

Karrabing: An Essay in Keywords

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Using forms of “improvisational realism,” the north Australian-based Karrabing Indigenous Film Collective mimics and plays with strategies of fabulation and faux realism to provoke audiences into new ways of understanding the multileveled worlds Indigenous families inhabit and think about. Successful as their filmography has been, Karrabing works nonetheless enter a culturally saturated visual contract that threatens to tip their productions back into a recognizable, morally responsible, set of resemblances. This visual or social contract is not of the Karrabing’s making but interpolates a response, which we explore here by way of keywords: ethnography/documentary, cultural maintenance, training, collaboration, and transparency. [collaboration, cultural maintenance, documentary, ethnography, training, transparency]

Introduction

A cracked egg sizzles in fat in an aluminum fry pan, as a metal spatula plays at the edges, lifting and releasing the albumen as it yields its transparent ooze to an opaque white. “What do you think about that Dog Dreaming?” a woman asks a child who is sitting on the kitchen bench, watching the cooking egg as she hugs her knees close to her chest (see Figure 1). The answer is not immediately ascertainable. Indeed, viewers don’t know yet to what “Dog Dreaming” refers; and even when they are introduced to the place to which the woman refers, it is via an argument rather than a set belief. A group of young adults and children debates what might have made a series of stone water holes on a small hill: an ancestral dog, digging machinery, dinosaurs, bombs maybe? Back at the beginning, viewers only see a girl staring back at the woman, the egg still spluttering, sounds of a television show playing in the background. As the scene moves from this discussion to one where householders have to rapidly wake themselves from their scattered sleeping places—a chair, a sofa, mattresses on a floor—there are no wide map shots to show viewers where all this is taking place. It is a lounge room, a house, a yard, then a street. It could be anywhere. From the first, viewers are asked to work out what they are seeing, and while they are helped with subtitles, the experience can be disorienting.

The film stages this disorientation as one of location and viewer. It suggests that the questions of

what and where are indeed legitimate, but subverts the expected conventions of ready cross-cultural translation or ethnographic exegesis by insisting that non-Indigenous viewers also experience the disruptions of place and time that are usually thrust upon Indigenous subjects. Thus, the film introduces a variety of frames of inquiry and reference that are part of the common life of the Indigenous north: introducing metaphysical questions about the Dreamings alongside socio-critical questions about the forces of settler colonial coexistence, including how to avoid and accommodate the relentless denial of Indigenous privacy and agency, from state claims to manage people’s time and money through to their intimate domestic mattress arrangements. The disorientation to reorientate the direction of a disruption of social ease is deliberate, and yet, as we will discuss below by way of common audience refrains, such efforts meet an equal desire to return Karrabing narratology to more familiar concepts, or if you will, more comfortable creations of unease. We stage our analysis of this interpolative reception space by way of actual dialogue extracts, Karrabing conversations, and a discussion of keywords, while probing the expectation that Karrabing members will reflect upon their film projects in recognizably enlightening ways.¹ We begin by briefly describing the Karrabing and their filmography (see also Angelotti 2015; Anon. 2015; Karrabing Film Collective 2017; Povinelli 2016).

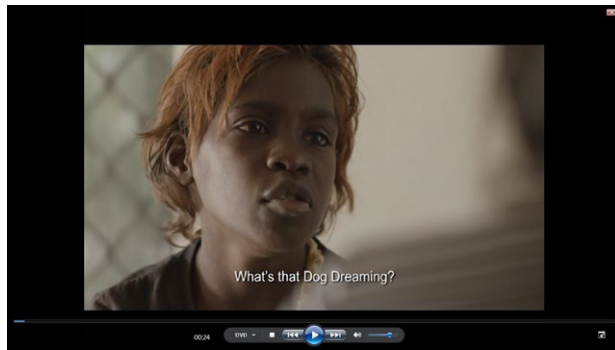


FIGURE 1. *When the Dogs Talked* (Povinelli 2014), opening scene screengrab, Karrabing Film Collective. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

The Karrabing

The Karrabing Film Collective is a grassroots cooperative of friends and family members, including Elizabeth Povinelli, whose lives interconnect all along the coastal waters immediately west of Darwin, and across Anson Bay, at the mouth of the Daly River, stretching outward into a global transnational network of curators, artists, and filmmakers. The Collective uses film to analyze contemporary settler colonialism and, through these depictions, challenge its grip. Their films operate at many levels: from insider jokes and hints of a sentient world beyond the edge of visibility, to probes on what is causing everyday corrosion within Indigenous life.

The Collective uses the Emmyyengal language term *Karrabing* (“low tide turning”) to disturb the usual anthropological binary between place-based (“traditional”) Indigenous polities and displaced, diasporic (“historical”) Indigenous socialities, seeing both as “brittle and outdated ethnographic construct[s]” (Vincent 2017, 3). While most members are Indigenous and from seas and lands that stretch along the Anson Bay region of the Northern Territory, the Collective places emphasis on a set of friendships and family relationships that stretch inland to freshwater communities and as far afield as the United States. These forms of connectivity knowingly and critically speak to the state’s

use of descent lineages and bounded spaces, enshrined in land claim legislation, to artificially fix them in a “homeostatic antiquity” (Neale 2017, 59). The forms of interconnection signaled by the term *Karrabing* push explicitly against the methods by which state agencies isolate and divide Indigenous people from one another via racialized descent. Ceremony, marriage, laboring together, and linguistic code-switching are all seen as a means of connect[ing] people and country: they make them one collective without canceling people’s independence and difference from each other. As Linda Yarowin puts it,

Through marriage, ceremony, sweat you joinim but you also keep your roan roan strong. Det why people bin strong then. They bin respect that nuther person because they also bin connected like inside outside (As so with marriage, ceremony, sweating in a place—by doing this you join the places that these activities cross over, but you also keep your own people and places strong. That is why people were strong before white people came. They respected that other person because they were connected inside and had an outside).

(Povinelli et al. 2017)

Or as another of the Karrabing founders, Rex Edmunds, has stated: “Karrabing means tide out. And when it comes in, coming together.” What we are witnessing is a more widespread doubling, a mode of connectivity *and* independence, of sameness *and* difference. This doubling of what is made strong as an individual body (place, landscape) by being internally connected to a set of surrounds counters the liberal dualism of inside *or* outside, as the same *or* different. Such subtle yet major conceptual distinctions sit at the heart of the impasses between the aspirations of the Collective and the metrics and discourses of governmental policy and engaged publics. And it is this impasse that defines the first of the Karrabing films.

When the Dogs Talked (Povinelli 2014) begins with the housing problems of one member.

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Elizabeth A. Povinelli is Franz Boas professor of anthropology and core faculty in the Institute for Research on Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Columbia University. Her writing has developed a critical theory of late liberalism that would support an anthropology of the otherwise, primarily from within a sustained relationship with Indigenous colleagues in north Australia and across five books, numerous essays, and multiple films with the Karrabing.

Gigi: [It's about] how we've been struggling through life. I'm the mystery. Every time I have all my family I have to put them up in my house and it is overcrowding, sometime it is too much for me. Sometime I just feel like walking out, feel like going somewhere. Too many stress, too many people. It affects all of us.

Rex: We want to go out bush where we can hunt and fish and not pay rent, just be with the rest of the family.

As with the housing conundrum, the Collective itself emerged at an impasse and reorientation of federal state policy on Indigenous welfare in the Northern Territory. Members originally began making short films as a method of self-organization and social analysis, prompted by the radical experience of becoming refugees in their own country (Povinelli 2002). Having come to the other side of their parents' experiences of the necropolitics of settlement—the extraordinarily violent period between genocide, assimilation, self-determination, and the exhausting exhumations of cultural identity that self-determination then required for land claims (Povinelli 1994 and 2002; Roberts 2009; Rose 1991)—things started to seriously unravel. As Povinelli has written elsewhere,

[O]n March 15, 2007, members ... were threatened with chainsaws and pipes, watched as their cars and houses were torched, and their dogs beaten to death. Four families lost rare, well-paying jobs in education, housing, and water works.

(Povinelli 2011, np)

In the shape-shifting vicissitudes of Indigenous housing and wider social policy (Crabtree 2013; Lea 2012b; Lea and Pholeros 2010), the initial response to this displacement had been vaguely hopeful. The families were promised new housing, proper schooling, and better jobs at Bulgul, close to the mouth of the Daly River, a site that, while small and with low to no civic infrastructure, was closer to their ancestral countries. A tent settlement was set up; the tide was turning.

Linda: In 2007, that's when we been fleeing from Belyuen. [We were] homeless people because we never had that house, you know, so we all had to live full house in Minmerrama [a public housing estate in Darwin] and then we all decided in wet season we just going to move to Bulgul [Daly River] and sleeping under the trees [in tents].

As they lived in small tents, waiting for the promised new housing, jobs, and schools, government policy swiftly changed, unleashing what felt like a new wave of violence. Aboriginal people could not receive funding for infrastructure on their customary country, but were now told to shift to arbitrarily determined "growth towns" (Markham and Doran 2015) or in the welfare suburbs of the capital city.

Gigi, repeating her points: The film we made was about the lifestyle we been living, we trying to show to other people how we been struggling through life. We decided to make this movie, it's about me ... because every time I have all my family I have to put them up in my house. It's a three bedroom house and it's overcrowded and it's too much for me and sometimes I just feel like walking out going somewhere. It's too many stress. It's too many people.

When asked if the film is thus her story, Gigi replies, "It's all of our story." Here, we return to an earlier point: the staging and distribution of disorientation within and by Karrabing films, and whose frame of reference is considered universal or particular. Gigi's comment that the film stages "all of our story" can be read as merely referring to "all of our (Indigenous members of Karrabing) story." Or can be broadened to "all of our (Indigenous people living in the Northern Territory under the harsh unforgiving logics of the Intervention) story." Or even further to "all of our (Indigenous people living under continuous occupation) story." And, onward ... soon the question of whose story is legible, is universal, is the general condition and story of most people, shifts—as does the dominant cinematic subject. *This kind of thing* is what is generally known if you live within the worlds of most people, Indigenous, of color, subaltern, radically marginalized, carved by bet-terment policies, and divided by extractive capitalism.

When the Dogs Talked [Dogs] is the first of three films (*Dogs*, *Windjarrameru: The Stealing C*nt\$*, and *Wutharr: Saltwater Dreams*), often referred to as Intervention Trilogy, that stage the condition of Indigenous lifeworlds under the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response, a.k.a. "the Intervention," without specifically referring to it. Non-reference in turn raises the impasse of documentation within conditions of the present. What would the Intervention look like at any rate in terms of its ongoing durative effects? How would documentary film stage and plot a harsh interruption of Indigenous life as also simply yet another ongoing set of historical interruptions, as event and

non-event at once? The barely articulable magnitude of what might need to be witnessed exposes the delusional promise of visual media as inherently offering a comprehensive recording device, let alone attending to phenomena that are otherwise invisible to an interventionist apperception.

On one hand, *Dogs* is a film about people constrained by their circumstances under conditions of continuing late liberal settler occupation. The film begins with a family, plagued by the Darwin Housing Commission about overcrowding, who set off in search of their relative, Gigi, who holds the lease. Agents of the Housing Commission tell them that if the absent Gigi doesn't come into the office by the very next day, she will lose the house. This loss will not be hers alone: everyone who depends on it for a night's sleep off the street will suffer as well. In other words, homelessness is a cause of the problem and the result. On the other hand, it shows a group of families who also sustain other connections, with each other, with their country, with different rationalities and beholdings. As the road trip commences to find Gigi, and the extended family travels ever further into their homelands and into arguments about what to prioritize, the film slowly reveals the ordinary embodied interconnections between the families and their countries that settler colonialism consistently trammels over but has not eradicated.

Their counterclaims about how to live properly, what it is to live well and according to local ethics, are not positioned as an alternative to the world of bureaucratized existence, but as something that pulses in and around the shifting demands of such an existence, iterating and circumventing its ubiquitous claims at the same time. Should they fight for their housing tenancy in the face of government regulations about noise and overcrowding, or live with no infrastructure on country ringbarked by subdivisions, cattle grids, and fences? Or will they manage both these existences and more besides, the calls of a desiring, demanding, accusing, punishing, and rewarding country included? These question marks are not answered by the film but rather animated and amplified by it. Every time a possible answer and thus exit from their dilemma arises, it is immediately diverted by another potential crisis, of very ordinary kinds. In other words, the epistemic open with which the film begins is continually supplemented by a series of practical openings and closings. The cause of the holes in the ground that our young girl from the opening scenes is asked about, the Dog Dreaming, might be dinosaurs, men with machines, or a giant ancestor whose paws got clubbed as firesticks were turned and turned in its outsized hands, burning and stumping

its fingers. Who and what the ancestral dogs are as these dogs persist into the present is the question the girl leaves unanswered, confounding audience expectations, egg still sizzling at the film's end. Not saying may well be more disruptive than saying. She is not going to represent a lamentable knowledge gap between what her forebears would have said about the Dog Dreaming, and young people's knowledge today, say. Nor will she be a measure of the dynamic claims of "modernity" over a static Dreamtime.

By refusing the moral and conceptual binaries, the film teases the audience's desire for closure, following film credits instead with jokes about Star Gate, foregrounding and laughing away a reference to the mediating role of cinema memories embedded within the film's narrative arc. But alongside these epistemological openings are the practical vortexes of a state that demands competing versions of Indigeneity—both bush savvy, *and* economically and domestically compliant—without providing pathways and blocking available resources for fully realizing either. The Karrabing wonder whether the state is all too happy for them to fail at both: "don't worry, they [white people] are still killing us," members will say. Like the Intervention, the riot and its ramifications began long before the riot, and will reverberate long afterward.

By the end of the film, as the opening scene repeats itself, hopefully viewers see more at stake than merely the positivity of cultural redemption that audiences crave, even as settler colonialism denies the same to Indigenous people. Instead (again, hopefully), the audience begins to feel the disorientation of their own moral, political, and social compasses in a way that Nietzsche might appreciate. But this cannot be controlled for. When showing *When the Dogs Talked* to an audience at the Gertrude Contemporary (a not-for-profit gallery and studio complex in the city of Melbourne, Australia), an audience member sought clarification about the relationship between Karrabing actions and Dreaming reactions and about the moral nature of the Dreaming itself. "Is the Dog Dreaming good or bad?" she asked. The answer, Karrabing works insist, is not to choose one or the other, but to refuse the underlying framework of the question itself.

Their second film, *Windjarrameru: The Stealing C*nts* (2015), makes this more explicit. *Windjarrameru* explores who goes to jail for what kind of stealing and violation, and what kinds of punishments meet different types of transgression. As in *Dogs*, mobile phones play a role. *Windjarrameru* opens with a young Indigenous ranger sitting against a tree, scanning for something, relieving the time with selfies as he listens to music on his phone. It has clearly been a prolonged vigil. He is interrupted by a group of age mates who call him over to join in as

they share a carton of hot beer they happily found in the scrub, with a short speculation on how the beer came to be there in the first place, subtly suggesting the normalcy of everyday trespass on Indigenous lands.

“Where do you think this beer came from?” asks one. “Campers,” answers another. “They must have forgot to put [the beers back] in their Esky.”

As the drinking goes on, slurring words and slowing bodies, the boys’ banter shifts from teasing to serious words about what being locked in Darwin’s Berrimah jail is like, where so many Indigenous men end up. Being accused of stealing when there were clearly trespassers on their country turns out to be one of many double standards that pass before viewers’ eyes. Before the young drinkers collected him, our young ranger was tracking suspected illegal mining activities, a problem that the adult Karrabing Collective members had thrown into the plot. In this film, the illegal miners are acted by Indigenous men, complete with mirrored aviator glasses and a callous disregard for the sacred sites they are intent on destroying, while other Karrabing actors show the collusion between extractive capital, policing, and incarceration. The unlikely image of Aboriginal mining executives works because of the actors’ perfect capture of their cynical ways, a character analysis based on deep familiarity with racialized forms of accumulation through dispossession (cf. Harvey 2005).

Linda Yarrowin: Explaining the plot: “The [miners] act like crooks, digging up land like that sacred site.”

Gavin Bianumu: “Us mob didn’t report the miners. Only us mob took the blame.”

Rex Edmunds: “Like we go jail anything, but *Berragut* [white people] they steal everything” (see also Madden 2015).

As they consider the roles played in the incident by the ancestral present, the regulatory state, and the Christian faith, the third film in the trilogy, *Wutharr: Saltwater Dreams*, now filmed almost exclusively with smartphones,² further explores the multiple demands and inescapable vortexes of contemporary Indigenous life. Across a series of flashbacks, an extended Indigenous family argues about what caused their boat’s motor to break down and leave them stranded out in the bush. In crucial ways, *Wutharr* returns to themes explored in *Dogs*, but now with a deeper transtemporal framework

that insists that their present life sits within and alongside an actively interpreting landscape. The ludicrous nature of the punitive welfare state is on full display as one of the members plays a state agent sent to help the group fill out the forms necessary to pay off a large fine they accrued for boating to their own country without proper safety equipment. By the time the agent outlines the seventh densely arcane document, any purported rationality to state practices has flown out the window. What returns is an equally demanding ancestral realm. When one of the protagonists—having been caught in a maelstrom that takes her back to 1952—asks her (still living) ancestors why they punished her and her family by breaking the motor, the answer is simple: you don’t come and visit us enough. Here is the Catch-22: to fulfill their country obligations in the context of contemporary late settler liberalism, they must violate the state law, or vice versa. They cannot avoid one or the other “punishing them.”

Talking to Viewers, Talking to Karrabing: Lessons in Keywords

Whenever Karrabing members are present for questions after viewings, whether in Berlin, Jerusalem, Athens, Mechelen, or Canberra, audiences attempt to pin the meaning of what they are seeing to gain a better account of Karrabing intentions. The questions are usually provocative, genuine, and probative, invoking laughter, discussion, and interaction. As such, they are not wrong questions. Still, they are also indicative of a field of power in the kindly quest for meaning, a subtle, well-intentioned semantic plea, which here, in turn, we place into a dialogue around keywords, probing the audience probings for what they reveal about the politics of reception and circulation. For it is this play between conditioned expectations—what a liberal, educated, Western audience has been tutored to know about Indigenous existence and what Karrabing members want to say about who they are—that all Karrabing films make visible.

Ethnography/Documentary

One of the continual questions the Karrabing are asked is one of genre (Povinelli 2016). Depending on where the films are shown, different suggestions are presented for members to select from: ethnography, documentary, surrealism, hyperrealism, faction, or neorealist nonfiction. When Povinelli is available to the audience, the

question often turns to ethnographic film, and more specifically, the tradition of Jean Rouch and his work in colonial French West Africa (Rouch 1978). Some are more insistent than others that the films be considered part of the ethnographic tradition (as opposed, say, to Augusto Boal's [2000] techniques otherwise known as theatre of the oppressed).

There are many things one might say about this. The first, importantly, is to note that contemporary ethnographic film is an incredibly rich and diverse visual field, one that is often more effective as a probative media than written ethnography, which nonetheless has been relentlessly critiqued as the ultimate form of colonial representation (Biddle 2008; Deger 2006; Ginsburg 2010, 2011; MacDougall 1998). As one of the founders of ethno-fiction—a genre that would spill into the written work of innovative anthropologists like Michael Taussig (Eakin 2001; Taussig 2004)—Rouch's own work broke multiple existing genres and helped to create visual anthropology as a field; but the problematics of representing “the Other” simply to re-present ourselves remained. As Rachel Moore (1992) argued some time ago, “Indigenous video” does not solve the problems which plague claims of ethnographic authority. Yet while these are important discussions, they misdirect Karrabing intentions. Working through issues of (mis) translation and (dis)orientation are key Karrabing methods, yet members have never positioned their work as the empowered solution to issues of anthropological voice, raising the question of why ethnographic film is assumed to be the genre in which the Karrabing are working.

One answer is obvious: one of its members is an identified anthropologist, albeit one who became such at the request of the parents and grandparents of current Karrabing members (Povinelli 2016). Another answer is that the Collective builds their narratives out of their everyday lives, and representing the quotidian is the claimed space of anthropological work. What is more interesting to explore is the collapse of a collective form of creation into a form of being represented by oneself or another: by the anthropologist or by the group. In other words, the function of the film work is to be represented or to represent oneself to an audience. To show oneself for the other. As Linda Yarrowin has said, “Our films show what it is really like, what's really going on, in our lives.” At another time, she restressed the point: “A true story but story; real but got story.” Likewise, Natasha Bigfoot Lewis describes Karrabing films as “true” in the sense that even though the most documentary of the films are fictional scenes mocked up out of reality, they are things that have or could have happened, a truthful capture of being Indigenous today.

And yet what members also say is that these films are making true something in but as-of-yet unable to define about the world. Sheree Bianamu and Ethan Jorrock, younger members of the Collective, describe this as a coming to understand, through the process of pulling into visibility through the needs of filming *and* sweating back into country, how the stories their parents and grandparents told them are not merely “children stories” but a means of framing their and their cohort's actions and land reactions (Bianamu et al. 2017). Here, the question turns from one of genre and classification to practice and formation: what practices bring forward a formation of social and land existence that Karrabing members struggle to (re)make as true, an issue which surfaces again with the question of collaboration.

Collaboration

The word *collaboration*, like *ethnography*, is not a word Karrabing tend to use, although it is a question routinely asked, perhaps as a front for the question people are too polite to ask: namely, what exactly *is* Karrabing? Either way, answers are not readily converted into the pithy statements different interlocutors are cued to hear, for they cut athwart the anthropologized definitions of land, kinship, and relatedness now enshrined in both legal and popular cultural recognition systems. The singularity of the concept also implies a mode of copresence that would otherwise not exist but for the deliberate intention of working together, raising the question: is it collaboration when the formation is already a set of relations among people who have lived with, loved, hated, and helped each other forever, relations of timeless *duree* and meaning? Here, we remember Rex Edmunds' statement that Karrabing means “as the tide comes in, coming together.” This describes a group of people who, like the tides, come together and move apart as different functions of their lives converge and dissipate, neither as a once-off nor as a constant steady state, but as a continuation of relational practices.

Conceived in terms of funding systems, “collaboration” might further assume members of the Collective represent discrete sovereign descent groups, as if these are an actual timeless entity—as if different descent groups discretely exist, having always done so in this type of form, who are now collaborating. Here too there is greater fluidity in practice. Let's say one way in which you get country is through your father; but if your father dumped you (“just left his egg”), then you might reckon country through your mother's father. Then, areas that might be one's country are always distributed and shifting. Tides come in and out, the

sands shift, the fires rage, the rivers flood, banks erode, the Dreamings are crossed and push back with their demands, economic livelihoods ebb and flow, and people move and get married across different assemblies. There are absorptive modes of kinship and there are exclusive ones. For Karrabing members, absorptive modes dominate: blood relations and friends alike are enfolded. Of course, formal kin might be judged with different criteria: how good an aunty, or daughter, nephew, son is this one, in relation to affective ties met or failed? But this is as fixed as group boundaries might get; which is to say, affectively speaking again, hardly fixed at all, amid other histories of relating, responding, beholding, and feeling—and simply being present, returning, staying.

It would be truer, but perhaps not clearer, to say the Collective collects relations between people who transcend the normative categories of liberal recognition. So another answer to the question of what is the Karrabing, or how does it collaborate, might be to say it is a formation that represents decisive self-organizing prior to the imposed land council model of sovereign groups that preclude lively sociality. And this convoluted answer would be needed because all this inherent fluidity became administratively settled under systems of bureaucratic and anthropological recognition: the boundary and the heteronormative descent deemed by social anthropologists as being true for everywhere helped render all other modes of assembling secondary, meeting a government demand for certainty in the moment of exerting disciplinary muscularity out of old ethnographic forays (Povinelli 2002). Karrabing posit a mode of belonging to each other and to a stretch of landscape that runs counter and diagonally across this ethnographic burden, refusing it, as Audra Simpson (2014) might say, even as they foreground how this burden weighs down and deforms their lives—and deforms them according to a specific, if evolving, late liberal settler logic. Yet, just as a self-organizing “all one family” assemblage does not pull anthropologisms from the law’s determinative carvings, so too Karrabing members are apprehended differently.

Povinelli: “We can love each other as much as we want—but white people and governments interpret and frame us differently; we can’t pretend the world is structured differently.”

Cultural Maintenance

If a general demand is often made of Indigenous collectives to produce narratives as forms of representa-

tion rather than as filmic innovation or straight play, a more specific demand is that Indigenous artistic effort be *for* something beyond the artistic production itself. Again, like the question of genre, or collaboration, the matter is complicated. After all, as a group the Karrabing Collective, including Povinelli, see filmmaking as a powerful means of actualizing what is already potentially within the group. Telling and retelling narratives, analyzing why scenes follow each other, figuring out how one generation’s embodiment of their analytics of people and place is refigured in another, and arguing about what aspect of this analytic should be a part of a film: all these practices do indeed keep in the present, by making them vital and compelling, what settlers would like to confine to the fading past. One could probably even quantify the effects of filmmaking and the continuing embodiment of Karrabing beliefs as a form of “cultural maintenance.”

And yet, cultural maintenance *per se* is not why many Karrabing make films and artworks. Instead, they make them because *how* they now make them—on their own schedule; scenes shot periodically; in some cases one person playing one role, in other cases multiple bodies playing multiple parts—is fun and absorbing, a diversion in a boring week, a means to open travel interstate and overseas, a way of having something “to show” in their lives, a pragmatic reason to come together, and a reason to co-create. Likewise, the success of Indigenous film and art as a mode of production, and the vital roles played by regional art and media centers in Australia, does not necessarily pivot on grand intent or glorious capacities³ but because they enable a way of doing, involving, and being together on country that is otherwise being strangled (for more on art centers, see Biddle 2016; on copresence as creativity in land care, see Vincent 2017). Film and art succeed for Karrabing when they take on board seriously the terms of everyday life and pragmatics. The multiplicity of reasons various members might make films opens the purposivity of filmmaking to an ever widening set of ends and thus opens the possibility of what filmmaking might do for Karrabing members. In this sense, Karrabing filmmaking refuses the late liberal capture of all practices by economic rationality or cultural recognition, including the idea of filmmaking as an apprenticeship to a more industrious pathway in the name of individual or community betterment. But this, like any answers so far, cannot lessen audience and potential funder demands that the point of making films is transitional, a teleological quest for a self-disciplined and accredited future destiny.

Training

Anthropologist in audience: “So I noticed from the credits [for *Windjarrameru*] that Aboriginal people are not holding the cameras. Are they being trained to this work, so they can get jobs?”

Particularly in Australia, where bureaucratized apperception of Indigenous possibility reigns even within anthropological circles (Lea 2012a), there is an ongoing demand that Aboriginal people adhere to reifications of their traditions. In terms of content, Indigenous sufferers must be obligated by their responsibilities to country, and be thwarted by an uncaring State, in particularly recognizable ways. And as filmmakers holding the restorative device that now symbolizes all racial and economic inequality, the camera itself, they should not only be representing themselves as ethnographic subjects but also as good citizens in the making. The work of being involved in films cannot be to simply provoke thought, mess around with meaningful purpose, have an excuse to get together, relieve boredom, or have fun, but has to be tied to an instrumental outcome. That is, beyond the demand that a film’s political work be done according to narrative conventions, audiences want the additional reparative move of having black hands holding the camera (see also Moore 1992): anything less is a diminution of Indigenous speaking authority, and a weakened platform for the ultimate goal of “real jobs.”

That the marshaling of non-Indigenous resources, expertise, and mediatic technologies in order to rewrite how the profound inhospitalities of settler colonialism are survived and resisted is not a betrayal of one’s indigeneity seems like an obvious point, one that has been powerfully made by scholars and practitioners alike (e.g., Ginsburg 2004). But given the insistent demand that this playful work of critique and analysis instead be interpreted as a labor of self-improvement, oriented toward the fictive policy category called “real work,” it is a point worth reiterating. The instrumental demand has interpolative effects. Karrabing members will answer that they too are showing their agency. But when Linda Yarrowin tells a questioner: “We actually doing something for ourselves. Not just being stomped down. People recognize we. Make us stronger,” this is not a statement of “we are training ourselves for the purpose of securing tax-paying jobs as videographers,” but indicates a different pragmatism: one of confirming and creating social relations, activating new possibilities for ongoing and freely associating agency, in a situation in which land itself (and not only government) has desires for and designs on people’s agencies.

There is another purpose of the filmmaking that the younger members note which could be categorized as “development” oriented: the pleasure that comes from shooting scenes, and of showing them to appreciative audiences, traveling across their countries and the world. Indeed, the way Karrabing increasingly produce their films strains the military worker logic of film production with its harsh timetables, technical requirements, and shoot schedules. Moving to smartphone cinematography, as the latest productions do, scenes are shot whenever the time seems right—folks are around; moods are good; an iPhone is charged; the place is right. And why not? Living within late settler liberalism creates enough stress for anyone and everyone. What if filmmaking were at core to retrain the self to instead experience the ludic pleasures of co-making, of consciously co-being, without a disciplining agenda?

Behind the scenes, these different perspectives are given shape in outline form as people talk through various possible scenarios, sometimes in formal meetings, but just as often more informally, as people are driving somewhere, sitting around somewhere else (Figure 2). All scenes are improvised based on members’ experience, desires, and mutual understanding. This said, while the above expositions suggest neither wholesale acceptance nor rejection of liberal settler terms and conditions but rather a grappling with its incessant demands and having fun in the process, Karrabing filmmaking is not about substituting an *avant* Indigenous cinematic practice to replace that of Hollywood, or for that matter, government-generated truth claims, with counterclaims about Indigenous alterity. Instead, they are a practice of critical probing of the conditions (of continuation) within which the lived realities of Indigenous lifeworlds proceed. And herein lies the rub for



FIGURE 2. “Improvisation.” Photograph by Tess Lea. [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

reception politics. Karrabing films are better described as the residual artifacts, not quite secondary but not quite objects either, of ongoing living analytics that are expressed in multiple modalities, being playful, hanging around, environmental listening, and political scanning included.

Transparency

Rocky: “*Berragut* [white people] got this way of talking; what do they mean with that word ‘transparency?’”

It was an enjoyable conversation at the end of a film shoot. Tess, the policy ethnographer, was asking her foreign types of questions about Karrabing decision-making processes and what people meant by their term “open book,” mimicking audience interest in how the Collective operates as a collective. Open book, she learned, like transparency, had flexible valence, generating different kinds of synonyms, from “nothing is hidden” or a shared problem (“what are we going to do with the money?”), to a probative sense of opening a topic in which everyone can participate, without a hidden agenda, without a fast looming deadline, with the pace, like that of using iPhones for filming, that allows multiple styles of chipping in. Open book means words do not veil intentions but disclose potential actions, establishing agentful possibilities.

It contrasts with—which is to say, in discussion it was contrasted with—how non-Indigenous people tend to deal with Karrabing members. An example was given. A land council representative might call, demanding to speak to a “Traditional Owner”.⁴ Speaking to this new category of legal personhood clarifies the mechanism for individualizing and hierarchizing the negotiation of access to land, usually for non-Indigenous extraction and enterprise development purposes. The transparent consultation, already made opaque to anyone outside the introduced category of “Traditional Owner,” can further hide its agenda through an overabundance of impenetrable material, said too fast; as comprehensiveness in the service of obfuscation, delivered in thick documents; or as radically simplified brevity, as in a pipeline that is coming through, with no words on the two kilometer land clearances either side of the pipeline to be permanently leveled along its entirety (the hidden sting behind the actual consultation being recalled). Such transparency is relayed in *Wutharr*, where the “why” of fines is conveyed through the administrative violence of impenetrable documents.

Linda: “That story [from *Berragut*], it cross-crosses. One story for this person; a different one for wepella [us people]. Like snake.”

Or, closer to the scene of global audience reception, via the background work of getting Karrabing members physically to such scenes of audience reception, we could take the moment of trying to get passports. After searching for birth certificates, creating repeat head shots to find ones which retained distinct facial features out of a booth’s poor artificial lighting, and locating legitimate “authorized” witnesses to sign these photographs as true, members discovered they had faithfully completed the wrong forms. Between earlier encounters with the passport authorities and the day of submission, another tectonic policy shift had occurred. Children born from naturalized Australian citizens could no longer assume their own Australian citizenship, a restriction that was announced in the negative, non-transparently: a line requesting proof of parent’s naturalization as part of a passport application no longer appeared in the otherwise identical forms, rendering our completion of the original, subtly more inclusive, document null and void. As the now incorrect documents of Indigenous applicants were torn up, the settler colonial nation-state asserted the non-national status of some, but not all, of its immigrant offspring.

So can the ongoing distance between Indigenous everyday lives and the desires of their interlocutors be bridged? We would say the answer is not better and better rendition. The Karrabing did not form themselves to be a translation machine or as a solution to the representational dilemmas of ethnographic description under continuing occupation. Rather, the gaps in interpretation and expectation are an inevitable outcome of the bureaucratized, ethnologized imaginations that many viewers bring to their interpretation, elicited by Karrabing media regardless of intention, revealing the power or force of the demand that Indigenous communicative forms be reformatted, or leveled, so as to be comprehensible and intelligible, while avoiding the implication that structural relations of power the films speak to sit inside theater spaces too. Grounded in the desire for palatable, consumable difference, the films resist while accommodating the audience expectations they are speaking to, an accommodation that attenuates as Karrabing filmography moves further away from more readily readable ficto-documentary formats into the more real surreality enabled by smartphone technologies. In this, the audience reception loop is similar to that of policy expectation, permeating creative efforts even as it is sidestepped, simulataneously satisfying and

resisting the desire for redemptive Indigeneity as a condition of audibility.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the ongoing vibrancy, creativity, and resilience of the Karrabing Film Collective and its allies. Lea's ability to undertake fieldwork with the Karrabing was enabled by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant [DP 1094139] entitled "Can there be good policy? Tracing the paths between policy intent, evidence, and practical benefit in regional and remote Australia."

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated transcript, all dialogue extracts are from conversations within and between Karrabing members and recorded in fieldnotes by Lea and Povinelli.

² Previous films were produced with the help of an external film crew.

³ A question that is beyond the scope of this essay but deserves separate reflection is that of adoption and why specific art world curators have responded to Karrabing films so positively, citing Karrabing innovations in terms of length, addressivity, and aesthetic imaginaries, including their layering and articulating of images to demonstrate both the separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and their irreducible interpenetrations.

⁴ In the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth), s3, Traditional Aboriginal Owners are defined legally as "in relation to a relevant tract of land, a 'local descent group' of Aboriginals who: (1) have common spiritual affiliations to a site on the land, being affiliations that place the group under a primary spiritual responsibility for that site and for the land; and (2) are entitled by Aboriginal tradition to forage as of right over that land."

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