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# Representing Indigenous Stories in the Cinema: Between Collaboration and Appropriation

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*Abstract: Not only has there been a large increase during the last decade in the amount of Australian films that tell Indigenous stories, but there has also been a significant diversification of both the kinds of stories that are being told and the ways in which they are being told. Where films like *Walkabout* and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* in the 1970s clearly came from a white perspective on Indigeneity, in recent years Indigenous filmmakers have become more visible with films like *Radiance*, *One Night the Moon* and *Beneath Clouds*. In addition, white filmmakers increasingly choose the road of collaboration when it comes to Indigenous subject matter, as can be seen in films like *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *The Tracker*. This type of collaboration is most pronounced in the recent Rolf de Heer film *Ten Canoes*. This paper will discuss *Ten Canoes* in relation to two main concepts, both coined by Aileen Moreton-Robinson: the idea of Australia as a postcolonising nation (rather than a postcolonial nation) and the idea of incommensurability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. In the process, it will explore the limits to collaboration and where collaboration becomes appropriation, and the implications of these processes for Australia as a postcolonising nation.*

Keywords: Indigeneity, Collaboration, Appropriation, Postcolonising Nation, Incommensurability

## Introduction

**N**OT ONLY HAS there been a large increase during the last decade in the amount of Australian films that tell Indigenous stories, but there has also been a significant diversification of both the kinds of stories that are being told and the ways in which they are being told. Yet, these stories and how they are told are only identified as collaboration or Indigenous when there is “obvious” Indigenous content and involvement. Where films like *Walkabout* (Nicholas Roeg, 1971) and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978) in the 1970s clearly came from a white perspective on Indigeneity, in recent years Indigenous filmmakers have become more visible with films like *Radiance* (Rachel Perkins, 1998), *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001) and *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002). In addition, white filmmakers increasingly choose the road of collaboration when it comes to Indigenous subject matter, as can be seen in films like *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002). While the degree of collaboration differs greatly, the idea of collaboration is taken to new levels in the recent Rolf de Heer film *Ten Canoes* (2006), which is a great example of both colonial and non-colonising collaboration. While making comparative references to other films, this paper will primarily focus on *Ten Canoes* to test the productive possibilities and limits of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration, and where collaboration becomes appropriation in a contemporary Australian

context. *Ten Canoes* will be discussed in relation to two main concepts, both coined by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003): the idea of Australia as a postcolonising nation (rather than a postcolonial nation) and the idea of incommensurability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. In staying with the theme of collaboration, this paper is itself produced as a collaborative effort, designed to further test the implications of Indigenous and non-Indigenous representation (with academic writing as the medium in this case) and to explore ‘where Australia is at’ as a postcolonising nation. It is also a response of sorts to Butler-McIlwraith’s call for the development of a dialogue ‘within Indigenous academic spheres and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars’ (2006, p.370).

When a non-Indigenous person works with Indigenous peoples and knowledges, it is a collaboration apparently – not an Australian or Indigenous Australian film. In the case of *Ten Canoes*, for instance, it is a film by Rolf de Heer and the people of Ramingining, not a film by the People of Ramingining and Rolf de Heer. Colonial collaboration is the white person’s power to work with Indigenous peoples and knowledges. Non-colonising collaboration would not be dependent on the power of one white man, but on the sharing, reframing and renewal of Australian stories and experiences. In the case of *Ten Canoes*, for instance, the people of Ramingining had power over what was told, how it was told, who did the telling and who represented the knowledge and they



worked with a mostly non-Indigenous crew to do this. The framework for colonial collaboration needs to be more fully examined, in particular how it has developed into an almost unquestioned process and how 'whiteness' remains normalised, and 'guilt' avoided. Attention also needs to be paid to the reception of the collaborative outcome and the intended and actual responses of the audience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. And finally, the process of non-colonising collaboration itself and the differing perceptions and outcomes this has for Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants – in both the making and reception of films.

### On Representation, Identity and Collaboration

Representation is central to postcolonial theory and Ashcroft clearly outlines what has become a dominant way of thinking about representation in postcolonial studies:

Cultural identity does not exist outside representation. But the transformative nature of cultural identity leads directly to the transformation of those strategies by which it is represented. These strategies have invariably been the very ones used by the coloniser to position the colonised as marginal and inferior, but their appropriation has been ubiquitous in the struggle by colonised peoples to empower themselves. This suggests that 'resistance' can be truly effective, that is, can avoid simply replacing one tyranny with another, only when it creates rather than simply defends. Post-colonial writing [and film making] hinges on the act of engagement which takes the dominant language and uses it to express the most deeply felt issues of post-colonial social experience (2001, p.5).

The concept underlying this process of identification is that of agency. Within this line of thinking, agency is 'recognised' in the colonised, which allows for a recovery of history from the perspective of the colonised, which is then seen as liberating and indeed empowering. Furthermore, there is an implication that the coloniser's tools are subverted and come back to haunt them (as in 'the empire writes back'). However, while this can be seen to open up previously colonised spaces (hence the 'post' in postcolonial), it raises a number of questions. For example, who affords this agency, and on whose terms? And why is 'resistance' apparently a necessary part of it? Most importantly, who polices the boundaries of what is to be admitted to this postcolonial space and who defines the criteria? In short, while such a conceptualisation of agency implies an opening up of an Indigenous discursive space, there is still a strong

sense that this space is predetermined by the coloniser, and as such it ultimately sustains the binary between coloniser and colonised. Consider for example Anthony Moran's concept of 'indigenising [sic] settler nationalism' which he describes as adopting 'a position that calls upon the nation to reconstruct itself through a fuller recognition of the indigenous [sic] and their claims as a central component of the national identity' (2002, p.1014). In other words, the onus is on the coloniser to afford agency to the colonised and extend an invitation to 'become' part of the national narrative. Similarly, the inclusion of 'resistance' in effect maintains the coloniser's privileged position as the one to be addressed by this 'writing back'. According to Iseke-Barnes, 'telling and retelling stories, reclaiming the past, and providing testimony to the past are all ways that Indigenous peoples are engaging the process of recovering from a colonial past' (2003, p.213). Thus, some of these stories and other forms of representation do specifically address the coloniser, and some of them are even 'resistant'. However, those that do not (either in terms of language or content) are often simply marginalised as not conforming to the coloniser's expectation of what constitutes Indigenous knowledge worth engaging with. In Bhabra's words, 'at present, the only way into debates around belonging and identity for those 'others' who are not acknowledged as 'universal' is by standing on 'their' traditions or in the new differences they can make from their locations- their voice is all about adding content, or colour, to what is already known, not about *refiguring the parameters of what is known*' (2006, p.38, original emphasis). And it is precisely here that *Ten Canoes* appears to have made an important intervention in a number of ways, to which we shall return a little later.

Can we just mention here that the 'othering' process is a non-Indigenous one. Indigenous peoples don't see themselves as 'others'. And this contributes significantly to the idea of collaboration. Since colonisation Indigenous peoples have negotiated relationships with non-Indigenous, shared their knowledge and their space – sometimes freely sometimes involuntarily, sometimes without acknowledgement. Unacknowledged collaboration has occurred since white anthropologists began representing their 'native' informants. Acknowledged collaboration has been framed by 'with the permission of'. Collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is not 'new'. It is not the intention here to raise questions about morality, ethics, guilt and rightness. It is the framework of (colonised) collaboration that is being examined and how it appears as neutral while silencing that which is too confrontational or not easily recognizable as 'Aboriginal'. 'The past is contested territory, and so memory, ethics, and narratives are

also contested' (Rose, 2004, p.11). Collaboration, as a continuing invisible colonising tool, needs to be made visible: it needs to be messy, unclear, unresolved and discomfiting. Non-colonising collaboration is discomfiting, tense, challenging and full of conflict. Real negotiated collaboration means that you don't need the power of the white person to be allowed to be a part of the collaborative process, but that it is going to be a disruptive, discursive experience involving different notions of time, patience, discussion and movement that don't always fit easily into Western procedures.

For example, West-Newman has written an article about the lack of space for Indigenous peoples to express anger in settler-societies. 'Cultural norms and values, as well as historical, social and legal context, shape the public uses and expressions of anger... no universal forms or practices exist for the ways in which indigenous peoples and settler descendants regard and deploy anger' (2004, p.190). She articulates how it is European thought that needs to be decolonised to reveal how it impacts on and engages with Indigenous knowledges and experiences: 'That is why projects of decolonisation are carefully framed to reject epistemologies' (2004, p.190). This idea also relates to notions of 'guilt' and 'whiteness' and how the experiences and meanings attached to them differ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous. These experiences, when shared in a non-colonising collaborative process are time-consuming, difficult and exhausting processes (as highlighted by the making of *Ten Canoes*) for both the creators and the audience. 'Negotiated knowledge does not imply, or require, consensus; parties are cognizant of, and tolerate, disagreement' (Davidson, Sanson and Gridley, 2000, p.96). This is what bell hooks advocates when she insists that decolonization is not a process that can be achieved solely by critiquing what already exists (1992). The framework needs to be transformed, renegotiated, expected images subverted, alternatives created, dualistic thinking dismantled. We need to know what collaboration has meant (colonisation), what it means today (colonising?) and what its potential is (decolonising and decolonisation). As Rose states:

The consequence of unmaking narcissistic singularity is that we embrace noisy and unruly processes capable of finding dialogue with other people and with the world itself. In doing so we shake our capacity for connection loose from the bondage of monologue. As Povinelli (2002) analyses in depth, plurality poses seriously disjunctive moments for individuals, and for states. Plurality is an ethical direction but by no means is it a paradox-free or conflict-free zone (Rose, 2004, p.21).

In recognition of the problematic implications of the term postcolonial, and in an attempt to 'name what is so invisible to contemporary 'white' majority societies: the racialised nature of power and privilege' (Haggis, 2004, p.50), Aileen Moreton-Robinson has usefully coined the term postcolonising, rather than the more final 'postcolonial nation', 'to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions us as belonging but not belonging' (2003, p.38). This is attractive because 'postcoloniality' is seen here as a continuing process, in which different subjects occupy very different positions, particularly in Indigenous/white settler societies such as Australia and New Zealand. 'In Australia the colonials did not go home and 'postcolonial' remains based on whiteness' (2003, p.30; Smith, 1999). The position of non-white settlers in Australia complicates this process even further, but at the same time draws attention to the dynamic nature of the postcolonising nation, for whiteness is not a static category and access to it changes over time and in different contexts. For Moreton-Robinson however, 'Indigenous people cannot forget the nature of migrancy and we position all non-Indigenous people as migrants and diasporic. (...) the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous' (2003, p.31). The term postcolonising then, allows for the important recognition that 'Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are situated in relation to (post)colonisation in radically different ways- ways that cannot be made into sameness' (2003, p.30), nor should they be. For resisting the impulse to create sameness (as opposed to equity) can help illuminate the powerful forces that try to do precisely that, as part of a restricting but politically dominant form of nation building. If used in Moreton-Robinson's conceptualisation, the term postcolonising inherently resists unifying discourses that sometimes underlie the term postcolonial. Moreover, it actually allows us to see difference as part of an ongoing, dynamic, and potentially productive field of power relations, rather than something that signifies a lack and therefore needs to be erased. However, it is at the same time open to misappropriation in which case postcolonising would be seen as part of a process *towards* a postcolonial nation that would in turn be based on an assumption of linear progression, which in itself is of course deeply embedded in colonial discourses and implicated in colonial practices.

Conceiving of Australia as a postcolonising nation can thus be seen as productive, and can easily be accommodated and envisaged as part of an 'anti-racist white identity that fits benignly into a multicultural jigsaw' (Ware & Black, quoted in Haggis, 2004, p.50/51). In this way, 'white' becomes just another

'identity' that allows the white majority to play at a rights-based politics of multiculturalism with all those lucky [including Indigenous] others who had 'culture' already' (Haggis, 2004, p.51). In Australian 'post-Mabo' cinema (Collins & Davis, 2004), this type of identity is characterised by films that 'explore and rethink the type of Australian-ness that ignores difference' (Elder, 2007, p.200), including films like *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992), *Lantana* (Ray Lawrence, 2001), *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003). This 'ignoring of difference' is closely linked with notions of identity as 'in-betweenness', demonstrating the 'hybridity of entanglement, of non-completeness, of always being (inter) related, of having no foundation' (Haggis, 2004, p.53; Ang, 2001). Although there is a strong case to be made that identity is always already hybrid for everyone to some degree, there is also a danger in accepting this in an unproblematic fashion, as hybridity comes in differing degrees where some of us are more hybrid than others, and more importantly, some of us are afforded the option of 'being hybrid' without the danger of being pulled back in line. In short, hybridity and in-betweenness is not free of the power relations that govern the concept, and can be seen to some extent as the product of white privilege. Drawing on Moreton-Robinson's conceptualisation of white academics as 'situated knowers', Cowlishaw notes for example that 'the inter-subjective 'social identity' of white academics does not include being subjected to racism' (2004, p.68). This is often silenced or at best paid lip service to in theoretical debates about identity and representation, but it underlies Moreton-Robinson's concept of incommensurability.

In contrast to the idea of the postcolonising nation, the concept of incommensurability is potentially far more 'radical' in that it disrupts the core of what white settler identity is based on in Australia: the narrative of *terra nullius*. Moreton-Robinson argues that there is an 'incommensurable difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous people... and those who have come here'. The basis of this incommensurability is the Indigenous ways of being *in* the land, the 'ontological relationship to country', which is quite different from the settler's claim to *possession* of the land (quoted in Haggis, 2004, p.54, original emphasis). In her response, Haggis argues that 'the ontology of country is an expression of radical difference that precludes blending or entanglement in Ang's sense of an always incompleteness. In other words, there is no sense of 'in-betweenness' inhering to 'being in country' (2004, p.55). While this can be seen as strategic essentialism, 'it can only be perceived as such if the white Western construction of the subject is taken as the norm' (2004, p.55), but

Moreton-Robinson argues that the term cannot be applied to Western ways of thinking about self and identity. Herein lies its confrontational (and thereby transformative) potential, as it effectively shuts the door on the possibility of white access to 'being in country'. The anxiety this causes is premised on the perceived need to anchor oneself both physically and symbolically, and it flies in the face of what Collins and Davies perceive in recent Australian 'post-national' cinema: that this cinema could be defined by 'modernity's anchorless mode of belonging' characterised by 'a montage of places' and a 'bastard of a national history' (2004, p.129). This, they argue, is the cinematic response to post-Mabo Australia. However, this implies a white acceptance and a feeling of being at ease and present 'in country' while never being able to achieve being 'in country' in Moreton-Robinson's sense, and such an acceptance is questionable. Elder argues in contrast that 'more commonly Indigenous peoples are desired because of the legitimacy they can bring to non-Indigenous peoples' occupancy of this land', which she calls an attempt to 'indigenise oneself' (2007, p.147). Cowlishaw similarly talks about 'a hunger for accounts of Indigenous experience' (2004, p.70). However, this hunger or desire is often highly selective and frequently results in aspects of Indigenous cultures being 'appropriated or used by non-Indigenous peoples to help create a feeling of belonging' (Elder, 2007, p.148). It is only when belonging is seen as necessitating a fixed link that the anxiety becomes a factor. Alternatively, belonging can be seen as 'an act and a process' (Feldman, 2006, p.110), which is potentially far more productive, for it removes the anxious and obsessive search for a fixed end point (and indeed a fixed starting point), while it allows at the same time for a recognition of incommensurable difference and a *respect* (as opposed to *tolerance*) for such difference. This element of respect is central to the idea of productive collaboration and dialogue.

However, let's not forget the need for retaining the audience who are predominantly intended to be non-Indigenous. From tokenistic inclusions, stereotypical archetypes to the use of Indigenous languages, there has been little change to the meta-narrative: specific adaptations are adhered to and universal principles remain embedded in the narrative. A social justice narrative, a 'blame' narrative, is not easily accepted, nor are the aspirations of Indigenous peoples (Davidson et al, 2000, p.96). 'It is not an option, within the latter narrative to respond to the difficulties of engagement by choosing not to be involved. Failure to act is itself a political statement' (Davidson et al, 2000, p.96). So if the statement is not made in the first place, what are the means and strategies by which the audience is permitted, encour-

aged or forced to question the representation, the construction of the narrative, or its purpose. This needs to be examined, especially when the narrative is perceived as inciting 'guilt', whether the representation of 'guilt' is for benevolent purposes (i.e., *Rabbit Proof Fence*) or racial ones (*Walkabout*). Constructions of 'guilt' can be legal, educational, psychological, cultural or ecological. The latter usage often stems from outright rejection of contemporary Indigenous peoples for a more romanticised, ahistorical version, which removes any need for guilty associations with present and future conditions. The former usage is much more subtle and covert. Pedersen and Walker examine these positions in relation to prejudice against Indigenous Australians.

The more strongly a person identifies with a particular group, the more that group and its relations with other groups will affect that person and direct his or her beliefs and behaviours. (...) Intergroup relations are of little consequence to someone who is apathetic about the groups involved. Prejudice is a form of intergroup behaviour (...) In the context of contemporary race relations in Australia, the social category 'White' has little currency. Instead, we suggest that for our respondents the dominant social category will be their national identity as 'Australians' (...) prejudice against Aborigines will be positively associated with strength of identity with the category 'Australian' (i.e. with strength of national identity) (1997, p.568).

What needs to be considered in collaborative processes, is how intrusive the idea of 'Australian' strength and national identity is (in both the content of the film and the assumptions made about the intended (white) audience). Negotiated collaboration can expose these prejudices or attempts to conceal them: 'Negotiation is about thinking and acting strategically. It is about recognizing and working towards long-term goals...[Previously] their negotiations were undertaken quite literally with guns held at their heads, with their people starving and with death around them. In today's environment negotiation is still about deal making and it is still about concepts of leadership' (Smith, 1999, p.159).

An ongoing colonial legacy ensures that attempts at Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration are by definition fraught with dangers and contradictions, not least in university contexts (in which this paper is written) and cinematic contexts (which this paper critiques), as universities and the cinematic apparatus were, and continue to be, crucial instruments of the colonising project. This does not mean that collaboration should be dismissed as a potential way forward. It does mean however that it needs a relationship of trust and reciprocity if it is to be productive. As

Cowlshaw succinctly puts it: 'to be *engaged with*, rather than *concerned about*, others would seem the first requirement for any exchange of ideas' (2004, p.67, original emphasis). Genuine engagement and reciprocity are far removed from what Butler-McIlwraith identifies as the Indigenous 'reserve army of labour for White academics to selectively include in order to handle the contentious obligatory Indigenous inclusion' (2006, p.378), something which is mirrored in the cinematic 'token Aboriginal'. She goes on to quote Sherrers and Solomon who argue that 'we need to consider ways in which we can participate collaboratively and at the same time use research to extend understandings about tensions and contestation around the construction of knowledge' (2006, p.378). This involves not only knowledge itself, but importantly also the ways in which that knowledge is represented, for example in the formal structures (and language) of the academic essay, or cinematic codes and conventions (including language). Respect and reciprocity in this context means a space for representation *on one's own terms*. Ideally, this can lead to collaboration where both Indigenous and non-Indigenous can define, critique and engage with each other rather just define themselves, in 'a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation' (Langton quoted in Paradies, 2006, p.356). Of course there are different and contradictory layers to this; for example, we can operationalise it within the context of this essay, but we have no control over the formal rules for publication in this particular journal, and whether this paper's style of expression is deemed 'appropriate'. These kinds of factors can potentially have a constraining effect on productive collaboration, but despite that, transformation can only occur when boundaries are pushed, even if only incrementally. In the context of Australian cinema, *Ten Canoes* appears to have pushed such boundaries quite considerably.

### Collaboration and Power: *Ten Canoes*

*Ten Canoes* can be seen as constituting a 'break' in Australian cinema in terms of the ways in which it approaches collaboration in the film making process, including the ways in which it addresses its audience(s). According to Collins and Davis, 'the post-*Mabo* period might be understood as a particularly *open* moment in the history of the genre of Australian cinema' (2004, p.26, original emphasis). Moreover, 'the post-*Mabo* film (together with its generic audience of viewers and critics) signifies the return of unreconciled national issues, at the very moment when a cinema of national identity seems most redundant' (2004, p.26). The idea of reconciliation can be seen as central to these 'unreconciled

national issues', and in the context of Australian cinema, it is exemplified by a number of films by Indigenous film makers (e.g. *Radiance*, *Beneath Clouds*, and *One Night the Moon*) as well as a number of films by white film makers that directly engage with the impact of colonial history on Indigenous peoples (e.g. *Dead Heart*, *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *The Tracker*). Elder sees these representations as emerging 'from the shifts and changes of the 1990s brought about by the reconciliation movement' (2007, p.157). In this context, the figure of the tracker can be seen as 'the [white] cinematic audience's guide in moving towards reconciliation in a place where non-Indigenous viewers often cannot read or see the signs to follow' (Probyn, quoted in Elder, 2007, p.157). Thus, the figure of the tracker is appropriated (this time symbolically) to afford white access to 'being in country'. In a sense, these films can be seen as serving a white interest, in that the role and responsibility of Indigenous peoples/actors in this particular configuration of power is to 'demystify themselves' to afford white access to their 'cultural essence'. Overall then, while these films address important issues, the Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration in these partnerships is skewed towards the 'white partner', and this ultimately denies Indigenous peoples access to cinematic tools to tell stories on their own terms. In addition, these films tend to be about 'the 'problem' of black Australia, rather than the more basic questions of who people are. Aborigines can never really just 'be' in our (white) films; they're always a threat, an accusation, a regret or an ideal' (Byrnes, 2006). *Ten Canoes* does something very different.

The emphasis on collaboration in *Ten Canoes* is highlighted by the adage on its promotional material: a film by Rolf de Heer and the people of Ramingining, which suggests a communal process from the start rather than the vision of an individual artist. The film originated from a previous partnership between Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil, as Gulpilil played the role of the tracker in the film *The Tracker*. During their collaboration on that film Gulpilil invited de Heer to Ramingining to meet with him among his family, to see his traditional lands, to travel the Arafura Swamp, to talk, to fish, to eat bush food and to learn to understand each other (Ten Canoes Press Kit). This eventually led to Gulpilil's repeated invitation to make a film in Ramingining. Thus the film's story was initiated by Gulpilil and the collaboration was based from the outset on trust and respect. This collaboration gradually expanded once the process was set in train, with the whole community involved in all stages of the process, including casting. The end result is a film that tells a story set about 1000 years ago (in colour) with a parallel morality tale (in black and white) set in mythical times. In this case,

'there are no whites in this story, because it takes place long before whites arrived. There is no us and them, only us, so an objective camera isn't really possible' (Byrnes, 2006). Thus, it is 'the first picture about an Aboriginal community that doesn't focus on its interaction or clash with white settlers' (Ide, 2007). It is important to recognise however that it could have been, should the community have wished to tell a story about that. It is especially on this level of control over what story to tell, and for whom, that *Ten Canoes* represents a true break from what came before. As David Gulpilil's narrator unapologetically tells the (white) audience (in English) in the beginning of the film: 'It's not your story, it's my story, a story like you've never heard before'. This clearly addresses a white audience in a playful but confrontation way. While the fact that a white audience is addressed at all could be seen as undercutting the film's radical potential, a collaboration based on respect and trust meant that three versions of the film were made. There's a version that has Yolngu languages dialogue with English subtitles and English storytelling by Gulpilil [the mainstream version]; there's the version that has both Yolngu languages dialogue and storytelling in Mandalpingu by Gulpilil, with English subtitles; and there's the Yolngu version, no subtitles, everything in the languages of the people whose film it is. It was this last version that played in open air in Ramingining as soon as it was ready to be screened and before any public screening of any of the versions (Ten Canoes Press Kit). Overall then, from its genesis to its eventual screening, this film is testament to the productive potential of collaboration, based on trust and respect rather than appropriation.

If this potential is to be more fully realised in the future, there is a need for more of this kind of collaboration across the full spectrum of Indigenous experience, which relates closely to what Hartley and McKee argue in *The Indigenous Public Sphere* (2000): namely that there is a need for what they call 'banal Indigenous representation', rather than the two dominant tropes of Indigenous peoples as either 'a problem' or 'noble savage'. In Paradies' words, 'I am suggesting that we free Indigeneity from the prison of romanticisation and recognize that although the poor and the rich Indigene, the cultural reviver and the quintessential cosmopolitan, the fair, dark, good, bad and disinterested may have little in common, they are nonetheless all equally but variously Indigenous' (2006, p.363). But if *Ten Canoes* remains an isolated incident, 'it is going to be difficult for [white] Australians to shake off their investment in the noble savage' (Conor, 2006). There are clear echoes of the extent of this investment in some of the reviews of the film in the mainstream press. For example, Byrnes comments in *The Sydney Morning*

*Herald* that ‘one of the surprises of *Ten Canoes* is how funny it is’ (2006), which is firmly based on an expectation that ‘authentic’ Indigenous cultures (especially when it comes to Dreamtime stories) should somehow be ‘serious’. This expectation is based on a long colonial history of anthropological and ‘scientific’ discourses of ‘authentic’ Indigenous cultures. This emphasis on ‘authenticity’ severely limits Indigenous discursive spaces, both in the cinema and the academy, which is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the title of a recent academic paper about *Ten Canoes*: ‘Authentically articulating the Aboriginal in *Ten Canoes*’ (Starrs, 2007). In his discussion, Starrs focuses on Rolf de Heer as a white artist who ‘unlike other ‘Aboriginal’ films, tells an *authentic* Aboriginal story in an authentic Aboriginal manner’ (our emphasis). Rather than commenting on the collaborative aspects of the film’s production, Starrs suggests that ‘de Heer has empowered *them* to the extent [that] the social malaise of *their* contemporary indigenous [sic] Australians seems an aberration, not the expected norm’ (2007, our emphases). This clearly draws on colonial discourses of ‘white benevolence’ to the rescue of Indigenous peoples who apparently need ‘saving’. The strength and enduring power of such colonial discourses leads Starrs (and others) to completely miss the point of the film, and its significance.

## Conclusions

This brings us back to the labeling of the film as ‘collaborative’. Inherent in appraisals such as Starrs’ is the idea that ‘authentic’ comprises non-Indigenous involvement with *obvious* Indigenous content. A film, set in non-traditional social, cultural and economic settings, whether totally Indigenous controlled or negotiated collaboration, does not warrant the same labeling. Urban, English speaking blackfellas aren’t as interesting as the ‘real’ ones (Brough, Bond, Hunt, Jenkins, Shannon & Schubert, 2006). And the audience gets little say in this labeling – it is presented to them, marketed to them. So what they see is controlled by the image presented to them and their individual ideological positioning and training. At present, ‘Indigenous’ films or collaborative relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers, require the viewer’s familiarity with the coloniser’s gaze – whether they agree with it or not. For example, what does it mean when a film is described as an Indigenous film? While this has links to the ‘I am an Indigenous director’ and/or ‘I am a director who is Indigenous’ argument, it goes beyond this. The label needs to be attached to shout to the ‘conventional’ mainstream Australian viewer, that this is not a conventional mainstream Australian perspective or creation with its intent to colonise at-

tributes. Colonial confusion can arise when one is labeled Indigenous to denote exoticism, difference, or even inferiority. Spears tries to deal with the impact of the entrenched colonial gaze and the labeling of Indigenous (non-Indigenous is never labeled, it just is) by emphasising the importance of simply creating:

Artistic self-expression and performance bring social benefits, even if they are not specifically designed to educate, resist or heal. I believe that it is our role as artists to play, to enthusiastically reach for artistic excellence and to experience the world on a level apart from the mundane. But there are many stories to tell and other artists may approach their work in different ways. The point is not to strive for a single definition of our work [or in this case, a single definition or process of collaboration] simply because we ‘happen to be Native’. Our lived experience will inform our work, whether we’re making horror films, erotic poetry, intellectual/theoretical works, love songs, broken-heart songs, romantic comedy, stand-up comedy or searing social commentaries (2005, p. 2).

The collaborative framework that is becoming accepted and popular can still be colonising and this approach should be continually dismantled and reformed so that Indigenous perspectives and inclusions in ‘collaboration’ do not become formulaic, expected and colonising. It also means that such collaboration allows different purposes to be intended. For instance, in the press kit for *Ten Canoes*, two very different experiences and understandings of the film and its making are apparent. For the Balanda, it is perceived as a one-off experience, not as an entry into potential negotiated, non-colonising collaboration (*Ten Canoes* Press Kit, 2006, p.11), whereas for the Yolgnu, it is not part of their culture, their knowledge base and their renewal of memories. In Gulpilil’s words: ‘I really want to thanks to Rolf, what he done for my people and my people’s story and a true Australian story, fair dinkum. That story is never finished, that *Ten Canoes* story, it goes on forever because it is a true story of our people, it is the heart of the land and people and nature’ (*Ten Canoes* Press Kit, 2006, p.25). Mainstream audiences view the film as a piece of extraordinary cinematic collaboration. Yet the film, and what it means to make the film, how the film was made, is a part of Australia’s postcolonising present. It is not just an insight into pre-colonial times for non-Indigenous. It is an example of negotiated, non-colonising collaboration – not just cinematic, but social, cultural and economic. To rely on simplistic binaries: for the Balanda it is a safe setting – before colonization, no need to deal with complex issues of ‘guilt’, it is a

unique experience (both in the watching of the film and the making), it is easily recognizable as Aboriginal 'myth', and it is easily recognizable as 'collaboration'. For the Yolgnu, it is a form of cultural renewal, a process of negotiation in colonised Australia, and an example of how languages, colour, culture, and difference are not hindrances.

In negotiated non-colonising collaborative processes, an important element is the awareness of how the audience has been trained to view/read the text/meta-narrative. Representations of either Indigeneity or non-Indigeneity incite intended responses by employing specific strategies. Non-colonising collaborations might employ new strategies or use expected strategies in new ways. The creation of new strategies and new intended audience responses will create new representations and frameworks. The purpose in creating such collaborative texts will need to be negotiated and may not necessarily result in a unified outcome or solution. Disruptive and challenging representations and audience responses continue the construction of new collaborative frameworks. Discovering uncharted and potentially tense ways of collaborating will mean that audiences also have to experience different processes in their viewing/reading. Sharing these processes, open and two-way dialogue between communities involved in the creation and also the reception of the film, and employing different and culturally sensitive practices allows the film to become more than a one-dimensional benevolent or malevolent appropriation.

A crucial feature of the system is that others never get to talk back on their own terms. Communication is all one way as the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue. Power lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one's actions, but rather to go one's own self-centric and insulated way. Plumwood (...) notes two key moves in sustaining hierarchical dualism and the illusion of autonomy – dependency and denial. The pole of power depends on the subordinated other, and simultaneously denies this dependence (Rose, 2004, p.20).

In negotiated non-colonising collaborative processes, power would be as much associated with the audience as it would be the creators of the film. How this power manifests for Indigenous audiences compared with non-Indigenous would most probably differ, yet respect and trust in the negotiation process is vital. The power to reject and be heard will not be the same as the power to remain unquestioned and secular. So does this mean, that whoever has the power to decide what will be heard, how it will be heard and who will do the hearing, has the power to decide whether it is collaboration or colonisation? The press kit for *Ten Canoes* is blatant about its need not to alienate Western audiences: 'It was soon clear that the challenge would be to create a story, to make a film, that would not only satisfy local tastes and requirements, but that would also satisfy a Western cinema-going audience, to use Western storytelling conventions... The only problem was that goose egg gathering itself is particularly non-dramatic in the paradigm of Western cinema... and the third major problem was that the Thomson photos, which were somehow being represented in the film, were in black and white ... the cultural history of the people was in black and white, but the film was contractually bound to be a colour film' (2006, p.11). Such little respect for and trust in that Western cinema-going audience...

In talking about reconciliation and social justice, Larissa Behrendt has argued that 'better socio-economic outcomes are achieved when Indigenous people are involved in the setting of priorities within their community, the development of policy, the delivery of services and the implementation of programs' (2006, p.8). Collaboration based on respect and trust is vital to such involvement, and the process through which *Ten Canoes* was conceived shows the potential of such collaboration. Moreover, it shows that a recognition of incommensurability (in Moreton-Robinson's sense) does not equal disengagement and separation, but rather a productive way forward in Australia's postcolonising process, based on respect and trust, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and between the film and the audience.

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