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Samson & Delilah

From Central Australia to Cannes

Faye Ginsburg

This past summer, Australian Aboriginal director Warwick Thornton showed his film *Samson and Delilah* (2009) at Cannes and walked off with the *Caméra d'Or*, the annual prize for the year's best first feature. In his acceptance speech, Thornton put the prize in perspective, describing the life he had led in central Australia before turning to film. "I grew up on the streets of Alice Springs, getting into trouble with the police. I needed direction and somehow I found cinema, or cinema found that direction for me. It saved my life." Thornton, a naturally modest and deeply driven man who loves Gibson guitars and dirt bikes, was stunned when he was told at Cannes that he had won this life-changing award.

Samson and Delilah is a spare, gestural narrative with little spoken dialogue, made with nonprofessional actors, shot in and around Thornton's hometown of Alice Springs. It tells the story of two Aboriginal teens, a boy and a girl, living in a remote community in the central Australian desert. With no parents to look after them, they seek connection in the music and

art that the adults engage in, and eventually in each other. After the unexpected death of Delilah's grandmother, they steal a car and take off to Alice Springs, for what turns out to be a grueling journey of survival involving substance abuse, racism, and rape, but it is also an unconventional story of love and redemption. Rendering the harsh reality of the lives of these contemporary indigenous teens 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 gets off the hook.

Set in central Australia, *Samson and Delilah* depicts a community where the older generation continues to create traditional dot paintings. In the movie, the 14-year-old teen Delilah (played by Marissa Rowan) spends her days assisting Nana, her grandmother (played by Mitjili Napanangka Gibson), in her daily routines as well as in her painting. Mitjili, a female Warlpiri elder is, in both film and in fact, a highly regarded artist.

The film's narrative raises worrisome concerns about the fragility of the painting tradition—and broader cultural knowledge—and its transmission to the next generation. At a key moment in the film, Mitjili passes away before she can teach Delilah the rituals and iconography that would allow the granddaughter to eventually achieve a similar status as a painter, creating a crisis in cultural reproduction. The story also



Warwick Thornton receiving the *Camera d'Or* at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival. Photo courtesy of *Samson and Delilah*.

raises important questions about the economics of the indigenous art market, as we witness penniless Delilah discover the way an Alice Springs gallery has been ripping off enormous profits from her grandmother, who only saw modest sums during her life.

The appearance of the paintings and the global art market in the film also interrupt potentially essentialist readings of indigeneity. Aboriginal paintings are not only beautiful but are seemingly timeless. The inherited repertoires of iconographic designs represent mythic stories of ancestral activities as they are imagined to have marked the surrounding landscape, part of an ancient system that had inspired Freud, Durkheim, and Levi-Strauss (among others) to theorize about these cosmologies as the elementary forms of religious and social life.

Indigenous filmmaking in any part of the world raises important questions about the role of media in the discursive evolution of multiculturalism and indigeneity in relation to both the desires of minority communities and the interests of the state. In Australia, Aboriginal media makers contribute to the expanding (if contested) understanding of that nation as culturally diverse, offering alternative accountings to those presented by unified national narratives. They also demonstrate the value of analysis that takes into account the off-screen cultural and political labor of Aboriginal activists and their fellow travelers whose efforts at gaining a space in this cultural arena have made this work possible.

As one might imagine, Thornton did not just “find cinema.” There is a lively and com-

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elling backstory to these questions, or to be more formally anthropological, a world of kinship, social practice, and opportunities that indigenous activists and their fellow travelers have struggled to create so that people like Thornton might find and shape an indigenous world for the 21st century. What has encouraged the development of such vibrant indigenous filmmaking from Aboriginal people who comprise only about 2 percent of the population of Australia?

The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) helped build a remarkable cohort of indigenous filmmakers from Alice Springs—Warwick Thornton and his collaborator and business partner Beck Cole among them—who otherwise might never have had the opportunity to launch their talents. These young adults who first started out working on CAAMA productions were part of a distinctive “Alice Springs mob” who gained their skills and knowledge from the ground up. CAAMA was one of the places I visited on my first field trip in 1988. It had officially been established in Alice Springs as 8-KIN FM, an outback Aboriginal radio station that used the most rudimentary tape machines to record local Aboriginal “bush music,” eventually creating



DJ Kenny (David Page) in Warwick Thornton's 2005 film Greenbush. Photo courtesy of CAAMA.

cassettes that sold out in community stores across the country, giving CAAMA Radio its longstanding moniker as Australia's Bush Radio.

At the time of my initial visit, CAAMA had expanded from its do-it-yourself local radio format to encompass a broad range of activities, becoming the first indigenous production company in Australia, situated in "the Alice" but reaching out to the key remote, traditional communities in the region. CAAMA quickly became known for its Aboriginal-directed works reflecting the lives and interests of indigenous central Australians, establishing what became its "house style." Young indigenous producers went out to the surrounding remote areas to talk and produce documentaries with elders and others whose stories were not well known beyond their local communities. This enduring technique of "respectful lis-

tening" to community members as they told life and local histories in their native languages became the hallmark of the "Nganampa Anwernkenhe" culture and language documentary series shown on Imparja, the satellite downlink, across central Australia. These half-hour shows, produced continuously for over two decades, showcase the diversity of Aboriginal life in the center of Australia. They are now the foundation of an irreplaceable "accidental archive" of that region's indigenous cultural history that had little documentation in writing or film prior to this body of work—material that is clearly of enormous value for current and future generations.

Warwick Thornton's mother, Freda Glynn, is an indigenous woman from central Australia and one of the three founders of CAAMA who helped oversee the expansion into broadcasting. She had an unshakable conviction that indigenous media production was essential to keeping young people interested in their language, culture, and history.

When I interviewed Freda Glyn back in the 1980s, she told me that without Aboriginal access to cameras, radio, and broadcasting, media would be nothing more than "a third invader" whose effects might be as devastating as disease and alcohol on already fragile Aboriginal communities. Culture for her was not an ossified object, but a lively social practice that could, among other things, "indigenize" new technologies and create new media worlds that reflected rather than erased local realities. The spirit of that approach was visceral. Everyone was

welcome at CAAMA's buildings, at that time located in repurposed funky prefab buildings on the edge of town where the desert takes over.

Warwick Thornton entered that world in his teens as a trainee. His rebellious antics made it clear he would not find a place for himself in traditional schooling, but his love of and talent for music and his knowledge of the rough, rich indigenous world around Alice Springs gave him the right credentials for radio and camera work at CAAMA. Over the years, as I kept pace with the growth of Australian indigenous media into areas such as feature filmmaking, I noticed his name showing up increasingly on provocative new works as a talented director of photography and eventually as a film director. Some of the filmmakers talk about the camera as a weapon of cultural resistance, and others as a passport, facilitating passage between the lives of bicultural indigenous people in town and more traditional communities in the bush. Eventually, many of them were able to gain further experience through a visionary program for emerging indigenous media makers created by the Indigenous Media Unit of the Australian Film Commission (now Screen Australia) and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. Providing judicious support, and carefully scaffolding projects from short films to longer formats, this program has had unprecedented success as foundational training for some of Australia's most



John Macumba, Freda Glynn (Warwick Thornton's mother), and Philip Batty, founders of CAAMA. Photo courtesy of CAAMA.

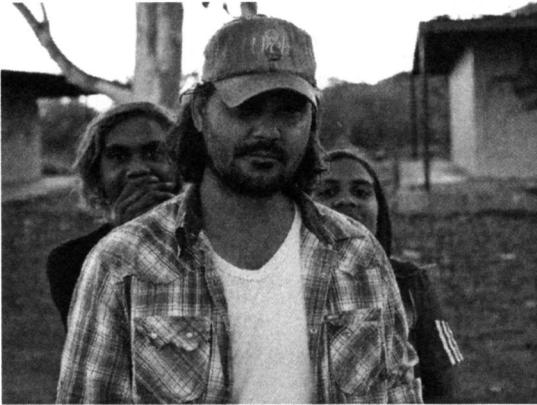
important contemporary indigenous filmmakers.

In a preview screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Warwick Thornton told his story as the audience sat in quiet contemplation after witnessing the harrowing lives rendered in *Samson and Delilah*. He began:

I left school when I was 14, 15 and got into film making. . . . and you had to get up in the morning, 'cause you had a job to do. I mean, suddenly you're telling people's really important stories, so you've got reason to get up. And I could have gone down the same path as a lot of my friends, you know. A lot of them are dead now, so, in a sense, cinema did save my life.

Equipped with the stories, training and vision to enter into feature film production, Thornton and his peers have made Australia a new center of Fourth Cinema, to use the term coined by the late Maori filmmaker, theorist, and writer Barry Barclay for works

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Warwick Thornton on the set of *Samson and Delilah*. Photo courtesy of *Samson and Delilah*.

produced through an indigenous perspective. Barclay's term makes evident that indigenous producers understand the distinctive value of this work for themselves, their communities, and the world.

The week before arriving in New York, Thornton won the first prize at the 2009 Australian Writers Guild awards (AWGIEs) for the spare, 80-page script of *Samson and Delilah*. Addressing the New York audience, Thornton spoke about the difficulties of writing with a limited formal education, "I had these ideas of starting to tell stories that

I wanted to tell, I actually picked up a pen and a blank piece of paper and went, 'Oh shit!' I forgot how to actually spell. I forgot how to write. It was, you know, what I'd learned, I'd lost, you know. So, that was really interesting, learning just the basics of spelling and that was pretty hardcore." Clearly, revisiting writing paid off. The film was nominated as Australia's entry into the best foreign language film category for the February 2010 Academy Awards—surely the first feature positioned for an Oscar that is primarily in the Warlpiri language—but possibly not the last. As Thornton told us in his final remarks at the screening in New York in September 2009: "*I've got hundreds of these ideas and stories, so it's gonna be fun for the next forty years.*" Stay tuned!

Faye Ginsburg is David B. Kriser Professor of Anthropology at New York University. She is also the director of the Graduate Program in Culture and the Media and the Center for Media, Culture and History. She is currently working on a new book, *Mediating Culture: Indigenous Identity in a Digital Age*, with Duke University Press.