

You Are Here

Living Maps of Deep Time, Clock Time

Felicity Collins

Let me begin with an aside, with a scene from Warwick Thornton's frontier western, *Sweet Country* (released in Australia in January 2018). Early in the film there is a startling moment – a scene, a performance, a sequence of gestures – where a skinny Aboriginal boy is given a hiding. In a short, sharp sequence, the boy is held tight in the grip of a grey-bearded Aboriginal man (an overseer, a station hand) while the white station boss uses a thick leather belt to punish him. After a single preview screening, the boy's misdemeanour is hard to recall. Perhaps it was for stealing a watermelon from the station's desert garden patch, or maybe the boss just felt like giving the boy 'a good hiding'. A scene or two later, the boy is handcuffed and chained to a rock for prying into a saddlebag. These punishments are presented as ordinary, inviting no sympathy from the white boss or the Aboriginal overseer. They occur early in the film as part of an iconography of frontier violence that looks more like slavery in the American south than conquest of the west. The slave iconography persists as the boy unbolts the chain and makes his escape across the sandy desert to the next station, still handcuffed with the chain trailing behind him. Arriving at the neighbouring station, the boy lurks in an outhouse from where he witnesses a shootout. This scene of violence draws on the American western's classic iconography of 'innocent' homesteaders defending themselves from an attack by 'crazed' Indians. But in *Sweet Country*'s twenty-first century, Australian iteration of the western, it is the innocent 'natives' who are trapped inside the timber homestead, desperately dodging the bullets fired by the crazed 'homesteader' outside.

Based on true events that occurred in Central Australia in the 1920s, *Sweet Country*'s main storyline appears to hang on the fate, not of the boy, Philomac, but of a mild-mannered blackfella, Sam Hamilton, who goes on the run with his young

wife after he shoots the 'homesteader'. They elude the law by crossing the frontier into hostile country, but eventually Sam and his wife turn themselves in, and Sam is charged with murder. Found not guilty, frontier justice nevertheless seals Sam's fate. Sam's storyline, however, is only one thread in a film that looks a bit like an American western and a lot like a southern slave film. What makes *Sweet Country* something other than both those American genres is its location in landscapes, or more specifically in 'country', that Australians are beginning to recognise as a 'living map' created by the ancestors (Tilley qtd in Stadler et. al. 2015, 182).

The question of how Blak Wave filmmakers and their culturally diverse audiences are making sense of and encountering themselves in this 'living map' is at the heart of the television event, *You Are Here* (NITV and SBS-TV, 2017). The event consisted of four documentaries – *We Don't Need a Map* (Warwick Thornton, Barefoot Communications), *In My Own Words* (Erica Glynn, Blackfella Films), *Connection to Country* (Tyson Mowarin, Weerianna Street Media) and *Occupation: Native* (Trisha Morton-Thomas, Brindle Films) – along with panel discussions and interviews with the directors (*The Point: You Are Here Interviews*, Eps. 1–4, 2017). Marketed as 'films for Australians to find their bearings' (Screen Australia 2017b), three of the documentaries were launched at the 2017 Sydney Film Festival as part of its First Nations focus (Screen Australia 2017a), and all four were screened on SBS and NITV in July–August 2017. *You Are Here*, then, is a simultaneous cinematic and televisual event in Australian screen culture.

Deep Time, Clock Time

While *You Are Here* is the main focus of this chapter, I am not yet quite done with Philomac. *Sweet Country*, in its very title, seems like a good place to start my account of the central task faced by the filmmakers of the Blak Wave, and in particular those involved in *You Are Here* – the task of orienting Australian audiences to where we are as a settler-colonial nation, to what has gone on here in the colonial era, and to what persists here from upwards of 65 000 years of continuous occupation by the world's oldest living culture. Set in central Australia, *Sweet Country* was filmed within a 50 kilometre radius of Alice Springs. It features the 'visual splendour' of landscapes such as the MacDonnell Ranges and Simpson's Gap that have become part of the nation's cultural imaginary, not only via popular reproductions of famous watercolours by Albert Namatjira, but via the paintings, outback films, television travel series and tourist brochures that, during the course of the twentieth century, transformed the 'dead centre' of Australia into something akin to the nation's spiritual heartland.

While recent Australian outback films such as John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* (2005), Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008) and Ivan Sen's *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016) have rendered their landscapes as barren, flyblown, dilapidated,

sparsely-populated, drought-stricken and treacherous, *Sweet Country* renders the desert landscapes of central Australia as richly photogenic and teeming with life – and with stories waiting to be told. Framed in wide-shot, these geological formations are widely recognised by Australians not only as photogenic landscapes, but as ‘country’ in the Indigenous sense:

These landscapes are defined and bound by custom and hereditary rights, shaped by *a priori* spiritual forces and imbued with spiritual power. ‘Country’ may include landscapes, seascapes and riverscapes, and may have one or more focal sacred sites. [...] Customary management of ‘country’ involves special knowledge and practices that traditional owners bring to the task. (Davis and Langton 2016, 1–2)

In *Sweet Country*, wide-shots convey the vast scale and spiritual power of rock formations that stretch horizontally across the screen, towering over human actions set up for the camera in the middle ground. Human actions arising from outside the frame unfold on a diagonal into the foreground. But whether located in the middle or foreground, the narrow plane of human action is diminished by, estranged from, and subject to the spiritual forces of ‘country’ in which the film’s actions are performed.

If the classic John Ford western claimed as its territory the imagined frontier between nature and culture, wilderness and garden, the outlaw and the law, then *Sweet Country* is a western insofar as it borrows some of Ford’s tropes, such as the raising of the gallows and the raising of the church steeple. But the forms of violence in which *Sweet Country* trades resonate with history rather than myth, and the Australian audiences addressed by the film are deeply implicated in that violence rather than safely distanced from it. Of the many acts of violence performed and presented in *Sweet Country* – including a determined rape committed in furtive silence under the cover of darkness – the one that lingers is the hiding meted out to the boy, Philomac, who is then chained up like a dog. This act of violence lingers because it is shockingly familiar. Unlike public floggings and hangings, or frontier spearings, shootouts and beheadings, ‘a good hiding’ was an ordinary part of childhood in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australia, witnessed and suffered in schools and homes across the country, as well as on outback stations using Aboriginal workers as slave labour.

Witnessing Philomac’s casual hiding in *Sweet Country* involves both a shock of recognition and a moment of reorientation. It implicates us¹ and aligns us ethically and affectively with three figures in the scene: the boss who delivers the hiding, the station hand who holds the boy and enables the hiding, and the boy who suffers the hiding. As an allegory of colonialism, this scene goes to the heart of the settler-colonial imaginary, at the very moment when the politics of recognition in Australia enters a new, highly contested phase. At the same time, the scene offers something other than the chance to witness an allegory of race relations. Under cover of the hiding, Philomac sneaks a small object into his pocket, an object that

will come in handy when he needs to unshackle his chains. After witnessing the shootout at the neighbouring station, Philomac takes two more objects from a saddlebag – a tobacco pouch and a gold pocket watch. The tobacco is quickly dispensed with, but Philomac holds onto the precious watch until the very end of the film. As it turns out, Philomac is the unacknowledged son of the white boss who gave him the hiding. There is a moment of affiliation between them, however, as the story of frontier ‘justice’ unfolds, deep time wins over clock time. Philomac’s final, pensive gesture in the film is to contemplate and then relinquish the beautifully crafted watch by casting it into a waterhole. In this gesture of relinquishment, the film suggests that colonial clock time is but a drop in the waterhole of Indigenous deep time.²

The boy, Philomac, is a minor character in *Sweet Country*, but one who speaks to me in two ways. Firstly, he asks for mutual recognition of ‘a good hiding’ as a temporality or event endured by children (and adults) on both sides of the colonial story. Secondly, Philomac serves as a spatial marker who says *I am here, you are part of this living map, we are standing at the junction between clock time and deep time*. This junction, this meeting place between the brief history of colonial dispossession and the long duration of Indigenous presence, provides an entry point into the documentary films shown on television under the rubric of *You Are Here*. Arising from the ‘Moments in History’ initiative by Screen Australia, NITV and SBS-TV, *You Are Here* is part of the Blak Wave of film and television production that, since the turn of the century, has been redefining Australian national cinema and its place-based imaginary – one film at a time, one interview at a time, one television series at a time, one international award at a time.

Recognition Politics

On 16 November 2015, Screen Australia, in partnership with Indigenous public broadcaster NITV, put out a call for ‘a slate of compelling and powerful documentaries’ to help Australians ‘find their bearings’ in the lead up to the proposed 2017 referendum – anticipated since 2012 – on the Constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples (Screen Australia 2015). In June 2017, three of the documentaries were screened at the Sydney Film Festival, and in July–August 2017, all four documentary films were screened and discussed nationwide on NITV and SBS-TV (the Indigenous and multicultural network) under the rubric of *You Are Here*. In the time lapse between the commissioning of the four documentaries in 2015 and their broadcast in 2017, a confluence of events in the public sphere changed the context for the promotion and reception of *You Are Here*. These de-railing events included not only a radical challenge to the proposed Constitutional referendum – embodied in the May 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart* – but also the displacement of recognition politics from Australia’s First Nations to the

LGBTQI community. Instead of the anticipated recognition of First Nations in the Australian Constitution, 2017 ended with a triumphant ‘Yes’ vote in the marriage equality postal survey. The reform of the Australian Constitution was replaced, in a sense, by the reform of the Marriage Act.

You Are Here started as an orderly, collaborative project between national, publicly funded screen institutions, to commemorate two milestones in the politics of recognition. Screen Australia’s 2015 call for submissions noted that 2017 ‘marks the 50th anniversary of the 1967 “Yes Vote” referendum and the 25th anniversary of the Mabo Native Title High Court decision’ (Screen Australia 2015). While anniversary documentaries and mini-series constitute a genre in national television, in this case the foreshadowed referendum failed to occur. After several years of work by an expert panel and a select committee to draft an amendment to the Constitution that would hopefully win a majority of voters in a majority of states, the Recognise campaign (which was widely expected to succeed) had shifted ground.³ On 26 May 2017, twelve regional dialogues with First Nations representatives culminated in the 2017 National Constitutional Convention at Uluru in Central Australia. In the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* the Convention’s delegates issued a resounding rejection of a minimalist, symbolic statement of inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the nation’s Constitution (Referendum Council 2017). Asserting the unceded sovereignty of Australia’s First Nations, and the outstanding necessity for agreements or treaties between Indigenous nations and settler Australia, delegates at the Uluru Convention rejected the proposed amendments to the Australian Constitution and challenged the conceit that 60,000 years (or more) of continuous occupation could be removed from world history by a mere two hundred years of colonial settlement. The *Uluru Statement* declared:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from ‘time immemorial’, and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown. (emphasis in original, Referendum Council 2017)

Drawing attention to the ‘dimensions of our crisis’ – including the world’s highest rates of incarceration, alienation of children from families, and ‘obscene numbers’ of youth in detention – the *Uluru Statement* called for ‘constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country.’ Specifically, the *Uluru Statement* calls for ‘a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution’, and

a Makaratta (*the coming together after a struggle*) Commission 'to supervise a process of agreement-making between Governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history'. The *Uluru Statement* concludes with a declaration, and an invitation:

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future. (Referendum Council 2017)

On 30 June 2017, the Referendum Council delivered its final report, including and supporting the key features of the *Uluru Statement*. By the time Prime Minister Turnbull responded to the Referendum Council's Report on 26 October 2017, rejecting its recommendations out of hand, public attention had moved to the postal survey on marriage equality. Prime Minister Turnbull's year may have ended with an almost unanimous Parliamentary vote to support legal recognition of marriage as a 'union of two people', but recognition of First Nations sovereignty was a step too far for an increasingly conservative government, further entrenching Turnbull's status as a disappointment to an electorate that had invested in him as a progressive liberal.

In the absence of a referendum on Constitutional recognition in 2017, new contexts emerged for the presentation of the *You Are Here* documentaries, followed by interviews and panel discussions on NITV. These contexts included: a media kerfuffle over the defacement of public statues of early colonisers such as Captain Cook and Governor Macquarie, coinciding with a political stoush over the decision by some local councils to support the campaign to Change the Date on which the nation celebrates Australia Day (Watson 2017, 13–17); the online publication of an interactive map of *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Eastern Australia* (University of Newcastle 2017) as further evidence of the nation's origins in genocidal violence; and the 2017 discovery by archaeologists of tools and artefacts in the Madjedbebe rock shelter in Arnhem Land that demonstrate over 65,000 years of continuous occupation (Griffiths 2018, 271–6). In the wake of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, these events created a rich public context for the launch of *You Are Here*, a screen culture event that participates in the disorderly process of 'Australians finding their bearings'.

The marketing of the series featured the ubiquitous symbol for 'You Are Here' that tells us which direction we are facing, where we need to go, and how we got so lost. This trope, of disoriented newcomers trying to find their bearings with inadequate maps and a poor sense of direction, has been a staple of Australian literary and visual culture. Over the course of the twentieth century, Australian cinema relied heavily on the image of a photogenic landscape swallowing up intrepid figures – runaway convicts, shipwrecked sailors, colonial explorers, cattle drovers, lost children, disoriented tourists and intrepid backpackers – who ignore or misread the signs separating navigable space from the sublime void that lingers

on in the imagined landscapes of the twenty-first century. This ‘navigable-void’ has attracted the attention of writers, painters, photographers and filmmakers over two centuries. It occupies a special place in the scholarship of cultural nationalism, most evocatively in Ross Gibson’s *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002). Of the rich scholarship on the Australian landscape, *Badland* is the slim volume that resonates with and anticipates the poetic intelligence, shifting perspectives and immersive approach taken by *You Are Here*’s four directors. Together, their films propose that the sublime, menacing void of *terra nullius* has always been a navigable place, a ‘living landscape’ to which we belong, rather than ‘sweet country’ there for the taking.

My discussion, below, focuses on how each film in *You Are Here* engages the imagined spectator–viewer. In three of the films, the director appears on screen and addresses the spectator–viewer directly. I am indebted here to a century of critical thinking on the cinema–spectator relationship, elucidated so elegantly by Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener in *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (2010). In what follows, I draw lightly on Elsaesser and Hagener’s formulations of cinema as door, window, skin and mirror to explore how each film in *You Are Here* locates and dislocates the spectator–viewer. I count myself as one such spectator–viewer who has taken up the invitation to cross a threshold, to peer through a window, to touch and be touched by a living landscape, and to look into a mirror and come face to face with an ignominious history.

Some readers may object to my indefinite use, throughout this chapter, of ‘you’, ‘our’, ‘we’, and ‘us’. Finding our bearings in Australia today depends on recognising just how mutable pronouns can be. The series begins with a greeting from director Warwick Thornton, ‘G’day Australia’, and it ends with a question from director Trisha Morton-Thomas, ‘we all want to be friends, eh?’ In *You Are Here* spectator–viewers will ricochet from ‘we’ to ‘you’ to ‘they’; from ‘here’ to ‘there’ and back again. This rebounding is part of the exhilaration of getting lost as we find our way into the living maps that unfold ‘from the heart’ in *You Are Here*.

You Are Here: We Don’t Need a Map

‘They threw a rock at me. I threw a grenade back at them.’ (Warwick Thornton, *The Point* 2017)

What’s most striking about the experience of sitting down to watch Warwick Thornton’s *We Don’t Need a Map*, is that, in a documentary about taking our bearings from the night sky – in particular, from a constellation of five stars in the Milky Way – there is no stable position from which to view the film’s explosive montage of flags, journeys, interviews, stories, tattoos, songs, paintings, sky maps, history lessons and bush puppet-shows. The pre-credit montage makes the formal

intention of the film clear. A mash-up of images flash-dance on screen to the sounds of the 1976 Australian punk rock classic, '(I'm) Stranded' by The Saints. This pumping anthem marks Thornton's emergence from 'the cupboard' where he's been hiding since his casual remark – that the Southern Cross is becoming the new Swastika – ignited a social media storm in 2010, following his nomination for Australian of the Year. After the frenetic opening sequences, a 'short history lesson by Warwick Thornton' draws us into an irreverent alignment with a filmmaker tuned into the Australian vernacular. By the end of the 'history lesson' there is little chance of settling back into our armchairs for a sober treatise on the Southern Cross as an emblem of race relations in Australia. Instead, we embark on a series of journeys with Thornton. Together, we will criss-cross south-eastern, northern, and central Australia. We will find ourselves speeding down highways, hovering around campfires, landing on faraway beaches, gazing up at the Milky Way and watching a miniaturized Captain Cook come ashore. As spectator-viewers we will find ourselves stepping through dark portals into living maps, a step or two behind Thornton and his camera (see Figure 1.1).

The cinema spectator's uncanny experience of crossing a threshold, of stepping through doorways into other worlds – in the company of a *doppelgänger* or double – has been described by Elsaesser and Hagener as both projection and identification:



Figure 1.1 Crossing the threshold into Yolngu country with Thornton and his guide. Source: *We Don't Need a Map* (2017). Directed by Warwick Thornton. Produced by Cutting Edge/Barefoot Communications. Frame grab captured by Felicity Collins from NITV broadcast 23 July 2017, available on Informit EduTV.

projection allows the spectator to plunge into the film, to temporarily dissolve part of his/her bodily boundaries and give up his/her individual subject status, in favour of a communal experience and a self-alienating objectification; [...] identification means the spectator can absorb the film, make it his or her own, i.e., incorporate the world and thereby constitute him-/herself as an “imaginary” subject. (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 37)

Thornton presents himself as a *doppelgänger* seconds into the film. It opens before the title sequence with a black screen and the first line of the Australian national anthem. Lights burst out of the darkness to form the Southern Cross, and we hear a greeting from the director himself: ‘G’day Australia, how’re ya going?’ Appearing on camera with the clapper board for Scene 1, Take 1, Thornton introduces himself as the maker of films with daggy titles we would never want to watch. Disarmed, we can relax while Thornton does the hard work of interviewing urban experts on Australian racism and the Southern Cross as a symbol of equality *and* exclusion. Heading south, Thornton interviews an astronomer who lets us in on a ‘beautiful’ idea about where we are in time and space. With Thornton, we learn that the light we see in the sky from the five stars we call the Southern Cross, was the light that began its journey across space almost 250 years ago, around the same time that Captain Cook ‘took off to come and find us’ – not, Thornton adds, that anyone was lost, or waiting to be discovered.

Thornton’s colloquial history lesson – together with a puppet-show performed by tiny bush toys and a miniature sailing boat – demonstrates that Captain Cook’s encounter with this continent and its peoples in 1770 constitutes a small moment in the great expanse of deep time. The brevity of settler-colonial history is summed up in a montage of flags that supplanted the Union Jack (left behind by Cook to claim Australia for the British crown). We barely have time to ask ourselves why it’s the lead singer from The Drones, Gareth Liddiard, who is chosen to point out the motif of St George’s cross on successive versions of the Australian flag before Thornton whips us off to the Eureka Stockade in Ballarat – to see the original Southern Cross flag and to slide down the blue slippery dip in the children’s playground. Just as we are beginning to think the Eureka flag might stand for something worthwhile, like the fight for democracy, we are confronted with evidence of how this flag, with its five stars arranged in a cross, was used to drive Chinese miners from the goldfields.

Burdened by the knowledge of a mob of patriots laying into Australia’s new-born egalitarianism, we follow Thornton on another kind of journey, crossing new thresholds into the presence of Indigenous elders for whom identity (as Romaine Moreton says towards the end of the film) is a verb not a noun, ‘a doing word’. The Yolngu elders who have agreed to be part of Thornton’s film are responsible for passing on and keeping sacred the stories to which they belong. Arriving by boat in Yirrkala with Thornton, we cross the threshold from clock time to deep time (see Figure 1.1 above). With Thornton as our double, we are introduced to Djulpan, the Yolngu story of the Southern Cross. As the story of

Djulpan unfolds, we see footage of young men cutting into a tree with an axe to make a bark canoe. A young child is placed in the canoe on a white sandbank, while the custodian of the story tells us that the spirits of the ancestors are travelling in that canoe, across the sky.

Interspersed with further scenes of storytelling, connecting earth and the night sky in Warlpiri country, we are presented with comic scenes of colonial figures, reduced to bush toys, attempting to sail their boat across desert sandhills. In a series of bush puppet-shows, Thornton appears as a giant puppeteer making a pantomime of British attempts to invade and colonise the interior – an invasion of ‘sweet country’ featuring cowboys with guns, warriors with spears, and windmills that drain the desert of water. In between journeys that take us from clock time into deep time and back again, Thornton ventures into conversation with urban scholars, writers, comedians and rappers who have stuck their necks out, challenging the ‘dickhead’ use of the Southern Cross by the ‘Aussie Swazi’ brigade. Near the end of the film, we cross another threshold with Thornton, into the danger zone of tattoo parlours where zealous nationalists have embraced the Southern Cross tattoo. In one of these parlours, we catch up with a young teacher having his tattoo removed by painful laser because the Southern Cross no longer honours his forebears who died under the flag at Gallipoli in 1915.

How, then, might we orient ourselves at the end of this riotous film? Alighting from the back of a bush-toy motorbike, with the earth spinning under our feet, we might look up at the night sky and see Djulpan shining through the Southern Cross. Then again, we might look to the earth and recall Thornton’s final, slow motion shots – gestural movements of sweeping up, of clearing the ground, of sending the ceremonial map of Djulpan ‘back to a warm place, back up there’. In this closing shot of Djulpan becoming a cloud of dust, mingling with the smoke of the campfire, *We Don’t Need a Map* leaves us standing at a threshold. This liminal space, reserved for future custodians of Djulpan, is not ours to cross. It is the limit point of our journey.

You Are Here: *In My Own Words*

‘I want to get people’s hearts, their conscience. It’s not just about educating them, we have to get beyond, and get to their hearts.’ (Erica Glynn, *The Point* 2017)

In My Own Words, Erica Glynn’s observational documentary shot in an isolated rural town, provides a complete change of pace for the spectator-viewer. The film invites us to sit quietly, outside the frame, and attend to the small moments that will take place inside a classroom, and inside a town called Brewarrina (see Figure 1.2). The filmmaker holds dear the lives of a small group of adults who consented to be observed and recorded by a film crew for 14 weeks as they learned



Figure 1.2 Waiting for the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Program to begin in Brewarrina. Source: *In My Own Words* (2017). Directed by Erica Glynn. Produced by Blackfella Films. Frame grab captured by Felicity Collins from NITV broadcast 30 July 2017, available on Informit EduTV.

to read and write. The condensation of 14 weeks of filming into a documentary of 52 minutes would, on the face of it, speed things up. But the film is shot and edited in such a way that time slows down.

In My Own Words seats us outside the classroom, allowing us to take a long look inside. Indeed, it takes a second viewing to realise there are no long takes in this film, and our sense of action unfolding on different planes within the shot is at odds with the film's montage of many shots covering each scene from different angles and distances. Similarly, the separation of voices we hear from persons we see, adds another layer, that of listening while looking. From outside the room, we observe a slowly unfolding relationship between the teachers and the participants who reveal something of themselves for the camera, and something else for the audio-track. The feeling, of looking through a window into a world that knows we are there, owes more to montage techniques than to the immersive experience of the long take. Yet the immersive experience of this film, the feeling of observing a world, brings to mind Bazin's commitment to neorealism as 'a description of reality conceived as a whole by a consciousness disposed to see things as a whole' (Bazin in Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 29–30). Neorealism, then, 'is not so much concerned with a choice of subject as with a particular way of regarding things. [...] It rejects analysis ... of the characters and their actions. It looks on reality as a whole' (Bazin in Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 30). In films that conceive of reality as a whole, the question of the long take versus montage is not the issue. For Bazin, 'the neorealist film has a meaning, but it is *a posteriori*, to the extent that it permits our awareness to move from one fact to another, from one fragment of reality to the next' (Bazin in Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 31). This account of a cinematic experience – of moving 'from one fact ... one fragment of reality to the next' without imposing a meaning – seems a good fit for the experience offered by *In My Own Words*.

It would be easy to pigeon-hole *In My Own Words* as advocating the Literacy for Life program from Cuba as a solution to high rates of illiteracy among adult Indigenous Australians. This would categorise the film as an intervention into social 'disadvantage' rather than an engagement with the intergenerational impact of colonial 'dispossession'. In the interview (*The Point* 2017) that followed the screening of *In My Own Words* on NITV, the film's director, Erica Glynn, insisted that her intention was not to 'educate' the audience. Rather, she wanted the audience's experience of Aboriginal adult illiteracy to be 'heartfelt'. Initially, Glynn considered fiction and other forms, before deciding to make an embedded, observational documentary. Building a relationship with Literacy for Life, and with those delivering the program in Brewarrina was 'the right way' to make this particular film. What worked for the filmmakers during 14 weeks of shooting on location in the classroom and in the town of Brewarrina, is what works for the viewer during 52 minutes of screen time. The film is a slow revelation. It unfolds shot by shot, moving us from one scene to the next. As these scenes accumulate, they invite us 'to look on reality as a whole'. This occurs in three ways.

Firstly, we witness students in the 'Yes I Can' program take one step, and then another, towards literacy, starting with the letter A, then copying words, combining words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs, understanding exclamation marks and writing a letter (and receiving one in return). Secondly, we learn more about 'reality as a whole' when we listen to backstories from participants. Delivered in snippets, each reticent voice-over brings us into closer proximity with the teller. From these voice-overs, and from classroom exchanges, we learn what is at stake for the teachers and adult learners who were treated as outcasts in the school system. Two words arise: 'shame' and 'rubbish'. The 'shame' of not being able to do what others do without effort or help – withdraw money, go shopping, vote, read the electricity bill. The 'rubbish' of family feuds and community conflicts – as well as unemployment, domestic violence, drugs and alcohol – that make life in Brewarrina precarious. 'Shame' and 'rubbish' are the words we hear, but in the classroom the *sound* we hear around those words is laughter, and what we see in the faces, pondering letters and words with intent, is a form of resilience and renewal, described by Jonathan Lear as 'radical hope' (Lear 2002; see also Pearson 2009; Collins 2016).

Finally, the film makes spaces for us to pause in the here-and-now of time itself. At regular intervals, there is a lull in the storytelling, a breathing space to contemplate shots of earth and sky, river and trees, passing trucks, perching birds, derelict cotton sheds and a patient moon. To borrow from Bazin again, the film 'rejects analysis ... of the characters and their actions. It looks on reality as a whole.' If *We Don't Need a Map* takes the viewer on an exhilarating ride through many portals, *In My Own Words* 'gets to' the viewer by unfolding a world, that for a decade or more we have understood through media coverage as 'remote', 'dysfunctional' and 'disadvantaged'. Glynn reframes this world as close and real.

You Are Here: Connection to Country

‘The country is always a character in my films ...’ (Tyson Mowarin, *The Point* 2017)

In 1992 the High Court of Australia, in its famous *Mabo* decision, threw out the nation’s founding doctrine of *terra nullius*. The native title legislation arising from the decision required Indigenous Australians to prove an unbroken ‘connection to country’ in order to gain native title over their land. Tyson Mowarin’s documentary offers a bird’s eye view of what ‘connection to country’ means in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. The view is so wide and high, so deep and piercing that the *Mabo* decision, and the deeply flawed native title legislation that followed, are reduced from landmark decisions to errant judgments. At one level, the film’s probing camera-eye takes us into Indigenous communities as they seek our support to protect heritage sites from the mining and resource sector in the Pilbara – as a matter of urgency. At another level, *Connection to Country* reaches out to spectator-viewers with an all-embracing message, an enveloping touch, from the spirit of country herself (see Figure 1.3).

The film opens with a sweeping, panoptic shot of a landscape of unsurpassed splendour, capturing our look and drawing us into the scene to reveal, standing on the headland, not a man with a movie camera but a man with a drone. At some point he will say, ‘I want to share this way of thinking with you, why the



Figure 1.3 In the opening drone shot of *Muruga*, we hear the spirit of the land say in Ngarluma language, ‘This is my story, but it’s your story too.’ Source: *Connection to Country* (2017). Directed by Tyson Mowarin. Produced by Weerianna Street Media. Frame grab captured by Felicity Collins from NITV broadcast 6 August 2017, available on Informit EduTV.

country means so much to blackfellas, and why it should mean something to you too.' After the opening sweep of the moving image, Mowarin's words draw us slowly back to earth. Captured and complicit, our look cuts to an overhead shot of a flat dusty road and a lone vehicle coming into view. At the wheel, the driver introduces himself as Tyson Mowarin, a Ngarluma man and the director of the film. He takes us home to the town of Roebourne in time to see his young daughter, Sharliya, receive an award at school. We look on as Mowarin tells us that Sharliya was 'born with a responsibility to look after country. And I'm making sure she's strong on that.' In Mowarin's safe hands, we make another smooth transition to a river where a Ngarluma woman calls out, in language, to the spirit of the land. Turning to the camera she explains, 'meeting and greeting ... is very important for us. The kids can go fishing now.' Listening while taking in the scene, we hear Mowarin on the soundtrack, adding: 'the spirit of the land is still alive, she's still out there, the country's living and breathing spirit.' Our knowledge of this living landscape begins to deepen as the film turns our attention to the rock art of Murujuga, twice as old as the oldest cave paintings in the world, and more than equal to the pyramids of Egypt in terms of world heritage. But then, in a tenth of a second, our growing sense of awe is shattered. At the moment of our recognition of Murujuga as unique, the ancient stones are blasted to pieces – then shovelled aside to make way for a gas plant, and later, a corrosive fertiliser plant. The beauty and civility of the opening sequence give way to shock.

Still reeling, we are presented with a montage of memory-images that bring to light the enslavement, massacres and assimilation policies that enabled settler-colonial exploitation in the Pilbara. To drive home the point, Mowarin shows us footage of iron ore magnate, Lang Hancock, saying of Aboriginal people in the Pilbara: 'the ones that are no good to themselves and can't accept things, the half caste ... I would dope the water up so that they were sterile and would breed themselves out in the future, and that would solve the problem.' As we absorb these words, and acknowledge their continuity with the 1868 massacres, we can only concur with the spirit of the land when she tells us (in the language of the Ngarluma people): 'I feel this pain. I can be angry too.' Here, the body of the film, the voice of the land, and the embodied viewer converge in a haptic experience involving all the senses. This is a somatic form of spectatorship best described by Vivian Sobchack who insists: '[W]e do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our accultured sensorium' (qtd in Elsaesser and Hagener, 116). The remainder of *Connection to Country* puts our 'carnal knowledge and accultured sensorium' to the test as we are drawn into the hard graft of political activism in the Pilbara.

A film that began by sweeping the viewer into its welcoming orbit, 'to share this way of thinking with you', brings us back to the here-and-now. Our wondrous view from above is replaced by what's happening at ground level. Here, we are sidelined while elders and children – and the politics of mining and heritage sites in the

Pilbara – come first. Heading off in two directions, the film leaves us to tag along as best we can. We hover out-of-frame at profilmic events staged by the Pilbara community with Mowarin's camera and microphone as their witness. We follow behind, as he records bush meetings to fight the 'erosion by stealth' of Western Australia's Aboriginal Heritage Act. We stand well back, as he talks with a generation of men who maintained their connection to country by working as station hands on land taken from them. Back in his studio in Roebourne we share Mowarin's interest in using VR technology to 'render' country anew for Sharliya's generation. Later, we attend a roadside meeting between elders and a young pastoralist couple to protect a *thalu* site from passing vehicles. We share the tensions of the meeting and the relief that this small but powerful site will be recognised and respected.

At ground level, the camera aligns us with Mowarin as an embedded activist. Multiple violations of Australia's Aboriginal heritage sites in the Pilbara are brought to light in interviews and bush meetings, and a petition is presented to the Western Australian parliament. Traversing town and bush, cattle stations and homelands, the film's drive to make this story 'our story too' draws on 'cinema as a specific kind of contact' – postcolonial, intercultural – involving both skin and touch in 'a haptic experience' of bodies brushing up against each other (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 110). Coming into close contact with Mowarin's activist filmmaking, the spectator-viewer is drawn into a visceral sense of urgency, of time running out – made all the stronger by Mowarin's purposeful and patient exposition of what is happening to country and why it matters to all of us.

In the closing scenes, the haptic body of the spectator, the voice and spirit of the land, and the profilmic presence of Mowarin begin to permeate each other. We find ourselves back in the car, driving somewhere not-yet-known with Mowarin. On arrival, we observe a brief exchange that indicates we are here for a special event. In the next scene, we find ourselves looking at a kangaroo tail being scraped and cooked over a campfire while the last rays of the sun linger on the kids running free. On the soundtrack Mowarin is speaking to us. He wants us to understand the inclusivity of Aboriginal culture as a heritage that Australians should 'be proud of' and 'embrace', 'help fight for', and see 'as part of their identity as well.' In this moment we feel here-now with Mowarin, while 'Australians' are not-here-yet. With this to ponder, we arrive at the penultimate scene of the film. Young boys, painted up and lit only by the campfire, dance in a curving line, out of the darkness towards the camera. The voice of the spirit of the land speaks to them – and our ears are touched, one last time, by the beauty of her language and her tender words, translated for us:

I heard you today, calling out to me.
I'm happy for you.
I love it when you sing and dance for me.
I feel the rhythm in my sands.
I hear it on the wind.
Make me feel so good!

The screen fades to black and we pause in the afterglow, waiting for the credits. Instead, the screen lights up and we find ourselves swept up by the camera in a series of high, wide shots that reveal Mowarin and Sharliya in a pristine seascape, close at first, and then almost swallowed up by the vast, shallow sea merging with the sky. Mowarin's voice calls for our attention, speaking to us directly: 'I hope you understand now why I wanted to bring you to the Pilbara in northwestern Australia, and listen to the land the way we do, and understand our connection to country.' A song, Ngarniui Ngurra WAM's Sounds of the Pilbara, fills the space as Mowarin and Sharliya reappear in the foreground. Mowarin's voice urges us 'to work together' to save 'our heritage' for 'our kids future'. We remain inside this thought, this expansive space, as Mowarin exits the frame and Sharliya takes his place, front and centre with the sea stretching out behind her. Our vision dims and the credits roll, leaving us in a haptic, sensory state – touched, captured and held by this bounteous film.

You Are Here: *Occupation: Native*

'I was coming across stuff that was really heart-breaking and gut-wrenching and horrific. [...] Generations and generations before me had been treated so horrifically in a country that I actually *love*. And that really hurts. And then, to turn around ... to make it funny was really hard.' (Trisha Morton-Thomas, NITV interview)

In the final film of the *You Are Here* series, we come face to face with writer, actor and director, Trisha Morton-Thomas, an Anmatyerr woman from central Australia who has a thing or two to show us about our history, from the other side. This is a history lesson like no other – one made possible by the archival documentary series, *First Australians* (Perkins and Cole, 2008), a labour of love that brought Aboriginal voices and stories out of the archives and turned them into Australia's top-selling educational DVD (Collins 2016). *Occupation: Native* picks up on these characters and stories from the archives and gives them a satirical makeover, turning a horror story into a comedy of errors. The film begins with a classic landscape shot of the sun setting over a red desert. On the soundtrack we hear a familiar voice, one we've heard in cinema, on television and on stage.

History tells us the original people of Australia were hunter-gatherers who lived in isolation for tens of thousands of years – blah, blah, blah.

A gum tree replaces the setting sun, and a kookaburra responds to history's egregious claim with peals of laughter. The frame shifts to reveal Trisha Morton-Thomas under the tree. On the soundtrack she exclaims: 'That's me! Reading my birth certificate. They got my mum's name wrong.' On screen we see a

superimposition of the certificate and the words Pansy Pidgigal crossed out in favour of Patsy Morton. 'But that's not the part that does my head in', says Morton-Thomas, 'my mum's occupation is listed as a native. Occupation: Native.' Lifting her head from the document and looking to camera, her voice-over continues: 'I wonder how you get into that kind of work.' An iris shot transports us to an office where *Black Comedy* (ABC-TV) star, Steven Oliver, is seated at a desk, wearing a shirt and tie and looking at a computer screen. He turns to Morton-Thomas, perks up, and tells her just why occupation 'native' is perfect for her:

Well, you get to be on country, sleep under the stars, hang out with the mob, plus you get to go hunting and gathering and maintain a healthy lifestyle and, the best perk of all, you get a lot of dreaming time. [The downside:] it's a 24-hour kind of deal, you can't just switch off. Plus, you've got to deal with 229 years of negative stereotypes.

Oliver 'speaks native' for a moment: they look at each other and burst out laughing. But we are not let off the hook. The screen fills with a barrage of hate-filled social media posts, riddled with racist stereotypes. The sequence ends with Morton-Thomas back in the desert, under the gum tree, gesticulating at the camera operator (now in the frame) then storming off into the distance, leaving us with the song lyrics: 'when you see us in a car, you don't know who we are – black 'n' deadly.' In the far distance, Morton-Thomas turns once more to the camera, remonstrating furiously. On the soundtrack we hear her declare, 'I'm not an expert in Australian history, but *this* film is the way *I* see it.' The task for the spectator-viewer is not to *see* history through Morton-Thomas's eyes, but to come face-to-face with 'our' history, reflected back to us from the other side.

As Elsaesser and Hagener put it in their summary of cinema as mirror and face:

[...] entering into the diegetic world through window and door was a matter of keeping one's distance, however "close" one was, or of crossing thresholds and traversing liminal spaces. Now the metaphor of cinema as mirror blocks this passage [...] A look into the mirror necessitates a confrontation with one's own face as the window to one's interior self. Yet this look at oneself in the mirror is also a look from outside, a look that no longer belongs to me, that judges or forgives me, criticizes or flatters me, but at any rate has become, the look of another, or "the Other". (56–7)

There is, however, a great deal more to this film than an encounter with the look of 'another' or 'the Other' who has every reason to judge and criticise. Morton-Thomas not only holds up a mirror, she performs the role of the impresario (see Figure 1.4), the one who rivets our attention as she presents, with great fanfare, the sorry story of a loutish 'Aussie tribe' – the one tribe, among many visiting tribes, to plant a flag and take possession of the land, in rude violation of all the rules of hospitality. We are here, then, to look at our unvarnished history and learn a lesson in good manners.

This show-and-tell unfolds in two parts. The first debunks the myths of peaceful settlement and stern nation-building. The second documents the story of Aboriginal activism, from the protests and petitions in the 1930s to the contemporary struggle for recognition, expressed most recently in the *Uluru Statement*. While archival footage, re-enactments and expert interviews help us understand the impact of colonisation, and the courageous resistance to it, the affective force that keeps us glued to the screen, despite the ground being pulled from under us, comes from the combination of mimetic performance and vernacular narration. Together, they turn Australian history on its head. This comic reversal leaves us defenceless as we come face to face with the cruelty, injustice and mendacity presented to us in a series of theatrical cameos. When Morton-Thomas steps out of a colourful row of bathing huts, dressed in a colonial costume, complete with top hat and walking stick, we cannot help but laugh (see Figure 1.4). When Steven Oliver appears beside her, dressed as Captain Cook, we can only marvel at their audacity as they tumble national icons from their pedestals – and take their place.

As the history lesson unfolds, portraits of eminent invaders, explorers and other colonists are brought to life by actors who step out of picture frames, and quote



Figure 1.4 Trisha Morton-Thomas mirrors our history back to us. Source: Screen Australia. *Occupation: Native* (2017). Directed by Trisha Morton-Thomas. Produced by Brindle Films/Screen Territory. Broadcast on NITV 13 August 2017, available on Informit EduTV.

from letters, diaries and reports. While the cameos are ironic, the words hit home. These segments reveal that the early colonisers recognised and, in many cases, admired the ways in which Aboriginal people inhabited and cultivated the land, extended hospitality to strangers, and fought to protect themselves from the worst of the British invasion and the frontier wars that continued into the twentieth century. As Morton-Thomas and Oliver reduce us to laughter at our own expense, we cannot help but recognise that our colonising forebears have much to answer for. They admired Aboriginal people and recognised the injustices heaped upon them, but remained deaf to the self-serving 'blah, blah, blah' of colonial discourse. The nation's first two prime ministers, Barton and Deakin, give us further cause for shame: their repudiation of Aboriginal Australia retains not a trace of the mutuality, affection and regard that arose through face to face contact during the colonial era.

We might wallow in or turn away from this short history of infamy, but the film closes with another option. Having stepped into the pages of history, paddled her canoe across Sydney Harbour, travelled to London to walk in the footsteps of Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne, Morton-Thomas is transported back to the red desert of central Australia. The camera finds her dressed in black, standing barefoot on a sandy track, holding a wooden stick. This will be our final lesson, and we need a big stick to learn it. For the next seventy-seven seconds, Morton-Thomas will walk along a desert track, drawing a line in the sand – one second for every thousand years of Aboriginal occupation of Australia. This line in the sand gives us a new perspective on deep time and clock time. They are part of one continuous line, with 'our history' lasting about 0.25 of one second. From this perspective, it is only a small step to accept the invitation to align our story with deep time. Released from the mirror of our sorrowful-laughable history, we (the ill-mannered Aussie tribe) are given the chance to soar with the camera to find Morton-Thomas sitting on a ridge overlooking Alice Springs. Contemplating a new relationship based on truth-telling, she turns to face us and says, '... we all want to be friends, eh?'

Which Way From Here?

The four films in *You Are Here* not only speak to us 'from the heart', they take us where we haven't been before, show us things we need to see more clearly, and tell us stuff we really ought to know by now. They teach us lessons in hospitality and good manners, and they have a good laugh *with us* at our sheep, our flags, our statues and our tattoos. They invite us to get on board, learn to be friends, and become part of something bigger and more inclusive than the short history of the 'Aussie tribe'. Between them, the four filmmakers translate the key tenets of the *Uluru Statement* into language we can all understand: the need for an Indigenous voice to keep the government on track when it comes to looking after culture and country; the need for truth-telling about the past if we want to be friends in the

future; and the need for treaties with Australia's first peoples and their descendants, recognising they never gave up their land or their sovereignty.

But everywhere I turn, in the discussion of where we might go from here, an anxiety arises – that the best efforts, over two centuries, of Australia's first peoples to attune us to where we are, seem to fall by the wayside. Time and again we tune into Indigenous knowledge of where we are, but somehow it fails to 'stick' or to 'seep' through into 'broader public consciousness' (McKenna 2018, 30). We listen, but with 'tin ears' that fail to *hear* (Davis and Langton 2016, 6); and we look, with 'a kind of sightlessness' at 'what it is to be a blackfellow in the here-and-now of Australian life' (Stanner 1959, quoted in Pearson 2009, 8).

For spectator-viewers who have sought out the films of the Blak Wave over the past two decades in order to find out who and where we are in relation to Indigenous Australia, how often have 'attempts at somatic, affective and haptic understanding shatter[ed] on the soft ... impenetrable surface of ... [our culturally and semantically charged] skin'? (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010, 109) Recognising our problem – our thick skins, tin ears and sightless eyes – *You Are Here* takes a big stick to the carapace that protects our soft underbelly. Towards the end of *We Don't Need a Map*, for instance, our intrepid *doppelganger*, Warwick Thornton greets Captain Cook coming ashore in the form of a tiny bush toy strapped to a motor boat: 'I've had a word with the mob' he says. 'You can stay, but none of that raping and pillaging, ok?' Contemplating this invitation to come ashore on new terms, our thoughts might drift to Philomac, sitting by the waterhole, its surface rippling as the little clock descends to its resting place below. Looking into that waterhole, glimpsing the dissolution of clock time into deep time, we might find ourselves turning towards the much-expanded 'here-and-now of Australian life' on offer in both *You Are Here* and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*.

How might we stay attuned to the expansive 'here-and-now' presented to us by *You Are Here's* interlocutors? Bruce Pascoe, a writer and Yuin /Bunurong man, sitting around a campfire with Trisha Morton-Thomas at the end of *Occupation: Native*, has this to say:

Sensible Australians will decide ... they want to belong to this culture ... because it makes so much sense ... That's why I want the eight-year-olds, the nine-year-olds – whatever the colour of their skin – to learn the law and the culture of this land. Because it will stand them in good stead.

On the sensible shift to belonging and learning, the last word goes to Romaine Moreton, a poet, filmmaker and Goepul Jagara/Bundjalung woman. In *We Don't Need a Map*, she has a thought that turns out to be a good answer to the question, 'which way from here?'

Our identities need to be doing words ... not who you are, but what you are responsible for.

Acknowledgement

I would like pay my respects to the traditional custodians and elders, past, present and future of the Yuin nation on whose country I was born and where I spent my early years, the Bundjalung nation whose country I came to love in my growing up years, and the Kulin nation on whose country I have lived and worked for three decades.

Notes

- 1 By 'us' I mean a discursive public of strangers who form an indefinite audience for films and other texts that address Indigenous and settler relations in Australia. See Collins 2016a, "A Hungry Public".
- 2 See McGrath and Jebb (eds) 2015. This interdisciplinary anthology investigates the conceptual and methodological gains and pitfalls of expanding the reach of 'history' to 'deep time' in the Australian context. I am mindful throughout this essay that 'deep time' is an invention of 'clock time' – a concept arising in the present moment of rethinking 'where we are' in temporal and spatial terms.
- 3 On the shifts in public debate that gave rise to the 2017 *Uluru Statement From the Heart* see Q&A: *Live from GARMA Festival*, 2014; Davis and Langton 2016, McKenna 2018.

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