

Gebrands Lecture #2

Australia's indigenous New Wave:
Future Imaginaries in Recent Aboriginal
Feature Films

Faye Ginsburg



FONDS VOOR **ETNOLOGIE** IN LEIDEN

Adrian Gerbrands Lecture

The Adrian Gerbrands Lecture is an annual public lecture by a laureate chosen for his or her contribution to the broad international field of the study of visual and material culture. The lecture celebrates the memory of Adrian Gerbrands, who pioneered the combination of ethnographic film and material culture studies in the translation of cultural differences in aesthetic production during his career as museum curator (1947-1966) and professor of cultural anthropology (1966-1987) in Leiden.

Organisation

The lecture is organized by the Foundation for Ethnology in Leiden in collaboration with the Museum of Ethnography, the ethnographic film festival Beeld voor Beeld, and the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology of the University of Leiden.

Themes

A jury annually selects the laureate from among several nominees, on the basis of a theme jointly agreed upon by the organizers. Themes covered by the speakers may include cultural heritage (tangible and intangible), indigenous media, repatriation, ethnographic photography and film in the broadest sense, museum studies, material culture studies, music, multimediality and alternative media.

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New York University

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Australia's Indigenous New Wave:

Future Imaginaries in Recent

Aboriginal Feature Films

Introduction

In 2009, the indigenously directed narrative film, *Samson and Delilah*, the first feature by Aboriginal Australian filmmaker Warwick Thornton, opened in Adelaide, Australia (Thornton, Warwick, n.d.). Within a few months this remarkable portrayal of the unforgiving conditions of life for Indigenous youth in Central Australia was selected for the Cannes Film Festival, picking up the coveted *Caméra d'Or* Award for best first feature film, the second time in history that this prestigious award has gone to an Indigenous director. In his acceptance speech at Cannes, Thornton spoke about how cinema saved his life (Clarke, 2010). By 2011, two other features by indigenous directors of the same generation premiered in Australia: Beck Cole's *Here I Am*, the story of a young Aboriginal mother's bleak journey finding her feet in Adelaide after being released from jail (Cole, Beck, n.d.) and Ivan Sen's *Toomelah*, set in the remote Indigenous community bearing that name, depicting the dilemmas of Indigenous masculinity through the eyes of ten year old Daniel who gets caught up in drug running (Sen, Ivan, n.d.). My talk addresses this recent "new wave" of Indigenous filmmakers who - like the French directors who coined that name -- work with non-professional actors, shoot on location, and offer highly original iconoclastic aesthetics. They each tell

closely observed stories of the grim situation for many young people in Australia, yet end with a brief moment of recognition of possible lives. This article explores how, despite the difficulties of contemporary Indigenous life that are so clearly rendered in their works, the on and off screen practices of these contemporary indigenous storytellers suggest future imaginaries for Indigenous Australians?¹

In particular, I consider the difficult aesthetic and locally engaged production process embraced by these three Australian Indigenous filmmakers in their recent notable feature films: *Samson and Delilah* (2009) by Warwick Thornton, *Here I Am* by Beck Cole (2011), and *Toomelah* (2011) by Ivan Sen. In each film, discussed more fully below, the protagonists are young Indigenous people facing dysfunction and violence in the Aboriginal worlds they inhabit, struggling to find a place for themselves in history, and in the intimate world of kin and community. These works, all shot in gritty neo-realist style with mostly non-professional actors, are among the most notable of recent interventions in the broader project of indigenous media and filmmaking in Australia, representative of work by a second generation of Aboriginal directors that I identify as an Indigenous New Wave. Like the French New Wave, a blanket term coined by critics for a group of filmmakers working in France in the late 1950s and 1960s, these directors refuse the usual framings of commercial or even independent cinema (Neupert, 2007). They all share an unadorned realism, grounded in local Indigenous communities that they know well. Their films offer an unforgiving look at these Aboriginal worlds to ask questions – also being raised in the political sphere – about intergenerational responsibility, as a way to locate broader questions about cultural futures (Ginsburg & Myers, 2006) (Michaels, 1988)

As an anthropologist, I go beyond the question of screen aesthetics, to address the way films acquire off-screen regimes of value: the way that cultural significance is invested in media and shapes their circulation into a “media world” (Appadurai, 2009) (Ginsburg, Abu Lughod, & Larkin, 2002). My framework for understanding how that process of value-making works draws on the foundational work of the late Maori filmmaker and

writer Barry Barclay. His influential idea of Fourth Cinema, a term he created, in his 1990 book *Our Own Image* (Barclay & Limited, 1990), drew attention to the social practices that he felt characterized an emerging Indigenously-produced cinema, including his own work. He defined Fourth Cinema against its imagined First, Second, and Third Cinema counterparts (Pines & Willemen, 1989). As Barclay explained in a public talk given in 2003 discussing why he invented that term, taking seriously while also critiquing the numerical/political/aesthetic categorizations of world cinema:

The phrase Fourth Cinema comes as a late addition to the First-Second-Third Cinema framework.... First Cinema being American cinema; Second Cinema Art House cinema; and Third Cinema the cinema of the so-called Third World.
(Barclay, 2003)

Fourth Cinema's approach, he argues, derives "its potency from 'ancient remnant cultures' that persist within, yet are separate from modern nation-states, and thus offers up an outlook that is markedly distinct from that which informs the institutions that typically lend it financial and/or infrastructural support" (Barclay quoted in (Columpar, 2010) p. xi). He advocated an approach to filmmaking that offers a counter-current to the relentless neoliberal commodification of culture, recognizing instead that indigenously made films are rooted in histories and relationships with local communities that are not simply represented on screen, but honored in the processes of production and circulation.

I argue that these three recent films -- and no doubt others -- written and directed by Indigenous Australians with a distinctive approach to their work, indicate a key moment in the development of Australia's Fourth Cinema. They mark the emergence of a new wave of sophisticated cultural production that is self-consciously indigenous - and socially engaged - at many levels, not only in terms of content or the fact that they have an indigenous director. These works are of a different order than what has come before. In all of them, death, loss and violence overshadow the lives of the young Indigenous Australians at the center of each story, such that the fine-tuned calibration

of the final glimpses of hope and transformation in each film – almost evanescent to those of us whose sensibilities have been dulled by overexposure to happy Hollywood endings -- nonetheless exemplify a poetics of possibility given the current state of lives in Indigenous Australia. In other words, while these films demonstrate a new level of highly accomplished filmmaking that is consolidating well-deserved international reputations for their directors, they are made with the potential effects of these works within local communities very much in mind. The filmmakers are concerned with how young Indigenous Australians might carve out culture futures for themselves. Their protagonists not only suffer but also survive and take on the task of imagining possible lives despite the clear challenges that lie before them.

It is not an accident that all of the filmmakers are from a cohort who trained together at Australia's National Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS); but it is the experience they bring to their work that, I suggest, generates similar back stories, sensibilities, and connectivity to the everyday world of Indigenous Australians. Warwick Thornton, Beck Cole and Ivan Sen all have developed a locally-based auto-ethnographic production style, working with mostly non-professional actors in communities they know well, through kinship and years of close observation. They each deploy a distinctive approach using neo-realist visual vocabularies and musically rich soundscapes, along with an unflinching willingness to look at the dark side of contemporary Indigenous experience in Australia. They are all part of what I think of as the second generation of Aboriginal filmmakers who, unlike the first generation, grew up outside of urban centers in close proximity to or in remote or rural communities where they have relatives and friends. As a group, they represent a sector of Indigenous citizens whose experience has been rendered largely invisible in the Australian imaginary: mixed descent, urban and rural indigenous subjects, historically removed from contact with their traditional forebears, as well as from narratives and the reflective screens of public media. They offer complex accounts of alternative Indigenous subjectivities, and draw on a broader range of indigenous experiences than the depleted repertoire of longstanding stereotypes of

“the Aboriginal” (Ginsburg, 2005). They create the kind of stories that many contemporary anthropologists or Euro-Australian filmmakers are disinclined to tell due to the potential harm such narratives might cause, with a few notable exceptions (Burbank, 1994) (Cowlshaw, 2004) (Langton, 2007) (McKnight, 2002), Sutton, 2011). As always, it matters who is in control of the representation, and what kind of relationship has been established between the person with the camera and those who are being depicted.

Thornton, Cole and Sen entered into filmmaking in the 1990s, first building their capacities and sensibilities making short films, an opportunity provided through a brilliantly structured mentoring program for aspiring Indigenous filmmakers taught at AFTRS. The program was established by Indigenous filmmakers/activists Wal Saunders and Rachel Perkins. In the mid-1990s, they, along with other Indigenous filmmakers and activists, persuaded the Australian Film Commission to establish an Indigenous branch, in order to give emerging Indigenous artists the scaffolding and funding they needed to move confidently from documentary and short films into feature filmmaking on their own terms (Ginsburg, 2010) (Riley, 2007). For over a decade, the very successful Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission was directed by Aboriginal director and producer Sally Riley; this unit has been incorporated into Screen Australia where it is under the leadership of Erica Glynn, who stepped into that role when Sally Riley moved to head up the Indigenous Department of the ABC.² The Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission -- and now Screen Australia -- has been crucial for this small and talented group of mixed-descent Aboriginally identified artists and cultural activists, giving them the professional experience and entrée that is now placing their work onto national and international stages (Gallasch, 2007). Rather than operating in an exclusively indigenous space -- as if such a thing existed -- the work of these Aboriginal filmmakers is characterized by forms of collaboration with a range of players from both indigenous and non-indigenous backgrounds, on work over which they have creative and artistic control. The people identified with this group recognize

the potential of their work -- perhaps more than documentaries, ethnographies or government reports -- to change the way that Aboriginal realities are understood by their own communities as well as by the wider Australian public and beyond.

Samson and Delilah



Rowan McNamara as Samson, on set.

Photographer: Mark Rogers, Photo courtesy of Scarlett Pictures. (Scarlett Pictures, n.d.)

In 2009, *Samson and Delilah*, the first feature by Aboriginal Australian filmmaker Warwick Thornton, premiered at the 2009 Adelaide Film Festival in Australia to stunning acclaim. A second opening occurred soon after that at the Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival in Sydney to an enthusiastic mostly urban Aboriginal audience that embraced the film, the difficulties it reveals, and the filmmaker, as their own. *Samson and Delilah* is a spare, gestural narrative with little spoken dialogue, most of it in the Warlpiri language. It was made with non-professional actors, shot in and around Thornton's hometown of Alice Springs in central Australia where it may have had the most enthusiastic screening of all.



“Delilah” played by Marissa Gibson, outdoor premiere in Alice Springs.

Photo courtesy of Scarlett Pictures. (Scarlett Pictures, n.d.)

The screening there “took place under the stars at the Telegraph Station, curtained only by the Todd River embankment..... Many of the 4000 people who went to see the film that night travelled from remote communities to see themselves represented ... That screening was itself an example of the importance of media that reflects the lives and culture of Indigenous Australians” (Rennie, 2009).

The film tells a story of love and survival, focused on two Aboriginal teens, a boy and a girl named (in the story) Samson and Delilah who are living in a remote Warlpiri-speaking community in the Central Australian desert. With no parents around to look after them, they seek connection in the music and art that the adults engage in – both traditional painting and contemporary Aboriginal rock and roll -- and eventually in each other. After the unexpected death of Delilah’s grandmother for which Delilah is ritually punished, Samson (played by Rowan McNamara) steals a car, invites Delilah (played by Marissa Gibson) to join him and the two take off to Alice Springs, for what turns out to be a grueling journey involving substance abuse, racism, and rape, but it also is an unconventional saga of love and possibility.



Marissa Gibson (“Delilah”) and Rowan McNamara (“Samson”) on set.

Photo courtesy of Scarlett Pictures.(Scarlett Pictures, n.d.)

Rendering the harsh reality of the lives of these contemporary Indigenous teens – both non-professional actors -- in stark, almost mythic terms, this low-budget narrative is profoundly riveting. It also asks hard questions about what happens to young Aboriginal people in Australia, and who might be responsible for their neglect: no one – white or black -- gets off the hook.

When the film won the *Caméra d’Or* Award for best first feature at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, it was the second time in history that prize has gone to an Indigenous director. (The first time was in 2001 when Canada’s Zach Kunuk and Igloolik Isuma won this award for *Atanarjuat* (IsumaTV, n.d.).



Warwick Thornton at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival receiving the Caméra d'Or from actress Isabelle Adjani.

Photo courtesy of Scarlett Pictures. (Scarlett Pictures, n.d.)

At the ceremony, Thornton, a naturally modest and deeply driven man who loves Gibson guitars and dirt bikes, had almost left the reception when his name was announced. He was astonished to be told that he had won this life-changing award. In his acceptance speech at Cannes, he spoke about filmmaking in terms that no doubt distinguished him from the assembled glitterati.

I grew up on the streets of Alice Springs, getting into trouble with the police. The original story came out of anger at the neglect of Aboriginal children, not only by the government and wider society, but even by parents. So it came from a dark place. I had to think about it for a year in order to present something that wasn't angry, where people could just go on a journey with these children. I've got so many more stories to tell, ...that are fires inside me that I desperately need to show the world. I needed direction and somehow I found cinema, or cinema found that direction for me. It saved my life. (Thornton, Warwick, n.d.)

The sense of mission that he articulates is similar for a number of other Indigenous filmmakers -- in particular Beck Cole and Ivan Sen who I discuss below. Their recent feature films also are shaped around dark and difficult stories told with an ethnographic sensibility, closely focused on the social complexities of everyday life. Each film attempts to find a glimmer of a future imaginary – however faint -- in the narratives they create, at a time when positive visions for the future of Indigenous life in Australia are hard to come by. Despite the sense of desolation that mark their works, filmmaking, for them, I argue, constitutes a site for *redemptive culture-making*, at multiple levels:

First, we see this sense of redemption in the remarkable poetics of the stories they tell that serve as powerful cautionary tales directed as much to questions of accountability in their own communities – and this is key to what distinguishes their work-- as they are to the destructive legacies of settler colonialism. In their films, they walk a fine line between a commitment to communicating the experiences they know best, on the one hand, responding to a sense of narrative urgency to tell certain kinds of critical tales at a time of cultural crisis for much of Aboriginal Australia. On the other hand, they run the risk that their representations might contribute to already existing portrayals of contemporary Indigenous lives as deeply dysfunctional, the kind of accounts that were central justifications for government interventions into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territories beginning in 2007 (Pazzano, 2012).

Second, redemptive culture making plays out in their everyday practices. As writers and directors, they have discovered a vocation that provides them with a sense of purpose, place and creativity. As filmmakers, they have the capacity to document, critique and possibly transform the face of indigeneity in their local worlds, as well as in the Australian national imaginary, and even on the world stage.



Beck Cole and team for documentary, *Making of Samson & Delilah*; Right:
Warwick Thornton and team, on set, *Samson and Delilah*
Photographer: April Goodman, (Pazzano, 2012)³

Third, for members of the remote and marginalized communities who are in the films as well as for other indigenous audiences more generally, these films offer powerful forms that provide those who see themselves represented in this way, perhaps for the first time, a potential source of cultural reflection and regeneration. In the interview in the clip below with Fenella Kernebone of Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Sunday Arts Program*, Warwick Thornton talking about *Samson and Delilah* (along with some illustrative clips from the film), you get an idea of how he both articulates and visualizes some of these concerns.

Link to interview: <http://youtu.be/SMgyZ7AgsOo>

Video courtesy of Scarlett Pictures, Running time: 13 min, 47 secs.

Here I Am

Beck Cole's *Here I Am* is her first feature, shot with a small crew and mostly non-professional actors.



Poster for *Here I Am*, (Cole, n.d.)

The cinematography is by Warwick Thornton, her partner in work, life, and parenting.



Director of Photography Warwick Thornton with director Beck Cole on set, *Here I Am*.

Photographer Sam Oster. (Cole, n.d.)

Beck cut her teeth on documentary work at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in Alice Springs where she got her start, and her sensibilities are very much built on that experience, as well as a kind of ethnographic approach to filmmaking whether fictional or non-fiction. As she explains:

I am very interested in observational filmmaking. I like to get out into the community.... I am not into beautiful pictures and a big score although they are important. What's important to me is to bring Aboriginal women to the screen. With *Here I Am*, I set out to make a film about women now, women whose lives I know. (University of South Australia, 2011)

The central character in *Here I Am* is Karen, a young Aboriginal woman whose journey we follow as she finds her feet in Port Adelaide after being released from jail.



Shai Pittman as "Karen" on set for *Here I Am*.

Photographer: Warwick Thornton. (Cole, n.d.)

She had been incarcerated on petty drug charges, just long enough to lose both custody of her young daughter and the respect of her mother -- played by Marcia Langton, one of Australia's most well-known indigenous intellectuals, anthropologists and activists -- who has taken charge of her grandchild during Karen's time in jail and is unwilling to surrender the medically vulnerable girl to an uncertain home life.



Quinaiha Scott as 'Rosie', Marcia Langton as 'Lois', Shai Pittman as 'Karen',
on set for *Here I Am*: Photographer: Sam Oster. (Cole, n.d.)

Karen finds solace and community in a women's shelter, and by the end of the film – at her first parole session – seems ready for redemption although her future is far from clear.

Beck's concern from the outset as director was to show the rarely seen realities of the lives of Aboriginal women who have a disproportionately high rate of incarceration as well as the historical and contemporary removal of their children. Her intention with the film, in part, was to provide the opportunity for indigenous women to reflect on these kinds of experiences that have virtually no public visibility and are a potential source of shame locally. *Here I Am* screened at key festivals in Australia and across the world, winning the best dramatic feature award at Canada's Imaginative Film and Media Arts festival held annually in Toronto, one of the most important and enduring international indigenous film venues, now in its thirteenth year. Of equal if not more importance for Beck, was her tour with the film that took her and Pauline Whyman, one of the lead female actors in the film, to indigenous communities across Australia where, in each venue, they held post-screening discussions with women about the issues raised in *Here I Am* that almost never have an airing.

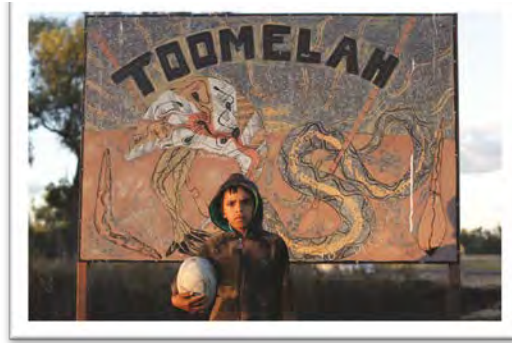
In the following clip from the opening scene of the film, we see Karen as she leaves jail and heads into Adelaide with nothing more than a box of clothes, a few dollars, and her mother's address. As in all the films, music is a crucial element, signifying a particular kind of cultural location as well. In this opening scene, we hear the song *Brother* sung by vocalist/guitarist Katy Steele of the Australian indie rock band Little Birdy, accompanying Karen on the first steps of her journey, with the repeated chorus, "Who's gonna love you now?", a theme that is prominent in all three of the works.

Opening scene from *Here I Am*,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZobxORwMWyA&feature=em-upload_owner

© 2011 Scarlett Pictures. (Cole, n.d.), 3 min. 57 sec.

Toomelah

The third work I consider is Ivan Sen's *Toomelah*, beloved by the indigenous community of Toomelah where the film was set (Sen, n.d.-a). To give you an idea of Toomelah's meaning in an Australian context, it was first established as a place of violent colonial encounters over a century ago, eventually re-created as a mission settlement in the 1930s, where Gamilaroi and Bigambal people from the surrounding area were settled. Toomelah came to national attention in 1987 when it was visited by Marcus Einfeld, then President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, who reported first-hand on its appalling living conditions (Einfeld, 2012). This was followed by a second report in 2008 when the District Nurse resigned, exhausted by 20 years of bearing witness to endemic neglect and abuse (Gibson, 2008). Director Sen – who in this film serves as director/writer/composer/ cinematographer – spent much time at Toomelah while growing up (Robb, 2011).



Daniel Connors ("Daniel") in front of the sign that welcomes visitors to Toomelah. Photo: (Sen, n.d.-a)

In an interview, he explains his choice to work there and his process.

Toomelah is where my mother is from and all my family so I had a bit of responsibility in telling this story....

I have always wanted to make a film there, took a while to get the confidence to go there and do the film on my own with the community. The only way to do that was to go out by myself without crew. Within a few days everyone knew I was there to make a film and everyone was really keen and enthusiastic about the whole idea. I really wanted to get something that was a slice of life and truthful. All kinds of things would come up, even to find the actors for the day, sometimes they would be fishing, in jail, in another town. So, Toomelah is my experience of their experience through constantly observing them and then going away and putting it into a script.

A lot of their traditional culture has been destroyed as a result of the government policies over the years. People are not quite living in mainstream Australia either. So they are living between the two worlds. For me the number one issue, is what I call cultural extinction. It's a difficult thing to approach. It's easy to build houses, and health and education can be improved through clinics and schools, but the internal psyche of these kids is something that is a lot more complex. (Sen, 2011)

This film, Sen's third feature, which he shot this time entirely on his own with local community members, depicts the dilemmas of contemporary Indigenous life – and especially masculinity -- through the eyes of ten year old Daniel, the central Character.

In the film, his parents are separated: his father – once a successful boxer – has been lost to a drug habit; his mother with whom he lives is not far behind. Daniel's grandmother is one of the few forces of stability and care in his life. Seeking older male attention, Daniel gets caught up in drug running, one of the few viable ways to make on the reserve.



Dean Daley-Jones ("Bruce") and Daniel Connors ("Daniel") on set. (Sen, n.d.-b)

In the opening scene to the film, we see the tenuousness of Daniel's familial life –he is even left to find his own food – and we witness his inability to pay attention in school. Sent out of the classroom for behavior issues, he goes to the library and wanders over to the bulletin board, where he literally comes face to face with his ancestral past laid out with old photos that range from images taken a century ago of proud warriors to evidence of a 19th century massacre. He ponders all of these with a sense of wonder. The film cuts immediately to the next scene where we see him playing single shooter video games at home with his friends. This wall portraying Toomelah's indigenous history is the site to which Daniel returns at the end of the film when it seems all other possibilities have collapsed.

CLIP: Opening sequence of Toomelah:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EloaPNAs70Y&feature=em-upload_owner

5 minutes 44 sec.

The film was a critical success in Australia in June 2011 when it opened at the Sydney Film Festival, then moving onto the international festival circuit. Its first screening however was in Toomelah itself.



Director Ivan Sen with Daniel Connors at Toomelah. Photo: (Sen, n.d.-b)

As director Ivan Sen described it:

When we went out to do the community screening, it was the first time they had seen themselves on the screen. All these families came together... Out on the football field on a blow up screen, in cars and on the grandstand. They were cheering and beeping their horns all the way through. I got the feeling that the community felt that their existence had been validated. They are still talking about it on a daily basis. (Sen, 2011)

Eventually, Toomelah was selected to represent Australia at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival where it was in competition for *Un Certain Regard* award. The key cast members made the trip with director Ivan Sen; it was their first trip outside of Australia. As Ivan Sen commented on their return:

The guys we took over had an extraordinary time meeting all kinds of people. In the community all they meet are schoolteachers, police officers, and Telstra workers. They were amazed that there is such a range of white people. (Sen, 2011)

Clip of Toomelah cast and crew to Cannes with Ruby Boukabou:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33kn578-5Wc>

From trip of director Ivan Sen, Daniel Connors (“Daniel”), Christopher Edwards (“Linden”), Courtesy of Screen Australia and Ruby T Productions.

First People’s Cinema

Prior to the rise of this “Indigenous New Wave”, a pioneering group of Indigenous filmmakers had emerged in the early 1990s, focused more intently on creating affirmative and at times provocative imagery as well as rarely seen or told Aboriginal histories – the other side of settler colonialism -- as a corrective to the relentless absence or overwhelmingly negative portrayal of Indigenous lives in Australia’s public sphere. The more recent work of this second generation of directors has had an unwavering focus on the present and questions of indigenous intergenerational responsibility. As has happened with artists from many other minoritized communities, they no longer feel the need to shoulder the initial burden of representation borne by those before them who literally had to invent Indigenous cinema when virtually nothing existed (Mercer, n.d.). As discussed earlier, I chose the term New to characterize this more recent group of Indigenous Australian artists because in their efforts to depict and understand everyday life in Aboriginal communities they know intimately, their work resembles, in some ways, the French cinéastes for whom the term *nouvelle vague* was originally invented in the 1950s and 1960s, despite radical sociological and cultural differences. Like their French counterparts, these indigenous filmmakers are inventing a new cinematic language. They work on tight budgets using a minimal crew and mostly

non-professional actors, shooting on location in a gritty documentary style, drawing on their own autobiographical knowledge of local cultural life as well as that of the lived communities where they are shooting. They all deploy an ethnographic, everyday life sensibility in their work, and draw on deep, experiential, long-term familiarity with their subjects. In their films, intergenerational relations are frayed and even abusive, traditional cultural knowledge is diminished, and drugs and grog (alcohol) have taken their toll. The result is a highly original and often iconoclastic aesthetic as well as an implicit social critique. However, the films are never pedantic. While they are haunted by questions of the historical destruction of their ancestral cultural worlds -- and the legacies of grief and violence wrought by settler colonialism -- their focus is resolutely on contemporary indigenous accountability.

As is the case for most cautionary tales, the *mise-en-scène* and the narratives that shape their films are bleak. All tell unblinking stories of the grim situation faced by many Indigenous young people in Australia; yet at the conclusion of each film, their protagonists end their filmic journey with a glimmer of recognition -- only a glimpse at best -- of a possible future in what otherwise seems an disintegrating Aboriginal world. But these filmmakers are not without hope for Indigenous futures; the conversations their works produce both on and off screen -- particularly for indigenous audiences -- are central to their productivity.

Their films follow distinctive social itineraries that have particular kinds of effects. Aboriginal audiences at home are always their first audiences. After local and national premieres in Australia, their work toured other Australian cities, as well as outback communities, and then moved onto the world stage via festival circuits. Of particular importance is the emerging network of international Indigenous festivals that showcase this kind of filmmaking in ways that have helped to produce -- over the last two decades -- a robust and lively transnational Indigenous counterpublic, not only in Australia, but in Canada, as well as New Zealand/Aotearoa, the US, and much of Latin America.⁴



Poster for First Peoples Cinema: 1500 Nations, One Tradition.

Image courtesy of Toronto International Film Festival ("First Peoples Cinema," n.d.)

As a case in point, in the summer of 2012, the prestigious Toronto International Film Festival held a special program entitled *First Peoples Cinema: 1500 Nations, One Tradition*, featuring 34 key works, primarily from the four countries that form the canon of First Peoples cinema: Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the U.S., including the films of Thornton, Cole and Sen. As programmer Jesse Wentz (Ojibwe) writes on the website introducing the First Peoples Cinema program...

First Peoples cinema largely defies conventional film-critical or -scholarly categorization; that is part of its very nature. The prevailing modes of film theory and interpretation — genre theory, national cinema study, auteur theory — have historically excluded the work of First Peoples filmmakers precisely because that work largely does not conform to their organizational boundaries.

First Peoples cinema thus strives not only to have more or better representation of Indigenous peoples on screen, but to challenge and change the conventional terms of film interpretation and understanding. To see these films is not only to discover a heretofore neglected wing of film history, but to reconsider what film itself is and can be. ("First Peoples Cinema," n.d.)

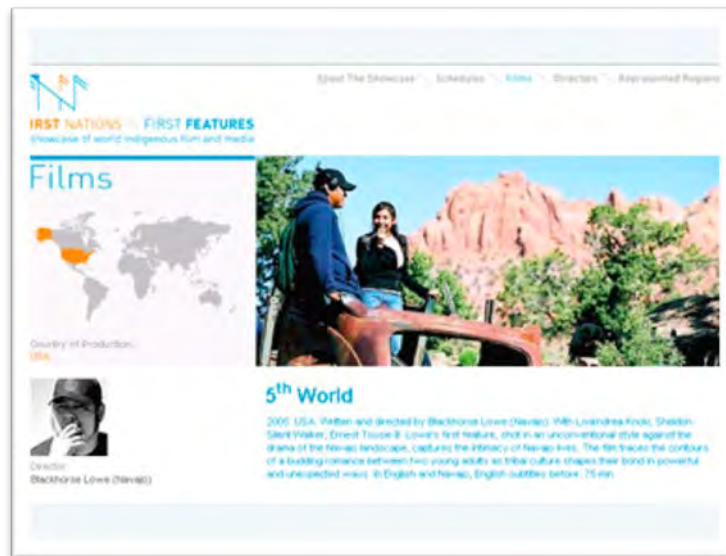
This kind of event is woven into an infrastructure that is starting to create a place for such work as part of World Cinema, while providing a sense of community among Indigenous filmmakers worldwide who come together through the festival circuit.

The Politics of Research

For the last twenty-five years, I have been one of a small but dedicated number of people involved with a broad range of Indigenous media makers, attracted to this work because of its originality and liveliness. Anthropologists, curators, artists and activists along with indigenous intellectuals have been quick to see the political promise and cultural possibilities of this kind of media-making, despite the fact that it is only now beginning to be recognized as part of world cinema. Many of us feel a responsibility not only to study and write about but also to help support these projects of collective self-representation by indigenous activists and artists who are resisting the impositions of Western paradigms or dominant global media, an approach that owes a debt to the work of Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her 2002 book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2012).

Recently American anthropologists have coined the term “engaged anthropology” to capture a sense of the kind of research that extends from collaborations to advocacy, to activism (Low & Riley, 2010). And there is the time honored notion of “anthropologie partagée” introduced in the 1960s by the late French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch (Rouch & Feld, 2003). I embrace his understanding of shared anthropology because it emphasizes not so much advocacy but more the co-production of both knowledge and its material representation, whether through films, books, or other media forms. In that spirit, I have been involved in multiple “shared” projects over the years beyond the extensive writing I have been doing on the topic of indigenous media. These activities include funding and running a fellowship program beginning in the

1990s for Indigenous filmmakers (and others) to come to the Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University. I also have co-curated multiple film exhibitions, including (along with colleagues) in 2005, First Nations/First Features, a major showcase that brought twenty Indigenous feature films and their directors from around the world to New York City's Museum of Modern Art, followed by screenings at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC (MoMA, n.d.).



Screenshot, First Nations/First Features website. Courtesy of MoMA. (MoMA, n.d.)

But it is not only with such engagements that this work has particular implications for anthropology that challenge and expand its usual practices. While the media we study may be “off the map” of dominant media cartographies, they are crucial to the media transformations beginning in the late 20th century, not only in terms of what gets represented. Their work calls attention to who gets to control the means of representation and what the consequences of that might be, an idea that Tuscarora colleague, visual artist and scholar Jolene Rickard calls visual sovereignty (Rickard, 2011). Those studying Aboriginal media – including myself -- seek to grasp how these

practices are increasingly part of the lives of indigenous communities, repositioning them vis-a-vis local, national as well as transnational imaginaries that are increasingly shaped by the doubled and contradictory telos of our time: agendas of neoliberalism, on the one hand, and postcolonial cultural politics on the other. Inevitably, our relations with those we study are continually in flux as our cultural worlds grow closer in ways that push the boundaries of anthropology.

This shift in vision that comes from bringing together these different perspectives – what I have elsewhere called the parallax effect -- forces a recognition that the so called “natives” are deeply engaged in establishing and circulating representations more or less on their own terms, through forms marked as resolutely modern – and which have been indigenized in multiple ways (Ginsburg, 1995). Fundamentally, this work can be understood as part of broader efforts to “decolonize the screen”, a term first used by my friend, the respected Maori filmmaker, activist and writer, the late Merata Mita, a colleague and friend who has deeply influenced my work.



Merata Mita as a young woman. Photograph: Marti Friedlander. (Screen, 2008)

In her writing, she talked about the power of counter-discursive representation using the metaphor of “swimming upstream.”

Swimming against the tide becomes an exhilarating experience. It makes you strong. Making and showing our own feature films is like that. For 90 minutes or so, we have the capability of indigenizing the screen in any part of the world our films are shown. (Mita, 1995)

Perhaps the most comprehensive theorization of indigenous media has come from the work of the late Maori filmmaker and intellectual, the aforementioned Barry Barclay, who coined the term “Fourth Cinema” in his influential 1990 book, *Our Own Image*.



Barry Barclay with Nissie Herewini on the set of *Te Rua* (1991).

In all his writing until his untimely death in 2008, Barclay argued for what I have written about as an “embedded aesthetic” (Ginsburg, 1994) -- a system of evaluation that refuses a separation of the regimes of value shaping textual production and circulation from the less visible but equally important concern with cultural protocols and social relations. Barclay talks about indigenous filmmaking as a *hui*, (the Maori term for a gathering), drawing attention to Maori understandings of the power of community both on and off screen, from pre-production consultation with the communities to be filmed, to the actual details of the shooting, and on to the questions of distribution, reception and film use. His notion of total film-making, and his emphasis on *korero*, or protocols, ensured that the end product was appropriately returned to those who had given it (Barclay & Limited, 1990).

In this sense, indigenous media as Fourth Cinema represents a counter current to neo-liberal trends that seek to deracinate and commodify culture. Working against the grain of a late-capitalist economy, indigenous directors seek to circulate their work according to regimes in which value is measured in terms other than financial gain or even critical acclaim, the values associated with commercial or art-house cinema respectively, although few would turn down money or fame. Instead, productions are prized for their embedded aesthetics that build value through the reciprocity of the social relations of production, respect for and acknowledgement of cultural rights, and the need for communities to maintain guardianship over work so that the circulation of films, the telling of stories and histories, and the creation of archives are managed according to appropriate frameworks.

If we take the idea of Fourth Cinema seriously, clearly a textual analysis of what we see on screen is insufficient. In addition to the protocols Barclay discusses, our research needs to take into account the cultural and political labor of indigenous artists and activists (and fellow travelers, including anthropologists) whose interventions have made the infrastructural support for this work possible, one pathway by which contemporary states, and their indigenous citizens might negotiate diversity. This is a problematic central to current discussions of cultural citizenship, a topic that has gained considerable currency over the last decade in anthropology and other fields. In other words, citizenship is not just a legal status, defined by a set of rights and responsibilities, but also an identity, an expression of one's membership in a political and cultural community, subject to powerful representational regimes, and often a site of struggle and negotiation for recognition as curator, theorist and photography scholar Ariella Azoulay's work has shown us in her book *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (Azoulay, 2012).

The work of the Indigenous Australian New Wave in particular invites us, along with the Indigenous communities who are their first audiences, to see and hear extraordinary stories, that bring recognition to the off screen lives of the subjects on screen, lives that

extend far beyond the range of the cinematic gaze. These films ask us to imagine a renewed vitality of the off screen social worlds – what I think of as the possibility of cultural redemption -- inaugurated in part through the practice of locally based filmmaking in the spirit of Fourth Cinema. The filmmakers of the Indigenous New Wave address their work to the contemporary local worlds they come from and ask hard questions about their own cultural legacies and responsibilities, bending the boundaries of the national imaginary to include Aboriginal realities, and along the way – like many of their fellow travelers from Canada and other parts of the world -- suggesting new possibilities for understanding the category of cinema itself.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper is part of the penultimate chapter of a book I am completing based on 20 years of research and engagement with Indigenous media makers and their work, entitled *Mediating Culture: Indigenous Media in a Digital Age*. In it, I cover a wide range of projects from the earliest epistemological challenges of the video experiments in remote Central Australia in the 1980s, to the emergence of indigenous filmmaking and television as an intervention into both the Australian national imaginary and the idea of world cinema. I also address the cultural activism and that led to the creation of four national indigenous television stations in the 21st century starting with APTN in Canada in 1999, Maori TV in New Zealand in 2004, Taiwan Indigenous TV in 2005 and National Indigenous Television in Australia in 2007). And of course, I turn to the questions of what the digital age might mean for Indigenous people worldwide, groups such as the work going on in Nunavut, with Igloolik Isuma's recent Digital Indigenous Democracy project which addresses the inequalities of access to broadband and other hidden problematics of our current media era, engaging these with great technological as well as political creativity. My analysis should be understood as part of this broader context of indigenous media production that I have been studying and writing about steadily since 1989.

² In 2012, Sally became head of the Indigenous Unit at Australia's national broadcaster, the ABC; Erica Glynn took over as Head of Indigenous Unit at Screen Australia.

³ Beck Cole made a lively and insightful documentary chronicling the process of casting, filming, and showing the film across the world. *The Making of Samson and Delilah* is available on the DVD of Samson and Delilah, via Madman films.

<http://www.madman.com.au/actions/catalogue.do?method=view&releaseId=12703>

⁴ Such festivals include Message Sticks in Australia, imaginative in Canada, the biennial showcases at the National Museum of the American Indian in the U.S. (NYC), and the CLACPI Festival Circuit in Latin America.

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