we're doing with *Stone Bros.* is opening up another area and saying, this is another element of us" (qtd. in Bodey, "Adjust" 19). Two scenes in *Stone Bros.* particularly assist the film to this end. First is a highly stylised scene in which Eddie—completely stoned—dreams he is surrounded by a crowd of blond-haired admirers in a whiter-than-white supermarket. They move around him making noises of admiration, the manager offers him goods for free, and a family asks if he would like their daughter because they would "love a black man in the family" (figures 3 and 4). The shoppers then start apologising to him, repeatedly: "sorry, sorry, sorry."



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

A pertinent feature of this scene is that Eddie is in blackface. On one level this is a clever postcolonial subversion of cinema's historic practice of Nuggetting-up white actors to play indigenous characters, most commonly seen in North American films. A memorable Australian example is the Aboriginal tracker Jubbul in *Journey Out of Darkness*, played by non-indigenous Ed Deveraux. More recently, in a talent contest on an Australian entertainment television program, panellists and viewers took great offence to a

performance by “Michael Jackson” in white makeup accompanied by five men in blackface (*Hey Hey*). In blackface Eddie undercuts a history of mis-representation, objectification and mockery. Moreover, blacking-up is one technique amongst others that *Stone Bros.* employs to trouble established ideas about the links between skin colour and Aboriginal authenticity. *Stone Bros.* signals its intention to raise this sensitive, contested topic in a single frame, early in the film. In his room, Eddie takes off his shirt and to his right on the wall is a poster of the iconic image of young Australian Football League player Nicky Winmar, lifting his football jumper in front of a crowd. Upon winning in 1993, Winmar had defiantly pointed out his skin colour to a crowd that had berated him with racist taunts throughout the game. This moment is heralded as the sport’s “I’m black and I’m proud” equivalent, and reminds viewers of the history and broad scope of skin colour politics in Australia.

However Eddie faces a different dilemma to Winmar. Eddie dreams in blackface because he desires to be darker: he struggles with how to be “black and proud” when his skin is light. People Eddie meets frequently assume he is white. Vinnie jokingly asks him if he is Italian, because he drives like one, but then states that he is “not very black” compared to Charlie (to whom he repeatedly points out the obvious: “You’re black!”). When Eddie finds himself accidentally incarcerated Mark takes pity on him because he is “practically white.” Charlie also, who is much darker-skinned than Eddie, is constantly derogatory of Eddie’s lightness and considers himself significantly more attractive to women because he is darker—and Eddie agrees. In one scene, what has hitherto been a smouldering tension over this issue is brought to the surface when Charlie sings a roadside ditty, which he accompanies with pelvic thrusts: “I’m blacker than Eddie, blacker than Eddie. Eddie’s not very black, Eddie’s not very black. I’m blacker than Eddie, whoo!”

Frankland insists that the issue of skin colour is a topical one, and claims, “the living discrimination between very dark skinned Aboriginals and lighter skinned ones is an issue that is alive and well” (“Director’s Statement”). Contemporaneously, Aboriginal identity is frequently posited in public discourse as being irrelevant to skin colour. The recent case against newspaper columnist Andrew Bolt by nine “light-skinned Aborigines” provides an example. The case was triggered by Bolt’s assertion that the people concerned claimed Aboriginality for the purposes of career gain only (Quinn). Bolt lost the case, and in handing down his judgement Justice Bromberg declared that people “should be free to identify with race without fear of public disdain” (qtd. in Quinn), implying that light skin colour is not an impediment to identifying as Aboriginal, nor dark skin the quintessential

signifier. We hear similar arguments in cinema also. In *Last Ride*, for example, young light-skinned Chook (Tom Russell) is reassured by the dark-skinned Park Rangers he meets that it simply means he was born in the day and not at night. Chook's Aboriginal identity is proven not by colour, but when he quotes some graffiti he once saw: "Koori Rulz: The only bet is on black." In the end *Last Ride* and *Stone Bros.* make essentially the same point, however Frankland takes a completely different path to get there.

Stone Bros. also draws attention to the reality of dynamic contemporary Aboriginality through its depictions of indigenous drag queens. The first is the character of Reggie/Regina, who is central to the narrative, and the second is the most well known of real-life Aboriginal drag queens, Mark Bin Bakar. Echoing an earlier Australian comedy, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, Regina performs in outback venues with mixed success, then finds an unexpected and respectful lover in Vinnie before going on to have a successful singing career. Unlike the white Drag Queens in *Priscilla*, Regina has to juggle both gender and racial discrimination, and she claims that the latter is the easier of the two: "It's easy being a Noongar compared to being a man!" Regina is representative of real-life cross-dressing Aboriginal comedians, including Bin Bakar. Bin Bakar is the comedian behind the persona of Mary G, who began on a Broome radio show and has performed on stage around Australia. Other indigenous drag performers include Constantina Bush from Melbourne who has also travelled and performed around Australia. By portraying transgendered indigenous people the film alerts viewers to the reality of the complexities of gender and race identities.

Despite his reservations about his own film having an impact on reconciliation, Frankland is nonetheless certain that comedy in general serves a reconciliatory purpose. For him, comedy is a means for overcoming what he sees as a deep divide between black and white in Australia: "A lot of people are fraught when they see indigenous films. They're constantly hit with the heavy message, and one way to breach the cultural abyss, if you like, breach the walls of discrimination, is humanising, and one of the ways to humanise is to laugh" (qtd. in Bodey, "Adjust" 19). He also hopes that more laughter will result in less violence and less tears (Frankland, Interview).

The film's statement about (inter)cultural pluralities is also reinforced at the point of reception, specifically through the accessibility of *Stone Bros.* humour across perceived cultural boundaries. *Stone Bros.* adds to a chequered history of Australian comedy films, which have come in waves and experienced mixed commercial success (McFarlane,

“Australian Comedy”; Korsten). The marketing of this film as the first feature length “(Ab)original comedy” points to a dearth of indigenous content in Australian screen comedy, and suggests that the humour will be something new to viewers. Identifying the film as an “Aboriginal” comedy also implies that the humour is distinctly indigenous. In a radio interview Frankland defined Aboriginal humour as characteristically self-deprecating, laconic, and irreverent and gave the example of people joking on the most solemn of occasions (Frankland, Interview). However, consistent with the film’s stance against racial determinism, Frankland qualifies this definition with the suggestion that indigenous humour is both the continuation of a similar, pre-contact style of humour and the result of shared social and emotional experiences of colonial oppression (Frankland, Interview). This feature of Aboriginal humour has been long recognised. In 1956 anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner described a great deal of Aboriginal humour as “dear-brought” (270). This does not, however, detract from its impact. As they revisited some of *Stone Bros.* comedic moments during the interview, as if proof of its appeal to Aboriginal viewers, Frankland and indigenous interviewer Daniel Browning were at times hardly able to speak for laughing.

At the same time, there are several ways in which the indigenous humour of *Stone Bros.* is also unmistakably accessible to non-indigenous viewers. While not all reviewers warmed to *Stone Bros.*’s comedy (for example Schembri), all indicated that it was understood. The humour was described as, for example, endearing, wry and “moderately entertaining” (Pomeranz, “*Stone Bros.*”); “as broad as the surrounding acres” (Hall, “*Stone Bros.*”); and “uproarious” by Ruth Hessey (“*Stone Bros.*”); and although Alice Tynan found it “brash and silly,” she felt it successfully “communicate[d] some home truths,” and asks “who isn’t going to have a giggle at John Howard’s expense?” This is partly because much of the humour in *Stone Bros.* is common to comedies past: gender and sexuality confusion, crazy hallucinations, grown men being scared of spiders, and Benny Hill-type chase scenes. *Stone Bros.* also draws upon some established tropes of Australian comedy cinema. The irresponsible larrikin bloke(s) (Collins, “Kenny” 87), taking a crass, light-hearted approach to sex (Dermoddy and Jacka 54; Murray 73), and a certain Australian ‘quirkiness’ (O’Regan, “A National” 143) are all features of this film.

Corinn Columpar asks: “Does a particular representational strategy have different effects depending on who employs it?” (17). Her question is particularly pertinent when considering how this indigenous comedy might be received. Frankland is an indigenous

filmmaker who is perhaps best known as a director for his award-winning 1999 short film *Harry's War*. He has also directed numerous documentaries and short films (including *Songlines* [1993] and *No Way to Forget* [1996]), productions for the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (*Double Trouble* [2006]) and written for and directed television dramas (*The Circuit* [2006], *Blue Heelers* [2002-05]). He is a prominent figure in Aboriginal political and cultural arenas, as a songwriter, musician, playwright, novelist and cultural awareness educator. As such, in *Stone Bros.* Frankland laughs as much at himself as at others. Alan McKee argues indigenous authorship is a means of stabilising comedy's potentially unpredictable messages, and forestalling the possibility of 'unattractive meanings' ("Superboong" 48). This is not to suggest that a filmmaker's Aboriginality prescribes particular, or predictable, meanings. Content and reception are unpredictable. However, in the case of *Stone Bros.* Frankland's public persona means that the film is situated within the extra-textual fields of indigenous activism and arts in which he operates, thus helping to circumvent 'unattractive' interpretations of the film's comedy.

Conclusion

That popular cinema does "more" than political policy might is perhaps ultimately unmeasurable, and at the very least would require a fuller examination than is possible in this chapter. Entertainment cinema's impact on real life, particularly in the area of race and cultural relations, is ambiguous. Edward Castillo, writing about the impact on audiences of the box office hit *Dances with Wolves*, a seminal, popular film which re-imagined North American history to include an examination of settler/indigenous relations, states that "to minimize the power of the mass media to generate sympathy, concerns, and demands for reform is to ignore reality" (63); however, he adds that "true reform will always require more than Hollywood can offer" (63). Misgivings about *Australia*'s inappropriate fairytale treatment of serious indigenous issues are redolent of Castillo's concerns of the limited capacity for escapist films to affect change.

However, this chapter demonstrates that there is a number of ways in which *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.* make significant contributions to how reconciliation is understood and experienced. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis observe a cinematic shift post the High Court decision to recognise Native Title, that they demonstrate to be characterised by the recognition of Aboriginal presence and of white

intrusion onto the landscape (*Cinema After Mabo*). Post-Mabo cinema, they propose, started to re-imagine Australians' relationships with the land and with each other, or, to use Catherine's Simpson's words to "register Indigenous agency and rethink settler/indigenous relations" (90). Using a deliberately popular format to re-imagine relations, as do *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.*, takes this process a step further. These films are not only the result of directorial urges to re-imagine history, or to reassess relationships with land. By deliberately choosing to entertain audiences the films make a point of engaging with as large a range of people as possible. This is post-Mabo cinema with an added pro-reconciliatory twist, the inclusion of the element of celebrating living alongside each other.

The emphasis in each of these three films is on the relationships between diverse peoples, inter- and intra-culturally. *Bran Nue Dae*, *Australia* and *Stone Bros.* take the notion that people come to know Aborigines through the screen as a given, and each addresses Langton's concerns of 20 years ago that cinematic representations were not doing justice to reality (*Well I* 33). Langton expressed this concern at a time when there were very few indigenous characters on screen, and few indigenous stories, and this is no longer the case. *Australia*, *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.* are not critical of the spectator-film relationship, rather, they capitalise on it. These films embrace the opportunity that people do come to know and experience Aboriginality via cinema and use these spectator-screen encounters strategically. In 2008 the Reconciliation Barometer Survey reported that 76% of the non-Aboriginal population said they would like to have more contact with Aboriginal people in the future (Auspoll 51). These three films provide this possibility. They present a diverse and contemporary range of characters to become acquainted with; these are not savages, primitives, mystics or solemn figures but funny, articulate and self-deprecating characters. Drawing on viewers' familiarity with the features of popular cinema genres encourages positive experiences that are beneficial for off-screen inter-cultural relations.

Stone Bros., *Australia* and *Bran Nue Dae* bring something refreshingly new to both popular and Australian cinema. Highly intertextual, and particularly referential to past indigenous representations, or the lack thereof, in popular cinema, the films speak to both past simplistic cinematic representations and also to a history of predominantly dealing with indigenous issues in heavy seriousness. They subtly criticise the absence or marginalisation of indigenes, whilst also contributing to redressing the imbalance, all the while keeping audiences on side. This is not to say these films mark a complete break from the past, rather what has preceded these popular works has also enabled their production.

Actor Ernie Dingo notes: “We have our wonderful people that have gone before us and paved the way for us, the Mazzas, the Syrons, the Foleys, that did all the work, there are some great actors that have gone before and paved the way for us” (*Making of Interviews: Bran Nue Dae*). Through *Stone Bros.*, *Australia* and *Bran Nue Dae* viewers re-negotiate their understandings of settler/indigenous relations, in what is a guilt-free and victimless exercise in mass national re-imagining. The happy ending of the musical, melodrama and stoner comedy is an optimistic metaphor for an anticipated happy ending to the national struggle for reconciliation.

Conclusion: The Cinematics of Reconciliation

Whilst scholarly and critical attention has been paid to the representation of indigeneity in film, as well as the impacts of indigenous filmmaking on both the industry and imaginings of Australia, little analysis of cinema's engagement with Australia's reconciliation process has been undertaken to date. Scholarly work on the representation of reconciliation and collaborative cinema is only just beginning to emerge. This thesis not only contributes to this work but also begins to broaden its parameters. It demonstrates that the representations of interculturalism on-screen in Reconciliation Cinema, and its manifestation in collaborative production projects, function to establish "new conditions of interactions" (McGonegal 33) to redefine reconciliation. In addition, the intersections between these new modes of interactivity in cinema and broader ideas and expressions of reconciliation in other domains are made clear.

Whilst the primary texts in this project have been organised according to commonalities of theme, production approach or genre, to conclude I look at the films as a collective—a definitive body of work—and analyse some of the key features of this new movement. I will discuss four aspects of Reconciliation Cinema in turn and summarise the contributions that each make to further understandings of reconciliation. The four features are: a sense of optimism; an insistence on a dynamic and unsettling interpretation of reconciliation; the enactment of reconciliation in production; and a multiplicity of sites and forms of intersubjective encounters through which meanings of co-existence are negotiated. A close look at each of these elements reveals the centrality of these visual texts to the ongoing reshaping of reconciliation in Australia.

Optimism

The persistent doomed race narrative that permeates much of Australian cinema's earlier films about indigenous peoples, for example in *Jedda* (1955), *Manganninie* (1980), *Walkabout* (1971) and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), creates a sense that co-existence is futile. However, although widespread this ideology was not exclusive and there were also occasional films such as *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986) and *Jindalee Lady* (1992)

that attempted a more positive approach to the future of cross-cultural relations. In these two examples positivity manifests as resistance to white hegemonic ideas and practices. Notwithstanding the apt criticism of the representational strategies in the comedic depictions of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994) these films also generated a more optimistic tone to representations of settler-indigenous relations. Since 2000 particularly, hopefulness has been consistent in the films that foreground settler-indigenous relations. In the feature films that comprise Reconciliation Cinema, there is a positive undercurrent about past, present and future cross-cultural relations and indigenous rights in Australia that runs throughout. Its obviousness varies: in some films only a hint of optimism is detectable, such as *Samson and Delilah* (2009), whereas others radiate hopefulness throughout the entire story, for instance *Bran Nue Dae* (2010). This is not to say that Reconciliation Cinema is blind to the troubles that comprise settler-indigenous relations in Australia—it is not a fool’s paradise. Frequently a utopian outlook is viewed from a dystopian platform. Often hope is deeply embedded within ostensibly incompatible environments of trauma, poverty and discrimination, such as in the frontier films analysed in Chapter One, *The Tracker* (2001), *The Proposition* (2005) and *Red Hill* (2010), and the narratives of dysfunction discussed in Chapter Five, *Boxing Day* (2007) and *Samson and Delilah*. The idealism in these films is tempered by an astute consciousness of fractured relations and injustices.

The cause of optimism about reconciliation varies across the texts. However, there are some recurring tropes that generate the optimism of Reconciliation Cinema, and collectively these form a schema of representational and narrative codes. The first is family. In the most challenging of circumstances—fractured families, child neglect and abuse, racist institutions—the strength and love of family frequently manages to sustain the characters and give them confidence about the future. *Call Me Mum* (2008), for example, depicts mothers and children, black and white, who are determined to show their love for each other despite separation. In both this film and another Stolen Generations visual text, *Blessed* (2009), family love enables forgiveness and personal redemption from the myriad of mistakes made as birth and foster parents. These family dramas bring depth and complexity to the public debates about the removal of Aboriginal children into foster and institutional care, and the significance of symbolic and personal apologies in postcolonial Australia.

A loving family drives the hope for non-violent co-existence also, although it does not always eventuate. In *The Proposition* outlaws, victims and police all seek refuge and solace in their families, despite how futile this proves to be. The Burns gang, an extended cross-cultural family, provides respite for its members from the otherwise unrelentingly violent frontier albeit briefly. The protective power of family is a strong theme in *Boxing Day* also. Chris' sense of obligation to protect Brooke is what rescues her from her abuser. The paedophile has no place in this family and is cast out. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) is also a triumphant tale of family love. Driven by a desire to be re-united with their mothers, Molly, Gracie and Daisy overcome enormous physical and emotional obstacles to return home. In addition, the stoned cousins travel home to be with their family in *Stone Bros.* (2009) and their revelations and reformations take place when they reach their aunt and uncle. This is not to say that family is romanticised in Reconciliation Cinema: it is sometimes fractured, unstable and cruel. However, despite their difficulties the family is a consistent signal of hope for a loving and peaceful future.

The second way hope for reconciliation is codified in Reconciliation Cinema is in indigenous resilience, embodied in characters who have withstood, or who are able to withstand, the impacts of colonisation and its ongoing effects. In *The Tracker* and *Red Hill*, the period of early contact between settlers and Aborigines is not only a time of bloody racist-fuelled massacres of Aboriginal people by whites but also of Aboriginal stoicism when indigenous people outsmarted the enemy. The three young girls who followed the rabbit-proof fence, avoiding capture and finding their way home, demonstrate an enormous capacity for survival. In some of the films resilience also manifests as cultural continuity. Despite its over-romanticisation of female and Aboriginal spirituality, *Serenades* (2001) alerts viewers to the enduring strength of Aboriginal culture when Jila draws on her memory of her grandfather for strength to flee her oppressive Islamic community. *Yolngu Boy* (2000) bespeaks the persistence of cultural values and laws despite Western pressures on young Aboriginal boys to believe and behave otherwise. *Boxing Day*, *Stone Bros.* and *Australia* (2008) provide convincing depictions of continuing cultural life, and perhaps the most persuasive is the thriving, dynamic, ancient and modern Yolngu culture of *Ten Canoes* (2006), evident on and off the screen. In Reconciliation Cinema doomed race ideology is only used for the purposes of subversion, as these films operate on the converse beliefs of resilience and longevity of Aboriginal culture.

Reconciliation Cinema reiterates the utopian notion that good always triumphs over

evil, and this is a third (narrative) trope of optimism. These films insist that moral justice will prevail. They imagine an Australia comprised of individuals, both indigenous and non-indigenous, who are passionate about moral and ethical justice. In *Black and White* (2002), for instance, the underdog, the silenced Aboriginal defendant, eventually gets to be heard despite the established structural racism driving the justice system. The young fair-minded lawyer enables a just outcome in this film, and in *Red Hill* the newly arrived, naïve police officer plays a similar role. The morally astute Claire in *Jindabyne* (2006) pursues posthumous justice for the young murder victim unrelentingly, and in doing so critiques persisting discriminating attitudes toward women and Aborigines. *Lucky Miles* (2007) offers a glimpse of what a structurally equitable environment may look like, by depicting the Army Reserve Unit as an exemplary postracial workplace. *The Combination* (2009) and *Last Ride* (2009) create egalitarian work environs in the boxing gym and National Parks and Wildlife service respectively, with similar effect. These utopian visions of well-established equality counter-balance the images of abuse and discrimination that constitute much reconciliation discourse.

Reconciliation Cinema's fourth and most powerful signifier of optimism is love: young, intercultural, physical love. In addition to the positive depictions of family love and collegial camaraderie mentioned above, the coupled young characters in these films persuade viewers to believe that mutual love is the ultimate source of promise and potential. Duos Samson and Delilah (*Samson and Delilah*), Blackie and Dumby, then Blackie and Clarence (*Australian Rules* [2002]), Ed and Paddy (*September* [2007]), Vaughn and Lena (*Beneath Clouds* [2002]) as well as Tony and Nikki (*Blacktown* [2007]) swim against the tide of racist relationship norms in their communities. These intimate encounters, where reconciliation is at its most personal—"as close as the bed shared" (Critchett 23)—are what enables the characters to bring about change. For instance, Samson and Delilah recover from a life of substance abuse; Blackie and Clarence renounce the violence between their families; and Ed and Paddy repudiate the unpaid Aboriginal farm labour system they have grown up with. Reconciliation Cinema invests much in these young people as they move toward adulthood, and in the utopianism that stems from their friendships (Gandhi), and positions them as passionate champions for genuine reconciliation in its most golden state.

Family loyalty, Aboriginal resilience, moral goodness and intimate interculturalism are thus cinematic signifiers of optimism about reconciliation. There is however one other

unlikely source of optimism to be found in cinema itself, that is in the increasing on-screen presence of minor Aboriginal characters and indigenous sub-themes in some narratives. Peripheral Aboriginal identities and/or settler-indigenous relations in films that deal with different issues in their main narratives are indicative of a sense of hope in the general film industry about reconciliation.

There are three different ways that Aboriginality has a peripheral presence: in minor Aboriginal characters (e.g., *Footy Legends* [2006], *Beneath Hill 60* [2010]); in the casting of Aboriginal actors in culturally neutral roles, where Aboriginality is not mentioned nor or consequence to the story (e.g., *The Combination*, *Lantana* [2001], *My Year Without Sex* [2009], *Look Both Ways* [2005], *Japanese Story* [2003]); and through subterranean themes of reconciliation that run beneath an alternative dominant narrative focus (e.g., *The Tender Hook* [2008], *Beautiful Kate* [2009], *Dr Plonk* [2007], *Last Ride*, *Blacktown*, *Blessed*). In *The Combination*, for example, the owner of the local gym, Wesley (played by Tony Ryan from *Blacktown*), is an unacknowledged Aboriginal presence. The audience is aware of this presence only because of Wesley's Aboriginal flag. Ryan's Aboriginality, however, is of little bearing on the character, and Wesley's Aboriginality is incidental to the narrative. Aboriginal boxers are part of an Australian reality, but this film is about contemporary Lebanese immigrants: a non-Aboriginal manager might just have easily run the gym. Similarly, *The Tender Hook* is first and foremost a love story between three (white) main characters—a psychopathic, illiterate boxing manager (Hugo Weaving), his tortured wife (Rose Byrne) and her young lover (Matt Le Nevez). However, when this highly stylised boxing film introduces a supporting character, the up-and-coming indigenous boxing star Albie “Othello” McShea (Luke Carroll), it adds a complementary minor narrative about the history of discrimination against Aboriginal people in sport in the 1920s to the principal story. When we add to these examples Rachel Maza's brief appearance as a nurse in *My Year Without Sex* and Leah Purcell's role as a policewoman in *Lantana*—made without reference to their indigeneity—a pattern emerges.

In the past, Aborigines were *only* at the margins of feature films (with few exceptions), so reading marginalisation as an indication of positive developments in race-relations in Australia might seem ambitious, at the very least. Indeed, it could just as readily be the continuation of what Suneeti Rekhari argues is the well-established practice of constructing Aboriginal characters in such a way as to support the white hegemony (“The ‘Other’” 126). Or, as Catherine Simpson shows in her work on contemporary diasporic

Australian cinema, minor roles that are filled by non-Anglo-Celtic Australians—“fleeting representations” or “bit parts” (34)—can function to confirm the dominant position of Anglo Australians. Another potential problem with leaving Aboriginality unremarked upon is that issues pertaining to reconciliation compete with many other issues and areas of concern and interest, and as such may go unnoticed. That is, when indigenous Australians are depicted as one part of a diverse population, and settler-indigenous issues as only one element of a range of competing concerns that constitute the nations social problems, the larger and louder themes will dominate. In addition, normalising co-existence in such a way that downplays hierarchical divisions, as these films do, might be antithetical to the promotion of indigenous rights, as any cultural differences are silenced. These possibilities notwithstanding, it is also possible that indigenous “bit parts” and sub-themes might now be functioning in a positive way.

Incidental Aboriginality is optimistic because its suggestion that Australian cinema has reached a point where the past practice of widespread erasure of indigenous peoples has been adequately countered. That is, it implies that recent films have sufficiently addressed absent, inadequate and/or inappropriate representations that typified past cinema. As such, it is now possible for Australian films to include Aboriginal characters, stories, themes and actors in the peripheries and backgrounds without it being interpreted as the perpetuation of racist ideologies, or a tokenistic nod to an indigenous presence because in many other films Aboriginality is front and centre.

It also indicates that filmmakers are confident that audiences are knowledgeable about issues of reconciliation, meaning these can now be raised with subtlety. The Stolen Generations, for example, dealt with comprehensively in cinematic fiction for the first time in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* in only 2002, has since appeared in film without the need for explicit explanation of the events. In *Blessed*, for instance, no dialogical explanation is given for why Jimmy was adopted, and the film assumes that the audience will know that the mysterious, quiet Aboriginal woman who knocks on the door is his birth mother. Secondly, for Aboriginal actors culturally neutral roles allows the freedom of acting in a larger range of roles than those identifiably Aboriginal, and bespeaks a recognition of their professional identities. Thirdly, the phenomena of Aboriginal “bit parts” is perhaps also indicative of the industry’s desire to represent settler-indigenous relations and indigenous issues in ways free from political correctness (as is evident in opposition to the use of Cultural Protocols, detailed in Chapter Six); consequently, they provide an alternative to ignoring protocols or

avoiding the difficulties of pursuing “correct” representations of Aboriginality.

Dynamic, Unsettling Reconciliation

Just what reconciliation entails—what it means, what it involves, and what might be its promise—is explored, but not concluded, in Reconciliation Cinema. In this section I discuss some of the issues of reconciliation that Reconciliation Cinema engages with, to demonstrate the depth and breadth that these films add to viewers’ understandings of the concept and its practice. Collectively, the films repudiate any simple, fixed idea of how reconciliation might be achieved, and instead suggest the opposite, that it is an open-ended process that requires constant (re)negotiation.

The Tracker, *The Proposition*, *Red Hill*, *Serenades*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Australia* foreground features of Australia’s traumatic, discriminatory colonial past, and in doing so they also draw viewer attention to the furore surrounding the fictionalisation of contact history that has punctuated the reconciliation process. Despite cinema’s photogenic realism roots, that imagined the power of film was its ability to be a “truth machine” (Ben-Shaul 8), fiction films generally celebrate storytelling and aesthetics, and are less concerned with the accurate reconstruction of archived events. The historical dramas of Reconciliation Cinema, for example, do not attempt verisimilitude. The impacts of fiction’s casual approach to the “truth” of the past have been played out in the history war debates, and the influence these films have on contemporary opinions about the past has been scrutinised. This thesis demonstrates, however, both the important roles that historical re-imaginings play in Australia’s reconciliation process, as well as the arbitrariness of the categories, truth and fiction. The past is a spectral presence in other Reconciliation Cinema also, in the films that look back at Australia’s recent history (e.g., *Australian Rules*, *September*, *Black and White* [2002], *Bran Nue Dae* and *Lucky Miles*) as well as those that focus on the present (e.g., *Beneath Clouds*, *Jindabyne*, *Call Me Mum*, *Boxing Day*, *Samson and Delilah*, *Yolngu Boy*, *Stone Bros.*). The question of how Australia came to be at this point is always lurking in the subtext. No simple answers are presented to viewers about how and if the past determines the present, or predicts the future. Instead, Reconciliation Cinema provides opportunities to (re)consider the past and invites the viewer to interpret the “truth” of history, and to contemplate the implications for current realities.

Reconciliation Cinema explains reconciliation as not exclusively personal or public, informal or formal, but rather as the interplay of all of these that alters according to the context. The impacts on individuals' lives of structured (in)justice and (in)equalities, determined by political and workplace policy and practice, are the focus of *Black and White*, *Lucky Miles* and *The Tracker* and different meanings are generated in each. The overlapping of responsibilities between individuals and governments is a particularly overt theme in *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day*, two films that strongly advocate for individualism over collectivism. Even in films that portray interculturalism in the most personal of situations, awareness of the intersection between the personal and public realms is always present. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*'s portrayal of the removal of Aboriginal children to institutional care is an obvious example. Similarly in *Australia* and *Call Me Mum* intimate family relationships are inextricably bound up in the implementation of child-removal policies. While *September* provides an intimate portrayal of a golden young friendship, it also alerts viewers to the mixed blessings that the broadening of the Federal Pastoral Industry Award in 1968 brought for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal farmers.

Expanding the picture of reconciliation even further, Reconciliation Cinema draws attention to the myriad of intersecting social and cultural factors that inform reconciliation discourses. In Chapter Four, my analysis of the daughter of mother earth trope highlights the interplay of race and gender in three films with central female characters, *Serenades*, *Jindabyne*, and *Call Me Mum*. In films that focus on dysfunctional Aboriginal family life, such as *Beneath Clouds*, *Samson and Delilah* and *Boxing Day*, the prevalence of drug use, violence, crime, and family breakdown makes links between culture and poverty. *Lucky Miles* asks how reconciliation is to be understood in a contemporary multicultural context, and the same question is explored indirectly in *The Combination*, *Lantana* and *Footy Legends*. Race and culture appear as part of a wider mix of competing and complementary elements that come to bear on reconciliation: recent migrants, gender, age and class to name a few.

Considered collectively, these films critique all of the discrete elements of Australian reconciliation: symbolic expressions, pragmatic measures, as well as calls to address indigenous rights. None escape scrutiny, and accordingly no single factor is held to be the panacea to indigenous inequities or poor settler-indigenous relations. Some of the films that highlight dysfunction, poverty and violence, for example, call into question the effectiveness of any solution that is not intensely practical (e.g., *Boxing Day*, *Samson and*

Delilah, and *Call Me Mum*). On the other hand, *Jindabyne*, *Australian Rules* and *Serenades* value symbolism and ritual as a means of ensuring forgiveness and provoking personal change. Similarly, there is a divergent approach to indigenous rights. Indigenous autonomy is an essential part of the decolonising project of *Ten Canoes*, *Yolngu Boy*, *Australian Rules* and *The Tracker*, but less important in *Lucky Miles*, *Beneath Clouds* and *Bran Nue Dae*. In these latter films cultural continuity is still vital, but more emphasis is placed on coming to terms with cooperative coexistence than achieving or enacting Aboriginal sovereignty. Reconciliation Cinema is a working example of the implementation of indigenous rights: a forum for indigenous storytelling, and an arena where indigenous people take control over narratives, visual representation and the transmission of cultural knowledges. Moreover, film itself intertwines aesthetics, beauty, poetry with depictions of inequity, trauma and discrimination—as such, it is the meeting of symbolism, practicalities and political actions. Thus, Reconciliation Cinema demonstrates reconciliation has the potential to accommodate all of its symbolic, practical and rights-based elements.

What then to make of Reconciliation Cinema's insistence on polysemanticism? Instead of trying to tame its woolliness, the many facets and interpretations of reconciliation are explored, critiqued and even celebrated. Instead of defining reconciliation in narrow and concise terms—as political parties, religious groups and indigenous organisations have done, in order to make use of the malleable concept—cinema embraces its freedom to do the opposite. It expands upon simple definitions and suggests abundant possibilities. Consequently, the cinematic definition of reconciliation, as determined by Reconciliation Cinema, can be described only with ambivalent adjectives: unsettled, dynamic and fluid.

Collaboration: Reconciliation in Practice

Filmmaking is a highly collaborative practice, and the films comprising Reconciliation Cinema are funded, written, produced and directed by people from a range of cultural backgrounds, indigenous and non-indigenous. As a micro-model of broader arenas of interculturalism, extrapolating issues arising from the examples of collaborative cinema provides insights into Australia's broader reconciliation process. Foremost, at the heart of problems that dog cross-cultural collaboration is the fear that non-indigenous people will intervene in, mediate and dominate over indigenous stories, knowledges and images. Were

this to be the case, any resulting production will be simply a reflection of hegemonic ideas and interests, and not those of the indigenous peoples involved in the partnership. In the Australian film industry Cultural Protocols have been devised to prevent this from occurring. However, protocols—designed to improve representation and rectify power imbalances—create their own new set of problems to be considered: what are culturally appropriate images, and who might determine them? Should consultation with indigenous people by non-indigenous directors and producers take precedence over the pursuit of art and aesthetics? Can a set of guidelines (or policy or even legislation) ensure any one particular outcome? There is also the risk that collaborative projects, so aware of the need to foreground sanctioned indigenous voices and images, might exclude alternative voices of dissent, difference and contestation (black or white) from the discourse.

Whilst there are problems to consider, this thesis demonstrates that there are also positives to be gleaned from collaborative filmmaking. For one, Reconciliation Cinema provides a useful example of how decolonisation might manifest in a settler nation; it attempts to establish relations that acknowledge indigenous rights whilst adhering to the ethics and principles of reconciliation. This practice, a variation of “recuperative decolonisation” (Bird Rose 23) that is most evident in the teamwork that produced *Boxing Day*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Ten Canoes*, takes the issues associated with indigenous control and non-indigenous mediation seriously, but equally so the importance of making cinema of a high quality for viewer pleasure. Secondly, throughout the collaborative process specific knowledges, beliefs and ideologies are challenged and questioned, be they black or white, and their validity is tested. These four aforementioned highly collaborative films demonstrate that indigenous and non-indigenous voices, viewpoints and subjectivities can share the production space and as a result, occasional romanticisations notwithstanding, all voices are open to mediation and modification. This dialogical process results in a cinema that functions, as Gerry Turcotte suggests, “not so much as a device that eradicates colonial encounters and their postcolonial legacy,” but rather in such a way that unsettles, contests, initiates and empowers broader discourses (8). Reconciliation Cinema therefore acts as an example to other forums of cross-cultural interactivity of how they might achieve the same.

Intersubjective Negotiations

This thesis reads the on-screen cross-cultural collaborations that typify Reconciliation Cinema as intersubjective encounters that allow multiple meanings to be generated: meanings that resonate particularly with a reconciling nation. Moreover, as a similar process takes place in the space of interaction between the screen and the viewer, personal ideas are (re)shaped at through reception.

On-screen, the characters frequently test reconciliation's viability in the course of their interactions. For instance, young characters try out their idealist notions about the future on each other—matching each other in passion and vigour—to determine what behaviours and attitudes might endure in the adult world. Blackie and Clarence will stay together, but not in their town where others' attitudes will be difficult. Paddy also decides to leave home but not before realising that he will not forgo his childhood friendship with Ed. The future for Vaughn and Leah is more opaque, but during the road trip both discover the value of closeness and trust, regardless of whether one is black or white. The journeys to these decisions are determined by words, as the characters verbally challenge each other in a discursive search for answers.

In situations when black and white characters are unable to communicate, or make verbal connections with each other, negotiations are played out in the silence. For example, when the priest and Delilah meet in the Alice Springs church (in *Samson and Delilah*) and say nothing to each other, their silence speaks volumes about the history of relationships between churches and Aborigines. The silent hitch-hiking scene in *Beneath Clouds* offers something different again: the promise of peaceful, non-judgemental co-existence. When Blackie is separated from Dumby's father by a wall that divides black and white drinkers in *Australian Rules*, and when the characters in *Bran Nue Dae*, *Australia* and *September* are segregated in the cinema, viewers are made aware not only of a past history of racial segregation, and the importance of cross-cultural intersubjectivity is made all the more apparent by its absence in these instances. These instances also alert viewers to what is a decidedly more equitable modern-day reality, where cross-cultural dialogue is the norm. Now audiences of black and white share the same space, watch films that are made by blacks and whites about blacks and whites interacting together.

Characters on the frontiers negotiate the meanings of widespread discriminatory violence: for themselves and the colony. In the interplay of brutality and tenderness in *The*

Tracker, *The Proposition* and *Red Hill*, the truths of frontier history are called into question. In one moment the new recruit, The Follower, taunts a group of captured Aborigines and in the next he receives comfort from The Tracker; outlaws Two-Bob and Charlie interrupt their run of murders to quietly and sadly bury young Mikey; and Sergeant Cooper and Jimmy Conway touch hands briefly before Conway dies from a barrage of bullets. In these conflicted scenarios the characters try to make sense of the violence they commit and the intimacy they desire. Their intersubjective encounters reveal some of the extreme barriers that might prevent the harmonious ideal of cross-cultural co-existence that reconciliation can engender.

In films with contemporary settings also, characters put the ideologies at work in reconciliation discourses to the test. Some characters agonise over the reasons why inequities exist, such as Lena and Vaughn during their road trip beneath the clouds, while others brush off anything unpleasant with a song or a joke (e.g., *Bran Nue Dae* and *Stone Bros.*). Chris' family, in *Boxing Day*, negotiate what it means to earn or deserve respect, a key concept in Australia's reconciliation process, as they argue back and forth about drinking, taking drugs and the murder of a paedophile. Harrowing experiences are also the impetus for Delilah to decide that it is up to individuals to act respectfully toward themselves and others, in order to command respect in return. The nature of hegemonic power is also closely examined. While some films highlight the inequities between people (*Black and White*, *The Tracker*, *Australian Rules*, and *September*) others explore what might be the conditions for structured equality (*Lucky Miles*, *The Combination* and *Last Ride*).

In order to maintain friendships, the majority of characters in Reconciliation Cinema, black and white, eschew static stereotypical identity positions in preference for an intersubjectively determined and dynamic persona. For example, neither The Tracker nor The Follower, in *The Tracker*, adopt the identities expected of them by their colleagues; Carmel socialises with her white friends and Claire insists on being accepted into the indigenous community in *Jindabyne*; Nullah floats between an indigenous and white family and Mrs Boss is equally as stranded in *Australia*; and in *Australian Rules* Clarence is not aggressive or angry like her cousin Pretty, and Blackie is more passive and sensitive than his father and his friend Pickles (and indeed the majority of white Prospect Bay). The white characters that comprise one half of these cinematic friendships are social misfits: that is, people who are at odds with the norms and expectations of the dominant society, not those

who seek to further hegemonic ideals. Many of the central black characters also operate in a zone that is separate from, yet crosses between, established white and black social, political and cultural arenas. While *Clarence*, *Carmel*, *Nullah*, and *The Tracker* periodically function as mediators for both whites and blacks, *Blackie*, *Claire*, *Mrs Boss* and *The Follower* also play the roles of intermediaries across indigenous and settler domains. These films are, therefore, not “circumscribed by dualistic logic” (Columpar 79) but rather explore intersubjectivity under different, looser and dynamic conditions of interaction.

Just as characters negotiate truths dialogically on-screen, discursive encounters on another plane enable spectators to test out the meanings of reconciliation. The encounters between audience and screen create a reception-based dialectic, and provide opportunities for viewers to move towards a deeper understanding of reconciliation. Filmmakers strongly encourage audience empathy. For example, in the frontier narratives viewers are invited to enter into the experience of the past: to feel deeply the fear of frontier violence, the horror of massacres and the delights of moments of triumph or tenderness. In the courtroom drama of *Black and White* the viewer is encouraged to side with Stuart in the battle against prejudice; in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to anguish with the grieving mothers; and in *Beneath Clouds* to enter into the minds of Lena and Vaughn and see the world from their perspectives. *Stone Bros.* encourages everyone to laugh at him or herself, black and white, and *Bran Nue Dae* takes this a step further and on the DVD release provides the means for the audience to “sing-along.” These are only some of the examples of the many instances in Reconciliation Cinema that actively seek audience empathy and understanding.

However, this matters only if there is an audience to see the film, and Australian films have always struggled to compete with exported films from the USA for viewers (Bodey, “Culture”; Miller, “How Many”). Moreover, Ken G. Hall’s “box office poison” remark (O’Regan, *Australian* 59) about the negative appeal of films about Aborigines still echoes in the industry; only recently director Peter Carstairs claimed: “A film with Aboriginal characters is difficult to get people to go and see” (qtd. in Gleeson 20). Nonetheless, the signs are that Australian cinema has embraced films that have indigenous characters and stories and that raise issues of reconciliation. A film with Aboriginal characters is no longer the rare spectacle it was when *Jedda* first caused a stir in the 1950s and *The Sapphires* (2012), a film about four glamorous Aboriginal singers from the 1960s, was the second highest grossing film on its opening weekend, taking \$2.34 million (Swift). This indicates great scope for more detailed reception studies in this area.

In 2011 and 2012 Reconciliation Cinema has expanded further, with the addition of four more relevant feature films: Brendan Fletcher's *Mad Bastards* (2011), Beck Cole's *Here I Am* (2011), Ivan Sen's *Toomelah* (2011) and *The Sapphires* directed by Wayne Blair. Suneeti Rekhari argues that reconciliation and change can only be achieved if the representation of indigenous histories and identities continues ("Introduction" 4). I would add that its capacity, unique to cinema, not only to represent indigenous identities but to confront, contest, confirm and confound established norms of settler-indigenous relationships is how Reconciliation Cinema makes its most significant impact. Reconciliation is, however, an ongoing process, that by its very nature is always incomplete (Van Der Walt 642) and is continuously renegotiating the divergent contexts that affect its aims, whilst always gnawing at Australian's self, and national, identity. Not only is reconciliation a process of establishing new conditions of negotiation, but so too is Australian filmmaking. Consequently, continued film analysis of reconciliation texts will be important to reveal trends in settler-indigenous representational strategies, as well as collaborative production developments, as they occur alongside political and social changes, and any associated shifts in understanding that may emerge as a result of cinemas ongoing engagement with reconciliation.

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