“It’s Ok, We’re Safe Here”: The Karrabing Film Collective and Colonial Histories in Australia

Maggie Wander

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/389>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.389
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 November 2018
Number of pages: 53-62
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Maggie Wander, “It’s Ok, We’re Safe Here”: The Karrabing Film Collective and Colonial Histories in Australia”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 41.1 | 2018, Online since 05 November 2019, connection on 23 August 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/389> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.389>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

'It's Ok, We're Safe Here': The Karrabing Film Collective and Colonial Histories in Australia

*Windjarrameru (The Stealing C*nt\$)* tells the story of four young Indigenous Australian men who are accused of stealing beer and then chased by police into a marsh that has been contaminated by mining. The film subverts representations of Indigenous Australians in ethnographic film and makes visible the way these representational tools are part of the same destructive force enacted by colonial structures of power that support the mining industry.

*Windjarrameru (The Stealing C*nt\$)* is the third film by the Karrabing Film Collective from the Northern Territory, Australia. A project of the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation, the film collective is made up of about 30 Indigenous Australians as well as their close colleague Elizabeth Povinelli, an American anthropologist. Since establishing themselves in 2007, the collective has made a number of films that have been screened across the globe.¹ Povinelli often refers to the first three films as the “Intervention trilogy,” each engaging with different experiences Karrabing members have had while living in the aftermath of the Northern Territory Emergency Response in 2007. This paper focuses on the third of this trilogy, *Windjarrameru (The Stealing C*nt\$)*; however, all their films share key characteristics. The plots always reflect everyday issues the collective members face such as living in government housing, youth incarceration, poverty, the imposition of mining on traditional lands, local responsibilities to ancestors, and navigating the bureaucracy of the nation-state.

Although the general plot of each film is written before they begin filming, there is no script. Instead, the actors perform what Povinelli calls “improvisational realism”:

The stories arise from one or another idea of the Collective’s membership and are then shaped into a general narrative arc by other members. But the dialogue and blocking of scenes are improvised while we are shooting. Sometimes the plot shifts too. As a result, when I am asked the genre of our films, I often reply, improvisational realism or improvisational realization. (*Geontologies* 86)

Among the issues Karrabing members wanted to address in the “narrative arc” of *Windjarrameru* are youth incarceration, mining, and the role “tradition” has to play amidst the continuing demands of the settler Australian state to conform to constructed identities of “Aboriginality.” The film follows a group of young men who have been falsely accused by the police of stealing a carton of beer. Two older men, who are working for a mining company at a sacred site nearby, report the young men to the police. The cops proceed to chase the young men, who eventually find refuge in a marsh that has been marked off as a contaminated area because of nearby mining activity. The police do not follow the young men into the toxic area, but instead wait outside for the outlaws to emerge. Later, we learn that one of the young men is a ranger working for

1. This includes international film festivals, arts exhibitions, and gallery installations including: Berlinale Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival, Contour Biennale in Mechelen Oslo National Academy of Arts, Institute of Modern Art at Brisbane, Tate Modern, documenta 14, Centre Pompidou, Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 9, to name a few. In 2015 they received the Visible Award for socially engaged contemporary art practice as well as the Nova Award for Best Short Fiction Film.

the local land council and was in the area to investigate illegal mining activity occurring on the coast. The film ends with a scene depicting how the ancestors, embodied by the Australian landscape, are surviving in the face of the mining industry, just as the young men are finding refuge in the same landscape in order to survive police brutality and racist policies.

Through a complex and multifaceted plot, Karrabing reveals the intersections between youth incarceration, illegal mining, the destruction of sacred sites, and the continuing significance of ancestral power embedded in the landscape. I argue the film makes visible the relationship between these issues and the way Indigenous Australian cultures have been, and continue to be, represented (or misrepresented) in mainstream colonial narratives. For instance, Indigenous lifeways have historically been depicted as degenerate, dangerous, and in need of “modern” improvements. Such depictions were (and continue to be) reinforced through media representations of Indigenous lives, for instance ethnographic films of the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Through strategic misrepresentation, ethnographic filmmakers since the turn of the century have framed Indigenous Australians as exotic, “savage,” in need of enlightenment, and fundamentally Other. Through an analysis of specific scenes that confront this representational legacy, I wish to show how *Windjarrameru* actively resists common colonial tropes and complicates essentialist notions of Indigenous experiences today by making visible the way these representational tools are part of the same destructive force enacted by colonial structures of power that support the mining industry.

The Karrabing Indigenous Corporation emerged out of the turmoil caused by what is commonly referred to as the “Intervention.” In 2007, the Australian parliament passed the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act, which gave the government unprecedented control over Indigenous lives in northern Australia. Under the guise of responding to a report of child sexual abuse, the government increased police presence in rural communities and resumed control of land that had only recently been returned to Indigenous owners through land rights legislation of the 1970s and 1990s. Programs designed to provide income and training for Indigenous workers were replaced with government welfare that in the end decreased already low wages and gave the state absolute control over resource allocation. Indigenous communities were portrayed in the media and in political rhetoric as perverse and degenerate, infected with child abuse, pornography, and alcoholism. What is widely called “the Intervention” was portrayed as a solution to the “backward” ways of Indigenous cultures.² According to this rhetoric, “traditional” lifeways, including specific social formations and kinship, hunting, and religious practices, were to blame for increasing levels of poverty and violence. The

2. I am summarizing here some of the main arguments that have emerged since 2007 about the impact of the Intervention on Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. However, I do not wish to deny the experiences of victims and survivors (primarily women and children) of the sexual abuse that was occurring at the time. I encourage the reader to look at Marcia Langton's writing on the subject, for example Marcia Langton, “Trapped in the Aboriginal reality TV show,” *Griffith Review* 19 (2008), <https://griffithreview.com/articles/trapped-in-the-aboriginal-reality-show/>. For more information on the Intervention, one can check Elisabeth Baehr and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, eds., *“And there'll be no dancing”: Perspectives on Policies Impacting Indigenous Australians since 2007* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017); Elisabeth Povinelli, *Economics of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 52–61; Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, “Very Risky Business: The Quest to Normalise Remote-Living Aboriginal People,” *Risk, Welfare, and Work*, ed. Greg Marston, John Moss, and John Quiggin (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2010), 185–211.

only way to “improve,” or in other words “modernize,” was to participate fully in the nation-state’s economy.³

For most rural communities along the Top End, the mining economy is the primary source of income and fulfills what the Australian state views as a way for Indigenous Australians to participate in the “modern” world. Gold mining in the region began as early as the 1850s and the country experienced a succession of gold rushes throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. By the mid-twentieth century, mineral deposits had been discovered across the continent, including uranium in northern Australia. The doctrine of *terra nullius* – the presumption that Australian land was unoccupied and un-used, rendering it “available” for European settlers – formed a basis for mineral extraction (as it had for European settlement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). *Terra nullius* assumes the landscape is empty yet, paradoxically, settlers and mineral prospectors knew of, and interacted with, the Indigenous population. In fact, as Daniel Vachon and Phillip Toyne argue, the relationship between the mining industry and Australia’s Indigenous population is central to the Indigenous experience of settler colonialism: “overshadowing the influence of missions, pastoralists, and government agencies, mineral exploration and extraction have emerged as the major contact point between Aboriginal and European societies in remote Australia” (307). As Benedict Scamبارy explains in his book *My Country, Mine Country* (2013), mining operations (in addition to other settler initiatives) created a niche for Indigenous Australians to participate in the growing mineral economy. Scambarry recounts how Indigenous laborers worked on farms and in mines early on, while makeshift communities formed on the outskirts of newly developed mining towns. Indigenous Australians have thus engaged with the mining industry from the beginning, albeit this relationship was (and continues to be) fraught with racial prejudice.

Since the 1950s, the tension between mining companies and Indigenous Australians has centered around issues of land rights and the destruction of sites that manifest and maintain ancestral power. In fact, throughout Australia’s mining history, Indigenous communities have resisted the industry’s presence, perhaps most notably through land rights petitions and subsequent legislation. In 1963, for example, the Yolngu community in Yirrkala petitioned for legal rights to their land in the face of mining corporations which were beginning to lease that land from the government. Similar petitions occurred in the following decades, leading to the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act in 1973 as well as the landmark court case *Mabo vs. Queensland* in 1992, which declared the doctrine of *terra nullius* to be null and void (Mason *et. al.*). This, in turn, led to the Native Title Act in 1993, which, among other initiatives, required mining corporations to get permission from Indigenous communities who are now legally referred to as “Traditional Owners.” Mining companies must also pay royalties to Traditional Owners, and this money, along with government welfare, is often the only source of income for those communities. However, I believe this “Right to Negotiate” is arguably a neocolonial form of controlling Indigenous lands because these communities are increasingly living at the poverty level and these “negotiations” with mining companies are often the only way for them to pay for living expenses. This “right,” therefore, is

3. For instance, the “Closing the Gap” initiative implemented in 2008 prioritizes “educating” Indigenous Australians according to settler Australian standards and “training” Indigenous Australians in skills that would grant access to employment so they can participate in the capitalist economy (<https://www.pmc.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/closing-gap>).

often a farce – Traditional Owners have no choice but to work with mining companies for their economic security.

The fraught relationship between the Australian state, the mining industry, and Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory is one of the main plot devices in *Windjarrameru*. In fact, the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation emerged specifically out of a moment when these relationships were at their most volatile. In 2007, the year of the Northern Territory Emergency Response, a number of people who would later establish the Karrabing corporation left the town of Belyuen on the coast of the Northern Territory, Australia, in the face of riots brought on by a contentious land claim at the time. The group left the town, intending to live on traditional lands with the help of government support. However, due to the Intervention a couple of months later, that government support was no longer available.⁴ Out of these conditions, the group created the Karrabing Indigenous Corporation as an exercise by which members could themselves define what it means to live in Australia during and after the Intervention.

Povinelli, as a founding member of the collective, describes Karrabing as an “analytic of existence” in the face of settler late liberalism (*Geontologies* 25). Rather than a documentary film, which typically presents a story that has already played out, the Karrabing films are mechanisms by which the members can discover and come to terms with their own story as it unfolds. As an “analytic,” it gives Karrabing members the tools with which to discuss and share with others the contemporary experience of living in the settler state. The *process* of making the films opens up avenues for exploring the histories and present conditions of their real-life experiences. For example, Povinelli recounts how, while filming *Windjarrameru*, they came across a sign that reads “Danger: Asbestos Cancer and Lung Disease Hazard.” This led them to research the history of that location and how it came to be contaminated. This research led them to the Cox Peninsula Remediation Project of December 2014, which states “Asbestos is widespread and pesticides, heavy metals, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have been detected above safe levels at a number of sites on Cox Peninsula. This presents a potential health risk to site users and the local Indigenous community” (Department of Finance). Learning of this contamination in their own lands, Karrabing accordingly wrote this into their film and made additional signage to include in their “set” in order to make visible this contamination. Thus, Povinelli writes, “What was intended to produce an aesthetic experience transformed an aesthetic activity into an analytic of existence” (*Geontologies* 89).

In spite of the improvisational script and the narratives based on real-life experiences, Karrabing’s films are not “ethnographic” in the sense that they are not anthropological documentaries meant to be exposés of “non-Western” cultures. In fact, *Windjarrameru* deliberately subverts modes by which Indigenous cultures have historically been (mis)represented on screen.⁵ The film begins with black and white footage of two

4. For more on this, see Povinelli, *Geontologies* 22.

5. It is important to note, however, that Karrabing “members have never positioned their work as the empowered solution to issues of anthropological voice” (Povinelli and Lea 41). The subversion to which I am referring is rather a mode of exploring what it means to “be” Indigenous in the Australian settler state, and engaging with colonial modes of representation is one part of this process. Furthermore, Karrabing never claim to be representing *all* Indigenous Australians, especially because, as scholars such as Marcia Langton have argued, the notion of one “authentic” representation is a colonial myth (“Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...,” 27). Rather, Karrabing’s films are one means by which *this* group of individuals is navigating *their* specific circumstances in this specific moment.

men sitting by a rock wall on the water's edge. One of the men begins to paint on the rock, and as he does so a voice-over explains to the audience what they are witnessing on the screen: "Tonight, we bring you one of the strangest and one of the most dramatic aspects of life in this wide land of ours." This voice-over is taken from an Australian television show called *Australian Walkabout*, a documentary series made for the ABC and BBC in 1958. Karrabing paired this clip with their own video footage, which they present in black and white in order to evoke films of the early twentieth century.

In this opening scene, Karrabing sets the audience up to imagine these two men are participating in a religious ceremony. They position their audience as "outsiders" looking into this "exotic" moment. The filmmakers accomplish this by using a set of formal conventions from ethnographic films including an authoritative voice-over, usually narrated by a man of European descent, accompanied by distant shots that separate the viewer (who is presumed to be white) from the people on screen. These figures are often involved in an activity that takes their attention away from the camera, creating a sense among the viewers that they have happened across a "natural" and "timeless" moment. These films rarely show signs of a settler colonial culture, but instead portray Indigenous societies as "untouched" by modernity or colonial violence.

However, the black and white footage soon turns to color, and the painter stops what he is doing to ask his companion, "How do you spell 'blasting?'" What the viewer was supposed to think is a religious ceremony is in fact a potential mining site. This surprising move subverts audience expectations of witnessing "authentic" scenes from Indigenous life by juxtaposing the authoritative voice of the white settler anthropologist with the lived reality of Karrabing's members. Subversive moves like this turn the film, through an "analytic of existence," into a critical political project. For this reason, Karrabing is participating in a long tradition of what visual anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has called Indigenous media. In her essay, "Culture/Media: A (Mild) Polemic," she argued

the media being produced by indigenous, diaspora, and other media makers challenge a long outdated paradigm of ethnographic film built on notions of culture as a stable and bounded object, documentary representation as restricted to realist illusion, and media technologies as inescapable agents of western imperialism. (14)

In other writings, Ginsburg suggests that Indigenous media can be a form of "cultural activism" that critically engages with the effects of colonization while simultaneously making space for "traditional" culture in the contemporary moment ("Shooting Back" 299). Filmmaking is a particularly effective medium by which to "talk back" to colonial structures of power because it has historically been used as a tool for subjugating Indigenous populations ("Screen Memories" 51).

In the opening scene of *Windjarrameru* described above, the two men transform from ethnographic subjects to mining employees. Karrabing members thus "refus[e] to play the part they ha[ve] been assigned. They refus[e] to function as a past-oriented and changeless object, a trace of something before the savage assault of settler colonialism" (*Geontologies* 82). In the scenes that follow, not only do Karrabing members refuse to fall into the trope of Indigeneity created by settler colonial ideology, but they also depict what is usually left out of the frame: the violence and destruction brought about by the mining industry.

In responding to the way in which the northern coast of Australia is often portrayed by mainstream media, Karrabing makes visible the connections between colonial tools

of misrepresentation and neocolonial depictions of the Australian landscape. Early depictions of mining operations in North Australia focus on industrial feats rather than the landscape itself. For example, in the same *Walkabout* series mentioned above, there is an episode about “Rum Jungle” near Darwin, where the original uranium mine was established in 1954. The episode clearly wishes to portray the mining industry in a positive light, saying “most people think of bombs when they think of uranium, but today the accent is on energy and heat and medicine and agriculture” (Chauvel, *Australian Walkabout*). The camera focuses on the large machine digging into the mountainside, even describing it as a “near-human monster with supernatural power.” The narrator’s reverent tone positions the mine in a positive light, as a feat of industrialization and also as a source of income – for example, the narrator stresses that the man driving the machine is “very highly paid.”

Today, mining is portrayed in a similar way. For instance, in a video produced by the BBC in 2013, a reporter stands above an iron ore mine in Western Australia. With a beaming smile, she exclaims “I’m at one of the biggest iron ore mines in the world [...]; they dig out 300,000 tons of material every day and they’ve got another 150 meters to go!” (Yueh). Like the *Walkabout* episode, the news story focuses on the technological feats of the operation. As the camera closes in on a machine loading iron ore onto a truck, the reporter explains how the machine works and even says “It may look like something out of a Star Trek or sci-fi movie.” Here, again, an association is made between mining equipment and an other-worldly, or supernatural power. A settler colonial reverence for “modern” technologies continues from the 1950s television show into the twenty-first century. This industrialization, as a form of “progress,” is framed once again as a source of economic (and, by implication, social) wealth: “this reclaimer is a money generator. It moves the equivalent of 1.3 million US dollars worth of ore every hour.”

By focusing on the technological accomplishments and the economic benefits of the mining industry, these depictions render Indigenous lives invisible and overshadow the destruction of a significant amount of land, the exploitation of Indigenous laborers, and the unequal distribution of wealth. *Windjarrameru* inserts Indigenous experiences into this narrative, “talking back” to the positive, awestruck portrayal of mining in Australian media. In Ginsburg’s words, “indigenous people are using screen media not to mask but to recuperate their own collective stories and histories – some of them traumatic – that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture” (“Screen Memories” 40).

After the two men in the opening scene are revealed to be working for a mining company, the viewers learn they are in fact illegally trespassing on Indigenous lands. After they have called the police to chase after the young men who were drinking, the two men meet up with their coworkers and drive to the contaminated marsh to wait for the police to arrive. “And you rang the police, why?” one of the miners asks as they wait. “Those mongrel shit faces were throwing beer at me when I was painting,” another replies. “They’re gonna find out we’re mining there,” his colleague says, implying the miners were illegally working on land without the permission of the local land council.

As it turns out, one of the young men who was falsely accused by police of stealing beer is actually working for the local land council. In a later scene, when he is sitting in the back of a police vehicle, another agent comes up to him and says, “I told you to

spy on those miners.” He replies, “I did but those boys [the police] collected me.” “But where did they go? Look, where?” she says as she pulls out a map of the area, asking the young ranger to point out exactly where the miners were writing “blast” on the rock face.

This plotline, while fictional, is based on the reality that Karrabing members face every day on the Cox Peninsula. These land council agents are concerned with illegal mining because sacred sites are under constant threat. There have been a number of instances in which features of the Australian landscape were destroyed by mining companies and Indigenous land councils work to prevent this from happening. Additionally, the film addresses contamination caused by mine tailings. This is a significant issue in the Northern Territory, the location of some of Australia’s largest mines. In December 2013, for example, a container with radioactive material burst open at Ranger Uranium Mine, leaking 1.4 million liters of “acidic radioactive slurry” (Norman). This spill was said to be “one of the worst nuclear incidents in Australian history” (“Contaminated Slurry Spills”). Energy Resources of Australia Ltd., one of the major uranium producers in Australia and whose primary shareholder is Rio Tinto, a massive global mining corporation, released a statement that said none of the waste was released into the surrounding environment, but this was before a government-led inquiry was completed (Norman). Six months after the spill, the Ranger mine began operations again and parts of the Northern Territory remain contaminated, as exemplified by the Cox Peninsula Remediation Project mentioned above.

Windjarrameru makes contamination from mining visible when the young men find refuge from the police in a contaminated marsh. As they are being chased, the young men duck under a barbed wire fence and the police come to a halt. The camera zooms onto a makeshift sign that reads “Stop Poison” and one of the police asks his colleagues, “You two going in there?” “No. Poison country,” another responds, pointing to the sign. The police return to their car and drive around the swamp, waiting for the “outlaws” to emerge. While they wait, one of the officers asks, “You think this is a good fishing area?” The other officer responds, “No, with all this mining around here I don’t trust eating this food. Might come out with two heads!”

While the young men are hiding from the police, their families arrive and some of the younger relatives join the outlaws in their hiding spot. One of them asks, “You boys know this is a poisoned swamp? It’s a radiation area here.” At that moment, one of the young men who had been exploring the area returns holding a flagon of bright green liquid. “Why are you drinking a poison thing?” the friend asks. They begin passing it around, smelling it, sometimes taking a sip. “Supposed to be dark red, that beer,” another friend exclaims. “Not green. It’s supposed to be red. You’re swallowing it to poison yourselves. Marcos, don’t drink that. You’ll get sick.” In a stark departure from mainstream portrayals, *Windjarrameru* makes the ravages of mining acutely visible. Not only is the mining industry present throughout the film’s narrative, but it is also visualized and made manifest by the green grog. This is also a pointed response to predominant representations of Indigenous Australians as alcoholics – another trope that was mobilized by the government during the 2007 Intervention. In a poignant defiance of this stereotype, Karrabing actually makes visible the way alcoholism, like the mining industry, is a violent imposition on Indigenous lifeworlds. The films are an important exercise in making these conditions of Indigenous existence visible. Povinelli describes

this process using the term “manifestation,” her translation of the Emmiyengal phrase *awagami-mari-ntheni*.⁶

an intentional emergence: when something not merely appears to something or someone else but discloses itself as a comment on the coordination, orientation, and obligation of local existents and makes a demand on persons to actively and properly respond. (*Geontologies* 58)

Manifestations thus serve as pedagogical tools, “sign[s] that demand to be heeded” (59). The flagon of poisonous beer is a “manifestation” of the toxic slurry pervading the swamp where the young men find refuge (91). What is usually invisible in mainstream media is not only made visible in the film, but also demands that the audience heed the poisoning of Indigenous land.

By rendering the effects of mining visible in the face of a history of erasure, Karrabing intertwines Indigenous survival in the face of government pressure – in this case, unfair policing of Indigenous youth – with the ravages of mining, both legal and illegal. In this scene, mining is made manifest in the flagon of what was once beer, and which has now become toxic from the radiation emitted by uranium mining. The film effectively shows how these two colonial legacies, misrepresentation and resource extraction, are both at work in contemporary Indigenous lives. And it is the effort to make tangible, to *manifest*, the effects of mining that makes *Windjarrameru* different from what could have been a documentary film. Instead, the fictional plot, the improvised script, and the manifestations of how mining impacts Indigenous experiences all combine to form a tool through which Karrabing members navigate their relationship to the Australian state.

In the scenes discussed above, Karrabing subverts ethnographic representations of Indigenous Australians and brings to light the effects of mining on Indigenous lives today. In the final scene, Karrabing also addresses how the mining industry affects “traditional” Indigenous cosmologies. They give form to the ancestors that inhabit and are embodied by the Australian landscape. These manifestations depict a disorienting, radioactive ancestral presence that is also struggling to survive in the same toxic marsh where the young men hide. Thus, it is not simply the young men and the members of Karrabing who must cope with the mining industry, but also their ancestors, the living beings embodied in the marsh.

While different Indigenous communities across the continent have their own unique belief systems, they all share a fundamental view of what is sometimes referred to as the “Dreamtime.” This is an imperfect translation for the place and time before human existence where (and when) ancestors emerged from the ground and journeyed through space. By interacting with each other and by moving through this space, ancestors formed the earth’s topography and made manifest peoples’ relationship to the physical landscape. As Lynne Hume explains, “Where ancestors bled, ochre deposits were created; where they dug in the ground, water flowed and springs formed; where they cut down trees, valleys were formed” (*Ancestral Power* 25). Individuals today are responsible for each “Dreaming” – the pathways and physical traces of individual ancestors – and

6. Emmiyengal is a language group of northern Australia, and the collective itself is named after the Emmiyengal word “karrabing,” meaning “tide-out.” However, Povinelli says Karrabing members are specifically *not* bound to each other by language or kinship. Rather, they are operating beyond or outside the parameters of how the settler state defines them (Povinelli and Lea 37).

maintain the landscape by recreating these Dreamings through dance, visual representations, and oral narratives.

Karrabing portrays the power of ancestral presence in *Windjarrameru*, but it is intertwined with contemporary Indigenous lives in the face of Australia's mining boom. Towards the end of the film, as the stakeout ensues, the sun lowers and the young men fall asleep. The camera pans over one of the sleeping bodies, then the scene changes to a group of figures who appear to be sitting along the water, covered in white face paint that glows. The cinematography becomes disorienting as the camera spins around the figures, going upside down and side to side. The colors are blinding and overlap with infrared-like images of other figures, while a slowed-down, disembodied voice becomes indistinguishable from eerie noises in the background. The colors, face paint, disorienting camera-work, and unnatural colors signal a shift to the "Dreamtime." The figures are ancestral spirits also seeking refuge in the swamp.

Unlike ethnographic documentaries, this scene is not meant to make the Dreaming/Dreamtime legible to the audience. "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" (Povinelli and Lea 44). Instead, this scene – and the film as a whole – is a means by which Karrabing members figure out what ancestral power in this contaminated land means for them and their modes of existence in the mining industry. The dream scene addresses the questions Povinelli asks when she discusses manifestation:

What effect were these new forms of existence – settlers, cattle, pig, influenza, barbed wire – having on the given arrangement of their world? And how were other modes of existence in the landscape and the landscape itself reacting to these new modes and relations of existence? What were the *manifestations* that signaled these views and which ones should be heeded? (*Geontologies* 77)

The dream scene imagines how the neocolonial form of existence that is the mining industry is affecting ancestral modes of existence. The disorienting camera movements, the eerie voice-over, the infrared images are all ways of manifesting the toxicity confronting the ancestors who are embodied in the marsh where the young men find themselves.

Like the dream scene or the flagon of toxic beer, *Windjarrameru* is itself a "manifestation" because it is a tool with which to heed the threat of mining on Indigenous lives. Povinelli suggests that "perhaps the central purpose of Karrabing's films is to discover what we never knew we knew by hearing what we say in moments of improvisation" ("Windjarrameru"). For instance, she recounts a moment during filming when one young man hiding in the toxic swamp, Kelvin, reassures his friend, Reggie, who is worried about the police following them. Kelvin says, "It's ok, we're safe here. We're inside this radiation area. Police won't come in here, we're safe." In this one statement, improvised on the spot, Kelvin summarizes the current reality Indigenous Australians face while living amidst the mining boom in northern Australia: they are "safe" from being unjustly arrested by a corrupt police force, while at the same time this "safety" is found amidst the toxic waste produced by that same corrupt system of settler colonialism. The process of filming enables Karrabing to identify this reality – it is a manifestation of how Indigenous Australians can navigate both the laws of the settler state and the destruction of the landscape at the hands of mining companies. And during this pro-

cess, as I have shown in an analysis of a few specific scenes, part of this reality includes the way Indigenous Australians have been (mis)represented by mainstream media in the past. By incorporating this history in their exploration of the mining industry, Karrabing makes manifest the way colonial modes of representation are part of the same destructive force as the mining industry.

Maggie WANDER

University of California Santa Cruz

Works Cited

- CHAUVEL, Charles, Dir. *Australian Walkabout*. BBC. 1958.
- “Contaminated Slurry Spills from Uranium Mine Tank.” *ABC News*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 7 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-12-07/spill-at-nt-uranium-mine-near-kakadu/5142148>>.
- Department of Finance. “Cox Peninsula Remediation Project.” Canberra: Australian Capital Territory Publishing, 2014.
- GINSBURG, Faye. “Culture/Media: A (Mild) Polemic.” *Anthropology Today* 10.2 (1994): 5-15.
- . “‘From Little Things, Big Things Grow’: Indigenous Media and Cultural Activism.” *Between Resistance and Revolution: Cultural Politics and Social Protest*. Ed. Richard G. Fox and Orin Starn. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997. 118-44.
- . “Shooting Back: From Ethnographic Film to Indigenous Production/Ethnography of Media.” *A Companion to Film Theory*. Ed. Toby Miller and Robert Stam. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999. 295-313.
- . “Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media.” *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*. Ed. Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. 39-57.
- HUME, Lynne. *Ancestral Power: The Dreaming, Consciousness, and Aboriginal Australians*. Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2002.
- Karrabing Film Collective, Dir. *Windjarrameru (The Stealing C*nt\$)*. Karrabing Indigenous Corporation, 2015.
- LANGTON, Marcia. *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television*. Woolloomooloo, New South Wales: Australian Film Commission, 1993.
- MASON, C.J., et. al. “Mabo v Queensland (No 2).” Canberra: High Court of Australia, 1992.
- NORMAN, James. “Rio Tinto’s Stance on Kakadu Cleanup Alarms Indigenous Owners.” *The Guardian* 24 April 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/apr/24/rio-tintos-stance-on-kakadu-cleanup-alarms-indigenous-owners>>.
- POVINELLI, Elizabeth. “Windjarrameru, The Stealing C*nts.” *E-Flux Supercommunity*. 21 May 2015. <<http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/texts/windjarrameru-the-stealing-c-nts/>>.
- . *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 2016.
- POVINELLI, Elizabeth A., and Tess LEA. “Karrabing: An Essay in Keywords.” *Visual Anthropology Review* 34.1 (2018): 36-46.
- SCAMBARY, Benedict. *My Country, Mine Country: Indigenous People, Mining and Development Contestation in Remote Australia*. Canberra: Australian UP, 2013.
- VAHON, Daniel, and Phillip TOYNE. “Mining and the Challenge of Land Rights.” *Aborigines, Land and Land Rights*. Ed. Nicolas Peterson and Marcia Langton. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983. 307-26.
- YUEH, Linda. “Mining on a Massive Scale in Australia.” *BBC News*. BBC. 2 July 2013. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-23143585>>.