Overhearing *Ten Canoes, The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country.*
Theology in dialogue with the collaborative films of
Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil

Figure 1.1 Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil on the set of *Charlie’s Country.*
Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.

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**Katherine Helen Rainger**

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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis.

Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services, Charles Sturt University or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of thesis, subject to confidentiality provisions as approved by the University.

Katherine Rainger

31st August 2019
Cultural Sensitivity Warning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this thesis contains the names and images of people who have died.

Access to the Films

Ten Canoes and The Tracker can be viewed on the free streaming site kanopy using a university or public library log-in. For access go to: https://www.kanopy.com/.

Charlie’s Country can be hired or purchased from Apple iTunes or Google Play.
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Abstract

Australian films and filmmakers have received little attention in film and theology research. In response to this situation, this thesis provides a theological dialogue with the work of filmmakers Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil. De Heer and Gulpilil’s body of work includes *The Tracker* (2002), *Ten Canoes* (2006) and *Charlie’s Country* (2013). These films can be classified as both Fourth Cinema and Intercultural Cinema. Barry Barclay’s seminal work defines Fourth Cinema as films that foreground the perspectives, stories and cultural norms of First Nations Peoples. The Intercultural component is evident in the diverse backgrounds of non-Indigenous director Rolf de Heer and Indigenous lead actor and co-writer David Gulpilil. The films’ content includes Indigenous storytelling which is made accessible for a non-Indigenous audience.

The categories of Fourth and Intercultural Cinema, as well as detailed analysis of the films, establish the key themes that guide the theological dialogue contained in this thesis. Themes include the importance of place as a marker of identity for Indigenous peoples, the devastating effects of colonial violence, and race relations in Northern Australia in the present. The primary interlocutor chosen for this research is the theologian Willie James Jennings. Jennings’ work highlights Christianity’s role in Indigenous dispossession, the legacy of supersessionism in colonial ways of seeing and the disconnection of people from place which led to a particular kind of racial imagination. He also argues that Christianity contains the propensity for “joining” which is based upon connection, belonging and reciprocity. This form of joining was diminished as Europeans forcibly entered into the lands of others and reshaped the land and the Indigenous peoples in their own image. According to Jennings, recovery of the significance of place is an important step for creating communion between peoples that is just and equitable.

Several Indigenous theologians are also included in the dialogue in order to further examine the themes emerging from the films from a theological perspective. Reading Jennings in an Australian context in conversation with Indigenous theologians and the work of de Heer and Gulpilil provides new opportunities for the application of Jennings’ work. At the same time reading Jennings in this context raises questions relating to his theology.
concerning biblical Israel’s land, the place of biblical Israel in Christian self-understanding, and the importance of culture for Indigenous theologians.

The dialogue between Jennings’ theology, Indigenous theology and the cinematic works of de Heer and Gulpilil provides compelling insights into the legacy of Christianity’s role in colonialism. Together they also provide new ways of imagining relationality between peoples, and between people and the rest of creation.
Glossary

**Film Studies**

**Audience** refers to the people who watch the films (either collectively or individually, privately or publicly).

**Viewer** is used in the analysis of the use of story, image, and sound to communicate in particular ways. Viewer includes engagement with the aural component of film reception.

**Diegetic sound** is sound (voice, music, or sound effect) that has its source in the film’s fictional world.

**Non-diegetic sound** is sound from outside the film’s fictional world. For example, music in a soundtrack.

**Off-screen** refers to the real lives of the cast and crew, in contrast to the characters and plotlines of the films. The term is also used to refer to the historical and social contexts at the time of the films’ production.

**Off-screen space** is parts of a film scene that are not visible to the audience. For example, the space above, below and on the left and right of the frame.

**On-screen** refers to sound and image that occurs within the frame of the film that the viewer can see and hear.

**Indigenous Studies**

**Country** refers to a culturally defined area of land associated with a particular, culturally distinct group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Country can also refer to more than a physical place—it indicates a cultural and spiritual relationship and responsibilities associated with caring for land and waterways.

**Nation** is generally accepted by Indigenous peoples as a useful word to describe culturally distinct Indigenous groups. Other potential appropriate terms include language groups and people groups. Family groups, kinship groups, and clans usually refer to sub-groups within a nation.
Chapter 1: Setting the Scene

1.1 Chapter Overview

Films show us our stories. They invite us to imagine our past, present and future. Director Rolf de Heer and actor David Gulpilil have produced a body of work which tells part of Australia’s story. At the same time, their films depict their personal stories. Ten Canoes (2006), The Tracker (2002) and Charlie’s Country (2014) contain vibrant images of people and place, and haunting soundtracks which provoke and entice audiences. De Heer has referred to these three films as the Accidental Trilogy. De Heer and Gulpilil’s shared body of work makes a significant contribution to the Australian cinematic canon. To date, the Accidental Trilogy has not been the subject of theological study, something that this thesis addresses.

Figure 1.1 Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil on the set of The Tracker. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.
The theologian Willie James Jennings is the primary theological voice in this thesis. Jennings was chosen due to my analysis of the Accidental Trilogy. The on-screen world of the Accidental Trilogy depicts: creation stories and Indigenous life before contact with Europeans; the impacts of colonisation; and life in the complex web of race relations in twenty-first century Australia. These themes are also central to Jennings’ theology. In addition, I use the work of Indigenous theologians, such as Denise Champion, Graham Paulson and Terry LeBlanc, to gain further insight into the films’ content and ways that theology can enter into dialogue with them.

A tension exists between the integrity of the films which contain a particular cultural worldview, and the work of Christian theologians who come from a range of backgrounds. This thesis, therefore, uses dialogue as a framework to hear what the films and theology might say to one another. The films and the theologians who interact are on their own paths. These paths intersect in the thesis and provide mutual illumination and interpretation, before once again continuing on their separate journeys. At the point of engagement, new insights and possibilities for theology in Australia emerge.

The dialogue and engagement are guided by two features derived from the production, content and reception of the films. First, the style and content of the Accidental Trilogy initiates a dialogue with viewers. The Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers of Ten Canoes, The Tracker and Charlie’s Country invite diverse audiences to see and hear things differently. Second, the understanding that the transmission of knowledge and intercultural exchanges “are never equivalent or equitable.” Histories of geographic and cultural dispossession influence the relationships between individuals from dominant and minority cultures. Both of these features are kept in view as I respond to the films’ invitation, while also being aware of my social location.

As is demonstrated throughout this thesis, the theology of Willie Jennings provides a lens that helps to focus and navigate the dialogue between the Accidental Trilogy and theology. One of Jennings’ critical contributions is the theologically inspired posture of overhearing. He initially applies this posture to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles; however, it also has broader application in the relationship between peoples who are estranged due to

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the processes of colonisation. Overhearing is, therefore, a theological motif which is applied throughout this thesis. Overhearing in Jennings’ usage is not primarily about hearing without the knowledge of the speaker. Rather, it implies coming close enough to the speaker’s linguistic and spatial world to be able to commune with them on their terms. As the analysis in the following chapters demonstrates, the films’ audiences are encouraged to overhear the experience of others in distinct ways through the cinematic devices used by the filmmakers.

There are several components of this research task to consider. These include: terminology and orthography; the films themselves; where this thesis fits in the broader conversations within film and theology; the theological approach used; and my social location. This introductory chapter addresses each of these items in turn, laying the foundation for the following chapters.

1.2 Terminology and Orthography

This section explains some of the terminology used to refer to peoples and groups throughout this thesis. A glossary for terminology relating to film studies and Indigenous studies can be found on page xiii, in the introductory material.

The term “Yolŋu” refers to the First Nations people of north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, Australia. Most of the cast and some of the crew of Ten Canoes and Charlie’s Country, including David Gulpilil, identify as Yolŋu. The Yolŋu Matha word “balanda” refers to Europeans. In my analysis of Ten Canoes, the term “non-Yolŋu” refers to all peoples who do not identify as belonging to the Yolŋu people. As Romaine Moreton observes “Ten Canoes is an invitation to non-Indigenous peoples—and Indigenous

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2 The majority of Yolŋu people live in the towns of Ramingining, Milingimbi, Galiwin’ku, Gapuwiyak and Yirrkala. Traditionally, Yolŋu referred to a human being (Miyalk is a Yolŋu Matha word for woman or female. Dirramu is a Yolŋu Matha word for man or male). The semantic range for Yolŋu can also include other Indigenous peoples. For example, during the “First White Man” short film as part of the Twelve Canoes series, the narrator refers to other Aboriginal people as “Yolŋu from down south.” People of Ramingining, “Twelve Canoes,” accessed September 9 2017, http://www.12canoes.com.au/.

3 The word “balanda” was a word used by Macassan traders from Sulawesi (Indonesia) to describe the Dutch. It is an accented translation of “Hollander.” The Macassan and the Yolŋu established a successful trade relationship before British colonisation. Some Macassan words were adopted by Yolŋu people. The short film The Macassans in the documentary Twelve Canoes depicts this intercultural relationship which was relatively harmonious and often used as a contrast to the later relationship with the British. For a detailed account of the relationship between the Yolŋu and the Macassans, see Marshall Clark and Sally K. May, eds., Macassan History and Heritage (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2013). I have not italicised “Yolŋu” and “balanda” because they appear in the Macquarie Dictionary of Australian English indicating their common usage.
peoples from other parts of the country—to glimpse the ancient world of the Yolngu through this film.”

When referring to Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples more generally, the terms Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, First Nations peoples, First peoples and Second peoples are used interchangeably. Indigenous peoples in an Australian context refers to two distinct groups: Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. First peoples or First Nations peoples can be used to refer to Indigenous peoples both in Australia and in other countries such as Canada and the United States of America, with specific usage applied in each jurisdiction. The use of First peoples and First Nations peoples in Australia emphasises the presence of distinct Aboriginal nations with sovereignty within their particular country before colonisation. It is essential to acknowledge the linguistic and cultural diversity within Aboriginal nations and the Torres Strait Islands; for example, there are over 250 different language groups in Australia. Wherever possible, the nation or language group of the person or peoples being referred to is used, such as Yolŋu, Adnyamathanha, Bundjalung and Gurindji.

Non-Indigenous theologian Chris Budden acknowledges the increasing tendency to speak of Indigenous peoples as First peoples. It follows then that “all those who are not Indigenous peoples are Second peoples.” This definition encompasses the initial British invasion of Australia and the many

7 See the glossary for entries on “nation” and “country.”
and varied waves of migration that have followed. Settlers and migrants are other terms that are used to refer to Second peoples. Second peoples have a range of backgrounds and histories, however they have one thing in common—they all “live on Indigenous land.” As will be further examined in chapter 7, “Indigenous land” denotes custodianship and a deep sense of relatedness, rather than ownership.

To resist homogenised and essentialist depictions when considering these definitions of First and Second peoples, it is important to remember that human identities are multifaceted, diverse and dynamic.

Yolŋu Matha is a general term used to refer to over forty languages spoken by Yolŋu people within their clan and language groups. Each clan has songs, art and stories which are associated with their language and their particular land given to them by their ancestors. David Gulpilil’s father’s language is Manhalpuŋku and his father’s mother’s language is Ganalbirju. He speaks fourteen languages.

This thesis uses a Yolŋu Matha font available from the Yolŋu Studies Department at Charles Darwin University, Darwin. Yolŋu Matha contains seven characters not featured in English: η or ɲ (ng as with song); η or ñ; d or D; ξ or ï; l or L (pronomounced with the tongue curled back); ä or Ä (long a, as with father); and ’ (glottal stop). The missionary-linguist Beulah Lowe developed the Yolŋu Matha orthography.

Australian English spelling is used throughout the thesis, with the exception of direct quotations where American spelling is used by the author being quoted.

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10 “Invasion” is a more appropriate term for representing Australia’s history than “settled” according to Flinders University, “Appropriate Terminology, Representations and Protocols of Acknowledgement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.”
11 Budden, Following Jesus in Invaded Space, 6.
13 Micheal Christie and Waymamba Gaykamanju, Yolŋu Languages and Culture: Study Notes Gupapuyŋku (Darwin: Yolŋu Studies, Charles Darwin University, 2016), 6.
15 Lowe was a missionary-linguist at Milingimbi during the 1950s and 1960s. Betsy Wearing, Beulah Lowe and the Yolŋu People (Terrigal: Betsy Wearing, 2007).
1.3 David Gulpilil, Rolf de Heer and the Accidental Trilogy

The acting career of David Gulpilil Ridjimiraril Dalaithngu AM (b. 1953) began at age sixteen. His skills as a dancer caught the attention of director Nicholas Roeg, who was visiting Gulpilil’s remote community (Maningrida in the Northern Territory) looking for locations for his film *Walkabout* (1971). Roeg cast Gulpilil as “Black Boy,” the Aboriginal youth who guides two lost white children to safety. Released in 1971, the success of *Walkabout* and Gulpilil’s on-screen charisma propelled him into the national and international spotlight. He has starred in numerous films and television series and won multiple awards.

Throughout his career, Gulpilil has led the change in the representation of First Nations peoples in Australian cinema: from stereotypes to characters with agency and cultural autonomy. In 2013, Gulpilil won a Red Ochre Award from the Australia Council’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board. Chair of the board, Lee-Ann Buckskin, commented on the contribution that Gulpilil had made throughout his career:

> The Red Ochre Award for David Gulpilil is a wonderful acknowledgement from his peers of David’s continual efforts to bring the experiences and wishes of his people to national and international attention . . . He is unquestionably one of the most respected Australian actors on the international film stage and a major contributor to the voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders . . . Beyond his work on screen, David’s contribution to our people is astounding . . . He has been, and continues to be, an inspiration to many people, opening doorways and creating career pathways where there were previously none.

He is an advocate for Yolŋu people, calling for past and present injustices to be addressed: “I want change, make it equal between balanda and Yolŋu people.” Gulpilil is also well-known for his role as a cultural ambassador between his Yolŋu culture and mainstream Australian culture as he lives and works between “two worlds.” Living between the balanda world and the

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16 Gulpilil was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1987 for “Service to the Arts through the Interpretation of Aboriginal Culture.” His full name as cited above is used on the credits of *Ten Canoes*. When Gulpilil won the National NAIDOC Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019, his full name was cited.

17 The film credits erroneously list him as “David Gumpilil.”


21 See Darlene Johnson’s documentary film, *One Red Blood* (2002) which includes interviews, archival footage and footage of Gulpilil in his remote community and on his country. In this
Yolŋu world has brought significant challenges for Gulpilil. He has battled addictions and depression. He has often expressed his frustration at not being adequately compensated by the film industry for his work.²² Gulpilil has also expressed frustration toward the Australian Government for his housing situation in his homeland outstation at Gulpulul, his remote community at Ramingining, and when he was living in Darwin.²³

Gulpilil is most well-known for his charismatic on-screen presence; however, his tumultuous personal life has also made headlines over the five decades of his career.²⁴ As the playwright Reg Cribb, who co-wrote the stage show *Gulpilil* notes, “David’s story is big, it’s complex, it’s unattainable.”²⁵ In July 2019, Gulpilil announced his retirement from acting due to ill-health.

Rolf de Heer (b. 1951) is a non-Indigenous Australian with Dutch heritage who spent his childhood in Indonesia. Jane Freebury’s comprehensive review of the work of Rolf de Heer, *Dancing to His Song: The Singular Cinema of Rolf de Heer*, was published in 2015. She argues that Rolf de Heer’s films have a distinct place in public discourse due to his boldness in terms of style, form and content.²⁶ While de Heer’s willingness to deal with diverse themes and issues make it difficult to synthesise his work, Freebury discerns the inclusion of marginalised characters as a constant theme.²⁷ Viewers are invited into unique and compelling visions of “outsiders” whose voices are not usually heard. Freebury distinguishes de Heer’s style from both the social-realist and art-house style of Australian cinema.²⁸ De Heer focuses instead on elements such as character psychology, dramatic interpersonal tension and the subtle use of humour.

documentary, Gulpilil expresses his Yolŋu spirituality connected with all living things through the Dreaming and the challenges of navigating obligations in two cultures throughout his career. See also the interview with prominent Australian film critic Margaret Pomeranz. The Wheeler Center, "David Gulpilil in conversation with Margaret Pomeranz," 2015, accessed May 7, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr5fDeezyqY.

²² Scobie, "King David," 18.
²⁵ Cribb, "David Gulpilil."
²⁷ Bruno Starrs has also discerned a consistent theme of the subversion of stereotypical forms of masculinity and unlikely protagonists. See D. Bruno Starrs, *The Films of Rolf de Heer*, 3rd ed. (Smashwords, 2015), 72–74.
²⁸ An index card with the unattributed quote: “In the Greek tragedies, no one ever knows what the gods had for breakfast,” was prominently displayed during pre-production for the film, *The Quiet Room* (Rolf de Heer, 1996). Freebury, *Dancing to His Song*, 110.
De Heer first met Gulpilil when he cast him in the lead role in the film The Tracker. This professional connection became a personal friendship when Gulpilil invited de Heer to his country in Ramingining, Arnhem Land. Gulpilil requested that the two of them work on another film project set in his country. This invitation was the genesis of Ten Canoes. Seven years later Gulpilil and de Heer’s third feature film, Charlie’s Country, was released.

Chapter 2 of this thesis provides an analysis of Ten Canoes (2006). Even though this was the second film made by de Heer and Gulpilil, it is discussed first, because in the on-screen world it is the first chronologically. Ten Canoes is set in the time of the ancestors before European contact. It contains a creation story and a story of a forbidden romance as the lore is passed onto the next generation. Ten Canoes extended the collaborative filmmaking process to include many residents of Ramingining, including co-director Peter Djigirr.

Chapter 3 discusses The Tracker (2002). The film was written and directed by de Heer. The Tracker depicts the brutalities of the colonial frontier and the interpersonal relationship between three European members of a police party and an Aboriginal tracker (played by Gulpilil).

Charlie’s Country (2013), discussed in chapter 4, tells the story of Charlie (played by Gulpilil) who lives in a remote community in contemporary Australia. His life is full of complexities, contradictions and questions which resist easy answers. Gulpilil and de Heer co-wrote this film.

The phrase “the Accidental Trilogy” implies that the three films fit together thematically. At the same time, it is only with hindsight—and with some reluctance—that de Heer classifies them as a trilogy. His reluctance is due to the fact the he and Gulpilil did not initially plan to make the three films and because of the films’ stylistic differences. He expressed these thoughts in the following way in an interview I conducted with him:

> Because it is accidental, there is no connection. The phrase came about because there is an attempt by some critics to make more of it than is the reality for me. So, we know why The Tracker exists: because I cast David. We know why Ten Canoes exists: because David nagged me about the film. I was never going to do it, ok. And then, you know, you’ve read the

29 Lore refers to a body of knowledge, stories and traditions held by a particular group. Lore encompasses “law,” for example behaviour and punishment codes, within a web of knowledge about relating to each other, the Creator and the creation. At times in this thesis lore and law are used interchangeably, depending on how the terms are used in the sources being discussed.
story about how it came about, and I took it into the office, and they said “how fantastic” and then I had to do it. No real connection to *The Tracker* other than David. In many years later, you know we did *Charlie’s Country*, and it wasn’t to make a trilogy or anything like that . . . and then somebody on set said something about, “ahh—the first one is how it used to be, the second one is what happened and the third one, these are the consequences.” They didn’t say it quite as articulately as that—I sort of have thought of that since. And you think yeah well that sort of makes sense, there are these three works that are stylistically profoundly different from each other, but they fit together in some sort of way.\(^{30}\)

Despite de Heer’s initial reluctance, his comment that in hindsight a connection between the films can be discerned is useful for this research. As is shown throughout the thesis, the existence of the Accidental Trilogy is due to a combination of cinematic vision, the pragmatics of production deadlines and budgets, and significantly, the professional and personal relationship between de Heer and Gulpilil.

Freebury argues that there is merit in considering the three films together. The three films are distinct in their form and content, and yet they are connected by a “triangular system which presents as an intriguing transition from thesis to antithesis to synthesis—to a recognition of the complexity of problems that are possibly intractable.”\(^{31}\) This interconnection is an important element, not only concerning the films’ content, but also because their production histories reflect the relationship between de Heer and Gulpilil which developed over a 14 year period.

Along with the Accidental Trilogy, Gulpilil and de Heer’s work includes the associated documentaries made in conjunction with *Ten Canoes*: *Twelve Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2008) and *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* (Tania Nehme, Molly Reynolds, Rolf de Heer, 2006). *Twelve Canoes* contains twelve mini-documentaries about Yolngu life and culture as well as still shots of many artworks by artists from Ramingining.\(^{32}\) *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* tells the production story of *Ten Canoes* from the perspective of de Heer. Two more documentaries, *Still Our Country* (Molly Reynolds, 2014) and *Another Country* (Molly Reynolds, 2015), were made in conjunction with *Charlie’s Country*.\(^{33}\) At specific points throughout the thesis, I refer to these

\(^{30}\) Rolf de Heer, "Interview One," interview by Katherine Rainger, October 10, 2017.

\(^{31}\) Freebury, *Dancing to His Song*, 262.

\(^{32}\) As well as at the free kanopy streaming site, *Twelve Canoes* can also be accessed at the website People of Ramingining, “Twelve Canoes.”

\(^{33}\) *Still Our Country* and *Another Country* were both filmed in Ramingining and feature many of the cast members from *Ten Canoes*. Both documentaries were directed by Molly
documentaries in order to enhance and further develop the theological dialogue taking place.

Indigenous filmmaker Darlene Johnson, who also made the documentary *One Red Blood* (2002) about Gulpilil, made a documentary film called *River of No Return* (2008) about Gulpilil’s niece Frances Djulibing, the lead female protagonist in *Ten Canoes*. River of No Return documents Djulibing’s quest to become a professional actor and her life in her community with her family. The film includes footage of Djulibing talking to de Heer on the phone and her request for his assistance in supporting her application for an acting school. While *River of No Return* is not part of Gulpilil and de Heer’s body of work, it is connected due to Djulibing’s involvement in *Ten Canoes* and *Charlie’s Country*, and her desire to follow in her Uncle’s footsteps. *River of No Return* provides a female voice and experience of life in Ramingining which adds to the first-hand accounts provided by Gulpilil in *Charlie’s Country* and *Another Country*.

1.4 Fourth Cinema and Intercultural Cinema

The analysis of the films in chapters 2, 3 and 4 pays careful attention to the filmmakers’ use of story, image and sound. Categories from film studies, such as Fourth Cinema and Intercultural Cinema, have been formative in guiding the analysis of the films and the theological dialogue with Jennings and others.

In 2002, Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay, from the Ngati Apa people, formalised the concerns of those writing about Indigenous representation and self-representation through the creation of a new category in global cinematic practice: Fourth Cinema. The classic division of cinema into First, Second, Third and Fourth Cinema provides a framework and genus within

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34 Frances Djullibing is also known as Frances Daingangan.

35 See Barry Barclay, “Celebrating Fourth Cinema,” *Illusions Magazine* July (2003); Barry Barclay, *Our Own Image: a Story of a Maori Filmmaker* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell define Indigenous film as “films made by, for, and about indigenous and aboriginal peoples in various parts of the world.” These films have often used a non-fiction documentary style. However, storytelling, oral history, nature imagery and an emphasis on place are also prevalent. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, “Indigenous Film,” in *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 227–228.
Film Studies. First Cinema refers to North American cinema. Second Cinema refers to European Art House cinema. Third Cinema, coined in 1969 by Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, called for films of “decolonization” that could provide:

. . . militant alternatives at the level of both form and content—to Hollywood and European art cinema, alternatives both stemming from and struggling against postcolonial conditions of poverty and underdevelopment.  

Barclay’s term Fourth Cinema refers to films made by Indigenous peoples. He includes multiple forms of Indigenous cinema which incorporate global and local perspectives.  

Barclay’s classification takes into account the permanent place of First, Second and Third Cinema and where their aims intersect with Fourth Cinema. At the same time, he emphasises Fourth Cinema’s distinctive characteristics and the need to resist being bound by the traditional definitions and expectations of these categories.

Barclay is concerned with who holds the camera, whose stories are told and how these stories are told. Dignity is a central concern for Barclay: “How can we take this maverick yet fond friend of ours—the camera—into the Māori community and be confident it will act with dignity?” The answer is found in “the reworking of ancient core values.” Values such as community consultation, reciprocity and the primary audience corresponding with the community from which the film derives, thereby subverting the commercial impetus which drives other forms of filmmaking.  

Guiding principles of Indigenous cultures, not only “surface features” (such as rituals, language, the use of Elders, attitudes to land and the rituals of the spirit-world on-screen), inform Fourth Cinema. Barclay envisages Fourth Cinema as the cinema

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37 Kuhn and Westwell, "Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies," 427. The term “World Cinema” can overlap with Second and Third Cinema and postcolonial cinema studies where non-mainstream attitudes to film content and/or film style are on display. Kuhn and Westwell, "Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies." Khorana states that a further term “transnational cinema” has often been conflated with world cinema. Sukhmani Khorana, "Crossover Cinema: A Genealogical and Conceptual Overview," in Crossover Cinema: Cross-Cultural Film from Production to Reception, ed. Sukhmani Khorana (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3. There is considerable fluidity in defining non-Western film. For example, Elizabeth Heffelfinger and Laura Wright use the categories of global cinema, accented cinema (the cinema of exile and the diaspora), third cinema and intercultural cinema. Heffelfinger and Wright, "Introduction: Situating Intercultural Film," 4.
38 Murray, Images of Dignity; Barry Barclay and Fourth Cinema, 29.
39 Barclay, Our Own Image, 9.
which overlaps with the politics of Indigenous visibility, Indigenous laws, cultures, languages, relationship with land and sovereignty. The Fourth Cinema camera moves the camera from sitting firmly on “the ship’s deck” (Barclay’s metaphor for settlers) and places it “ashore” so that it is held by those for whom “ashore” is their ancestral home.42

Corinn Columpar broadens Barclay’s definition of Fourth Cinema. While Barclay argues that Fourth Cinema requires Indigenous control in all areas of production, Columpar expands this to include collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers. Rather than Barclay’s “actual taxonomic category,” she prefers, following Houston Wood, to envisage a continuum at play.43 She argues that Fourth Cinema functions as an interdependent part of national cinema in a dialogic relationship with First, Second and Third Cinema.

Wood’s notion of a continuum of Indigenous filmmaking includes films that have complete Indigenous control and participation at one end of the continuum (a necessary component of Barclay’s concept of Fourth Cinema).44 The other end of the continuum contains films which do not have Indigenous creative control, yet seek to engage Indigenous actors and content in the film. Wood is, therefore, able to include films such as Ten Canoes, Rabbit-Proof Fence (Phillip Noyce, 2002) and Dances with Wolves (Kevin Costner, 1990) in his collection of Indigenous films, albeit with them located at various points on the continuum. Wood provides further nuance to his schema by adding that Indigenous films present an alternative to the storytelling of national cinemas and that the Indigenous community represented in the film should affirm and accept the film.45 Columpar, Wood, and Barclay emphasise that the social location and perspective of filmmakers dictate the on-screen content and representation.

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42 Barclay, “Celebrating Fourth Cinema,” 9. This overlaps with the four characteristics Houston Wood provides as being common to Indigenous films, one of which being that they are made by people who currently have or once had a homeland. Wood, Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World, 80. See also Janet Wilson, “Pathologies of Violence: Religion and Postcolonial Identity in New Zealand Cinema,” in Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
43 Corinn Columpar, Unsettling Sights: The Fourth World on Film (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), xii–xv.
45 Wood, Native Features: Indigenous Films from Around the World, 1–2, 89.
Following Columpar and Wood, an understanding of Fourth Cinema which includes intercultural collaboration can be applied to the Accidental Trilogy. In this case, Fourth Cinema and intercultural collaboration intersect on a continuum where Indigenous creative control has been negotiated alongside the artistic input and oversight of a non-Indigenous director. Indigenous studies academic and media commentator Marcia Langton, affirms this stance, arguing that to insist on Indigenous stories only being told by Indigenous filmmakers runs the risk of essentialism and limiting creative possibilities.

The Accidental Trilogy exemplifies something that Wood, Langton, Columpar, and to an extent Barclay, agree on—the nature of Indigenous representation on-screen is significant and collaboration that seeks integrity and consultation with Indigenous advisors, cast and crew is a productive and essential way forward.

De Heer and Gulpilil’s award-winning body of work is significant due to their intercultural collaboration, ground-breaking use of Indigenous languages, community consultation and willingness to position First Nations peoples as the tellers of their own stories and concerns. The Accidental Trilogy has been the subject of investigation in film, anthropology and culture studies; however, to date, substantial theological engagement with the Accidental Trilogy has not been undertaken. This oversight is representative of a

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49 The Tracker won the best film in 2002 from the Film Critics Circle of Australia and David Gulpilil won the award for best actor at the Australian Film Institute (AFI). Internationally it won best screenplay award at the Flanders International Film Festival, the press award at the Paris Film Festival, the special jury prize at the Valladolid International Film Festival and was nominated for the Golden Lion at Venice International Film Festival. It shared the SIGNIS award in 2002 awarded by the World Catholic Association for Communication. Ten Canoes won the Special Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2007 and six AFI awards in 2006. David Gulpilil won Best Actor in the Un Certain Regard section at Cannes in 2014 and Best Lead Actor in the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) awards in 2015 for Charlie’s Country.

50 The documentary Twelve Canoes has been the subject of a study in comparative religious traditions. See Bet Green, “‘I bring a sword’; “My peace I give”: experience, the binding factor,” in Dreaming a New Earth: Raimon Panikkar and Indigneous Spiritualities (Preston: Mosaic Press, 2012).
broader situation in film and theology where Australian and Indigenous films are underrepresented (see 1.5.2 below for elaboration of this point).

1.4.1 Representing Indigenous Cultures On-screen

Analysing Indigenous cinema with a religious or theological lens leads to questions concerning the nature of representation and the use of cinema as a medium of communication. Film scholar Julien R. Fielding begins by asking the question: “Can the viewer learn about Indigenous people and their religious traditions from film?” Fielding acknowledges the challenges of analysis in this area due to the immense diversity of beliefs and practices in Indigenous cultures, primarily since beliefs are often related to specific geographic formations and landscapes connected to place. Furthermore, colonialism and contact with the West have, in many instances, meant the denigration and destruction of languages, religion and culture. Cultural rejuvenation and revitalisation are necessary for the survival of cultural and religious stories from the past and present-day adaptations and reinterpretations. Ten Canoes is an example of processes of cultural renewal through a film which, along with The Tracker and Charlie’s Country, also challenges the political status quo by presenting alternative narratives from the past and present.

Fielding includes in his analysis films such as Black Robe (Bruce Beresford, 1991) and The Other Conquest (Salvador Carrasco, 1998) which depict conflicts between missionaries and Indigenous peoples in Canada in the seventeenth century and Mexico in the sixteenth century, respectively. He also includes films depicting cultural tensions in Australia where justice systems and differing conceptions of land are brought into conflict: Where the Green Ants Dream (Werner Herzog, 1984), The Last Wave (Peter Weir, 1977) and Dead Heart (Nick Parsons, 1996). Fielding mentions The Tracker as an example of the racism and colonial “savagery.” He does not, however, mention the references to Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity embedded in the film.

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52 Bruce Beresford who directed Black Robe is an Australian director whose oeuvre includes The Fringe Dwellers (1986), a film which depicts the challenges an Aboriginal family face moving into a fashionable “all-white” suburb.
53 David Gulpilil also featured in The Last Wave.
54 Fielding, “Indigenous Religions and Film,” 478.
Fielding asserts that there are difficulties for the “outsider who tries to describe Indigenous religions today.” Fielding acknowledges that when compared with non-Indigenous filmmakers, Indigenous filmmakers are often said to be “more accurate” in their depictions of Indigenous religion and the avoidance of stereotypes. He states, however, that their films are often “low-budget, independent films that can be difficult to find.” Furthermore, defining religion, culture and spirituality as separate entities can create false divisions in areas which Indigenous epistemologies view as inseparable. Film scholar Houston Wood also cautions that seeing a film which represents one aspect of Indigenous religion can give a false sense of understanding complex systems of belief and practice. Chris Eyre, of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, director of *Smoke Signals* (1998) and other films which depict Native American communities, summarises the difficulties in attempting to portray Indigenous spiritual practices on screen:

> I would not do ceremony in my films because I do not know how to capture it. It is subjective. Those who exploit it, do a disservice to it. *A Man Called Horse* bastardized the Sun Dance, and the vision quest sounds so clichéd if it is not done in the right way. There is nothing that can capture it. Indian religion is not considered a real thing. People regard it as non-religion, not a real religion. I think we’ve fallen short of portraying Indians in the media. Indians have never been portrayed in a respectful way, someone always romanticizes them or glorifies them on an iconic level. They don’t know how to portray them. We don’t need to make another *Dances with Wolves*, because it is not an Indian movie. When Indians portray themselves, then we have a different perspective.

Eyre discusses issues concerning the representation of Indigenous peoples in film along with his approach to filmmaking. Issues of cultural ownership and authority are also relevant in deciding who can depict certain rituals. These issues are at the heart of Barclay’s aims in making and theorising about Fourth Cinema, which was discussed above (1.4). Unlike other Australian films that represent First Nations peoples, the Accidental Trilogy has not been the subject of widespread criticism by Indigenous viewers. The

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affirmation of the films further confirms the decision to make the Accidental Trilogy the focus of this thesis. In contrast, *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002) (commissioned for the same festival as *The Tracker*) and *Jindabyne* (Ray Lawrence, 2006) were critiqued by sections of the Indigenous community at the time of their release due to the sensitive nature of content depicted on-screen.59

Representation remains a crucial issue in the production, reception and interpretation of films with Indigenous characters and content. Langton’s influential essay written for the Australian Film Commission in 1993 addresses the issue of on-screen representation of Aboriginal peoples.60 Langton analyses Aboriginal representation in films such as *Jedda* (Charles Chauvel, 1955), *Jindalee Lady* (Brian Syron, 1992) and *Night Cries: a Rural Tragedy* (Tracey Moffatt, 1990).61 Langton argues that it is important to address the issues of how Aboriginal people are represented because films, videos, and television are the way that most Australians “know” about Aboriginal peoples. “Knowing” has an inescapable socio-political edge: “Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to the stories told by former colonists.”62

Moreover, Langton insists that the *anti-colonial*, rather than merely the postcolonial, is the stance that is required when analysing the socio-political consequences of colonial representation of both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. In other words, Langton is aware that film and television can legitimise colonial stereotypes and attitudes as well as challenge them. Once again, it depends on who holds the camera and who has creative control of the story being told. These issues are pertinent to the discussion in chapters 2, 3 and 4 of the representation of Indigenous cultures and colonial violence depicted in the Accidental Trilogy.

Filmmaker and film scholar Romaine Moreton, from the Goenpul, Jagara and Bundjalung peoples, provides a stark reminder of the destructive and influential effects of representation. While she affirms *Ten Canoes* as a place

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59 Freebury, *Dancing to the Song*, 170.
for intercultural exchange, she also states that notions of “shared humanity”
cannot always be taken for granted:

*Ten Canoes* successfully creates a space for non-Indigenous peoples to access this story by drawing on common aspects of ‘humanity.’ The appeal of *Ten Canoes* is in the humanising of Indigenous peoples set in a period when Indigenous people have been historically presented as unhuman.63

Moreton then raises the question of how *Ten Canoes* humanises Indigenous peoples, without providing a definitive answer. In terms of representation, she pointedly remarks that: “The fact that a film has to ‘humanise’ Indigenous people at all is a testimony to the power of historical representations that have initially dehumanised Aboriginal peoples.”64

The changing nature of the on-screen representation of Aboriginal peoples is also a concern of Philip Hayward. He examines Aboriginal culture and spirituality in Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* (1977), which featured David Gulpilil, particularly regarding the way sound is used to create “sonic ambiances and dramatic emphases within the narrative.”65 Hayward also locates *The Last Wave* within its socio-political milieu and believes that the film would not be made in Australia today. He describes the transformation in Australian cinema in the last couple of decades where “the wilder imaginations of Aboriginality have been largely absent, as Australian settler society belatedly attempts to redress past injustices and misrepresentations and struggles to comprehend indigenous cultures.”66

Made in a time of transition in Australian cinema and social history, *The Last Wave* has a different production history to that of *Ten Canoes*. While Weir did engage with Lance Bennett, an Indigenous cultural consultant, he used a fictional tribe in the film’s plot.67 Conversely, *Ten Canoes* was a collaborative work from pre-production to post-production. The representation of Indigenous spirituality in *Ten Canoes* is located within a particular, rather than a universal, context reflecting the development of attitudes in

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63 Moreton, "Ten Canoes: Secondary Curator’s Notes."
64 Moreton, "Ten Canoes: Secondary Curator’s Notes."
66 Hayward, "Numinous Ambience," 27.
67 *The Last Wave* received some criticism about misrepresentation from Aboriginal rights groups. This criticism was largely negated due to the film being an entirely fictional work and its employment of Aboriginal actors (including David Gulpilil) and a cultural consultant (Lance Bennett). Weir was given permission to create a fictional “lost tribe” from the Sydney region but was not permitted to use any existing Aboriginal symbols. These too had to be created.
Australian cinema and society. As discussed further in chapter 2, creative control ultimately lay in the hands of the Yolnu cast and crew. Thus, final decisions about representation lay in the hands of the community at Ramingining. Collaboration with Indigenous peoples, as well as films written, directed and produced by Indigenous peoples, have been crucial determinants in changing on-screen representation. Film scholar Liz McNiven argues that David Gulpilil has been an instrumental figure in changing representations of Aboriginal peoples, appearing in films such as The Last Wave and Crocodile Dundee (Peter Faiman, 1986) as well as The Tracker, Rabbit-Proof Fence and Ten Canoes.

1.5 Film and Theology

This thesis is situated within the broader field of film and theology. Thorough overviews of the history, content and current trends in film and theology can be found elsewhere. This section highlights where this thesis aligns with previous studies and where it covers new ground. The interrelated area of film and religion is also relevant due to the Accidental Trilogy’s content, which includes Indigenous spirituality.

Studies undertaken in film and theology are generally from within the Christian tradition and use Christian discourse and categories. Studies in film and religion examine multiple religious traditions and are usually concerned with one of the following:

1) Religion in film, involving an analysis of the representation of religious themes, beliefs and practice;

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69 McNiven, "David Gulpilil: A Portrait."
2) Religion through film, exploring congruence between the act of cinema-going and religious rituals, arguing that the cinema replicates and potentially replaces traditional places of worship. Communication of meaning, narratives, ethical concerns and other traditional functions of religious communities that are now found in the domain of the cinema are included in this category.\(^\text{72}\)

3) Religion as film, where the film itself becomes a beacon for a spiritual encounter.\(^\text{73}\)

The primary focus of my thesis is theological. There are some instances when it is necessary to discuss the way that each of the films, particularly *Ten Canoes*, depicts Indigenous belief systems. The analysis, therefore, also includes a “religion in film” approach. The discussion of Yolŋu spirituality in *Ten Canoes* is partial rather than comprehensive. For example, Gulpilil’s creation story is discussed; however, due to the emphasis of the thesis, other references to spirituality, such as the character of the sorcerer, are not comprehensively explored.\(^\text{74}\)

1.5.1 Situating my Research within the study of Film, Theology and Religion

Two publications in the area of film and theology are particularly pertinent to my study. The first is Antonio D. Sison’s *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue*.\(^\text{75}\) The second is Mathew P. John’s monograph, *Film as Cultural Artifact, Religious Criticism of World Cinema*.\(^\text{76}\)

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\(^\text{73}\) For an example of religion through film, and religion as film, within the Buddhist tradition see Francisca Cho, “Imagining Nothing and Imagining Otherness in Buddhist Film,” in *Imag(in)ing Otherness: Filmic Visions of Living Together*, ed. S. Brent Plate and David Jasper (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1999). A vivid example of Religion as Film from within the Hindu tradition is the ritual and devotional behaviours that accompanied screenings of *Jai Santoshi Maa* (Sharma, 1975). See Philip Lutgendorf, ”Jai Santoshi Maa Revisited: On Seeing a Hindu “Mythological” Film,” in *Representing Religion in World Cinema*, ed. S. Brent Plate (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). For a collection of studies, originating from within Christian theology, which use continental theorists (largely from within the philosophical field of phenomenology) within a methodological paradigm that aims to “receive films as spiritual phenomena” see Zachary Settle and Taylor Worley, eds., *Dreams, Doubt and Dread: The Spiritual in Film* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016).


1.5.1.1 Edward Schillebeeckx and Third Cinema

Sison explores Third Cinema in conversation with the eschatological theology of Edward Schillebeeckx, arguing that together they offer “insights into the divine presence within human life.” His methodology analyses the aesthetics of *mise-en-scène*, editing, cinematography and sound in Third Cinema. These aspects are brought into a “creative and open-ended intertextual exploration that offers mutual enrichment to both sides of the Theology-Cinema equation.” Sison contends that Schillebeeckx’s engagement with Third World Liberationist Theologies provides a point of resonance with the aesthetics and aims of Third Cinema and its way of imaging the divine. Sison describes this as “Third Cinema’s audio-visual coding of the Third World postcolonial struggle and its ascription of a praxical imperative in the representation of the divine.” Sison provides a “rich discursive framework” for theological interpretation of Third Cinema film. He achieves this by bringing Schillebeeckx’s eschatological vision, configured through a rubric of “political holiness,” into conversation with Third Cinema. For example, Third Cinema highlights the socio-political struggles and contradictions present in postcolonial settings which Schillebeeckx sought to address in his own emancipatory theology.

Sison continues this engagement with Schillebeeckx in *World Cinema, Theology and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (2012), this time with an emphasis on the cinematic category of World Cinema as the locus of theological reflection. Sison undertakes several “creative crossings” within his hermeneutical strategy. In conversation with Schillebeeckx and others, he brings into focus “God-in-the-human” in the films he has chosen to discuss. World Cinema provides insights into the ways that humans flourish and, conversely, the systems, structures and circumstances which thwart the Kingdom of God in its “close at hand” but “not yet” status. Sison argues that

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77 Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx*. Third Cinema is cinema from the “third world”. I acknowledge that the terminology of “third world” is problematic. For information on Third Cinema, see Kuhn and Westwell, “Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies,” 427.

78 Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx*, 182.


80 Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx*, 183.


human flourishing requires works of justice, reconciliation, solidarity and liberation in which both cinema and the church participate.

Sison’s work has been influential on this research. He provides a methodology whereby film is viewed through a particular lens from film studies (in Sison’s case Third Cinema, in my case Fourth Cinema with intercultural collaboration) and brought into dialogue with a theologian with the intention of illuminating “creative crossings.” Sison’s work differs from mine as he uses works from several filmmakers, whereas I have focused on the collaborative works of de Heer and Gulpilil.84

1.5.1.2 Film as Cultural Artifact

In his monograph, Film as Cultural Artifact, Religious Criticism of World Cinema (2017), John emphasises a dialogical approach between cultural anthropology, religious studies and theology. His aim is to provide “thick descriptions” of films, engaging them both culturally and theologically.85 He demonstrates his approach to “cultural exegesis” in and through the diegetic film world through a case study of Indian-Canadian director and screenwriter Deepa Mehta’s Elements Trilogy: Fire (1996), Earth (1999) and Water (2005).

John’s method of “religious criticism” of film examines the functional aspects of religion—the cultural elements or the way that religion influences social norms, values and worldviews. He also examines the theological or substantive aspects—the belief system which undergirds and complements religious practice.

The cultural exegesis and “religious criticism” of the Accidental Trilogy will focus on Yolŋu cosmology, epistemology, creation narratives and connection with country explored primarily in chapters 2 and 7. John states that his method “provides a particular emphasis on the dialogical approach, where the theological framework for unpacking the film will be borrowed from the film

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84 Other works which resonate with my study due to their focus on a particular theologian and/or filmmaker include: Brant, Paul Tillich and the Possibility of Revelation through Film; David Humbert, Violence in the Films of Alfred Hitchcock: A Study in Mimesis (Michigan State University Press, 2017); Christopher Deacy, “From Bultmann to Burton, Demythologizing the Big Fish: The Contribution of Modern Christian Theologians to the Theology-Film Conversation,” in Reframing Theology and Film: New Focus for an Emerging Discipline ed. Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007); Christopher Deacy, Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001); Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., Theology and the Films of Terence Malik (New York: Routledge, 2016); Elijah Siegler, ed., Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

A dialogical approach has informed this research with the films being instrumental in my choosing the theological framework to use. For example, viewing *Ten Canoes* as an intercultural film on the Fourth Cinema continuum determined the discussion of theological themes found in Jennings’ theology such as creation, Indigenous connection to place and intercultural relationships.

The limitations to John’s approach, which he acknowledges, include the need to remember and appreciate the complexity, depth and application of religions and the reductionism that occurs whenever a belief system is communicated on-screen. John’s point applies to the depictions of Yolŋu spirituality in *Ten Canoes*.87

The strength of both Sison and John’s methodologies is that they provide a framework for engaging Christian theology with films that are from diverse cultural and religious contexts, allowing the films to be viewed on their terms and with bi-directional engagement. Sison does this through an intertextual hermeneutic where theological insights from within the body of Schillebeeckx’s work and the films mutually illuminate each other—to the extent that Third Cinema becomes the “filmic interpretation” of Schillebeeckx.88 Similarly, I am engaging Fourth Cinema, as exemplified in the Accidental Trilogy, in conversation primarily with Jennings. The conversation is then extended to include Indigenous theologians and others working within the Australian context. I also explore ways that the Accidental Trilogy illustrates, develops, questions and contextualises Jennings’ theology. At the same time, incorporating aspects of John’s methodology, such as “cultural exegesis” and “religious criticism” reinforces the films’ cultural integrity and resists cultural appropriation.

### 1.5.2 Theology and the Australian Screen

Discussion of Australian filmmakers in film and theology publications is limited mainly to the films of Peter Weir. Richard Leonard’s *The Mystical Gaze of the Cinema: The Films of Peter Weir* is a recent example of an in-

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86 John, *Film as Cultural Artifact*, 18.
depth study. The contributions of de Heer and Gulpilil to Australian cinema are significant. Their body of work warrants theological engagement due to the compelling content and style of their films. Moreover, while the works of specific directors have been the subject of research, to my knowledge, the films of a collaborative, intercultural team have not featured in substantial film and theology discourse. As this thesis demonstrates, intercultural filmmaking is a valuable resource for theological reflection.

1.5.3 Indigenous Spirituality and Christianity

Inherent in this thesis is the relationship between Yolŋu spirituality, represented in *Ten Canoes*, and Christian theology. Aboriginal spirituality can also be called the Dreaming, Dreamtime or Ancestral law. These terms are Western attempts to classify Aboriginal spirituality and belief systems. The term “spirituality” is preferred to “religion” due to the Western connotations associated with the structure of organised religions; however, spirituality also has connotations which can limit understanding.

Yolŋu people use variations of the word *waŋarr* to describe the Great Creator Spirit, and creation beings, who were active in ancestral time—a time of creation and giving of the land and lore which is distinct but not separate from the present. *Maŋayin*’, a word untranslatable in English, describes the intricate system of Yolŋu law, land boundaries and estates, politics, trade, customs, property, diplomacy, and animal husbandry. Identity for the Yolŋu people is embedded with land, sea, and sky. Identity is formed by “a sensory relationship within a sentient ancestral landscape.” Connection with the ancestral creator beings through sacred sites in the land

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91 Flinders University, "Appropriate Terminology, Representations and Protocols of Acknowledgement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples."


encompasses the past, present and future. A complex web of relational and ethical rights and responsibilities are also part of the Maŋayin:

The rich history of integration—and conflict—between Christianity and Yolŋu Ancestral law has been documented elsewhere. My research acknowledges that the Yolŋu cast and crew of Ten Canoes have provided a non-Yolŋu audience with an insight into their land and culture. As a film, it is a partial representation of a much broader reality of Yolŋu cosmology and spiritual connection to land and ancestors.

Ten Canoes and Charlie’s Country do not include references to Christianity. However, the documentaries Still Our Country and Another Country, do include Christian beliefs and rituals. For example, Another Country contains footage of Yolŋu ceremony and Easter celebrations occurring within the same community, with Gulpilil narrating the integration and co-existence of the two traditions. Some of the cast and crew also profess Christian belief. Michael Dawu, who plays the stranger in Ten Canoes, tells a dramatic story of conversion and healing in the documentary, Still Our Country.

The method of dialogue retains the integrity of the films and interacts with them on their terms. At the same time, it is clear that this is a project grounded in Christian theology and discourse, that draws on the work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous theologians. Dialogue between Christianity and Yolŋu spirituality has been occurring since missionaries first arrived in Arnhem Land. My thesis is a continuation of this dialogue through the medium of film.

1.6 Willie James Jennings

In order to ground this thesis theologically, the work of Willie James Jennings is used. Chapter 5 outlines in greater detail why I have chosen Jennings as the primary conversation partner for this thesis. Chapters 6 and 7 contain a dialogue between specific aspects of Jennings’ theology and the Accidental Trilogy: namely relationality between peoples and with the rest of creation.

Jennings has been chosen because his theology takes seriously the impact of colonisation on peoples and place. Jennings emphasises the way supersessionism was coupled with colonial practices in order to draw Indigenous peoples and their lands into European economic, religious and cultural structures.\textsuperscript{95} Western theology’s task, Jennings argues, is to understand the Christian colonial vision in order to overcome it.\textsuperscript{96} He argues that the colonial legacy which produced “racial faith” can be overcome by paying attention to geography and Indigenous worldviews and by addressing the forms of imperialism which have infected Western Christianity. Addressing this imperialism involves a certain form of joining between peoples in order to transcend epistemological, geographical and racial boundaries.\textsuperscript{97}

My thesis is that a cinematic model of joining is demonstrated in the off-screen relationship between de Heer and Gulpilil that led to the production of the Accidental Trilogy. Relationality is also demonstrated on-screen as the three films invite their audiences into ways of joining that respects rather than replaces the other. This form of joining is fostered through seeing and hearing the created world, and the connection between First peoples and place that persists despite the legacy of colonisation in Australia.

1.7 My Standpoint

Film and religion scholar Melanie Wright rightly observes that the religious convictions of theologians are part of the data to be interpreted when engaging in work with film.\textsuperscript{98} Similarly, George Aichele and Richard Walsh acknowledge the reader/viewer as an instrumental part of their hermeneutical approach to interpreting the bible in dialogue with film.\textsuperscript{99} According to Aichele and Walsh, an interpretive triangle is created by the reader/viewer who brings together the film, Scripture and their interpretive lens in order to reveal new meanings. The purpose of section 1.7 is to

\textsuperscript{95} Supersessionism refers to the notion that the church is now in possession of the divine election which formed the people of biblical Israel. See chapter 5 for an expanded definition.
\textsuperscript{97} Willie James Jennings, “Overcoming Racial Faith,” \textit{DIVINITY} 14, no. 2 (2015). As will be discussed further in chapter 6, Jennings’ notion of joining, across racialised boundaries, requires adaptation within the Australian context where Aboriginal land in remote areas is controlled by traditional owners using a permit system.
outline my religious affiliations and other factors which affect my standpoint as I approach this research. As the interpreter of the films, my approach to this research is informed by my values and attitudes, social context and life experience.

My convict ancestors arrived in Australia on the Second Fleet in 1790. Other ancestors arrived in the subsequent waves of settler migration from Germany and Sweden from the 1840s onwards. I was born on Wiradjuri country. My family and I have benefited from the dispossession of First Nation peoples in Australia. This benefit is seen in the purchase of land and legal protection without racial discrimination.

As a non-Aboriginal, Australian, woman, ordained a priest within the Anglican church, I come to this research as an insider and an outsider. Within Christian theological discourse, I am an insider who has studied theology within a University setting. I have participated in Christian communities in urban, regional and remote settings. In terms of the dimensions of Yolŋu spirituality that are represented in the films and scholarly works, I am an outsider who comes to this knowledge through the mediation of others. I have been to Yolŋu country and have gained a glimpse into the spirituality of the physical landscape and participated in some Yolŋu ceremonies at the Garma Festival.¹⁰⁰

There is a tension between being an insider and outsider which remains throughout my research. As an insider, I aim to bring a theological lens from the Christian tradition to the Accidental Trilogy. My outsider status is apparent as I approach the Accidental Trilogy and need to be inducted into Yolŋu storytelling and spirituality. Within the medium of the films, the dynamic between insider and outsider is demonstrated in the collaboration between de Heer, Gulpilil, and the community at Ramingining, each bringing specific knowledge which is then combined in the final product.

As an Australian, I bring to the Accidental Trilogy my memory of the context of the films’ themes and production. The Tracker is a cinematic response to aspects of Australia’s history, which were entering the national consciousness in a new way following the Decade of Reconciliation from ¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ In 2017, I attended the Garma Festival, held annually on Yolŋu country. See https://www.yyf.com.au/
The “Bridge Walks” that took part across Australia at that time were a public response to the *Bringing Them Home* report into the Stolen Generations and expressed a desire for reconciliation. On 28th May 2000, I participated, along with 250,000 others, in the walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. As the train took us to the beginning of the walk on the Sydney Harbour Bridge, we could see the entire width and length of the Harbour Bridge covered with people. The sense of being part of this “people’s movement” in a profound way was intensified as a group of women in our train carriage, on seeing the crowds outside the window, began singing in their Indigenous language.

*Ten Canoes* and *Charlie’s Country* are films set in the Northern Territory. In June 2004, I participated in a “Northern Exposure” trip in the form of a pilgrimage to Nungalinya Theological College in Darwin and Groote Eylandt with the Anglican Board of Mission (ABM) and Church Missionary Society (CMS). We were assigned readings to complete before arriving in Darwin. One of these texts was Richard Trudgen’s *Why Warriors Lay Down and Die* which de Heer has also expressed as being a significant influence on his understanding of a Yolŋu worldview.

The emphasis of the trip was to attempt to imagine Christian mission in the twenty-first century alongside First peoples in the Northern Territory. When my three companions and I arrived on Groote Eyelandt, the Rector in the Anglican parish lent us the parish four-wheel-drive and told us to drive for an hour along an unsealed road until we found the church leaders in the community of Umbakumba. We spent the next six nights camping as guests of Rev’d Colleen Mamarika and other church leaders. We attended nightly fellowship with other church members and accompanied our hosts on bush trips during the day. We also attended ceremonies associated with a funeral, both inside and outside the church. Participation in Christian fellowship with

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101 Anecdotally, my experiences in the education system provide examples of some of the changes that took place in this decade. In 1990, as a Year 4 student, I learnt about traditional Aboriginal culture as an object of study that has no connection with a living culture. In contrast, in 1998 my Year 12 Legal Studies class completed a unit on Aboriginal Customary Law and its inclusion in the Australian justice system. My education degree at the University of Wollongong (1999–2002) included compulsory units where prospective teachers were required to plan units of work on the topics of “Reconciliation” and “The Stolen Generation.” We were also taught to integrate Indigenous perspectives across the curriculum. These examples highlight the difference between my experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies as a student in primary school and the way I teach my own students as a teacher.


103 Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*. 
the church at Umbakumba was a point of connection with our hosts, although this was not without cross-cultural miscommunications involving differing expectations.\textsuperscript{104}

In 2006, in response to this “exposure trip,” I sought permanent teaching employment in the twin communities of Kalkarindji and Daguragu in the Northern Territory. I moved from an urban setting in Canberra, where, according to Federal Law, Native Title has been extinguished, to a place where Native Title is recognised and implemented. This move brought into sharp relief the parallel systems of law and land ownership which are present in Australia. Kalkarindji is a gazetted town (meaning it is on Crown land) with unrestricted access; however, I required a permit from the Central Land Council to visit Daguragu and other places which were on Gurindji country. This experience raised questions about the nature of the relationship between First and Second peoples within Australia. For example, I questioned the different understandings of family and place that I observed and the way that Western knowledge is valued and reproduced at the expense of Indigenous knowledge. I questioned the relationship of the past to the present and reflected on the different cultures that my colleagues and students inhabited. These questions are explored throughout this thesis through immersion in the on-screen world of the Accidental Trilogy and theological inquiry aided by Jennings and First Nations theologians.

Throughout the three years that I lived in Kalkarindji, I was conscious that I was a guest of the Gurindji people; however, I was also an employee of the Department of Education, with the associated professional obligations that this entailed. The Department did not provide me with any curriculum or language adjustments to meet the context in which I worked with students and their families. I worked alongside Ngumpit (Aboriginal) teaching assistants who acted as educators, translators and cultural advisors between the school and the community.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{104} During the Darwin component of the pilgrimage one of our non-Indigenous hosts at Nungalinya organised for us to visit the urban Aboriginal community at Bagot and collect rubbish (council rubbish collection did not service this community), attend a Catholic parish which was known for its enculturation of First peoples iconography within the liturgy and attend the outdoor “Deckchair cinema” to see the film \textit{Yolngu Boy} (Stephen Johnson, 2002). These combined experiences revealed the complexity of race relations within the Northern Territory, inside and outside the church, in both urban and remote settings.

\textsuperscript{105} These women, who were a similar age to me became professional colleagues and friends. As the pre-school teacher for two years, I taught students who were beginning to learn English: their main language was Gurindji Kriol. I relied on my teacher assistants to interpret my instructions to the students, and, in turn, to help me to “overhear” the children as they engaged in imaginative play.
Within the church context, I observed and experienced “compelling gestures of connection, belonging and invitation” through participation in fellowship meetings and church services. What began as a mission initiated by the Baptist denomination is now a congregation led by Gurindji women and men with the support of “Church Support Workers” through the Baptist organisation Global Interaction. I also observed structural inequalities within churches in the Northern Territory, across a range of denominations, in terms of decision-making and resourcing.

In 2014, six years after I returned to Canberra from Kalkarindji, I saw Charlie’s Country at the cinema. I was struck by the compelling storytelling and the raw, lived experience that the film conveys as Charlie navigates his life within two distinct locations, his remote community and urban Darwin. I was also struck by the dissonance between Yolnu culture and the dominant culture of mainstream Australia. As a viewer I observed the creative navigation which persists as First Nations people retain their cultural identity, languages and connection with country, often in challenging situations.

As a Christian from within the dominant culture in Australian society my first instinct was to ask, “What would theology have to say to Charlie’s Country?” I posed this question mainly about the characterisation of Charlie and his experience of life, which contained the pain of displacement, even as he remained connected with his land. Upon further reflection, another question formed: “What is it that theology has to hear from Charlie’s Country?” I extended the field of enquiry to the three feature-length films on which de Heer and Gulpilil collaborated.

As my experience has shown, films are not only a prevalent form of communication and entertainment, they also have the potential to influence our perceptions and decisions in profound and at times unexpected ways. One of the assumptions I bring to this thesis is that the medium of film is an influential mode of communication and social analysis. The ability of

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107 During the famous “Wave Hill Walk-Off” when the Gurindji people protested their conditions as stockmen and domestic servants on pastoral properties on their land (which began the land rights movement) Graham and Iris Paulson, who are Aboriginal, were the Baptist missionaries. They offered their support to the leader’s movement Vincent Lingiari.

108 Felicity Collins and Therese Davis argue that Australian cinema from 1990 to 2004 both describes and challenges the national social imaginary through portrayals of Australia’s colonial past and multicultural present. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, Australian Cinema after Mabo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Nicholas Wolterstorff’s discussion on the phenomena of relating the imaginary, yet necessarily realistic, worlds created in “social protest literature” to our moral and emotional engagement with people in
film to facilitate cinematic encounters with stories that are different to our
own is one of the reasons that the field of film and theology has emerged
as an established component of theological study.\footnote{30}

Caution is also needed when approaching the stories of others. Film and
religion scholar Margaret Miles reminds her readers that the storytelling and
social analysis in films contain bias and viewers need to be attuned to this.\footnote{109}

As previously mentioned (1.4.1), Wood notes the intercultural exchange that
viewing Indigenous films can foster, while also cautioning that this exchange
can be voyeuristic or superficial.\footnote{110} As the interpreter of the films, I am
aware of Wood’s caution and have endeavoured to allow the films to retain
their integrity as works of art that invite multiple interpretations.

The notion of place is a significant component of both Jennings’ theology
and the Accidental Trilogy. The issues that are raised in this thesis
concerning place are not limited to remote parts of Australia. I currently live
on Ngunnawal and Ngambri country, now known as Canberra.\footnote{111} Canberra
represents the legacy of British colonialism and Federation, which took place
in 1901 as the nation of Australia was established. For example, Parliament
House, the National Library, and the High Court of Australia are symbols of
the integration of British government and cultural institutions in Australia.\footnote{112}
The signs of colonial presence are easily discerned through the naming of
places such as King Edward Terrace, Kings Avenue and Commonwealth
Avenue, where many of these institutions are located. Similarly, colonial
naming is evident in the nearby States: New South Wales, Victoria and
Queensland.\footnote{113}

and Theology in Dialogue}, 181–201.

\footnote{110} Margaret R. Miles, \textit{Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies} (Boston:


\footnote{112} I acknowledge the different narratives concerning traditional custodianship in the
Australian Capital Territory. The Ngambri-Guumaal peoples are also acknowledged as
Traditional Owners. See Tegan Osbourne, “What is the Aboriginal history of Canberra?,”

\footnote{113} The permanent display in Parliament House of the Yirrkala Bark petition written by Yolnu
people in 1963 to assert their ownership of land and protest the Commonwealth’s granting of
mining rights to the Nabalco company is one example of the recognition of Indigenous law
and its integration into British law (as seen in Native Title legislation) in the Australian
context. This is an example of bi-cultural social imagination within the dominant culture.

\footnote{114} Queensland was named in 1859 in honour of Queen Victoria.
The presence of First Nations peoples is represented in Canberra in several ways including government funded institutions such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), the National Gallery of Australia, and the National Museum. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy, established in 1972 opposite Old Parliament House, acts as a visual reminder of the “unfinished business” within Australia’s national consciousness which requires First Nations peoples to have an embassy on their own lands.\textsuperscript{115} The Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples and the mountains and waterways surrounding Canberra bear witness to the peoples who have called this place of meeting home since the beginning of the Dreaming.\textsuperscript{116} As Ngunnawal Elder Aunty Agnes Shay shares: “I’m proud that Ngunnawal country with its limestone plains, surrounded by beautiful mountain ranges, rolling hills and mighty flowing rivers has supported the Ngunnawal people since the Dreamtime.”\textsuperscript{117} By paying attention to the stories that people tell about place, a multifaceted vision of Australia begins to emerge, one which takes into account the testimony, history and legacy of First and Second peoples.

I have included this extended reflection to expand Wright’s statement regarding the religious convictions of the researcher. I contend that non-religious experiences are also part of the data we bring to the task of film interpretation. My role as the interpreter in undertaking this theological dialogue is informed by both my Christian-Western worldview and my experience as a guest in remote settings. Therefore, I acknowledge the provisional nature of my findings, which nevertheless make a contribution to film and theology within an Australian setting.


1.8 Methodology

The methodology used in this thesis includes the following:

- Analysis of *Ten Canoes*, *The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country* focusing on the story, image, sound, socio-political context, production history and critical reception of each film.
- Where the films lend themselves to this approach, drawing on John’s methods of “cultural exegesis” and “religion criticism” (discussed above in 1.5).
- Interviews with the director of the Accidental Trilogy, Rolf de Heer, to ascertain background information on each film. The interviews are supplemented by material on the public record regarding the careers and motivations of Gulpilil and de Heer.\(^{118}\)
- Interpretations of the critical themes in Jennings’ work in dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy. I draw on the work of Sison, discussed above (1.5), to develop “creative crossings” between Jennings’ theology and the films.
- Incorporation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous theological voices to develop the hermeneutical insights arising from viewing the Accidental Trilogy in conversation with Jennings.

1.9 Thesis Aims and Overview of Chapters

The aims of this thesis are as follows:

1. To engage the Accidental Trilogy in theological dialogue.
2. To demonstrate “creative crossings” between the Accidental Trilogy and Jennings’ theology.

\(^{118}\) The interviews with Rolf de Heer were conducted according to Protocol Number 100/2017/08 issued by Arts and Education Faculty Human Ethics Committee, Charles Sturt University. In order to assess the on-screen and off-screen dynamics of the filmic contribution of de Heer and Gulpilil to Australian cinema and to theology, questions that auteur theory asks concerning style, motivation, content, background, themes and approaches will be considered. This discussion will accompany the analysis of story, image, sound and production and reception history. Auteur theory has been critiqued due to the emphasis it places on the directorial intent which can diminish the realms of the onscreen world and of audience response. It has also been critiqued on the basis that it does not account for the inherently collaborative nature of filmmaking. I am therefore using aspects of auteur theory while extending the theory beyond de Heer as director to the works of de Heer and Gulpilil. This also includes the input of others such as Peter Djigirr (co-director, producer, cultural consultant), Ian Jones (cinematographer), James Currie (sound design) and Molly Reynolds (director) who worked with them on one or more of the films in either the Accidental Trilogy, *Twelve Canoes, Balanda and the Bark Canoes, Another Country* or *Still Our Country.*
3. To critically apply Jennings’ theology within an Australian context through dialogue with, and arising from, the Accidental Trilogy.

4. To contribute to contextual theology in Australia through viewing the Accidental Trilogy in conversation with the theology of Willie Jennings and Indigenous theologians.

This thesis is made up of two parts. Part One consists of film analysis of *Ten Canoes* (chapter 2), *The Tracker* (chapter 3) and *Charlie’s Country* (chapter 4). In these chapters story, image and sound are analysed and aspects of production and reception history unique to each film are examined.

Part Two contains the theological dialogue arising from the film analysis found in Part One. Chapter 5 provides an overview and critical engagement of Jennings’ work with a particular focus on his theology of race, place and relationality concerning European colonialism beginning in the fifteenth century. This chapter includes initial reflections on the way that the Accidental Trilogy converses with Jennings to facilitate the construction of theological interpretations of the films.

Chapter 6 further expands Jennings’ theological agenda by focusing on the agents of colonialism identified by Jennings: the merchant, the soldier and the missionary. This chapter demonstrates how the Accidental Trilogy illustrates and subverts the modes of relating that these three agents espoused and introduces a fourth category with the potential to subvert these modes of colonial relationality: the way of the filmmaker. A discussion of Indigenous theology and culture also features in this chapter as part of my response to Jennings’ insights concerning the agents of colonialism.

Chapter 7 focuses on Jennings’ doctrine of creation. It explores the way that Christian doctrines of creation had a symbiotic relationship with the outcomes of colonial expansion such as racial imagination and the emergence of private property. Consequently, a Christian doctrine of creation needs to be reimagined in our contemporary contexts so that colonial hegemony can be overcome through a greater appreciation of the connection between people and place and the sacred nature of all of creation. This chapter includes First Nations theologians as interlocutors who articulate that which the Accidental Trilogy performs on-screen and Jennings desires to reclaim—a sense of creation as animated, communicative and connected and our shared place as creatures within, as opposed to above, the created world.
Chapter 8 draws the findings of this theological dialogue together. I make a number of proposals as to how this exercise in film and theology contributes to contextual theology in Australia and point to areas for further research.

This introductory chapter has set the scene for the journey ahead. Chapter 2 continues the journey as we enter into the world of Yolŋu ancestors in *Ten Canoes*. 
Part 1: The Accidental Trilogy Film Analysis

Chapter 2: Ten Canoes Film Analysis

I got tears falling down, I been crying seeing that movie, it’s such a good movie . . . It will hold them in the heart, the people who will see it, it’ll take you way down to the wilderness.

—David Gulpilil, Ten Canoes Press Kit

One of the most severe tests in moviemaking is communicating with strangers.

—David Thomson, “Have You Seen . . . ?” A Personal Introduction to 1000 Films

Figure 2.1 Rolf de Heer (left) and Bobby Bunungurr (right) on the set of Ten Canoes. Photograph by James Geurts.
2.1 Chapter Overview

Analysis in this chapter begins with the elements of story, image and sound. An overview of the significant issues which film and cultural studies critics have addressed in their engagement with *Ten Canoes* is then provided. Audience and critical reception of *Ten Canoes* have been consistently positive, even as critics have questioned the dynamics involved in the collaborative project and the representation of Yolŋu culture.¹¹⁹

Two major themes emerge from the critical literature: the intercultural collaboration in *Ten Canoes* and the role of the audience in the reception of the film. These two themes, along with the film’s story, image and sound, demonstrate a form of cinematic relationality which is both hospitable and at the same time attentive to cultural difference. The filmmakers invite and support a diverse audience to visually and aurally experience aspects of Yolŋu culture in and through a multifaceted story inspired by ten bark canoes. This experience of intercultural relationality is grounded in the acceptance of the invitation to engage with the people, stories, lore and land of the Storyteller (David Gulpilil) and his ancestors on his terms.

2.2 Story

The ground-breaking nature of *Ten Canoes* is demonstrated on-screen through a collaborative and improvised screenplay, and off-screen in the choices made in casting and production. The dialogue of the film was improvised by the actors rather than using a conventional script, due to the language divide between the Yolŋu Matha-speaking cast and English-speaking de Heer.¹²⁰ The film is structured around three levels of story-telling that represent different periods which are nested together and told using Yolŋu languages, primarily Ganalbiŋu. The viewer is invited into the on-screen world where a Yolŋu creation story, lore, land and cosmology act as commentary for a coming-of-age tale of mistaken identity, kinship, romance and the cycle

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of birth and death. The Storyteller’s role is significant as the ever-present host who guides the unfolding of the twin narratives and instructs the audience with the imperatives to “look,” “see” and “hear.”

2.2.1 On-screen

*Ten Canoes* begins with an aerial shot of the Arafura Swamp in Yolŋu country, Arnhem Land. The interconnection of generations of people and place is conveyed in these initial moments as the Storyteller, in voice-over, guides the viewer through his creation story.

The Storyteller introduces the audience to his ancestors (shown in black and white) who are on a hunting expedition for *gamang* (magpie geese) and their eggs. Minygululu (Peter Minygululu) and his younger brother Dayindi (Jamie Gulpilil) are two of the ancestors. Minygululu has heard that Dayindi is interested in his young and beautiful third wife (Cassandra Malangarri Baker). Minygululu tells Dayindi a story from long ago to help him “live the proper way.”

The story from long ago (shown in colour) is about an ancient ancestor Ridjimiraril (Crusoe Kurddal), who also has a young and beautiful third wife, Munandjarra (also played by Cassandra Malangarri Baker) and a brother, Yeeralparil (also played by Jamie Gulpilil), who is interested in her. A chain of events is unleashed when a mysterious stranger appears in the camp and Ridjimiraril’s beloved second wife Nowalingu (Francis Djulibing) disappears. Her disappearance leads to suspicion and rash action, culminating in Ridjimiraril’s death. According to lore, Yeeralparil can now marry Munandjarra.

The comic irony is that he also inherits the other two wives, Banalandju (Sonia Djarrabalminym) and Nowalingu, who have firm ideas about his role as their husband. The story-cycle is completed, as the men return home after the hunt, with Dayindi (and the viewer) now in possession of the full story, and a more circumspect attitude.

*Ten Canoes* contains stories designed to entertain and to educate diverse audiences, including the children in the community at Ramingining and mainstream audiences in Australia and overseas. The anthropologist Lester

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122 See statements by the cast in Vertigo Productions, “*Ten Canoes* Press Kit,” 20–25. See also interviews conducted by Daniel Browning on Radio National with the cast members David Gulpilil, Peter Djigirr, Frances Djulibing, Richard Birrinbirrin. Daniel Browning, *AWAYE!*
Hiatt describes *Ten Canoes* as “remarkably hybrid” due to the ethnographic reconstruction in the film which is coupled with the Storyteller’s genial style, rounded characters, imagined scenarios, bawdy humour and layers of storytelling. The integration of these various styles disrupts viewer expectations that this is a purely ethnographic film. In addition, *Ten Canoes* contains a pedagogical element communicated through the Storyteller and the characters as the viewer enters their world. For example, the viewer, along with Dayindi, learns how canoes are made, how magpie geese are caught and how relationships within the community are managed. Knowledge is conveyed through watching and waiting for the story to unfold.

**Storyteller:** Now you can see the canoes are nearly done . . . Now Dayindi can learn what happened to his ancestors.

The metaphor of an expanding tree is also used to explain the way in which the story is constructed.

**Storyteller:** And this story is now growing like a young tree that is flowering for the first time . . . This story is a proper tall tree now . . . But this story is growing into a large tree now, with branches spreading everywhere. All the parts of the story have been told for proper understanding. Minygululu keeps going, on the same branch.

The plot in *Ten Canoes* is non-linear: three levels of narrative intermingle and grow like a tree through the events in each time period. De Heer highlights the “cascading repetition” of Yolnu storytelling, where certain elements are emphasised and other elements are discarded as new concepts are added and then repeated, sometimes with a different meaning or in a different order. At the same time, the notion that a disturbance occurs that needs to be resolved features in both Yolnu and Western modes of storytelling. A sense of complication and resolution is present in *Ten Canoes.*

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124 Viewers are challenged to begin to interrogate the deceptively calm surface of history, “in essence to brush the ethnographic against the grain.” Crosbie, “Critical Historiography in *Atanarjua: The Fast Runner* and *Ten Canoes*,” 145.
125 The notion of watching is explicitly stated in Scene 12 when the Storyteller says, “Dayindi learns by watching that is the way we do it with our people.” Earlier in Scene 7, the Storyteller stated, “It is Minygululu’s story for Dayindi back then . . . and it is my story for you now.” This statement implies that whatever Dayindi is learning, the viewer is also learning. The modality of watching in this context refers primarily to Yolnu ways of learning; however, it also includes watching the film.
128 Walsh, “*Ten Canoes*,” 17.
The film follows some Western conventions while subverting others. For example, the Storyteller subverts conventional beginning and ending motifs found in Western storytelling:

**Storyteller:** Once upon a time, in a land far, far away . . .
(laughs). No not like that. I'm only joking. But I am going to tell you a story.129

**Storyteller:** And they all lived happily ever after (laughs). No, I don’t know what happened.130

In order to further appeal to a mainstream audience, which both de Heer and the community wanted, specific cinematic devices were included, such as: the presence of Storyteller to narrate and explain the action; a dramatic story with love, intrigue, death and payback; and the use of humour.

The Storyteller invites the viewer to hear his story: “It’s not your story . . . it’s my story . . . a story like you’ve never seen before.”131 This line develops a sense of inclusion and invitation which also retains the incommensurability of non-Yolŋu and Yolŋu understanding. With this “insider” knowledge entrusted to them by the Storyteller concerning “my people and my land,” the viewer (through the story being told for Dayindi’s benefit), is asked to “listen very carefully” and “learn the proper way.”132 This is a task which they are learning to do in and through the stories in the film. The gradual revelation of knowledge by the Storyteller also represents Yolŋu methods of teaching where knowledge is not given all at once, rather it is passed on when the knowledge holder deems that the listener is ready.133

As the story is passed from Minyngulu to Dayindi, Yolŋu epistemology is also made visible. Drawing on her research in storytelling traditions from different cultures, Caroline Josephs calls Yolŋu epistemology, “sacred epistemology.” She defines sacred epistemology as:

. . . a mystical tradition which includes phenomena such as revelation and epiphany, and of being present to the seen, the known, and at the same time, to Mystery, the Unknown, the ‘between’, the ‘ship’ of relating.134

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Spirituall and physical dimensions are interconnected in the epistemology depicted in *Ten Canoes*. For example, the waterhole in the opening scenes holds profound cosmological truths. A sense of mystery is also present as the lives of the ancestors intersect across time. A further example is found in the Storyteller’s attestation to the interplay of the “known” and “unknown.” Cause and effect require room for the “mystery” of “revelation” that may or may not be forthcoming. Mystery is conveyed by the Storyteller: “Back in that long time ago, maybe someone had done the wrong thing. Or maybe the spirits were angry for no reason. Whichever way it was the lives of the ancients were about to change.”

*Ten Canoes* presents time as cyclical. The continuity between life and death is represented through the Storyteller’s account of his birth and of Ridjimiraril’s journey after his death back to the waterhole where his spirit will wait to be born again. In addition, the Storyteller “has the uncanny effect of collapsing together different temporal vantage points. The story is told in retrospect; at the same time, we see it unfolding in the present tense.” This form of temporal sequencing has two effects. First, the audience is invited into the past, which can be revisited and reinhabited in the present through the film. Second, the Storyteller’s authority reminds us that we are being told these things “rather than suffering the illusion we are discovering them for ourselves.”

The use of colour and black and white help to distinguish the different periods of time. Vibrant colour signifies the time of the ancestors, which the Storyteller tells the viewer is just after the creation period and the flood that covered the whole land. The use of black and white marks a time of more recent ancestors. Film studies researcher and filmmaker Romaine Moreton, from the Goenpul, Jagara and Bundjalung peoples, locates the story shot in colour in a “‘Dreaming context” also known as “the ancient present.” Fusion between past and present, “the ancient present” as Moreton describes it, is an essential concept in Aboriginal spirituality. *Ten Canoes* creatively depicts this concept through separate, yet interconnected, time periods, characters, and narratives.

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136 Wilson, "Ten Canoes."
138 Moreton, "Ten Canoes: Secondary Curator’s Notes."
2.2.2 Off-screen

Several factors have contributed to the unique aesthetics and production story of Ten Canoes. Of primary note is the friendship between David Gulpilil and Rolf de Heer. The friendship between the two men grew into a relationship between de Heer, the crew, the cast and the people of Ramingining. The legacy of the anthropologist Dr Donald Thomson (1901–70), who lived with the Yolŋu people in 1935–37 and 1942–43, is also significant. Using still and moving images, Thomson documented many aspects of Yolŋu life.\textsuperscript{139} 11,000 ethnographic photographs in the Thomson collection are held in Museums Victoria.\textsuperscript{140} As part of the relationship between the museum and source communities, copies have been made available for the people of Ramingining.\textsuperscript{141} These images have “become consumed by the culture, become part of it. There’s such a concept as ‘Thomson Time,’ fondly remembered.”\textsuperscript{142}

In 2000, before the filming of The Tracker, Gulpilil invited de Heer to his homelands near Ramingining and asked him to make a film shot entirely on the traditional lands of his people and using their languages. In June 2003, after several visits to the community, de Heer agreed to make the film. In subsequent meetings that also included cast members Richard Birrinbirrin and Bobby Bunungurr, a vague decision was made about the film being set in “old times,” maybe a century ago, with some “sort of Aboriginal story that ends, just before its own climax, with a massacre by Balanda (Europeans) of most of the Yolŋu characters.”\textsuperscript{143} The storyline was still emerging when, on the morning of de Heer’s departure, Gulpilil came to see him. In de Heer’s words:

\begin{quote}
I was there for about four days, that first time and just before I left about a half hour or so before I was due to go to the airstrip David came in and said, “we need ten canoes.” And I said, “what?” And David said, “we need ten canoes.” “So what, why, do we need ten canoes for?” And he said, “for the film.” And, “David you know we don’t even know what the film is
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
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really going to be about. How can we need ten canoes?” And he said “aaagh” as if I was an idiot, Balanda, which I probably was and he just walked out. OK. End of story. Half an hour later he came back with this battered plastic blue folder and opened it up and shoved the Thomson ten canoes photos in front of my face and I looked at it and went “baaaagh, this is so cinematic; this is so fantastic what an image. This is brilliant.” So I looked at the photo and I looked up at David and said, “right we need ten canoes.”

Gulpilil recounts the same conversation and the way that production began:

I showed a photograph from Donald Doctor Thomson to Rolf de Heer and said what do you think? Rolf de Heer started to write that story with Ramingining people, my people, and we started to work together. I had to talk to Gudthaykudthay and Minygululu and Bunungurr and Bunyira and Djigirr and Birrinbirrin and I said okay, we’ll make that canoes. I wasn’t even there but they started to work on the canoes and it’s really hard work but it was perfectly done. I thought it wasn’t going to work but you know it was a thousand millions of mosquitoes and leeches and you name it but I tell you what, lucky it was Rolf de Heer, if Rolf de Heer wasn’t there it wouldn’t have been happening this story, this story of my people.

De Heer undertook extensive research into the Thomson collection and continued to visit Ramingining. With each visit, the circle of consultation concerning the production of the film grew. Gulpilil, who was living in Darwin when filming commenced, withdrew from the production for complicated reasons. His prominent role within the film as the unseen storyteller was developed post-production. Peter Djigirr became the co-director of the film and worked closely with de Heer and other crew members in script development, cultural consultation and working with the Yolngu cast.

The Thomson photographs became the authority for casting the film. For example, relatives of the canoeists in the photographs acted as the canoeists in the film. The construction of the canoes, bodywear and shelters were

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144 Rolf de Heer interview about the role of Donald Thomson with Louise Hamby and Lindy Allen, Adelaide, 16 March, 2006 cited in Hamby, “Thomson Times and Ten Canoes (de Heer and Djigirr, 2006),” 128. This scenario is also recounted in de Heer, “Interview One.”


147 The Ten Canoes Press Kit outlines the three-tiered process for casting: people involved in script development expected a role in the film; the relatives of those in the Thomson photographs were chosen for those roles and casting had to follow appropriate kinship relations. Every Yolngu person (and each element of the environment) is classified as being of one of two moieties: Dhuwa or Yirritja. A Yirritja man cannot be married to a Yirritja
also based on the photographs. The documentary *Balanda and the Bark Canoes* details the processes involved in making the canoes which have a design unique to the area and had not been built for decades. This act of cultural revitalisation brought pride and a sense of reclaiming knowledge from the past, as elders such as Philip Gudthaykudthay (who plays the sorcerer) instructed younger men such as Michael Dawu (the stranger) on how to find and treat the bark.

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Figure 2.2 Ganalbiŋu and Djinba men goose hunting in the Arafura Swamp, May 1937. Photograph by D.F. Thomson. The Donald Thomson Ethnohistory Collection. Reproduced courtesy of the Thomson family and Museums Victoria (TPH1090). This shot is recreated in Scene 58.

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Hamby, “Thomson Times and Ten Canoes (de Heer and Djigirr, 2006).”
The off-screen and on-screen worlds merged as the actors’ ancestors were evoked and embodied in several ways: first, as the actors played their ancestors; second, in the replication of the ancestors’ bodywear as a physical
indication of a link with the ancestors; third, in Jamie Gulpilil playing both Dayindi and Yeerarparil which symbolises the embodiment of the ancestor in the present; and fourth in the cast sensing the presence, protection and knowledge of the ancestors as the film was made. Canoeist Bobby Bunungurr refers to the evocative presence of the “spirits of the older people” when he states:

When I’m acting out on the swamp in the canoes, I feel full of life. The spirits are around me, the old people they with me, and I feel it. Out there, I was inside by myself, and I was crying. I said to myself, why I being like my people from long ago? And I would think way back and then I feel. Everything, like my hair, I’m going to be like my people and I said “Yeah!”, they’re beside me and they’re giving me more knowledge. And that never happened before . . . and that’s why we all worked and no one was bitten by crocodile, because the spirit of the older people were with us. I feel them, and I see them through the dream, they talking to us, slow, smooth. These old people went through this swamp in the past . . . no one can tell you now, but you can feel this, the spirit of the older people giving you more knowledge. We’re in the middle of the movie now. This is good fun, everyone together, teaching each other things, that’s good. We’re looking to the future, not just acting, not for ourself, not for the money, but for our children.

This quotation from Bunungurr is an example of Yolŋu epistemology. Revelation and knowledge are given by the spirits of the “older people.” This is an off-screen example of the “sacred epistemology” mentioned above (2.1.2). Bunungurr is “present” to both the processes of filmmaking (“everyone together, teaching each other things”) and the presence of the spirits of the older people who are ever-present, offering their guidance and protection.

The community embraced the role of cultural mediators for de Heer and the rest of the crew. Likewise, the Storyteller on-screen provides mediation in order to approach Ten Canoes and be embraced by the Yolŋu story and the connection with the ancestors within the story. This connection is vividly apparent in the stylised death dance which emphasises “the link between the tangible world and the spirit world that Ridjimiraril is about to enter.” The camera positioned at the head of Ridjimiraril, positions the viewer to be part

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149 Hamby, “Thomson Times and Ten Canoes (de Heer and Djigirr, 2006).” 132. The connection is also made through the credits where the full names of Jamie Dayindi Gulpilil Dalaithngu and David Gulpilil Ridjimiraril Dalaithngu are listed, connecting them with the characters and stories they are telling.


of the circle of mourners and invites the viewer into that intimate cultural space.\textsuperscript{152}

Making a film “in country and in language” resulted in numerous challenges. The initial schedule of production was twelve months; however, \textit{Ten Canoes} was nearly three years in the making. Production was due to commence in September 2003. Due to the need for extensive consultation and development, shooting began in May 2005. De Heer and his co-producer, Julie Ryan, have emphasised the consultation process as being a crucial element before, during and after the project. Ryan states: “We spent a lot of time talking about what was the right thing to do and how to do it.”\textsuperscript{153}

The relatively modest budget for \textit{Ten Canoes} of $2.2 million was financed by a syndicate comprised of the Film Finance Corporation, the South Australian Film Corporation, SBS Independent and the Adelaide Film Festival.\textsuperscript{154} \textit{Ten Canoes} earned $3 million at the Australian box office.\textsuperscript{155}

2.3 Image

The visual component of \textit{Ten Canoes} is immediately arresting as aerial shots reveal the beauty of the Arafura Swamp. Close-ups of plant and animal life in vibrant colour further transport the viewer into the wetlands. The colour story sequence has several characteristics: close-ups of actors talking directly to the camera, giving the audience the impression they are immersed in the film; mid-shots of groups of people interacting; and washed-out colour for subjective, imagined scenarios such as Nowalingu’s disappearance.\textsuperscript{156}

By way of contrast, the telling of Dayindi and Minygululu’s story is influenced by the ethnographic codes used by Donald Thomson, such as filming in black and white with a static camera. The use of a tableau as the composition within the frame creates a sense of distanced observation. However, humour, agency, emotion, complexity of the characters and juxtaposition with the dramatic colour narrative are combined to disrupt traditional ethnographic codes. This disruption repositions the “ethnographic”

\textsuperscript{152} See section 2.4.2 for a further discussion of the death dance.
\textsuperscript{153} Interview with Julie Ryan by Jane Freebury cited in Freebury, \textit{Dancing to the Song}, 198.
\textsuperscript{154} A further $200,000 was raised in post-production. Freebury, \textit{Dancing to the Song}, 195.
\textsuperscript{156} Thomas Caldwell argues that the imagined scenarios use magical realism to communicate the “dangers of false perception.” Caldwell, “Yolnu Storytelling in \textit{Ten Canoes},” 108.
camera. The subjects speak and the viewer overhears what is happening amongst the characters.

*Ten Canoes* deliberately recreates the composition of scenes from the Thomson collection, at times with the still shots appearing as “the live version of the photograph” as the actors move and interact.\(^{157}\) Anne Rutherford, an academic writing on Australian film, discusses the rationale for the use of the photographs by cast and crew to create authenticity and connection with ancestors. She then discusses ways that the images are received as part of viewing the film. Distinction between the original intention of recreating the photographs, and the reception of the recreations by the viewer, highlights the dual purpose and audience for which the film was made. The community in Ramingining has an affinity with the photographs and therefore can relate the scenes in the film to their external referents. For viewers without this local reference point, the reverse effect may occur. Rather than the image becoming animated, a “freezing or slowing of a moving image into stasis” may be experienced. This alerts the viewer through a momentary gap in the narrative to the cinematic devices at work in the film, which include “temporal manipulation” and directorial control.\(^{158}\)

When de Heer first saw the photograph of the ten canoeists, he described the image as “profoundly cinematic.”\(^{159}\) Rutherford describes the aspects of Thomson’s work which elicit this response. She argues that Thomson’s photographs which inspired this story sequence contain a “cacophony of textures” animating the visual encounter with them.

> It is a dynamism that makes the image bristle with contrasting planes, which confound the rules of perspective by their multiple points of focus within the frame, and produces a sense of human figures as agents in an environment in which every other element in that environment is just as alive and animate as the people. This is a fibrous world of reeds, leaves, reflections, feathers and shadows . . . It creates a sense of a world that swirls around the figures.\(^{160}\)

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\(^{157}\) De Heer cited in Anne Rutherford, "*Ten Canoes* as ‘intercultural membrane’," *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 7, no. 2–3 (2013): 141. A set of five of these matching images can be seen on the DVD extras of *Ten Canoes*. Rutherford has also argued that photographs in the Thomson collection reveal vivid, animated and intimate images which themselves have a sensory quality. Rutherford, "Ten Canoes and the Ethnographic Photographs of Donald Thomson."

\(^{158}\) Rutherford, "*Ten Canoes* as ‘intercultural membrane’," 141.

\(^{159}\) Browning, *AWAYE! Radio National*.

\(^{160}\) Rutherford, "*Ten Canoes* and the Ethnographic Photographs of Donald Thomson," 114.
Rutherford also examines the way that the photographs import their character into the film and the effect this has. For example, the use of wide shots in *Ten Canoes* also connects characters with their environment.

### 2.4 Sound

In her book, *Understanding Sound Tracks through Film Theory*, Elsie Walker identifies four significant sonic elements in *Ten Canoes*: narration, dialogue, the sounds of the Arafura Swamp and musical structures with a distinctly Indigenous sound. The combination of these four elements powerfully draws audiences into a “localized sense of place” and the lives of the Yolŋu characters who are intimately connected with the film’s setting. Rutherford agrees, noting that the “masterful soundscape” produces “a sonic texture with a phenomenological density of its own” leading to a sense of immersive experiences for audiences in the environment of the swamp. For example, the opening sequence combines the sounds of the landscape (bird cries and the buzz of insects) and the *yidaki* (a Yolŋu instrument also known as a didjeridu) with widescreen shots of the Arafura Swamp. The Storyteller’s words and laughter then commence guiding the narrative—indicating that he too belongs to that country. The diegetic sound in *Ten Canoes* not only evocatively immerses viewers in the Storyteller’s land and waterways: it also contributes to “enlivening” the setting as a “character” in its own right within the narrative.

Walker convincingly demonstrates that the “aural close-up” provided by the narration, along with the natural sounds and the diegetic and non-diegetic music and dialogue by Yolŋu people, amplifies the film’s focus on the land, waterways and stories “from within,” rather than “from an outsider’s point of view.” In other words, the soundscape aligns the viewer with the

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64 Walker, *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory*, 152.

65 Walker, *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory*, 137.

perspectives of the characters and the landscape. With this aspect of the film in mind, Walker makes a comparison with *Rabbit-Proof Fence* where the soundtrack positions the audience with the Aboriginal characters’ perspectives but also uses the English artist, Peter Gabriel’s, musical score to elicit emotion.¹⁶⁷

Aboriginal languages have been used in several Australian feature films, for example, *The Tracker, We of the Never-Never* (Igor Auzins, 1982) and *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005). However, de Heer and the people of Ramingining were the first to produce a feature-length film in Australia entirely in Indigenous languages. There are three versions of the film: the narration and dialogue in Yolŋu Matha; the Yolŋu Matha version with subtitles in English; and the “theatrical release” version with Gulpilil’s narration in English and English subtitles for the dialogue.¹⁶⁸ The film’s premiere on the basketball courts in Ramingining used the version entirely in Yolŋu Matha. The significance of making a film in Yolŋu Matha cannot be underestimated both in terms of the political and social statement it made about Indigenous languages in Australia and the challenges involved in making a film with a linguistically diverse cast and crew.¹⁶⁹

Walker’s postcolonial analysis of *Ten Canoes* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* claims that *Ten Canoes*, “does not impose the language of the colonizer on its characters at any time. This is another crucial difference from *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.”¹⁷⁰ She then incorrectly describes the “theatrical version” as the entire film in English with dubbed dialogue, rather than correctly stating that the theatrical release version contains Gulpilil’s voice-over narration in English, with English subtitles for the Yolŋu Matha dialogue by the rest of the cast. Furthermore, at the request of the Yolŋu cast and crew, the film has never

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¹⁶⁷ Walker, *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory*, 152.
¹⁶⁸ Clothier and Dudek have chosen to use the subtitled Yolŋu Matha version for their analysis as they felt this was in line with the community’s wishes. My own analysis began with the English narration version. A subsequent close-viewing used the subtitled Yolŋu Matha version. Watching the Yolŋu Matha version without subtitles offers a further experience of immersion in languages to which I have been exposed through participation in study in the Yolŋu language Gupapuyŋu through the Yolŋu Studies department at Charles Darwin University, although I am far from proficient. All three versions, to differing extents, are reminders of the linguistic diversity in Australia’s past and present, with an emphasis on Yolŋu Matha.
¹⁶⁹ The use of Yolŋu Matha within the film challenges perceptions that Indigenous languages have “died out.” It is also politically charged, as in 2007 legislation in the Northern Territory included a policy that Indigenous children in remote schools would have the first four hours of the school day taught in English only. This policy presented a significant challenge to bilingual education. The *Ten Canoes Press Kit* describes the process of working with a linguistically diverse cast and crew in the section “Language . . . the Cosmological Divide.”
¹⁷⁰ Walker, *Understanding Sound Tracks Through Film Theory*, 152.
been dubbed.\textsuperscript{171} The use of English for the narration in the theatrical release version is indicative of the filmmakers’ desire to be heard by Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu peoples. Gulpilil reveals this intention in an interview with film critic David Stratton:

\textbf{Stratton:} One of the things I really like about your telling the story was you speak to the Western audience in a very friendly, humorous way.

\textbf{Gulpilil:} Yes. Because I was thinking about how the audience is going to see it and what they’re going to hear it and how they’re going to feel, you know. For that word I put together so that people will understand.\textsuperscript{172}

The achievement of \textit{Ten Canoes} is that in the domain of sound, alongside story and image, a film has been made which “speaks” simultaneously in multiple directions. The film’s translators, Brian Yambal, Gladys Womati, Anthea Nicholls, Daphne Bunyawarra and Dick Yambal Durrurbunga have offered an expression of hospitable, intercultural, cinematic relationality in making \textit{Ten Canoes} available to as wide an audience as possible. At the same time, a feature-length film in Yolŋu Matha was created for their community.

2.5 Critical Reception

\textit{Ten Canoes} received critical acclaim in Australia and internationally. The film was celebrated as an invitation to see and hear a Yolŋu story from Yolŋu actors which transcended the cinematic representation of Aboriginal people as “a threat, an accusation, a regret or an ideal” and at the same time achieved something remarkable.\textsuperscript{173}

Critical engagement with \textit{Ten Canoes} within the fields of cultural studies and film studies has focused on the aesthetics of the film, the effective use of colour and black and white, the mode of storytelling, and the legacy of

\textsuperscript{171} In an interview with Mike Walsh, de Heer states that the actors did not give permission for the dialogue to be dubbed. This preserved the spoken language in the dialogue. Instead of dubbing for the international release, additional narration was produced which replaced Gulpilil as the storyteller and subtitles were used for the dialogue. For the Italian release de Heer acquired “a good Italian storyteller, one with a third world accent of some sort.” The decision to release the version with Gulpilil telling “my story” in English and then having a non-Yolŋu person tell “my story” in subsequent international releases raises issues about audience, purpose and commercial viability. These issues are made more complex by the nature of collaboration and ownership in the case of \textit{Ten Canoes}. As has already been noted de Heer and the community wanted to make a film which would appeal to Yolŋu and mainstream Western audiences. See Walsh, “\textit{Ten Canoes},” 17.


\textsuperscript{173} Byrnes, “\textit{Ten Canoes}.”
Donald Thomson’s work. The nature of the collaboration between de Heer and the people of Ramingining, and the role of audiences in the reception of the film have also received critical attention and are discussed below.

2.5.1 Collaboration and Intercultural Exchange

*Ten Canoes* has been lauded as Australia’s “most ambitious and most expensive cross-cultural film project to date.”\(^{174}\) The film garnered interest due to its ability to speak to multiple audiences and the fact that a non-Indigenous director was involved in a film which was dominated by Yolŋu cultural knowledge, language and storytelling. Conversations regarding Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration lead to questions of appropriation, representation and cultural ownership. Anthropologists, such as Louise Hamby and Lester Hiatt, and those working in the area of film studies, such as Anne Rutherford, Therese Davis, Romaine Moreton, Paul Byrnes, Henk Huijser and Brooke Collins-Gearing, agree that *Ten Canoes* is a film to be celebrated both as a final product and for the processes that brought it from conception to completion.\(^{175}\) However, the precise nature of the collaboration in the project has been critiqued and different conclusions have been drawn. The accompanying documentary *Balanda and the Bark Canoes*, which documents the making of the film predominantly from de Heer’s perspective, has also stimulated critical engagement. Film critic Sacha Molitorisz writes:

> If *Ten Canoes* is a blackfella film, with a story that grew out of the imaginations and lives of its Aboriginal cast, *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* is its whitefella sibling. It’s a rational, dispassionate account of de Heer’s exceedingly ambitious undertaking.\(^{176}\)

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\(^{174}\) Therese Davis, “Working Together: Two Cultures, One Film, Many Canoes,” *Senses of Cinema* 41 (2006). http://sensesofcinema.com/2006/feature-articles/ten-canoes/. I am using the word intercultural rather than cross-cultural to describe *Ten Canoes* because of the mutual exchange of ideas, transformation of filmmaking approaches and the development of deep relationships that took place, all of which relate to intercultural encounters. Cross-cultural tends to refer to comparisons and mutual understanding between cultures which does not rely on an actual exchange of cultures taking place.


\(^{176}\) Molitorisz, “The Balanda and the Bark Canoes.” I disagree that *Balanda and the Bark Canoes* is dispassionate. The documentary is full of emotional engagement for the viewer who witnesses the humour, frustration and genuine warmth that was part of making *Ten Canoes*. 
Balanda and the Bark Canoes highlights the complexities of the project, including the fact that there was not a consensus within the community as to whether filming should go ahead. De Heer acknowledges this in an interview with Ben Walters, stating that one of the original cast members, who did not end up in the film, suddenly started speaking against the film. The majority, however, wanted to go ahead and de Heer attributes the film’s completion to the fact that “we trusted each other, and they trusted me.”

In an interview with Rutherford, de Heer described the complexities involved in directing Ten Canoes. The struggle to articulate his role was evident as he was not comfortable with the terms facilitator, translator, mediator or medium. De Heer describes trying to “see everything from their perspective” while still using, “my cultural background, know-how, to achieve for them what they wish to achieve but they don’t have the cultural knowledge to achieve.” He states that every aspect of the film can be traced back to a member of the cast or crew in form and context. “My constant test for things on set was, if it doesn’t work for the mob, whoever I’m working with at the time, it doesn’t work for me.”

As the interview progresses, Rutherford suggests to de Heer that she observes an authorial voice in the film, in the structure and cinematic devices used. De Heer agrees; however, he also explains that these elements were a result of him absorbing and integrating a “cultural style” at the

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57 Balanda and the Bark Canoes includes a town meeting where co-director Peter Djigirr is addressing the community on a megaphone and the sound is crossed by the voice of an elder: “You should not be acting in this film. They are using you!” Davis says this invokes a long history of non-Indigenous filmmakers’ exploitation of Indigenous peoples. It is also a reminder of resistance to such exploitation. Davis, “Remembering our ancestors: cross-cultural collaboration and the mediation of Aboriginal culture and history in Ten Canoes (Rolf de Heer, 2006),” 6.


60 Rutherford, “Ten Canoes as ‘intercultural membrane’,” 147. De Heer reiterated these sentiments in his interview with me: “I guess the most significant thing for me, was point of view, perspective. We rarely see anything from the Indigenous perspective, and it is my job as a writer/director to get inside someone else’s perspective. Whether it’s a film about a seven-year-old girl [The Quiet Room, 1996] or a film with Heather Rose who had cerebral palsy [Dance Me To My Song, 1998], to give Heather Rose, to give her perspective. That’s my job to get inside her head. It’s the same here. My job is to do this and The Tracker was already a long way towards that, but The Tracker was meant to be more 50/50, but the other two were very much, very much to be seen totally from the Aboriginal perspective and with the mob up there I could do it.” For discussion of the portrayal of disability in terms of communication, sexuality and agency in Dance Me to My Song, see Catherine Simpson and Nicole Matthews, “Dancing Us to Her Song: Enabling Embodiment and Voicing Disability in Heather Rose’s Dance Me to My Song,” Australian Feminist Studies 27, no. 72 (2012): 139–155.

direction of cast member Bobby Bunungurr and co-director Peter Djigirr.\textsuperscript{182} Rutherford argues, in her analysis of the film and of de Heer’s comments, that the interface between pragmatics and aesthetics are driven by the location, working cross-culturally with the community and contractual obligations. This combination requires new paradigms of critical engagement regarding “authorship” and “ownership” of film. Rutherford uses the term “cultural intermeshing” to describe \textit{Ten Canoes} which considers the multiple stakeholders who “own” the film and who cannot be easily separated within the finished product.\textsuperscript{183} An engaged film criticism will “not place itself above the fray” by engaging solely in textual film criticism. Rather, it will acknowledge the “ambivalence, complexity, compromise, personal risk-taking and creative challenges” of intercultural filmmaking. Critical engagement of this nature requires a dialogic approach, which acknowledges the way overcoming practical challenges is an integral part of the creative process.\textsuperscript{184}

Other critics who have engaged with \textit{Ten Canoes} agree with Rutherford’s analysis of the nature of intercultural filmmaking. According to Huijser and Collins-Gearing, the provisional and contested nature of non-colonising collaboration, when made visible, will be “messy, unclear, unresolved . . . discomforting, tense, challenging and full of conflict.”\textsuperscript{185} Davis was initially concerned when watching \textit{Balanda and the Bark Canoes}. She felt that de Heer projected himself as a pioneer entering the uncharted waters of “the most foreign land I’ve been to . . . and it is Australia.” This initial reaction gave way to her final assessment that emerged as the story unfolded, of an “extremely talented, resourceful and remarkably non-egotistical filmmaker who worked extremely closely with equally talented members of the Ramingining community to enable the telling of a Yolŋu story in a Yolŋu way.”\textsuperscript{186} As Rutherford concludes, the production story of \textit{Ten Canoes} is one of cultural intermeshing, dialogue, pragmatics and aesthetics.\textsuperscript{187}

Another critique, made by scholars such as Marianne Riphagen and Eric Venbrux, is that the over-arching narrative in \textit{Ten Canoes} is one of:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{182} De Heer gives the example of a conversation with Bobby Bunungurr where the feel of the film and the way it should be was clearly articulated to de Heer and he thought, “okay it’s my job to do this. I became the functionary.” Rutherford, “\textit{Ten Canoes} as ‘intercultural membrane’,” 148.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Rutherford, “\textit{Ten Canoes} as ‘intercultural membrane’,” 148.
\item \textsuperscript{184} Rutherford, “\textit{Ten Canoes} as ‘intercultural membrane’,” 149.
\item \textsuperscript{185} Huijser and Collins-Gearing, “Representing Indigenous Stories in the Cinema: Between Collaboration and Appropriation,” 3.
\item \textsuperscript{186} Davis, “Working Together: Two Cultures, One Film, Many Canoes,” 3.
\item \textsuperscript{187} Rutherford, “\textit{Ten Canoes} as ‘intercultural membrane’.”
\end{itemize}
... cultural loss and a rather static notion of culture, resulting in a representation of Yolŋu that arguably does little to subvert the mythologizing of Aborigines by non-Indigenous people, particularly outside Australia.188

De Heer also addresses this critique of the film. Before filming, a member of the community expressed his concern that the film dwelled too much on the past and risked giving a stereotypical view of their culture. He felt they should be looking to the future. De Heer thought this point had some merit. This misgiving and other objections were, however, defeated by the majority who felt ownership of the project and wanted to proceed with a film that depicted the “old ways.”189

Similarly, Davis has questioned de Heer’s desire for “authenticity” and the impact this had on the overall project.190 She argues that his search for authenticity leads to “the fantasy of the artist as adventurer-hero, exploring the unchartered territory of the Other, in this case, the specific Eurocentric mythology of the Yolŋu’s peoples’ isolation.”191 Rather than focusing on the past to “preserve it,” she argues that the abiding achievement of Ten Canoes is its integration of Yolŋu cultural memory and its communication of Yolŋu cultural difference for non-Indigenous audiences.

Martin Renes, an academic in the field of postcolonial cultural studies, offers a similar critique of de Heer, and the film in general.192 He argues Ten Canoes appeals to a redefinition of Australian identity through indigeneity but does not achieve this aim. Ten Canoes as an instance of “cultural translation” fails because it cannot transcend conceptions of indigeneity as primitive and obsolete. Renes argues this is because of insufficient cultural understanding and its lack of “intercultural empathy,” seen primarily in de Heer’s promotion of the black and white sequence as taking place a thousand years ago as opposed to the community perception of it taking place in the 1930s in “Thomson Time.” Renes argues that Ten Canoes had “performative potential as dynamic Aboriginal post-coloniality within a post-

190 Davis, “Remembering our ancestors: cross-cultural collaboration and the mediation of Aboriginal culture and history in Ten Canoes (Rolf de Heer, 2006).” See Hamby for interviews with cast members concerning de Heer’s decision for the cast to be naked. Hamby, “Thomson Times and Ten Canoes (de Heer and Djigirr, 2006).”
192 This view is also expressed in Riphagen and Venbrux, “Ten Canoes.”
modern definition of the Australian nation.” He views this potential as compromised by a fixation on the past and what he claims is a non-Indigenous prerogative to market the film. Renes does not examine any of the statements by the Yolnu cast and crew, which emphasise both the desire to include the past and to share the film with a broad and diverse audience. For example, Frances Djulibing states: “It is my destiny to do this, so all over the world they can see how my ancient ancestors had been like this before.”

Renes concludes that *Ten Canoes* can be celebrated on the basis that it is a local micro-narrative of cultural difference, which gives testimony and meaning to the changing dynamics of First Nations peoples and settler Australians. The fact, however, that the film relies on “Western expertise” raises “disturbing questions regarding ethnic agency, identity, originality and authenticity in the Australian national space.” These are important questions to raise; however, in ruling out the incorporation of “Western expertise” and genuine collaboration, Renes runs the risk of presenting as static the very peoples he is defending. His position also limits the production and accessibility of educational materials and ignores the gift of the partnerships expressed in and through *Ten Canoes*. Furthermore, according to Renes:

> The touchstone for intercultural collaboration is the configuration of a post-modern hybridism that situates First Australians and their cultural traditions radically in and beyond the modern nation space, interrogating and subverting its Western Enlightenment traditions.

It is therefore surprising that Renes does not affirm with more enthusiasm where *Ten Canoes* meets the requirements of his “touchstone.” For example,

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193 Martin Cornelis Renes, “Reel Indigeneity: *Ten Canoes* and its chronotopical politics of Ab/Originality,” *Continuum* 28, no. 6 (2014): 860. The spin-off projects such as *Twelve Canoes* which demonstrated cultural self-recognition, self-definition and self-management, better achieved these aims, according to Renes.


196 Henk Huijser and Brooke Collins-Gearing discuss the way that any cross-cultural cinematic collaboration needs to be aware of the history of cinema as an instrument in the colonising project. Collaborations which contribute to the “postcolonising” project in Australia (a term borrowed from Aileen Moreton-Robinson) will be based on respect, reciprocity and a space for representation “on one’s own terms” (original emphasis). They conclude that from its genesis to its eventual screening *Ten Canoes* is testament to the productive potential of collaboration, based on trust and respect rather than appropriation. Huijser and Collins-Gearing, “Representing Indigenous Stories in the Cinema: Between Collaboration and Appropriation,” 4.

197 Renes, “Reel Indigeneity: *Ten Canoes* and its chronotopical politics of Ab/Originality.”
the film features Yolŋu cosmology, peoples, languages and culture. The film’s portrayal of Yolŋu people and their country are represented as existing pre-settlement and in the present through: the Storyteller; Yolŋu Matha dialogue being spoken by the cast, the land and waterways; and through the re-interpretation of Thomson’s ethnographic codes which subverts and re-interprets the Western ethnographic gaze. While the posture of the Storyteller throughout Ten Canoes is invitational rather than confrontational, there is no doubt that a subversive statement is being made about visibility and cultural knowledge in the “modern nation space” of Australia, to quote Renes. The makers of Ten Canoes have made their own decisions “about what and who informs their cultural identities” and how they wish to present these to a broader audience. To insist that they should have done something different is to deny their agency in the production decisions concerning the film.

2.5.2 Reception—Viewer as Patient Novice, Dialogue Partner and Receiver of Gift.

Audiences, whether they are Yolŋu or non-Yolŋu, are not monolithic; however, as a general statement, Ten Canoes has been created with two distinct audiences in mind. First, Yolŋu speakers, who can watch any of the three versions made. Second, non-Yolŋu speakers who rely on Gulpilil’s English narration and subtitles to appreciate the humour and nuances of characterisation and plot. Film studies scholar Nancy Wright argues that the film constructs the subject-positions of these two audiences using the different language versions. The Storyteller also contributes to this positioning by insisting that the audience needs to be told certain things about “my people, and my land.” The ownership of the story is internal rather than external. As the film critic, Paul Byrnes, concludes, “This is not, in that sense, a story that has been ‘collected’, but a story that is given directly to us. That is part of the film’s appeal—it is an act of great generosity.”

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198 “This is one of the most complex and intriguing dimensions of Ten Canoes – that it uses the codes of ethnographic film and photography in a fictional film. Ten Canoes both alludes to these interpretive frameworks and ruptures them.” Rutherford, “Ten Canoes as ‘intercultural membrane’,” 139.


201 de Heer and the people of Ramingining, Ten Canoes Post-Screenplay, Scene 1.

202 Byrnes, “Ten Canoes: Curator’s Notes.”
This act of generosity is the foundation of the relationality which features in and through *Ten Canoes*. From my own position as a non-Yolŋu viewer, the question then becomes: how to receive this generous act? Film scholars Ian Henderson, Lyn McCredden, Kim Clothier, and Debra Dudek offer varying perspectives on this question.

Henderson argues that non-initiated, non-Yolŋu viewers need to approach *Ten Canoes* as patient novices who view from the “borderlands,” where comfortable orthodoxies are “quietly disturbed” and the invitation is to hear rather than to occupy the story being told.\(^{203}\) Henderson explores the way that the Yolŋu cast re-embody their ancestors; however, as a non-Indigenous viewer, the ability to perceive this presence is speculative.\(^{204}\) He claims that the “border” which is part of his viewing experience is both the exploitative history of non-Indigenous filmmaking about Indigenous Australians and the ancestors which hold him “like all strangers in *Ten Canoes* at the borderlands of their home.”\(^{205}\) These two aspects of the border remind Henderson that, when approaching *Ten Canoes*, he needs to hold himself where the Storyteller has held him from the opening sequence: as one who is invited and told to wait until the story is ready.

Henderson also discusses de Heer’s presence in *Ten Canoes*. In many ways, de Heer’s path towards patient understanding models the way for the audience “through the patience of unknowing, deconstructed of his auteurship.”\(^{206}\) Gulpilil’s insistent invitation to work with his people and de Heer’s willingness to do so have opened the possibility of the ancestors extending a welcome to “a fourth (set of) unexpected stranger(s)—the audience.”\(^{207}\) This welcome is conditional, as the audience remains on “the border,” where some knowledge is accessible to all and other knowledge is only for some.

McCredden takes a different position to Henderson. Her position is guided by the larger question of the way filmmakers can engage Indigenous and non-Indigenous people with different worldviews. She defines worldview as “the palpable existence of traditional and sacred beliefs, stories and

\(^{203}\) Henderson, “Stranger Danger,” 55.
\(^{204}\) Henderson, “Stranger Danger,” 68.
\(^{205}\) Henderson, “Stranger Danger,” 68.
\(^{206}\) Henderson, “Stranger Danger,” 68.
\(^{207}\) Henderson, “Stranger Danger,” 68.
practices, the dynamics of a community’s meaning making.”

McCredden does not want to universalise the sacred or homogenise cultural and religious differences. Instead, she wants to productively and actively engage with difference as well as ask whether there might be aspects in common between different worldviews regarding to the category of the sacred. She then considers what role filmic representation might play in this engagement.

Like Henderson, McCredden notes the Storyteller’s first words, which give a welcome and a reminder not to take ownership of the story. McCredden then argues that the Storyteller’s welcome is “the beginning of a set of dance-like, dialogic movements in the film, between ancient history and the present—the present of Yolŋu, non-Indigenous Australians and international viewers (Cannes and beyond)” Ten Canoes is “enacting difference” for different audiences: Yolŋu, other Indigenous peoples, Australian and international viewers. McCredden concludes that the narrative outcomes are not as relevant as the way that the film represents and negotiates the differences of time and cultures which it represents and whether this representation is conducive to dialogue.

The question of how to respond to the performance of difference in Ten Canoes remains. McCredden directly responds to Henderson’s position on forms of engagement. She affirms his careful approach and the fact that the Western and Yolŋu understandings are not analogous: rather they represent “radical difference.” The way that a viewer responds to such difference is crucial to their experience of the film as well as to any dialogical relationship with sacred knowledge as it is espoused in Ten Canoes. Where McCredden differs from Henderson is her argument that dialogue should be the primary lens for approaching difference and respecting the sacred worldview of others. Dialogue transcends merely celebrating difference and also moves beyond “borderland silence in the face of other’s difference.” As an example of the dialogue that McCredden is proposing, she asks what exactly the non-Indigenous viewer is asked to understand and respect about

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the process and practice of Yolŋu lore as it is represented in *Ten Canoes*. Is it “unquestionable, immutable? *Only for Yolŋu?*” In remaining silent is the non-Indigenous viewer asked to respect every aspect of the film without question? For example, are we to read Dayindi’s predicament as an example of rashness and impatience and of the limitations of individualism, as Henderson does, or does the world of the film allow us to empathise with his desire for a wife and the humour that ensues as his desire is eventually fulfilled?

McCredden answers her question through a challenge to the premise that it is only through acceptance rather than in questioning and dialogue that cross-cultural respect can be shown. She also challenges Henderson’s monolithic representation of the “Western viewer.” She offers philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogics and heteroglossia as a possible mode for viewers from multiple contexts to dialogue with the worldview represented in *Ten Canoes*. Bakhtin’s concept of past meanings, which are not fixed but that are able to be renewed and developed in new circumstances, can be seen within the film itself. At first glance, Minygululu’s attitude to the lore is that it is unchanging and continuous. However, taken in its entirety, *Ten Canoes* can be viewed as actively seeking a vocabulary which McCredden, drawing on Bakhtin, proposes as, “a way of understanding the tensions between change (flux, forgetting, the immensity of time, boundlessness) and stability (Law, community, sacredness).” This form of engagement with the film acknowledges that cultural difference has distinct characteristics in twenty-first century Australia. Indigenous cultures are negotiated and reimagined as they face the inevitability of tension between traditional worldviews and the impact of colonialism and modernity, along with the creative responses that emerge from this space, as seen in *Ten Canoes*.

Alongside Henderson’s “borderland silence” and McCredden’s “dialogue,” Clothier and Dudek argue that postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak’s “critical intimacy” is the appropriate and “ethical” way for non-Yolŋu viewers to respond to the film. They are addressing the way that non-Indigenous people might engage with what they describe as a “Black narrative.” Their approach considers the political nature of viewing *Ten Canoes*, which includes

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212 McCredden, "*Ten Canoes* Engaging difference." 50.
213 McCredden, "*Ten Canoes* Engaging difference." 50.
214 McCredden, "*Ten Canoes* Engaging difference." 51.
subverting “whiteness” and the “hegemony” of English. They highlight the Storyteller’s use of “I” and “you” to create immediacy and intimacy as well as enunciating difference.

“Critical intimacy” involves reading/viewing with “passion and reason,” in other words being involved in the aesthetic and emotional experience that is *Ten Canoes* while also maintaining a critical distance. The powerful death dance scene emphasises this as the narration begins with: “And the people know.” With this knowledge “the people,” which does not include non-Yolŋu speaking audience members, then participate in supporting Ridjimiraril in songs and actions which are not subtitled. The Storyteller affirms the presence of the audience: they are commanded to “see” and “hear” all that is happening. This scene is a time of critical intimacy as both passion and reason—“engaging faculties and maintaining distance”—are required. The precise meaning of the Yolŋu songs sung at this point is not revealed to the non-Yolŋu speaking audience. As participants in the scene, they are felt by “intuition rather than understood by the intellect.”

Henderson, McCredden, Clothiers and Dudek all address the tension between invitation and difference which are central motifs of *Ten Canoes*. The conclusions that each of these scholars draw are revisited throughout this thesis in order to inform the dialogue that is taking place. The opening scene in *Ten Canoes*, which both welcomes and gives pause, is embodied within the entire film. Devices such as the Storyteller, the use of black and white and colour to depict different time periods, and Jamie Gulpilil’s role as Dayindi/Yeerarparil, enable the viewer to engage with the film. At the same time, a transformative experience is made possible as viewers are invited into different temporal, linguistic and spatial worlds. Huijser and Collins-Gearing argue that audiences are also part of the negotiation of power in collaborative cinematic projects and are “trained” to view cinematic texts in specific ways. Therefore, films such as *Ten Canoes* which broaden the expectations of audiences are also necessary for further power-sharing within the collaborative and intercultural film process.

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216 Dudek, "Opening the body: Reading *Ten Canoes* with critical intimacy," 91.
2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn on the work of scholars from various disciplines in order to present an analysis of story, image, sound, production history and critical reception of *Ten Canoes*. *Ten Canoes* is a vivid representation of Yolŋu life pre-contact. Lore, culture, intrigue, gossip, yearning, humour, unseen spirits and ancestors intermingle to construct two interconnected stories told by a patient and assertive Storyteller. The next chapter looks at what happens when the world of *Ten Canoes* is disrupted by violent strangers in *The Tracker*. 
Chapter 3: *The Tracker* Film Analysis

*The Tracker,* it tells the story when the white man—he’s got mistake in the beginning. He shoot blackfellas. He should wake up then and think, “ah yeah he’s got one red blood. He’s like me.” Anyway, that’s the story we tell.

—David Gulpilil, *The Tracker* DVD Extras

3.1 Chapter Overview

*The Tracker* was released in 2002, in the wake of Australia’s official decade of Reconciliation (1990–2000). The *Tracker* is written and directed by de Heer. De Heer cast David Gulpilil in his first lead role and thus their

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217 The Prime Minister at the time, Bob Hawke, had discussed signing a Treaty with First peoples; however, instead he dedicated the 1990s as the decade of Reconciliation through an Act of the Commonwealth Parliament. The National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation coordinated a series of events and reports, including the historic Bridge Walk for Reconciliation in Sydney and other cities and towns around Australia. 250,000 people marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge on 28 May 2000. ‘Sorry books’ were also placed in public spaces such as libraries throughout the country and approximately one million people signed them. Evelyn Scott, the chairperson of the National Council for Reconciliation, described the movement as a “people’s movement.” The Prime Minister in 2000, John Howard, did not march. His address to the Corroboree 2000 gathering reiterated the government’s commitment to Reconciliation; however, his speech was not welcomed by many delegates.
professional and personal relationship began. *The Tracker* is an unflinching depiction of frontier violence in Australia where the world of *Ten Canoes* has been altered by strangers who neither recognise, nor comply with, the lore embedded in the land.

This chapter examines the elements of story, image and sound. A discussion of the critical reception of the film follows. Throughout this chapter, the focus is on two aspects of *The Tracker*, which foreshadow the theological reflection taken up in later chapters.

The first is the film’s multifaceted depiction of relationality, further developed in chapter 6. Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone” is adopted as a useful way of framing the discussion of relationality on-screen, off-screen and in the mode of reception. Contact zones are social spaces where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.”

On-screen, the contact zone of the Australian frontier contains extreme violence and brutality. *The Tracker* explores a range of interpersonal encounters between the members of the police party as the expedition pushes them to their limits.

Off-screen, the dynamics between the cast and crew reveal elements of the contact zone in the aftermath of colonisation. Together, Indigenous and non-Indigenous cast members used the medium of cinema to wrestle with Australia’s violent past. The mode of reception is a subjective experience for each viewer; however, *The Tracker* encourages viewers to see the link between the past and the present. Interaction with the film, and the relational questions and issues that it raises, are presented as not simply a concern of the past, but as something that requires a response in the present.

The second aspect of *The Tracker* that is a point of focus is the representation of the land. On-screen and off-screen, the land has a distinct

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219 This connection between the past and the present in *The Tracker* is developed by Collins and Davis. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, “Disputing History, Remembering Country in *The Tracker* and Rabbit-Proof Fence,” *Australian Historical Studies* 37, no. 128 (2006).
and essential presence in the film. For the cast and crew, the seven-week shoot took place in the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary and Vulkathunha-Gammon Ranges National Park in the northern Flinders Ranges in South Australia. Since 2005, the traditional owners, the Adnyamathanha people, have co-managed the park in an arrangement with the South Australian Government. The discussion of representations of land and country in this chapter pre-empts the theological reflection in chapter 7, where creation theologies from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives are brought into dialogue.

Several unique elements in *The Tracker* immediately forewarn the audience that a “challenging filmic vocabulary” is in operation. These include: the use of Peter Coad’s artworks, which are inserted throughout the film; the evocative soundtrack, sung in English and Bundjalung by Archibald (Archie) Roach AM; the stylised nature of the film which resists conventional genre classification; and the enigmatic and unpredictable nature of the relationship between members of the police party. Each of these elements contributes to *The Tracker* being a highly original and compelling film.

### 3.2 Story

Set in 1922, “somewhere in Australia,” *The Tracker* tells the story of an official police party in search of an Aboriginal man who has been accused of murder. Over six consecutive days and five nights, the dynamics between the four men in the police party—three white police officers and their Aboriginal tracker—becomes the focus of the narrative. Growing tensions and dissension sideline the hunt for the fugitive. The tension comes to a climax when, after two massacres of Aboriginal people, the leader of the police party is tried and hanged by the tracker.

#### 3.2.1 On-screen

The plotline of *The Tracker* follows certain narrative conventions: a clear orientation, complication, dramatic resolution and a coda which concludes the story on a conciliatory, yet ultimately unsettling, note.

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221 All the artworks from *The Tracker* have been published in Peter Coad, *Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker* (Adelaide: Peter & Rosalie Coad, 2002). Bundjalung is Archie Roach’s father’s language. AM indicates that Roach is a member of the Order of Australia which is a national recognition of his achievements and service to Australia.
The Tracker opens with Coad’s painting, The landscape – the beginning, accompanied by the sounds of a ukulele.\(^{222}\) The painting slowly dissolves into the filmed scene of the landscape of Adnyamathanha county, in the Flinders Ranges. A long shot reveals three white men mounted on horseback with an Aboriginal man leading them on foot. The camera focuses on each of the characters in turn. No names are given; only brief, subtitled descriptions of each man. The closing credits reveal the archetypal names given to each character: The Tracker, The Fanatic, The Follower, The Veteran and The Fugitive. At no point in the film do any of the characters address each other by name.

The Tracker (David Gulpilil) is the first close-up, with the subtitled words, “Native to other parts, little is known of this man.”\(^{223}\) The accompanying song, Far Away Home correlates with the opening scene which is dominated by images of the Tracker. The song lyrics reveal his internal thoughts and provide additional commentary to supplement the sparse characterisation and dialogue. For example, Far Away Home provides poignant insight into the Tracker’s current plight and his previous life. The audience is, therefore, privy to information about him that the rest of the police party is not. The final line of the song indicates his intention to return home. This reference at the start of the film provides a parallel with the final scenes where the Tracker, having won his freedom, begins his journey home.

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Far away in another land} \\
&\text{I walked, my soul proud and free} \\
&\text{Now I'm torn from that distant land} \\
&\text{I'm going home}\end{align*}
\]

As the song plays, the viewer is introduced to the remaining members of the party with short subtitles. First, the Fanatic (Gary Sweet), “a mounted policeman, this man does not dwell on statistics.”\(^{225}\) Straight after the Fanatic’s close-up, Coad’s painting The rifle appears on-screen. The close-up of the raised, magnified barrel signals, “the intrusion of the white man and . . . the more aggressive and destructive technology of the newcomer . . . [who] had no contact with the earth . . . no feeling for the land.”\(^{226}\) A close-up of the Fanatic reveals his gaze is focused on the Tracker. The final

\(^{222}\) Titles of the paintings, including capitalisation are from Coad, Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker.
\(^{223}\) Rolf de Heer, The Tracker (Hendon: Vertigo Productions, 2001), Scene 3.
\(^{224}\) de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 3.
\(^{225}\) de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 3.
\(^{226}\) Coad, Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker, 10.
two members of the police party then appear on-screen: the Follower (Damon Gameau), “This man is new to the frontier,” and the Veteran (Grant Page), “This man has been drafted into this expedition.”

A widescreen shot of the landscape follows the introduction of the four members of the police party. The camera then zooms out to reveal the Fugitive sitting on top of a ledge with the subtitle: “This man is accused of murdering a white woman.” He is surveying the whole landscape, a foretaste of the ongoing surveillance by Aboriginal custodians that will follow the police party throughout their trek. The viewer can observe the police party from all angles. There is a marked contrast between the medium shots of them on the horses and the aerial landscape shots which show their small place in a vast landscape. The Fugitive then turns around, decides which way to go and walks off. The opening sequence ends with the subtitle “It is 1922 . . . somewhere in Australia,” as the final song lyrics, “I’m going home,” echo across the screen. This subtitle reveals a context in which this film is taking place. At the same time, particular historical referents are avoided by the use of allegorical characters and unspecified landscapes.

Medium shots of the actors, interspersed with the landscape at different levels, give the impression of constant movement through the environment and provide multiple perspectives on the journey to capture the Fugitive. Shots of the vast landscape, cut between close-ups of the Tracker looking around and down at the ground, illustrate his role in the expedition. The Tracker is always in the lead with the others following. The Tracker’s acute perception is demonstrated as he views a person with a spear far in the distance. The painting, The single barbed spearhead, then appears on-screen.

The artist, Peter Coad, contrasts this painting with the earlier painting of The rifle (which appears as foreign and intrusive). The single barbed spearhead is symbolically and literally connected to “the spirit of the land” through the use of pigment from the massive wall of natural ochre at Arkaroola. The focus is on the spear, while the abstract background is blurred slightly to subtly acknowledge “the view through the camera lens and the film medium.”

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227 de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 5.
228 de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 6.
229 Peter Coad asked Adnyamathanha elders for permission to use the ochre. Coad, Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker, 12.
230 Coad, Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker, 12.
The complication in the narrative arises through the actions of members of the police party as they navigate the terrain in which they find themselves. The first massacre of Aboriginal family groups demonstrates the broader context of this particular police hunt. For several seconds, the viewer is held in the gaze of the painting, *Surrounding the Aboriginals*. The film cuts to a brutal interrogation of the Aboriginal people in neck chains as the Fanatic and Follower yell, grab hair, threaten with guns and scream at them a few inches from their face. The words in English and Bundjalung, sung by Archie Roach, convey an acute sense of suffering and lament,

Now we’re no longer free,
we are dispossessed.
*Gunge-ngully, witha gin-yerrd*

*Ngung-garm, ngully-nee*
People of mine

*Ngar-goo gung nully*
Boomalairla
They’re my people
People
My people\(^{231}\)

The song represents the voices of the victims of violence in the scene and also the Tracker’s emotional response.\(^ {232}\) The line “Cause they’re people” broadens the response to invite the viewer to join the protest.

In a horrendous act, the Fanatic forces one of the men to stick out his tongue and then presses his cocked pistol downward into the tongue. In this moment, de Heer cuts to the painting, *Shooting the Aboriginales*. Coad describes the aesthetic and ethical reasons behind the use of the painting in this scene:

The savagery of the ‘tongue shooting’ scene was one of the most difficult to depict; it is also one of the most confronting images for the viewer. As one of the peaks of violence in the film, this scene demanded a particular way of working and a deliberated approach. The image must expose the evil and cruelty of the past, but not be too horrible to see.\(^ {233}\)

*Shooting the Aboriginales* also depicts the Follower shooting an Aboriginal woman in the breast. This act acknowledges the widespread and grotesque

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\(^{231}\) de Heer, *The Tracker*, Scene 23. Song lyrics in English and Bundjalung are quoted and presented throughout this chapter as they appear in the script.


\(^{233}\) Coad, *Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker*, 16.
abuse, murder and rape of Aboriginal women on “the frontier.”  

The still image halts the narrative flow for several seconds, allowing the viewer to witness what has taken place. Coad has not allowed any space in the foreground of the painting so that the viewer cannot escape the scene. The painting contains ochre pigment, the striking colour accenting the victims’ blood and the background of the hills. The bare trees symbolise mourning. Throughout the massacre, the Veteran has sat to the side, silently observing and smoking a cigarette.

The Tracker is also a bystander as the violence occurs. He then uses mimicry to undermine his companions on the trek. For example, he takes his police jacket off and throws it on the ground while saying, “Too much bulldust yackin’ Boss! Better keep after that other savage!” Fiona Probyn, drawing on the work of postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha, argues that in his speech, the Tracker both “resembles and menaces them.” This dynamic within the Tracker’s speech and action is part of the device for building tension in the film—whether or not the Tracker can be trusted fuels the Fanatic’s increasing paranoia.

The Veteran and the Fanatic hang the murdered Aboriginal people on trees, as a warning to others. Their deaths are witnessed in the painting, Hanging of the Aboriginals, which depicts this unspeakable atrocity.

As the journey continues, point of view camera angles, interspersed with close-ups, allow the audience to see the country through the Tracker’s eyes. The viewer is left in suspense, however, as to what it is that it senses. In Scene 33, the camera angle changes, giving the impression that the police party is under surveillance. The sudden spearing of the horse carrying the supplies startles the white members of the police party. The direct aim of


235 Susan Barber, “Driving the Narrative to Reconciliation: The Tracker as Road Picture” (The Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference, Adelaide, 2006).

236 de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 27.


the spear is contrasted with the randomness of the bullets which the party shoot in every direction, much to the Tracker’s amusement. The camera looks up at the party and then zooms out, engulfing them in the landscape which once again emphasises their vulnerability in a vast country, despite their weapons.

The police party continues its hunt for the Fugitive. However, the police chase becomes secondary to the growing tension within the group. The party’s dependence on the Tracker exacerbates the Fanatic’s need for control. The Fanatic attempts to diminish the Tracker’s agency by putting him in a neck chain.

In Scene 58, the viewer sees a spear appear from off-stage (both as a moving object and as a still in the painting *Spearing the Veteran*). We also see the Veteran fall to the ground in agony, while the police party continues moving. “The goal of the painting was to make the unnerving reality of the film sufficiently ‘unreal’ to allow viewers to step outside the screen action and become silent witnesses and conspirators to the downfall of the Aboriginals’ assailants.”²³⁹ The dramatic irony continues with the insertion of the next painting, *Removal of the spear*. Distance is created between the solitary Tracker and his three companions in a group. The painting, set against the vivid background, exposes the characters and asks “whose side are you on?”²⁴⁰

The struggle for control intensifies after the Veteran is speared. The Tracker’s laconic comment demonstrates his observational skills as he says to his completely unaware companions, “Better not go on boss…third fella missin’ off his horse.”²⁴¹ As his horse gallops to the group without the Veteran, the dialogue continues:

**Follower:** He’s been thrown!
**Tracker:** No Boss, he’s been speared.
**Fanatic:** What?
**Tracker:** I heard the spear whispering through the air . . . back there.
**Fanatic:** Why didn’t you say something?
**Tracker:** (shrugs). I thought you was on the lookout.²⁴²

²³⁹ Coad, *Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker*, 22.
²⁴⁰ Coad, *Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker*, 24.
In quick succession, both the Follower and the Tracker undermine the Fanatic’s control. The Tracker, showing compassion and courage, stops and waits for the wounded Veteran who is falling behind. The song, *Life Matters*, represent the Tracker’s internal monologue:

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Far away in another life
We’d all look out for each one
Can’t believe here life matters none
I’d like to be
Far away home.245
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The Fanatic whips the Tracker, pulls at his neck chain and shoots at the ground next to him, screaming, “I SAID MOVE!”244 As he aims his gun at the motionless figure standing before him, he hesitates. In contrast to the Fanatic’s rage, the Follower states in a reasoned way, “He’s not going to. Without him we won’t catch the other one.”245 The Tracker’s resistance directs the group’s actions. The Follower then goes to help the Veteran. The Fanatic and the Tracker share a moment of laughter in one of the film’s surreal and ambivalent moments as the Tracker mimics the colonial discourse:

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Fanatic: You’ll stand trial when we get back.
Disobeying orders in a field of conflict.
Tracker: Yes Boss.
Fanatic: You’ll probably hang.
Tracker: Yes boss. Poor blackfella, been born for that noose, eh?,
Fanatic: Too right (And the Tracker laughs out loud. The
Fanatic joins him, unexpectedly, wholeheartedly).246
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The Tracker further demonstrates his autonomy and modes of resistance when he observes the Fugitive a short distance ahead. He immediately turns to the others and starts singing and dancing, “That sacred country there Boss. No good there in dark night. We go cross in morning. Him other blackfella he no good there too.”247 The Follower is attuned to the Tracker’s subtle subterfuge, “We could go on a bit further. The sooner we catch him, the sooner we get back.” The Fanatic insists that the Tracker will be useless due to “the spirits.” He decides they will set up camp away from this area and hence the Fugitive remains uncaptured.

That night, under the cover of darkness, the Fanatic murders the Veteran. The painting, *The murder of the veteran*, positions the viewer as

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244 de Heer, *The Tracker*, Scene 71. Original capitalisation and emphasis.
247 de Heer, *The Tracker*, Scene 73.
“participant’ to the murder by cropping the imagery” which emphasises, “the close viewpoint over the killer’s shoulder.”\textsuperscript{248} The close-up of the painting is from the Tracker’s perspective, where he lies with his eyes open, captured in an extreme close-up. In the next scene, the Tracker gives the Veteran absolution in Latin (this scene is discussed in greater detail in chapter 6).

The wrestle for control becomes even more tangible as the Tracker pulls the Fanatic into a body of water. The party then comes across another group of Aboriginal people in the distance, sitting and talking. The Fanatic immediately starts shooting. The painting, \textit{The massacre}, “appears when the camera turns away at the crucial moment of the shootings. The figures instantly incite a chain of sensations—the viewer’s feelings exceed perceptions; the world inside overwhelms the world outside.”\textsuperscript{249} According to artist Peter Coad, being confronted with such brutality and the emotions this evokes is largely in the realm of the “unrepresentable.” Hence the artworks use metaphor rather than objective representation to form “the viewer’s deep-seated memories of fear and pain and forge a psychological identification with the victims.”\textsuperscript{250} This ruthless display of violence is too much for the Follower. He and the Tracker take control. At gunpoint, the neck chain is fastened to the Fanatic.

As the three men continue, they come to the clearing where the second massacre has just occurred. The song \textit{Gungalaria} is sung in Bundjalung, conveying the sorrow of the Tracker who weeps over the blood-soaked body of the murdered elder. To seek contrition, the Tracker pulls the Fanatic off his horse and forces him to come face to face with his victim. The Fanatic’s response demonstrates a complete lack of remorse. “They’ll give me a medal for it, and they’ll hang that black-lover, I’ll see to that. And you . . . I’ll see you flogged to the edge of existence.”\textsuperscript{251}

The trio make their camp for the night, and the Fanatic is tied to a tree. As the sun sets, the Tracker goes to get some food. The audience is then privy to the Tracker’s bush knowledge. He and another unidentified person grind leaves and insects together while discussing in an Indigenous language what they are doing.\textsuperscript{252} The camera focuses on the three hands involved in the

\textsuperscript{248} Coad, \textit{Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker}, 26.
\textsuperscript{249} Coad, \textit{Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker}, 28.
\textsuperscript{250} Coad, \textit{Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker}, 28.
\textsuperscript{251} de Heer, \textit{The Tracker}, Scene 94.
\textsuperscript{252} The language spoken by David Gulpilil is a Yolnu Matha language.
action and then on the Tracker using his spit to make a paste which he will use to drug the Follower as part of the execution of his plan.

The climax of the film is achieved, as the resolution of who will leave the trek alive is reached. The Fanatic’s monologue serves as a cinematic device to distract the audience from the Tracker’s actions. The Tracker continues the series of reversals by using his autonomy to put the Fanatic on trial. In the darkness of the night, the Tracker is a figure of composure and calm as he delivers the Fanatic’s sentence and then uses his apparatus of ropes and the neck chain to hang the Fanatic:

Tracker: You are charged with the murder of innocent people. How do you plead?
Fanatic: Who the hell are you?
Tracker: On behalf of my people and all people, I’m your judge.
and jury. How do you plead?

**Fanatic:** Hey! Wake up!! WAKE UP!! *(to sleeping Follower).*

**Tracker:** I find you guilty as charged. By your actions you have forfeited the right to live among your fellow humans. I sentence you to hang by the neck until dead.

**Fanatic:** You can’t do that!

**Tracker:** *Sic transit gloria mundi*

**Fanatic:** So passes the glorious world . . . *(whispering hoarsely).*

The reversal that is taking place in the death of the Fanatic is linked to other parts of the film through the elements of dialogue, painting and song. The painting, *Night—the Fanatic hangs*, contains a central image of the motionless chain glowing with firelight, set against the vastness of the black sky and dark blue landscape. The image of the chain, which is starkly conveyed in the painting, has been a motif of colonial violence throughout the film. First, for the Aboriginal family group chained together before being murdered, then the Tracker forced to wear the chain, and finally the Fanatic. The fact that neck chains were part of the supplies that the police party had with them as they set out on their mission is representative of the brutal ways that police sought to control Aboriginal people. The Tracker’s repetition of the Fanatic’s words, spoken almost like a benediction, to the group of Aboriginal people he had killed—*sic transit gloria mundi* *(so passes the glorious world)* increases the irony and reversals of power in this scene.

As the sun rises on the sixth day, the silhouette of the Fanatic haunts the skyline. The Tracker proclaims a full absolution in Latin as Archie Roach’s voice enters the soundscape with the powerful lyrics of *My History*, conveying the Tracker’s inner monologue of grief for himself and his land.

*You have taken my country*
*Fought me, killed me, exterminated by your hand*

*I have lost all my being*
*Empty, derided, forsaken in what was my land*

*And I can never return, until there’s contrition*
*And we can all grieve my history.*

*I still long for my country*
*I still remember the spirit that lives in my land.*

*But I can only forgive, when there is contrition*
*And we at last face my history.*

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254 See Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*. 
And so, I will only forgive, when there is contrition
And I can face, proud, my history.\textsuperscript{255}

In the coda to the film’s narrative sequence, we see a new form of relationship emerge which has been developing throughout the film. The Follower’s recognition of the Tracker’s knowledge and ability to keep them alive in the environment is further developed. The Tracker and the Follower are now both on foot. “Good eh Boss? We go faster now.”\textsuperscript{256}

The Tracker and the Follower discover that the Fugitive has been caught by a local clan. They agree that settler law will find the Fugitive guilty of a crime he did not commit: “Court already find him guilty Boss. He blackfella. Anyway, he telling the truth.”\textsuperscript{257} “Tribal Justice” is then enacted in the form of a spear through the leg of the Fugitive for the crime he did commit, the sexual assault of an Aboriginal woman. The painting \textit{The Fugitive speared} includes burial mounds and a broad, textured background which contains ochre mixed with paint in the same way that Aboriginal artists have used it in their paintings in the past and present. The ancient burial mounds which surround the figure of the Fugitive in the painting “underscore the eternal theme of human existence and the immensity of time, and . . . act as ancestral witnesses at the execution of Aboriginal justice as opposed to white man’s justice.”\textsuperscript{258}

The film’s penultimate scene contains a final exchange between the Tracker and the Follower. The Tracker’s connection with his land is again emphasised. He also issues a final subversive word about “white fellas” before riding off in the distance to his land.

\textbf{Tracker:} My land is far away Boss, but always I can find it.

\textit{The Tracker wheels his horse around and urges it into a walk. The Follower watches him for a bit, then calls out.}

\textbf{Follower:} I wonder who did kill that woman!

\textit{The Tracker calls back over his shoulder}

\textbf{Tracker:} Prob’ly some white fella Boss! They a murderous, shifti,
The image freezes and dissolves into the final painting—mirroring the opening scene of the film and the timeless mountains, trees and land of Arkaroola which have held and witnessed the story being told.

3.2.1.1 Genre

Due to the archetypes and tropes employed in the film, the terms allegory, fable, Western, anti-Western and frontier parable have all been used to describe The Tracker. The Tracker’s resistance to distinct genre classification is a strength, according to film studies scholar Garry Gillard. He describes four categories concerning the genre in The Tracker: a musical film; an art-house film (due to characteristics such as an unresolved narrative and the emphasis on the visual component of the film); a social problem film; and an Australian western. He concludes that The Tracker is “more than the sum of its types” and this is part of its appeal.

Film studies scholar Bruno Starrs argues that The Tracker is primarily a Western or an anti-Western. Starrs also states that the film “is like a mediaeval morality play, the characters are endowed with near-mythic status, identified not by their proper names but rather by their function in the narrative arc.”

Similarly, film critic Jake Wilson recognizes the inherent ambiguity in defining The Tracker and the need to approach it from multiple perspectives, which ultimately complement rather than contradict each other.

In some ways, The Tracker resembles a stripped-down Western, with its rugged outdoor setting and focus on primal power struggles between men. Equally, the film is a politically charged fable about colonisation and resistance, pondering the very contemporary question of how far two laws and two systems of belief can exist side by side. But above all, this is a drama of

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259 de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 120.
262 Starrs, "The Tracker" (Rolf de Heer 2002) and "The Proposition" (John Hillcoat 2005): two westerns that weren’t?, 166. See also Jones who focuses on the political nature of the film and the constructions of archetypes. Due to the use of archetypes, Jones chooses the genre of a “morality play,” in the tradition of Aesop’s fables, for The Tracker. Linden Jones, "Ancient Archetypes: The ‘Greek Chorus’ in The Tracker’s Songs," 118.
vision, where what each character sees (or fails to see) will determine his destiny.\textsuperscript{263}

De Heer describes \textit{The Tracker} as “a subversive political western, in a way.”\textsuperscript{264} Undoubtedly, Western tropes are used, such as a quest on horseback through “wild” country; however, de Heer plays with these conventions. For example, the Indigenous character has the most agency in the film, and it is the Indigenous tracker, and not the settler, who delivers justice and rides off into the sunset. Furthermore, the land is not “wild” and “empty.” It is inhabited and offers sustenance for those who know where to look.

Cultural studies academic, Fiona Probyn, provides a convincing alternative regarding genre which focuses on the representation of land. Her point of departure comes from de Heer’s statement that the film is a “road movie without roads” (de Heer’s production diary).\textsuperscript{265} Probyn argues that this notion of a film without roads makes \textit{The Tracker} a “No Road film.” \textit{The Tracker} contains conventional elements of a road film, such as a journey with a goal in mind, and a focus on relationships between characters. However, the fact that there are no roads challenges perceptions about space and place. Western forms of organising space—made tangible in roads—are replaced with “landscape that is \textit{country}, or land that can be read and is being read in multiple ways, with signs that cannot be read.”\textsuperscript{266} The Tracker conveys this epistemic limitation: “they can’t know what I see.”\textsuperscript{267}

The Tracker’s knowledge, which is “closed off” to the settlers, positions the viewer “\textit{in} the country, the land, the bush rather than hurtling through it.”\textsuperscript{268} Probyn’s insights have implications for the understanding of land in Australia. For example, the land is not only empty, harsh terrain. Rather, the land is full of signs. Throughout the film, the Tracker—and the land itself—reveal that settler attempts to possess them, or even to understand them, are ultimately futile.

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\textsuperscript{264} Rolf de Heer, “Interview on the set of \textit{The Tracker},” (\textit{The Tracker} DVD Extra: Vertigo Productions 2002).
\textsuperscript{265} Probyn, “The Ethic of Following.”
\textsuperscript{266} Probyn, “The Ethic of Following.”
\textsuperscript{267} Probyn, “The Ethic of Following.”
\textsuperscript{268} Probyn, “The Ethic of Following.” Original italics.
\end{flushright}
3.2.2 Off-screen

The Tracker is a dramatic reconstruction which draws on the historical record.269 In Dancing to His Song: The Singular Cinema of Rolf de Heer, Jane Freebury records that de Heer wanted his audiences to share the shock he felt when reading historical accounts of the hunting parties, mass killings, poisonings, torture and suffering on the Australian frontier.270 Examples of this can be seen in the Fanatic’s speech throughout the film, in particular, the monologue, which is part of the hanging scene. De Heer wrote the monologue on the set during shooting when he realised that the logistics of the scene required a distraction from the Tracker’s movements. The speech is a compilation of diary entries and other historical accounts that de Heer had read.

For de Heer, and the rest of the cast and crew, making The Tracker involved coming to terms with the brutality of settler violence in Australia. The Tracker also required cross-cultural negotiation in the contact zone between the cast and crew. For example, de Heer describes the initial wardrobe fittings of the actors being interrupted by the arrival of the neck chains, crucial props in the film. Both de Heer and Ian Jones (Director of Photography) were concerned about the comfort of the actors who needed to wear the neck chains. De Heer recalls the moment when the theatrical props, which closely resembled the genuine article, arrived on-set:

Those now-loathsome (then-too?) implements of restraint designed for convicts, suspects and Aboriginals, but still being used on the latter more than a century after their use for the former had been discontinued . . . The jocularity ceases while


270 Freebury, Dancing to the Song, 153. The process of making The Tracker, particularly the massacre scenes, led to de Heer stating: “What we’re taught at school is a joke, a sad parody of whatever the reality was or might be.” Rolf de Heer, The Tracker Diary: Production Notes (Hendon: Vertigo Productions, 2001). http://vertigoproductions.com.au/the_tracker_production_notes.php. For an account of the production history of The Tracker, which developed over a number of decades and was finally commissioned following a request from the Adelaide Festival of Arts and the public broadcaster’s SBS Independent ‘Shedding Light’ program (the South Australian Film Corporation provided additional investment), see Freebury, Dancing to the Song, 150; Rolf de Heer, "Personal Reflections on Whiteness and Three Film Projects," Australian Humanities Review, no. 42 (2007). http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2007/08/01/personal-reflections-on-whiteness-and-three-film-projects/.
the implication of the things seeps through. Gary [the Fanatic] tries one on . . . we shake our heads in a collective and belated ‘sorry’, that word that some seem to find so difficult to say.271

During shooting de Heer describes discomfort on set as the extras who were part of the massacre scene were “chained in the most horrible way.”272 There was a fair amount of “fussing over them” to relieve the tension of the situation. De Heer observed that the extras were committed to making the scenes as realistic as possible in order for the truth to be told.273 He also observed the “dignity” which the local Adnyamathanha extras—David Brown, Uncle Ross Coulthard, Francis Brady, Aunty Dorothy Coulthard, Glenys Austin, Susan Warren—displayed during the difficult scene:

I think the extras themselves understood what they were doing better than any of us could have explained it to them . . . they stood captive in chains, and simply maintained their dignity through anything we could throw at them.274

De Heer reflects on how easily any one of the non-Indigenous cast and crew could have been involved historically in scenes such as the ones they were filming. He includes in his diary the fact that these kinds of restraints were used in his lifetime. He recalls a conversation with a “lovely older man, most kind and helpful” who had been a police officer in the mid-1950s, alone in a territory covering tens of thousands of square miles. The police officer would chain Aboriginal people together and then to his vehicle when bringing them into custody.275 De Heer does not give any indication as to how the former police officer felt about his actions in hindsight.

From Gulpilil’s perspective, wearing the chains as the tracker and filming the massacre scenes were explicitly connected to his community’s experience. In Arnhem Land there are still people alive who were present at massacres that took place in the first half of the twentieth century.276 Gulpilil declares, “I like wearing the chain because it tells a true story of it you know. Because it...tells a true story of the trackers and that blackfella chain around his

271 de Heer, The Tracker Diary: Production Notes, 5–6. De Heer’s comment is a reference to then Prime Minister John Howard’s refusal to formally apologise to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families in what is known as The Stolen Generations. There are two explicit references to this in the film, when the Veteran and the Follower both utter sorry to the Tracker at different moments.
272 de Heer, The Tracker Diary: Production Notes.
274 de Heer, The Tracker Diary: Production Notes.
275 de Heer, The Tracker Diary: Production Notes.
276 Trudgen, Why Warriors Lie Down and Die, 12–38.
The desire to tell this part of Australia's history on-screen was a driving motivation for both Gulpilil and de Heer, even as they are positioned differently in terms of how they relate to that history.

While other Australian films have included the figure of the Aboriginal tracker and the ambiguous space they occupy in Australia's historic and cinematic imagination, *The Tracker* is by far the most enigmatic and stark portrayal, in terms of the relationship within the contact zone of the Australian frontier. The trope of the tracker embodies the paradoxes of colonial contact. A conflicted figure, he is, at any given moment, the "triumphant figure of culturally specific knowledge" or "part of an unwitting collusion in colonial expansion." In popular and literary imagination, the conflation of the Native Mounted Police and the police tracker have taken on mythological status in the form of "sinister bush guides," "indentured assistants in the colonial project" or "momentarily useful members of a dying race."

In the fictional world of *The Tracker*, resolution is found in the Fanatic's death. He is punished for his violent crimes. The hanging scene is a confronting reversal of colonial power as it startles the audience "out of generic expectations." When taken within the overall context of the plot the hanging scene is retributive justice for the character who "murdered innocent people" and did not show any form of contrition right down to his final moments.

De Heer leaves the audience to contemplate the justice, or otherwise, of the Fanatic's death by hanging as "the spectator is held in place by Roach's voice and Gulpilil's gaze, both of which demand our unflinching acknowledgement of the unfinished business of colonial history." Film critics Felicity Collins and Therese Davis argue that both Indigenous and

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278 Other films to include trackers include: *Kangaroo* (Lewis Milestone, 1952); *Journey out of Darkness* (James Trainor, 1967); *Lost in the Bush* (Peter Dodds, 1973); *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001); *Wind* (Ivan Sen, 1999); and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2001). The principal Aboriginal character in *Journey out of Darkness* was played by white actor, Ed Devereaux in blackface, a move that was criticised at the time of the film's release as awareness of Aboriginal agency was growing.

279 Probyn, "The Ethic of Following."

280 Langton, "Out From the Shadows." 56.

281 McFarlane, "Back tracking: Brian McFarlane considers racial matters and their historical representation in recent Australian cinema," 62.

282 Collins and Davis, "Disputing History," 51.
settler-Australians are located in the “traumatic afterwardness of frontier violence” even though they experience the imperative to remember colonial violence differently. Questions of reconciliation and retribution are raised, but not definitively answered, in this film. While contemporary viewers are not a monochrome group, there is a “bi-cultural revision of a violent frontier history” being enacted in the present, as “the hanging scene has the capacity to leave the viewer disturbed by a revision of history rather than replete with narrative catharsis.”

Furthermore, as Probyn argues, even if a relationship of shared understanding develops—as it does between the Tracker and the Follower—the relationship can still be prone to colonial logic in the form of cultural appropriation. Settler identity can become reliant on Indigenous knowledge to connect them to the land. Aboriginal sovereignty, Probyn argues, cannot be reduced to Aboriginal people being “guides” in order to enable settlers to become “ontologically dependent on Aboriginal ontological connection to the land . . . The Tracker reminds us that the ‘road to reconciliation’ is paved with tracks that whites cannot see and cannot presume to know in advance.”

The Tracker possesses knowledge and understanding that the others in the police party do not. The Tracker’s knowledge reveals the limits of settler knowledge and challenges the settlers’ claim to the land.

As the credits roll, the final song lyrics, Hope Always, outline the terms offered by the Tracker for a shared future. In order to “carry the burden with us” acknowledgement of frontier violence (“chain our hands”), the theft of land (“take our lands”), respect for Indigenous voices (“respect what we say”) is needed. Hope (“always we hope”) is, in fact, the final word of the film, but it is hope conditioned on truth-telling, lament, respect, acknowledgement of traditional custodianship of the land, and burden-sharing within the contact zones of contemporary Australia.

3.3 Image
Film critic Jake Wilson notes: “The film’s formal system depends in large part on an alternation between multiple points of view, spatial and psychological.”\textsuperscript{287} The use of artworks, widescreen landscape shots, as well as close-up and point-of-view shots, all make a significant contribution to the dynamic that Wilson has identified.

De Heer’s production notes reveal his vision for \textit{The Tracker}, along with the practical and artistic concerns he had during the production of the film.\textsuperscript{288} For example, finding the right location was complicated due to the number of possibilities within the Flinders Ranges, along with the pragmatics of vehicle access to high points, which was necessary for capturing the vistas and landscapes integral to the film. The landscape is an essential element within the narrative and required almost seventy specific locations. After initially surveying a larger area, a breakthrough came for de Heer in the decision to shoot the entire film in the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary:

I mean I was going to storyboard the whole film and then I realised that this was a journey that—and when we found the actual location which was Arkaroola it’s one property and it doesn’t go for 300km like the journey would be but it is the most extraordinary property in South Australia by far—and the variety of stuff on there is extraordinary. So instead of storyboarding I spent four weeks on Arkaroola—the location—driving around, casting the location. Taking photos. We bought a printer, printed it all out. Stuck them on the wall in the hotel room and started to cast those locations and create the journey. Create the journey purely out of landscape.\textsuperscript{289}

De Heer’s comments here indicate his influence in “directing” the landscape through containing it within photographic displays. There is also a sense of de Heer allowing the landscape to “direct” the film—it is the landscape which creates the journey, and therefore, the film. Importantly, de Heer consulted with Traditional Owners in order to have permission to film on their country.\textsuperscript{290}

Cinematographer Ian Jones recalls that de Heer chose to emphasise the Arkaroola landscape with “minimal sky” in the frame.\textsuperscript{291} As Freebury notes, the “look” of the film “with its reds, ochres, mauves and purples, its mountain ranges and thrusting granite peaks, twisted scrub and majestic

\textsuperscript{287} Wilson, “Looking Both Ways: \textit{The Tracker}.”
\textsuperscript{288} de Heer, \textit{The Tracker Diary: Production Notes}.
\textsuperscript{289} Rolf de Heer, “Interview Two,” interview by Katherine Rainger, October 15, 2017.
\textsuperscript{290} de Heer, “Interview One”.
\textsuperscript{291} Freebury, \textit{Dancing to the Song}, 152.
white-trunked ghost gums” is reminiscent of the famous watercolour images of the central Australian desert painted by Arrernte man, Albert Namatjira.292 The film’s artist Peter Coad was on site for much of the film shoot in order to be immersed in the setting and to experience the film shoot. The two landscape paintings by Coad which bookend the film, *The landscape – the beginning*, and *Final landscape*, convey his sense of awe at the country on which the filming took place.

Coad’s fourteen original artworks invite the viewer to contemplate the brutality and cruelty of the Australian frontier. As Wilson observes “with characters reduced to anonymous stick figures, the depicted punishments and massacres seem partially detached from their narrative context, like archetypal events repeated throughout Australia’s bloody history.”293 Wilson’s observation correlates with the filmmaker’s and artist’s aim to “alter the visual syntax” of the film’s presentation of colonial violence.294 The motivation for using iconic representations of violence in the film came from de Heer’s reflections on the nature of on-screen violence. He wanted to deal with the reality of violence “quite differently” as it is becoming “harder and harder to have any effect.”295 Film critic Margaret Pomeranz also comments on the use of Coad’s painting and the effect they have within the film. “De Heer’s use of Coad’s paintings adds an uncanny power to the film, strangely making the violence more meaningful, more tragic, taking away any notion that it’s only a movie.”296

The paintings deliberately create a distancing effect for the viewer. They refer to the action taking place within the world of the film. At the same time, they invite the viewer to transcend the immediacy of the film’s narrative and to reflect on the paintings as representative of other atrocities. While many critics, such as Wilson and Pomeranz, felt that the use of the paintings added gravitas and a broader application to the depiction of frontier violence in the film, the use of this aesthetic choice has not been universally welcomed. Indigenous filmmaker Romaine Moreton, of the Goenpul and Jagera people, and the Bundjalung people, critiqued the use of the paintings on the basis that they distance the violence being

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292 Freebury, *Dancing to the Song*, 152.
293 Wilson, “Looking Both Ways: The Tracker.”
294 Wilson, “Looking Both Ways: The Tracker.”
295 *The Tracker* DVD Extras: Interviews on Set.
perpetrated from the actual characters we follow in the film, because the actual execution of the violence is hidden behind the paintings. According to Moreton, the paintings therefore “mask” the perpetrators’ crimes—on-screen and potentially historically as well—rather than illuminate them. She also argues that the effect of the paintings interrupting the narrative means that the viewer does not fully digest what the Follower and the Fanatic have done. Interruption to the narrative allows the audience to focus on the Follower’s emotional state. The film becomes about empathising with him.297

Moreton’s critique raises significant questions about how to interpret the representation of violence that de Heer has provided. There is always the risk that Indigenous agency and voices are further silenced by universal depictions of the terror inflicted upon them. Scrutiny of this aspect of the film is warranted on the basis that the use of the pictures is a deliberate technique to portray the violence in a meaningful, yet experimental, way.

In response to Moreton’s analysis, it is helpful to remember that The Tracker’s aesthetics create a dialectic between accurate historical representation, such as the costumes and neck chains, and symbolic representation, seen in the use of archetypes and the unspecified location. The discussion of genre (3.2.1.1) is also helpful in guiding the overall interpretation of the film which accounts for its heavily stylised form, of which the paintings are a crucial element. The Tracker does not set out to be a “history film” which depicts specific events accurately.298 Instead, it functions as a cinematic memorial which uses image, sound and story to represent frontier violence in profound and deliberate ways.

In terms of reception of the images in the film as a whole, viewing The Tracker as a memorial is a helpful way forward. The film invites the audience to honour the victims and survivors of frontier violence through lament, participation in truth-telling, and bearing witness to the murder of “innocent people.”299 This space for remembrance challenges preconceived notions about Australia’s origins and settler-identity. For example, the land is not

298 For analysis of history films, see Robert Rosenstone, History on Film/Film on History (London: Pearson, 2006). Jane Lydon’s critique of the The Tracker is from a historical perspective. Lydon, “A Strange Time Machine: The Tracker, Black and White and Rabbit-Proof Fence.”
terra nullius, neither is it “inhospitable,” as the Tracker has shown, and neither was it “peacefully settled.” At the same time, assessing how well de Heer’s film communicates its message to audiences remains an ongoing task.

The Tracker is not the only account, cinematic or otherwise, on Australia’s colonial history. As de Heer himself has pointed out, Indigenous filmmakers like Warwick Thornton have and should be presenting cinematic accounts of Australia’s history. Thornton’s Sweet Country (2018) also depicts frontier violence and the compromised position of Aboriginal people in the colonial contact zone. The audience is aligned with the Aboriginal characters in Sweet Country, whose actions progress the plot. Thornton also made deliberate aesthetic choices in how to portray violence in his film. For example, the violent rape scene in Sweet Country happens in real-time; however, it is not shown: the screen is in darkness, and diegetic sounds portray the violent act. This directorial choice has a similar effect of memorialising violence against Aboriginal women by settlers. The action in not limited to the on-screen world: instead it is representative of widespread colonial abuses of Aboriginal women.300

3.4 Sound

The Tracker’s soundtrack is a compelling narrative device which supplements the sparse dialogue between the characters and adds to the emotional potency of the film.301 Anthony Jones argues that the ten songs composed for the film function like a “Greek Chorus,” allowing the audience to hear non-diegetic commentary on the plot and specifically to be party to the Tracker’s perspective.302 This feature, where the soundtrack not only accompanies the plot but is instrumental to its understanding, is rare in Australian film.303


302 Linden Jones, "Ancient Archetypes: The ‘Greek Chorus’ in The Tracker’s Songs.” Jones’ argument regarding the Greek chorus is perhaps best exemplified in the slow-motion segment with the song All Men Choose the Path They Walk where the camera focuses on each character in turn as the lyrics describe their motivations.

303 One Night the Moon (Rachel Perkins, 2001) and Bran Nue Day (Rachel Perkins, 2010) are examples of Australian films which have used a “musical” genre; that is the characters sing parts of the storyline as part of the diegetic sound.
The fact that de Heer wrote the lyrics for the songs, along with the script substantiates Jones’s argument. Graham Tardif, de Heer’s long-time collaborator, composed the songs. De Heer notes that writing the words to the songs attracted criticism in terms of a white person articulating the feelings of an Aboriginal character. He argues that, as the songs became such an integral part of his screenplay, he needed to write the words, “because the words were going to affect how one reads the film . . . they had such an intimate relationship with the storytelling of the film.” After struggling with the script and its multiple perspectives and creative use of genre, the choice of soundtrack was the elusive “last piece of the puzzle.”

The original idea had been to create a series of almost jaunty Country and Western tunes, to lighten the film by ironically counterpointing the weight of the themes. It simply didn’t work, trivializing what we had worked so hard to achieve.

The addition of the songs of lament and protest cemented the film as the Tracker’s film. He now dominated the screen not only visually but aurally as well.

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304 Interview with Rolf de Heer by Anthony Linden Jones cited in Linden Jones, “Ancient Archetypes: The ‘Greek Chorus’ in The Tracker’s Songs,” 128.
305 de Heer, The Tracker Diary: Production Notes.
Figure 3.3 Archie Roach singing live at the Adelaide Arts Festival. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.
The creative process was also guided by the pre-existent commitment to perform the music as live accompaniment for a performance of the film at the Adelaide Arts Festival. De Heer asked Archie Roach to sing the songs and Roach agreed. De Heer defends his song words with two stories involving Roach. The first is to do with Roach choosing to be part of the project:

The great Aboriginal singer Archie Roach was asked to sing them and seeing the film (without the words to the songs, which had not yet been written), he readily agrees. Some months later we spent a week recording (a very emotional time for Archie), he and I were sitting outside having a quiet cigarette. He looked at me several times, then asked a question . . . "Did you write those words?" I said that I had indeed written the words to the songs. A piercing stare from Archie . . . "All of them?" I nodded. He shook his head in some sort of disbelief, then said, "You and I have travelled very different roads, but we’ve arrived at the same place."^307

The second defence de Heer offers concerning his lyrics relates to an incident during the film’s promotion. “In a fairly pointed way, the interviewer asked Archie, who normally writes his own material, what it felt like singing a white man’s words. Archie turned to him, fiercely, and said, ‘They’re MY words, those words belong to MY people!’^308

Roach recorded the songs in English and parts of them were translated into his father’s language, Bundjalung. On the day of recording, de Heer describes the emotion on set in greater detail,

A difficult day, a deep, dark emotional day, yet one of the best days I’ve had on this entire project. Today was all Archie singing, the incomplete songs and the material in language, and by the end of it we were all a bit excited really, as well as being emotionally wrung out . . .

. . . Onto what might have been the most difficult number of all, song #8 [Gungalaria], the aftermath of the second massacre, all in language. Again, Archie nailed it straightaway . . . David’s performance in this scene is so strong it makes your hair stand on end: Archie’s performance in this song is so strong it brings tears to your eyes . . . We had to call a break then . . . people sat silently, I was overwhelmed, Archie was

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306 “How do you play a piece of cinema and give it relevance within an Arts Festival context...where you have all this theatre and live performance stuff? . . . And so, I talked to them about doing a live performance of it, which then became a contractual necessity...Because there was this agreement to have a band and songs, we developed it until it did work.” Interview with Rolf de Heer by Anthony Linden Jones, cited in Linden Jones, "Ancient Archetypes: The ‘Greek Chorus’ in The Tracker’s Songs." 128. The Tracker production notes provide interesting insight into the processes involved in writing the songs and deciding to contact Archie Roach regarding singing them.

307 de Heer, "Personal Reflections on Whiteness and Three Film Projects."

308 de Heer, "Personal Reflections on Whiteness and Three Film Projects." Original emphasis.
overwhelmed. To have sung this song in his father’s language was an experience that rocked him to the core.\textsuperscript{309}

As discussed above (3.3), making \textit{The Tracker} was a powerful experience for all involved; however, for the Aboriginal cast and crew, the emotional involvement has had an extra level of intensity due to the trauma that their ancestors experienced and the desire for the truth to be told.

As well as having a narrative function, Collins and Davis argue that the songs are part of the film’s ability to use the past to speak about the present. The songs are not consistent with the era of 1922, and by circumscribing them onto the events of the past, the audience is brought to a moment of recognition where the past and present intersect. This moment of post-\textit{Mabo} recognition occurs in the opening sequence as the words “Far away in another life, I walked my land proud and free,” are sung by Roach, himself a member of the Stolen Generations.\textsuperscript{310} The image of inequality, conflicted loyalties and oppression on-screen as the Tracker walks in front of the three mounted officers, is accompanied by the “meditative commentary” of the “mournful songs” of de Heer, Tardif and Roach. Wilson agrees:

These contemporary laments, backed by guitar and Hammond organ, create a kind of fourth-dimensional perspective that complicates our response to the linear narrative—an extraordinary effect, like looking down a corridor of time between past and present.\textsuperscript{311}

This effect is especially evident in the final song, where the Tracker’s final words move from individual response to a collective response on behalf of First Nations people.

\textit{Always I hope}
\textit{For my struggle}
\textit{Have to keep going on}
\textit{Sadly…}
\textit{Do all that can be done,}
\textit{searching for one who will carry the burden with me}
\textit{Hope’s all we have until we find our way,}
\textit{for all around to respect what we say…}

\textsuperscript{309} de Heer, \textit{The Tracker Diary: Production Notes}.
\textsuperscript{310} For information about Archie Roach’s life and work, see his official website at http://www.archieroach.com/ and Monique Ross and Greg Borschmann, “From stolen child to Indigenous leader: Archie Roach sings the songs that signpost his life,” 2018, accessed November 7, 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-12/archie-roach-a-life-in-song/9957168. Post-\textit{Mabo} refers to the High Court’s decision on 3 June 1992, when six of the seven judges agreed that the Meriam people held traditional ownership of the lands of Mer. The decision led to the passing of the Native Title Act 1993, providing the framework for Indigenous peoples to make claims. Eddie Mabo was a plaintiff and leader of the Meriam people who was instrumental in the process.
\textsuperscript{311} Wilson, "Looking Both Ways: \textit{The Tracker}.”
Chain our hands, take our lands, we stay. 
It’s where our future goes searching for those who will carry the burden with us. 
Always we hope.

Second peoples are invited to “respect what we say” and “carry the burden with us,” which evokes a response in the present.

The diegetic sound effects within the film are all from the Arkaroola environment, recorded by sound technician James Currie. He describes the way the environment enhanced the sound in the film:

An environment like Arkaroola immediately suggests certain tones, certain colours in the sound. We spent a lot of time sitting and waiting for nature sounds. Very tiny sounds you have to be aware of. If you can get in there and record that, that is absolutely marvellous. Make those tiny sounds live on the screen in a larger environment. So we take something small and expand it.  

Other diegetic sound effects include the sounds of screams, gunshots and silence. The most chilling use of these effects is when the Fanatic and the Follower start shooting during the first massacre. After the torture of the victims with the song My People playing over the top, the killing begins. The soundscape at this point consists only of gunfire and the victims’ screams, while displaying the painting, Shooting the Aboriginals on-screen.

De Heer intentionally designed the dialogue in the film to be sparse in order for the images and other sounds of the film to be given as much space as possible to engage the audience. An example of his refined use of dialogue is when the moving image returns after the artwork during the first massacre scene. The Fanatic is wiping down his revolver: he holds it up and speaks to it, saying, “Well spoken. Nice to have a comrade who speaks English.” This line is also an example of de Heer’s creative use of the historical record (see 3.2.1). As de Heer stated in his interview with me, Constable William Willshire, who was charged with “cleaning up” central Australia, would write phrases in his diaries and correspondence such as, “the Martini-Henry’s spoke very loudly today.” This phrase was code for murdering Aboriginal children, women and men in his infamous killing raids.

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312 "The Tracker DVD Extras: Interviews on Set."
313 de Heer, “Interview Two”.
314 de Heer, The Tracker, Scene 23.
315 de Heer, “Interview One”. See also: episode 4 in the documentary series First Australians (Rachel Perkins, 2008).
*The Tracker* is a cinematic depiction which grapples with the genocide and perversion of justice what has come to be known as “the killing times.”

### 3.5 Critical Reception

*The Tracker* received a strong, positive critical response and a range of awards. Prominent Australian film critics, Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton, both gave the film 4.5 out of 5 stars. Pomeranz stated: “At this time in our nation’s history most people are yearning for a big screen experience that offers some emotional catharsis for black and white reconciliation. For some people that came in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. For others, *The Tracker*."

Amongst the numerous positive reviews and accolades, there has been some criticism. Indigenous academic Marica Langton appreciates the revision of the tracker character; however, she resents the “crude psychological power” which she attributes to the lack of Aboriginal input into the script, as well as de Heer’s “military control over the plot.” She finds, “hints of artistic and moral vanity” which Bruno Starrs, who has studied de Heer’s work extensively, tempers as “occasionally heavy-handed didacticism.” By way of response, it is worth noting that *The Tracker* embodies de Heer’s film style with the absurd, confronting material, and the personal journey of characters, all on display. The film is unapologetically political; however, it does not leave the audience with neat conclusions. De Heer has noted the polemical nature of the film: “I’m happy to say that after screenings I’ve been spat on by white people and hugged by Indigenous people.”

At the same time, the fact that *The Tracker* was mainly De Heer’s creation, rather than a collaborative film with Indigenous partners, needs to be

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317 Awards for *The Tracker* include David Gulpilil winning the Best Actor Award at the Australian Film Institute; the Film Critics Circle of Australia awarded it Best Film; Best Screenplay at the Flanders International Film Festival; the Press Award at the Paris Film Festival; the Special Jury Prize at the Valladolid International Film Festival; and the film was nominated for the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival. The film was part of the official competition at the 59th Venice International Film Festival in 2002 and received a Special Mention for the SIGNIS Award given by the World Catholic Association for Communication.
318 "*The Tracker* DVD Extras: Interviews on Set."
319 Langton, "Out From the Shadows," 60.
320 Langton, "Out From the Shadows," 60. Starrs, ""The Tracker" (Rolf de Heer 2002) and "The Proposition" (John Hillcoat 2005): two westerns that weren’t?," 166.
321 de Heer, "Personal Reflections on Whiteness and Three Film Projects."
mentioned and acknowledged. Langton compares *The Tracker* with the film, *One Night the Moon* (2001), directed by Arrernte woman Rachel Perkins. *One Night the Moon* was also filmed on Adnyamathanha country in the Flinders Ranges. Langton argues that Perkins’ work is a more convincing portrayal of race relations than *The Tracker*. Perkin’s work is based in a homestead where the traditional custodians have been displaced and includes the dynamics of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families as they interact within and outside of the family unit. In terms of having an Indigenous director, Perkins’ work is closer to Barclay’s definition of Fourth Cinema. Due to the film’s content, Gulpilil’s strong presence in every scene and the pride that Gulpilil and Roach have expressed in the film, *The Tracker* is also Fourth Cinema, although the lack of total creative control places it on a different part of the continuum.

Other critical responses within film studies have focused on the representation of history in the film. Lydon critiques the elements with direct historical referents, such as the costuming, which she feels leaves the violence as situated in the past with no bearing on the present. Collins and Davis argue that the opposite is true. The reversals in *The Tracker* and the haunting songs of the soundtrack bring the past into the present, leaving a sense of the unfinished nature of Reconciliation. Sarah Pinto has analysed the notion of “White guilt” in *The Tracker*, concluding that the call for contrition must be supplemented with action.

3.6 Conclusion

*The Tracker* does not leave viewers with an “easy, reconciled, political space at its conclusion.” The film presents audiences with a vision of a range of ways of relating in the contact zone of colonial Australia, ranging from extreme violence and retribution to repentance, absolution and recognition. The land is the stage of *The Tracker*, “a road film without roads,” where the question of who is following who has unexpected consequences.

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322 *One Night the Moon* contains a powerful soundtrack by singer-songwriters Kev Carmody, Paul Kelly and Mairead Hannan.
The Tracker is a stark depiction of the colonial frontier. What is clear is that a vast disruption has taken place for the peoples of the land where the narrative takes place, and for the Tracker, who must navigate his role in colonial servitude. The Veteran, the Fanatic and the Follower represent caricatures of colonial control who undertake their roles and choice of path to walk. What comes after 1922? The answer, in part, is Charlie’s Country—the third film in the Accidental Trilogy, and the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 4: *Charlie’s Country* Film Analysis

Equal parts ethnographic and poetic, this eloquent drama’s stirring soulfulness is laced with the sorrow of cultural dislocation but also with lovely ripples of humour and even joy. —David Rooney
The Hollywood Reporter

![Figure 4.1 Left to Right: PC Monica, Charlie and Police Officer Luke. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.](image)

4.1 Chapter Overview

*Charlie’s Country* (2013) completes the triptych of the Accidental Trilogy. It is filmed in the same country as *Ten Canoes*, with the marked difference that the European “strangers” from *The Tracker* are still here, albeit in a different form. *Charlie’s Country* (2014) received critical acclaim in Australia and internationally.\(^\text{326}\) It is an evocative and poignant cinematic experience due to its unique combination of style and content.

Gulpilil and de Heer’s primary intention was to make a film that audiences would find rewarding to watch. They also wanted to make a political statement that connected with Gulpilil’s personal experience. The third in the Accidental Trilogy, *Charlie’s Country* depicts a particular experience.

\(^{326}\) A comprehensive list of the Australian and International awards *Charlie’s Country* won or was nominated for is listed here: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3244512/awards. Of particular note is the Cannes Film Festival Un Certain Regard Award where David Gulpilil won best actor and Rolf de Heer was nominated for best director; Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) Awards in 2015 where David Gulpilil won Best Lead Actor; the Asia Pacific Screen Awards 2014 where David Gulpilil won Best Performance by an Actor; and the Australian Film Critics Association Awards 2015 where David Gulpilil won Best Actor, Ian Jones won best Cinematography, and Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil won Best Screenplay.
the same time, an “emotional universality” can be discerned through the film’s “stinging depiction of marginalization” and its “observations about spiritual resilience in the face of white colonization and irreconcilable societal imbalance.”

Charlie’s Country does not provide easy answers to the questions that it raises about First and Second peoples in contemporary Australia. Rather than easy answers, Charlie’s Country presents audiences with the emotions and ambiguity that are contained within Charlie’s first-hand experience, as he navigates his politicised context.

This chapter describes the film’s production history and plot, followed by an analysis of the critical elements of image and sound used in the film. The final section of this chapter considers the way that personal narrative intersects with government policy in Charlie’s Country and the relational dynamics between insiders and outsiders, as depicted in the film.

4.2 Story

The films in the Accidental Trilogy have a connection between their on-screen story and their production history. In Charlie’s Country, this connection is accentuated by the fact that the on-screen storyline contains autobiographical references to Gulpilil’s own life. This section begins with a discussion of the production history before outlining the on-screen world, in order to explore the reception of Charlie’s Country as a fictional drama which nevertheless resonates with Gulpilil’s lived experience.

4.2.1 Off-screen

Three aspects drove the unique production history of Charlie’s Country: Gulpilil’s circumstances; de Heer’s pragmatism; and Gulpilil and de Heer’s friendship. In 2011, Gulpilil was charged with aggravated assault after he threw a broom at his wife, Miriam Ashley, which broke her arm. He was sentenced to twelve months in prison—which was suspended after five months—and participation in an alcohol rehabilitation program. De Heer, who lives in Tasmania, flew to Darwin to visit Gulpilil in gaol. When de Heer asked Gulpilil what he would like to do when his gaol term was completed, Gulpilil replied that he wanted to make another film with de Heer. After

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328 For Gulpilil’s recount of de Heer’s visits in gaol and his desire to make another film with him, see The Wheeler Center, “David Gulpilil in conversation with Margaret Pomeranz.” For de Heer’s account, see Film Quote Compile, “Charlie’s Country: Interview with director Rolf de Heer,” 2014, accessed March 1, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vegJVE68xNU.
some initial discussion, de Heer returned to his hotel room armed with index cards ready to map the dialogue and contours of the plot.

Figure 4.2 Left to Right: Peter Djigirr, Jennifer Budukpuduk Gaykamangu, Peter Minygululu and Rolf de Heer during the filming of Charlie’s Country. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.

De Heer wanted to broaden the scope of the film so that it was not purely autobiographical. When hearing the “scriptment” (a combination of script and treatment) in full, however, Gulpilil’s sense of identification with it remained. De Heer writes, “He gripped my arms many times, had tears in his eyes more than once. ‘That’s my movie!’, he said, ‘It’s about me’”.

While there are differences between Charlie’s on-screen character and Gulpilil, audiences have been known to conflate them. This conflation is due to Gulpilil’s iconic status and public profile, his references to himself when discussing the film, the contemporary setting of Charlie’s Country and the social-realist style. For example, in an interview, Gulpilil said:

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330 De Heer has made the point that Charlie as a character is distinct from Gulpilil. See Rolf de Heer, "Critics’ Talk #6 Rolf de Heer (Charlie’s Country)," interview by Bor Beekman, International Film Festival Rotterdam, January 30, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7hQOLr9vGk. De Heer has expressed the confusion that has resulted from conflating Charlie with Gulpilil. “Look it’s got itself very tangled up now . . . with David and how he is.” de Heer, “Interview One”.

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Charlie’s Country is true. That is the life of me. Drug and alcohol. When I was making Charlie’s Country, I was sick. I’m still sick. Charlie’s Country saved my life and saved my people’s life not to touch the drug and alcohol while they are growing the young generation. I’m talking to my people’s point of view. I’m in a Western world, I’m in a traditional world.\footnote{The Wheeler Center, “David Gulpilil in conversation with Margaret Pomeranz.”}

Echoing Gulpilil’s comments above, de Heer states that the prison sentence saved Gulpilil’s life and, “the film saved him as a human being.”\footnote{VPRO Cinema, “Interview with Rolf de Heer (Charlie’s Country),” 2014, accessed March 14, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tv7y-0pxEBY.} Since leaving Ramingining in 2004, Gulpilil had been drinking heavily and was in a very poor condition physically and emotionally. Gaol was a circuit breaker in a destructive cycle of substance abuse. Filming gave Gulpilil something to focus on, a reason to reconnect with the community at Ramingining after nearly a decade of living in Darwin, and the motivation to quit smoking and drinking, which he has maintained.

Film critic Paul Byrnes connects the on-screen and off-screen worlds when he states:

At the same time this is no polemic. Rolf de Heer stays very close to Charlie’s reality. Charlie is a proud man drifting from crisis to crisis, ever deeper in his isolation. It’s a devastating story, partly because we sense that parts of it may not be that far from Gulpilil’s own struggles.

That is not to take anything away from this performance. Gulpilil’s extraordinary grace and physical ease is still there, as it was in his first screen role 43 years ago in Nic Roeg’s Walkabout. But his face is now ravaged by time and history, and some of the close-ups here are terribly haunting. He shows us anger, resignation, defiance and sorrow at the same time, without a word.\footnote{Paul Byrnes, “Charlie’s Country review: Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil produce a work for the ages,” Sydney Morning Herald, July 17, 2014, https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/charlies-country-review-rolf-de-heer-and-david-gulpilil-produce-a-work-for-the-ages-20140715-ztbg2.html.}

De Heer has expressed that this was not an easy film project to be involved in, as dealing with Gulpilil’s intense personality can be demanding.\footnote{de Heer, “Interview Two”.} It was, however, a request from David that he could not refuse. As De Heer emphatically recalls: “I knew I had no choice but to attempt to make a film with David.”\footnote{Vertigo Productions, "Charlie’s Country Press Kit."}
4.2.2 On-screen

*Charlie’s Country* can be divided into three narrative sections, each one reflecting a specific location: an unnamed remote Aboriginal community; the bush surrounding the community; and various locations in Darwin, the capital city of the Northern Territory (NT), Australia. Each of these settings is the backdrop for a sequence of events which Charlie sets in motion as he responds to his circumstances.

The audience accompanies Charlie in his daily routines and interactions with those around him. Charlie is discontented and frustrated with the restrictions imposed on him in the community, so he decides to spend an extended amount of time in the bush. As he sets out to visit his mother’s country, his plans change when the police car he has “borrowed” runs out of petrol. In the bush where he stops, Charlie builds a shelter, hunts, cooks, gathers food and paints. This is a time of joy and satisfaction for him. The extended bush scenes reveal to the audience a place of belonging for Charlie.

Charlie’s contentment is cut short when his pre-existing medical condition becomes serious and he needs to be flown on a medical plane to Darwin. In the hospital, Charlie weeps with Fat Albert (Bobby Bununggurr), who is also far from his country and family. Charlie decides to leave hospital before he is officially discharged. In central Darwin, Charlie meets Faith (Jennifer Budukpuduk Gaykamangu) at the automatic teller machine when he is withdrawing money. Faith and Charlie navigate the alcohol laws and Charlie
gets acquainted with a new community—fellow drinkers who are permanently or temporarily homeless and live in the “Long Grass” (parks, beaches, urban bushland) in Darwin. During a dispute with the police, Charlie attacks a police car and is arrested, put on trial and sentenced. He uses his language to address the magistrate. The look of perplexity on the magistrate’s face symbolises the ongoing disconnect between Charlie and the institutions with which he engages.

![Figure 4.4 Charlie visits Fat Albert in the hospital. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.](image)

After serving his sentence, Charlie returns to his community and is re-acquainted with his friends, Old Lulu (Peter Minygululu) and Black Pete (Peter Djigirr), both of whom had visited him in Darwin. For Charlie, returning to his community is a homecoming in the sense that networks of belonging are re-established: he sits and laughs with Old Lulu and Black Pete, and teaches the children to dance. Reconnection is redemptive for Charlie; however, a sense of sadness is present because another friend, Bobby, is in hospital in Darwin and cannot teach the children himself.

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336 For a qualitative study which analyses the experiences and perceptions of people living in the “Long Grass” in Darwin, see Catherine Holmes and Eva McRae-Williams, An Investigation into the Influx of Indigenous ‘visitors’ to Darwin’s Long Grass from Remote NT Communities—Phase 2 (Hobart: National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund, 2008). The film Last Cab to Darwin (Jeremy Sims, 2015) also includes a storyline involving people living in the Long Grass.
Charlie is at the centre of the film’s storytelling. He appears in nearly every scene, and the viewer observes the events of the film primarily from his perspective. Like Ridjimirail in *Ten Canoes*, Charlie is a flawed character who makes decisions that are not always in the best interests of himself or those around him. The viewer is not required to condone all of Charlie’s actions. However, the viewer has insight and information about Charlie that those who have incidental interactions with him, such as the magistrate, do not. As film critic Jane Howard states: “When Charlie is indicted it is for a crime he did indeed commit, but we also see the endlessly complex, unsupportive and disparaging circumstances that lead him to that point.”

Charlie’s sense of humour permeates the film. He does not hesitate to take the opportunities, both inside and outside of the confines of the law, that come his way. For example, helping drug dealers find a place to camp, and then helping the police to find them. The use of humour adds another layer to the film in terms of developing Charlie’s personality and revealing some of the farcical interactions which he has with the police. For example, Charlie and Black Pete go hunting, then tie the shot bullock to the front of Black Pete’s car. When they are pulled over by the police and questioned about whether they have a licence for their rifles, Charlie responds with a quick-witted retort: “Licence? We not going to drive ‘em, only shoot ‘em!”

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The police confiscate Black Pete’s car, the rifles, and absurdly the bullock as well. The bullock is then locked in the police compound. After his initial anger, Charlie quips: “Serve them right, that buffalo stinking up that police station in no time.”

Figure 4.6 Black Pete and Charlie with bullock. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.

Charlie’s emotions of anger, sadness and joy further develop a sense of identification with the viewer. By the end of the film, the audience has been on an emotional journey with Charlie. Film critic David Stratton recounts that Charlie’s Country “brought tears to the eyes of many” in the audience at the Cannes Film Festival. The viewer watches Charlie get frustrated in the community, jump for joy in the bush, cry with Fat Albert in hospital, react angrily to police, long for home from prison, and share his cultural knowledge with pride. Throughout the film, Charlie looks wistfully at the photograph of himself dancing for the Queen at the opening of the Sydney Opera House. This proud memory is recalled by Charlie to counteract his current challenges, whether they be in the community, during the wet season in the bush, or gaol.

339 David Stratton, “Cannes winner evokes the spirit of Bergman,” The Australian, May 27, 2014. At the four public screenings of Charlie’s Country I have attended I have heard audience members reflect on the emotional impact of the film, which often leaves them initially speechless.
340 Film critic David Rooney views the motif of the picture as “effective dramatic shorthand for Gulpilil’s own significant cultural achievements.” Rooney, “‘Charlie’s Country’: Cannes Review.” Gulpilil has danced for Queen Elizabeth in England. This image is an example of drawing on Gulpilil’s life while also fictionalising it.
The final scene shows Charlie smiling and dancing with the boys in the community. The clapsticks, *yiŋaki* (didjeridu), and Yolŋu singing dominate the soundscape. The film officially ends on this high note with Yolŋu culture being celebrated as a source of redemption for Charlie as he connects a significant moment from his past, dancing for the Queen, with his present.

The credits, which play immediately after the final frame of Charlie and the boys dancing, are part of the film’s storytelling. For the final time, Graham Tardif’s piano score leitmotif is played. The leitmotif during the credits mirrors the opening scene, where it is played for the first time. As the credits roll, a close-up of Charlie’s face dominates the screen. He does not look directly at the viewer: instead, his gaze rests softly to his left. The haze of the fire in front of him gives a flickering effect to the credits. Charlie is present with the audience even at this point in the film. He silently sits and listens to the diegetic bird sounds. Charlie’s presence at this point has the effect of leaving the film unresolved. In a similar fashion to the credits of *The Tracker*, where the song *Hope Always* asks the viewer, “Who will carry the burden with us?”, the engagement with viewers of *Charlie’s Country* during the credits leaves the film open-ended. Although the plotline has finished, Charlie remains, and the camera continues to share his perspective—a perspective that is often overlooked in mainstream media and political discourse.

The minor characters in the film function as Charlie’s companions (Old Lulu, Black Pete, Faith) or as people who interact with Charlie at a bureaucratic level (police officers, medical staff, Errol the manager). Black Pete is a steady presence throughout the film, coming alongside Charlie at crucial moments in Charlie’s story, such as the beginning and end of his sojourn in the bush, in the Long Grass, in gaol, around the fire outside Charlie’s humpy, and when Charlie agrees to teach the children to dance. Peter Djigirr also played a significant role off-screen as a co-producer of *Charlie’s Country* alongside Nils Erik Nielson, Rolf de Heer, and Julie Byrne.

The on-screen presence of first-time actor Jennifer Budukpuduk Gaykamangu, who plays Faith, is also noteworthy. From the perspective of mainstream society, to be a “Long Grasser” is a precarious and marginalised existence. Primarily through Charlie’s story, but also through the presence of Faith, the viewer encounters two individuals and gleans a small insight into

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their lives, including Faith’s delivery of one of the film’s explicit indictments of colonial history, where she reminds the audience that the atrocities of the past remain part of the living memory of Aboriginal people. After witnessing their home in the long grass being disrupted by police officers, Faith says: “Why don’t they just shoot us like they used to.” Faith is referring to the indiscriminate killings and massacres such as those depicted in *The Tracker*.

![Figure 4.7 Faith and Charlie. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.](image)

This link between *The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country* provides a subtle acknowledgment that the contemporary relationships between First peoples and the dominant culture have not developed in a vacuum. Charlie navigates cross-cultural relationships in a contemporary contact zone that cannot be divorced from history. In *Charlie’s Country*, the content of the earlier films has been re-framed in the twenty-first century context. The binaries are less stark; however, tensions remain unresolved. Some of the “old ways” remain, and connection with country, kin and language is strong; however, outside of the bush, the world that Charlie navigates looks very different to the pre-contact world of *Ten Canoes*.

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4.3 Image

Ian Jones’s camera work contributes to the film’s emotional potency, immersing the viewer in the various settings and giving insight into Charlie’s world. Lingering long shots of Charlie as he walks through the community and in the bush involve the viewer as participants who watch Charlie’s unhurried pace. Gulpilil’s lithe movements are captured as the camera zooms in on Charlie, or when Charlie walks towards the camera. Long takes are interspersed with close-ups in the bush scenes. The camera does not pause for long, instead gliding around Charlie, conveying the vividness of this setting. The gaol scenes are stylised to signal the passing of time, yet once again the audience remains with Charlie.

Film critic Rowan Righelato connects the on-screen and off-screen worlds when he comments that: “De Heer obviously loves his actor dearly, and allows the camera to dwell for long moments on Gulpilil’s gentle, expressive face.” 343 In all the close-ups of Charlie, there are only two instances when he looks directly at the camera. The first is when his head and beard are being shaved, although even in this scene his gaze is not directly at the audience the whole time. This sequence is one of the most poignant in the film because it shows a moment of powerlessness and reconstruction of identity. As Black Pete says when he visits Charlie, “You don’t look like you.” 344 The second time that Charlie looks directly at the camera is also in prison. Charlie stares out from behind bars and says, “Home. I want to go home.” 345 At this moment, he is talking to himself, but he is also directly addressing the audience.

Charlie’s story unfolds and so too does new life in the bush around him. The sense of parallel, yet interconnected, environments is created through close-ups of plants moving in the wind or buds breaking forth, and the intersection of widescreen shots of the bush within the narrative. Bureaucratic forms of life also continue in the background, coming to the foreground when Charlie directly interacts with them. An example of the joining of the bureaucratic world, the natural world and Charlie’s world is

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344 de Heer and Gulpilil, Charlie’s Country, Scene 29. De Heer also made this comment about Gulpilil when he visited him in gaol in reference to his overall demeanour. See de Heer, “Critics’ Talk #6 Rolf de Heer (Charlie’s Country”).
345 de Heer and Gulpilil, Charlie’s Country, Scene 32.
the opening scene of the film. The sign about alcohol laws indicates that the film is set in an area where alcohol is restricted by law. This opening shot is followed by a widescreen shot of the bush and waterways before the viewer is introduced to Charlie in his humpy.

Towards the end of the film, a widescreen shot of the landscape is inserted between Old Lulu sharing the news that Bobby has been taken to hospital and Charlie sitting with the boys telling them his story. This particular shot of the landscape is accompanied by Charlie’s voice over, “I went from this land . . . Not just me, other boys too. We went far, all the way to Sydney. We danced there, all the boys. Dancing for Queen Elizabeth.” The next shot shows Charlie telling the boys his story; however, the effect of the widescreen shot of the environment with the voice-over is to connect Charlie with “this land.” This connection is one which the audience is already familiar with, having spent a third of the film with Charlie in “this land.”

*Charlie’s Country* utilises the visual component of the cinematic medium to show the viewer certain features of the film’s narrative rather than merely telling them. For example, close-ups of Charlie holding Fat Albert’s hand in hospital illustrate their connectedness in this intimate moment; Charlie walking through the community handing out his money shows the audience a contemporary manifestation of the Yolŋu practice of reciprocity and sharing of resources; and when Charlie and Faith leave the bottle shop in Darwin, bold signage on the shop window advertises a ten per cent discount when purchasing six bottles of wine. This eye-catching advertisement highlights the way that certain forms of alcohol consumption are endorsed, while other forms are heavily monitored, within the Northern Territory.

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347 See the documentary *Another Country* where Gulpilil describes and critiques the sharing of money and other resources within the community at Ramingining. For an anthropological account, which argues that there are social and symbolic aspects to reciprocity as well purely pragmatic ones, see Nicolas Peterson, “Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers,” *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 4 (1993). I note that this title uses outdated language.
Tom Heuzenroeder and Jamie Currie’s sound design captures the sounds from the natural environment, which add to the aural texture of Charlie’s Country. The use of natural sounds is similar to the sound design in Ten Canoes. Diegetic sounds from the environment help to draw the audience into the dense natural landscape. Heuzenroeder and Currie also convey the sparseness of the prison and uncomfortable silence of the hospital environments. The rich sounds of birds and trees are contrasted with the sterile prison environment where sounds such as the razor that shaves Charlie, the laundry bin, the lights switching off, and the dinner plates on the bench, echo in the manufactured and sparse prison environment.

The most striking feature of Charlie’s Country in terms of non-diegetic sound is Tardif’s haunting piano leitmotif which plays at ten different occasions throughout the film. The melancholy music bookends the film, and it also appears at critical moments in Charlie’s story. The music emphasises moments of heightened emotion for Charlie, such as when he is in the bush, when he is in gaol and when Charlie and his friends silently reflect that Bobby is in hospital. Film critic Eddie Cockrell states that “Graham Tardif’s plaintive score emphasizes both the dignity and the anguish of Charlie’s altogether-too-common plight.”

Jason Di Rosso is not so complimentary. Amongst the critical reception of Charlie’s Country, film critic Di Rosso is a lone voice of dissatisfaction, stating that de Heer ultimately fails in the ambitious task of trying to make art as well as entertain. He critiques the “almost documentary-like flatness” of Gulpilil’s character study. “There are few glimpses of an inner thought process unfolding to give depth to the image.” Di Rosso’s assessment does not stand up when the number of poignant images which connect with the viewer is considered. These include Charlie’s movement into the bush, the longing in gaol, and the scene where Charlie weeps in the hospital with Fat Albert. Here he is not only weeping for his friend, he is weeping for the overall circumstances and frustrations that have led to them both being in the hospital, a place where neither of them belongs.
Di Rosso reserves his harshest critique for de Heer's use of Tardif's composition.

Worse still is when the melancholy piano score underlines an emotion, as if the film is afraid that in the silence you might suddenly notice an emptiness. I actually think de Heer hasn’t shown enough faith in his central performer and the collection of beautiful and ugly landscapes he’s drawn together.\footnote{Di Rosso, "Charlie’s Country and the problem with Australian art films."}

By way of response to Di Rosso, the piano score complements, rather than dominates, the film. The musical score highlights the understated dramatic tension inherent in \textit{Charlie’s Country} as Charlie navigates living between two worlds. The “action” of this film mainly consists of witnessing Charlie’s life in both “beautiful and ugly landscapes,” as Di Rosso states. The piano score signifies to the viewer that there is more beneath the surface of these interactions. Furthermore, an emotional and empathetic response is required to bear witness to what is being portrayed on-screen. The extensive bush scenes and the gaol scenes—where the musical score only features momentarily—and the hospital scenes which do not use the score, are a testament that de Heer does not fear the effects of silence or diegetic sound alone. In summary, the musical score enhances, rather than detracts from, Gulpilil’s compelling performance.

\textbf{4.5 The Personal and the Political}

Gulpilil and de Heer wanted to convey a sense of the political, as well as the personal, in the film. As de Heer writes:

I’d taken away with me enough from that one conversation to get a good sense of where David sat with content. David has strong political ideas, passions about race and culture and about the effect on his people of cultural dislocation caused by white colonisation . . . It was in this direction that he wanted to go with the film, make it something political and meaningful, and I was only too happy to oblige.\footnote{Vertigo Productions, "Charlie’s Country Press Kit."}

Two aspects of the political comment in \textit{Charlie’s Country} are discussed below: first, the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, a 2007 federal government policy known as the NT Intervention, or simply the Intervention; and second, the dynamic between “outsiders” and “insiders” in the film.
4.5.1 The Northern Territory Intervention

As film critic Steve Dow notes, “The Northern Territory intervention is ever-present as shading in Charlie’s Country, though the details of the controversial policy are only sketched into the film.”\textsuperscript{354} De Heer referred to the NT Intervention in several interviews after the release of Charlie’s Country, where he made his dislike of the policy clear.\textsuperscript{355} The Charlie’s Country press kit also refers to the NT Intervention. For example, the press kit includes the following:

\underline{One Sentence Synopsis}
With the new invasion of his Aboriginal community in full swing, Charlie decides to make a stand . . . and finds he still has a long way to fall.

\underline{Short Synopsis}
Blackfella Charlie is getting older, and he’s out of sorts. The intervention is making life more difficult on his remote community, what with the proper policing of whitefella laws that don’t generally make much sense, and Charlie’s kin and ken seeming more interested in going along with things than doing anything about it. So Charlie takes off, to live the old way, but in so doing sets off a chain of events in his life that has him return to his community chastened, and somewhat the wiser.\textsuperscript{356}

The Northern Territory National Emergency Response (hereafter the Intervention) has since been renamed and re-packaged as the Stronger Futures legislation, which will remain in effect until 2022.\textsuperscript{357} By way of summary, the Intervention centralised the governance structures of remote communities and instigated reforms in the areas of land management, alcohol management, the justice system, employment, social housing, food security and welfare distribution.\textsuperscript{358}

\textsuperscript{355} For example, Dow, "’Charlie’s Country’ director Rolf de Heer shows his Dutch courage."
\textsuperscript{356} Vertigo Productions, "Charlie’s Country Press Kit." My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{358} The Intervention measures included increased policing, eradication of customary law in bail and sentencing decisions, welfare payments linked to school attendance, restrictions on alcohol and pornography, changes to the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), compulsory income management and modification to local and regional governance structures. See Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, eds., Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia (North Carlton: Arena Publications Association, 2007); Rosie Scott and Anita Heiss, eds., The Intervention: an Anthology (Melbourne: Concerned Australians, 2015).
The terms of reference for the Intervention initially focused on child abuse, family violence and levels of alcohol consumption, as well as a shortage of child protection services in remote Aboriginal communities. The catalyst for the Intervention was the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle “Little Children are Sacred”* inquiry into endemic child sexual abuse in remote communities in the Northern Territory.359 The former Northern Territory magistrate Rex Wild QC and Indigenous health expert and Alyawarre woman Patricia Anderson AO co-chaired the report.360

In June 2007, then Prime Minister John Howard responded to the “Little Children are Sacred” report by declaring a state of emergency that required immediate redress. The report found that Aboriginal community leaders were aware of the problems, had been communicating this for some time, and wanted to work with government bodies to find solutions.361 Education, alcohol consumption, family support services, empowerment of communities, child protection and policing required massive reform, along with a “long-term injection of funds.”362 The primary recommendation was that consultation with communities was essential.

The first recommendation . . . was absolutely clear: no solution should be imposed from above. We regarded it as critically important that governments commit to genuine consultation with Aboriginal people in designing initiatives for their communities. That recommendation was in line with every other study prior to ours.363

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361 Wild and Anderson, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle “Little Children are Sacred”*.  

Many initially welcomed a response from the Federal Government as long overdue. Criticism of the Intervention soon followed due to its implementation and the content of the legislation. The Federal Government implemented only two of the ninety-seven recommendations found in the “Little Children are Sacred” report. Instead of consultation with communities, six hundred army personnel, along with doctors and public servants, were sent in to “stabilise, normalise and exit” Aboriginal communities. Even though the NT Intervention was marketed as a response to child abuse in remote communities, the words “child” or “children” are not mentioned in the legislation. Examples of two areas which elicited concern were: changes to the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 which granted the Commonwealth acquisition of Aboriginal-controlled townships through five-year leases; and the compulsory income management for Aboriginal peoples living in 73 “proscribed areas” which required the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975.

In the immediate aftermath of the introduction of the Intervention, and in the decade following, the terms of reference for the debate concerning the Intervention have extended to include intricate policy issues with ramifications in domestic and international law. In addition, the

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364 This included the “Little Children are Sacred” report writers Rex Wild and Pat Anderson. See Wild, “Unforeseen Circumstances,” 119.
368 See Peter Billings for a discussion of the “special measures” allowance in the Racial Discrimination Act used in the NT Intervention. Peter Billings, “Still paying the price for benign intentions? Contextualising contemporary interventions in the lives of Aboriginal peoples,” Melbourne University Law Review 33 (2009). The “special measures” allowance is designed for policies that will benefit the racial group in question, something which was disputed in the government’s use of this power in the NT Intervention. The Stronger Futures legislation no longer contravenes the Racial Discrimination Act. In addition, Larissa Behrendt argues that the constitutional amendment in 1967 that allowed the Federal Government to legislate for Aboriginal peoples (previously separate Australian states had the jurisdiction for Aboriginal affairs) was made with the assumption that the federal government would act “benevolently” in the interests of Aboriginal people. In relation to aspects of the NT Intervention, this has not necessarily been the case, as attested to by countless Indigenous Elders, community members, representatives from community organisations and Indigenous and non-Indigenous social commentators, academics and health care providers. Behrendt, “The Emergency We Had to Have,” 19.
Intervention led to questions regarding the broader political framework of self-determination, which had been the dominant paradigm in Indigenous Affairs since the 1970s.\textsuperscript{370} In-depth analysis of the issues discussed above can be found elsewhere.\textsuperscript{371} It is necessary to acknowledge that these issues are part of the broader context of the Intervention. Moreover, they are part of the context that de Heer and Gulpilil respond to in their filmmaking.

The NT Intervention was introduced in 2007, a year after Ten Canoes was released. By the time Charlie’s Country was released in 2013, the Intervention had been in operation for six years.\textsuperscript{372} Off-screen, de Heer and Gulpilil made their political convictions clear in the aftermath of the film’s release, by signing the \textit{Statement of Eminent Australians on the continuing damage caused by the discrimination, racism and lack of justice towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, exemplified by the continuation of the Northern Territory Intervention}.\textsuperscript{373} This statement was written in response to three statements issued in 2017 by Elders, leaders, and communities expressing their rejection of the Intervention and Stronger Futures legislation.\textsuperscript{374} The statement of eminent Australians, which de Heer and Gulpilil are signatories to, called on the Federal Government:

\begin{quote}
\textit{to heed the call of Northern Territory Elders for an immediate end to the racism and discrimination of the Intervention}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{371} Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, eds., \textit{Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia} (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press). This volume contains a range of divergent opinions and covers a broad range of topics.


\end{footnotesize}
policies which are an ongoing stain on the Australian nation. It is time that Australian governments respect and negotiate with remote living Indigenous people in good faith, demonstrate proper duty of care to them and allow all First Nations of Australia the right to self-determination.\textsuperscript{375}

The issues raised in this statement issued in 2017—racial discrimination, adequate provision of services and the rights of Indigenous peoples in remote communities—were also raised when the NT Intervention was introduced in 2007. Commentators, including the co-chair of the “Little Children are Sacred” inquiry, Pat Anderson, have challenged the false dichotomy prevalent in public discourse between maintaining the rights of Aboriginal peoples and acting in the best interests of children.

We were divided whether we like it or not, into ‘those in support’ of the Intervention verses ‘those against’, between those who adopted a ‘rights based’ approach or those who focused on the need to protect women and children—as if these were opposing principles.\textsuperscript{376}

Anderson and others have argued that a response was needed which respected the rights of First peoples and was evidence-based and wholistic in its approach. For example, Indigenous academic Larissa Behrendt maintained that a chronic lack of funding to remote communities over the past thirty years is part of the problem of “cyclical and chronic poverty,” which is a determinant in high levels of abuse and violence.\textsuperscript{377} She argues that the Intervention did not take this into account. Furthermore, the Intervention did not adequately address the fact the children are vulnerable to abuse from non-Aboriginal people within the community.\textsuperscript{378}

Overall, official responses from representatives of Christian denominations welcomed the Federal Government’s focus on the needs of remote living Indigenous peoples, while rejecting the intrusive and coercive strategies of the Intervention and the subsequent Stronger Futures legislation.\textsuperscript{379}

\textsuperscript{375} Eminent Australians, “Statement of Eminent Australians on the continuing damage caused by the discrimination, racism and lack of justice towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, exemplified by the continuation of the Northern Territory Intervention.”
\textsuperscript{379} For an example of a comprehensive response from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) of the Uniting Church, see Uniting Church in Australia.
The documentaries, *Intervention: Stories from the Inside* (Vincent Lamberti, 2009), *Our Generation* (Sinem Saban and Damien Curtis, 2010) and *Intervention: Katherine, NT* (Julie Nimmo, 2008), have explored the issues of the Intervention in depth. As documentaries, they seek to “encourage viewers, through the formal arrangement of a work, to reflect on the realities indexed.” The strategies used include testimony from those affected, policy analysis and fact-checking the claims made that led to the Intervention. As well as truth-telling, these documentaries counter the negative representations that many Aboriginal people felt during the media coverage of the Intervention. The documentaries contain testimony from parents, Elders and health care workers which humanises those who come within the Intervention’s reach and provides a platform for their contribution to the debates.

4.5.2 Charlie’s Country and the Northern Territory Intervention

*Charlie’s Country* does not attempt complex policy analysis or detailed personal testimony. Instead, it uses storytelling from Charlie’s perspective to present insight into his situation, which the viewer is invited to witness. Charlie’s experience is constructed within the fictional world of the film; however, there are resonances between his story and the testimony of people directly affected by the Intervention.

Many people who have been directly impacted, have expressed the deep frustration, anger and fear, as well as the mental and physical toll, resulting from living under the Intervention. Reading the testimonies conveys a sense of demoralisation, disempowerment and discrimination. Arrente, Alyawarra Elder Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and Djiniyini Gondarra, a Yolŋu Elder

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and Uniting Church minister, spoke at the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in Geneva in 2011. Kunoth-Monks and Gondarra felt they experienced a more receptive platform for their concerns at the United Nations than in Australia.\footnote{On the 25th May 2011, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, made the following comments: “In my discussions with Aboriginal people, I could sense the deep hurt and pain that they have suffered because of government policies that are imposed on them. I also saw Aboriginal people making great efforts to improve their communities but noted that their efforts are often stifled by inappropriate and inflexible policies that fail to empower the most effective, local solutions. I would urge a fundamental rethink of the measures being taken under the Northern Territory Emergency Response. There should be a major effort to ensure not just consultation with the communities concerned in any future measures, but also their consent and active participation. Such a course of action would be in line with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – of which Australia is a signatory.” Anaya, “Report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people. Situation of indigenous peoples in Australia.”}

Kunoth-Monks describes the terror of having the army enter her community at Utopia with no warning and the vulnerability that she and others felt as their voices were ignored.

Just from this community I have had a tremendous amount of trauma, tremendous amount of soul searching of Aboriginal people feeling that they had done something wrong, but they couldn’t put their finger on what it is that’s wrong. They’ve come to the conclusion that what is wrong is that we were born black into a different culture and that as quickly as possible we’ve got to become as one people — speaking the same language, forgetting about our lands, forgetting even about our customary practices because we were really brutally removed by the Intervention into this new world . . . I feel such pain for our young people, like my granddaughter who, like calves branded with an iron, have been singled out as second-class citizens when they are trying to find their place in the world and build a bright future.\footnote{Rosalie Kunoth Monks, “Reflections on the Intervention,” in The Intervention: an Anthology, ed. Anita Heiss and Rosie Scott (Melbourne: Concerned Australians, 2016), 19.}

This sense of powerlessness, despair and the racialised pressure to conform that Kunoth-Monks refers to is depicted in Charlie’s Country. First Nations peoples repeatedly stated that they felt their voices were completely disregarded. Moreover, as Kunoth-Monks states, identity and indigeneity have both political and personal implications for First peoples within a settler state. The fragility of Charlie’s identity is seen when the doctor calls him a foreigner. Charlie’s self-identification is multifaceted and an act of survivance.\footnote{Survivance is a term from Critical Indigenous Studies first used in this context by Gerald Vizenor. It refers to Indigenous self-expression and the use of Indigenous epistemologies that nurture Indigenous life and proclaim active Indigenous presence in the world.} His statements about his identity include calling himself a
hunter, being connected to country through his birth and his mother and also being a dancer for the Queen.

While not referring to the Intervention explicitly, de Heer and Gulpilil’s decision to make Charlie’s life the centre of the film aligns the audience with Charlie’s perspective. The audience can see where Charlie can exercise agency and where his agency is limited as part of his daily reality. By keeping our focus on Charlie, we see how his language, connection with country and culture are part of his identity as a First Nations person. As Kunoth-Monks has remarked: “Take away from me my language, take away from me my responsibilities for the land, take away from me my land and I am nothing. I will become a carbon copy of a different culture.” This sentiment is performed on-screen through Charlie’s consistent refrain, “It’s my land,” and in the scenes where he communes with animal and plant life, mourns the ancestors, weeps with Fat Albert in hospital and in the final scene where he dances with the children.

The politics of land and access to food were part of the Intervention. Charlie’s decision to “go bush” removes him from his dependency on welfare and “white man junk food.” The community doctor chastises Charlie for “not looking after himself—you need to eat better,” to which Charlie replies, “like that white man junk food in the shop?” What Charlie really needs is a dentist: his false teeth do not fit, and he is “starving.” A vignette from the Intervention resonates with this specific example of Charlie’s plight, broadening the comment that the film is making regarding the incongruence of services in remote communities:

There’s a woman arguing with the health team outside the dilapidated community centre. She knows what her kid needs. A dentist. Fill the tooth or take the damned thing out. Kid can’t eat, can’t sleep. But we didn’t bring a dentist and the doctor’s not here to make that kind of medical check. The woman turns away in disgust, her kid cups his jaw and follows her. His feet are red with dust.

The viewer also witnesses some of the complexity of Charlie’s situation and his own sense of disempowerment, along with his determination to reconnect with his mother’s country. His experience in the bush is an integral part of the film. The unhurried nature of this section emphasises its

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386 de Heer and Gulpilil, Charlie’s Country, Scene 11.
388 Due to running out of petrol, Charlie does not actually get to his mother’s country.
significance, as Charlie’s identity is related to the bush. As he says to the doctor: “They didn’t find me in the bush, I was born in the bush!” In the bush, Charlie can sustain himself through his agency. However, he cannot sustain this isolated existence indefinitely. The paintings on the cave, like the references to his ancestors, locate Charlie within a much broader context than his daily reality. However, it is the quotidian, both in the community and in the bush when the wet season starts, that confronts him with the challenge of living between two different cultures.

4.5.3 Insiders and Outsiders

*Charlie’s Country* positions the viewer to see primarily from Charlie’s perspective. However, the Fourth Cinema camera also provides insight into the lives of other residents in the community, minor characters who I am calling “insiders,” such as Charlie’s friends, and “outsiders”—non-Yolŋu people who have come to the community from elsewhere for a fixed amount of time.

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De Heer includes a police officer (Jamie Gulpilil) and a health worker (Gladys Womati), both of whom are Aboriginal, in the film. This decision resists essentialised depictions of identities within the community, although neither of these professionals speaks, while their white counterparts do. The outsiders to the community are mostly convivial in their interactions with Charlie and see themselves as doing a job for a specific period.

As the anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw has argued, “outsiders” in communities are an under-researched group. And yet “outsiders” are an undeniable part of remote communities as well as the embodiment of “the state” in remote settings.

Teachers and nurses, government employees, anthropologists and consultants travel long distances away from their own homes to understand or provide services for those who dwell there. These visitors are part of a systematic relationship between the nation and Indigenous people. What all these visitors have in common and what we are actually doing there need far greater attention.

Cowlishaw’s argument hinges on the notion that “the state” and “the nation” are embodied in the concrete “face-to-face” encounters between the permanent residents of the community and visitors on government contracts. Cowlishaw’s observations resonate with my experiences as an “outsider” who is part of the community for a set period of time. When watching the film, I identify with both the “outsiders” due to my experience and with Charlie due to his perspective dominating the film.

Following Cowlishaw, the interactions between “insiders” and “outsiders” contain an undeniable political element. However, the political element here is not limited to actions of “the state,” as described above in the NT Intervention legislation. Instead, Charlie’s Country contains what Cowlishaw calls an “ethnographic focus on everyday interactions.” Interactions between “insiders” and “outsiders” can be used to “analyse and theorise the madness in remote communities.” Charlie’s frequent interactions with the police, where both his bullock and his hunting spear are confiscated, are examples of the “madness” to which Cowlishaw refers.

392 Cowlishaw, “Helping anthropologists, still,” 56.
393 Cowlishaw, “Helping anthropologists, still,” 56.
The police officer Luke is the “outsider” with the most substantial on-screen presence and interaction with Charlie. A sense of intimacy is communicated through their jovial dialogue, for example, “You white bastard!”, “You black bastard!” At the same time, the police station fence and the police car act as physical boundaries which separate them and reinforce the differentiation in power between the two. However, these boundaries are fluid. For example, in the scene where Charlie tracks the drug dealers at Luke’s request, Charlie is sitting between Luke and another officer. Within this proximity, Luke speaks as if Charlie is not there:

Nup, I don’t really like this posting too much. I mean the people are nice, like good old Charlie here. It’s just it’s isolated. It’s remote. I’m one for the big city you know PC. I like the high life.

This comment is followed by a racist comment “damn you blackfellas can be smart when you want to be.” In this context, Charlie demonstrates his creative agency by ingratiating himself with the police while also being paid in kind by the drug dealers.

Another dimension of the film is Charlie’s humorous subversion of non-Indigenous perceptions of Indigenous identity. Luke recruits Charlie to find the drug dealers. He then falls for Charlie’s supposed “tracking” skills. In a later scene, the attack on the police car and the fact that Charlie had previously stolen a car from the police station in the community fuels Luke’s anger. Luke reveals his racist attitude that has developed while working in remote and urban areas:

I should have hunted you down when you stole the car . . . I’ve learned my lesson you know. You don’t go soft on a blackfella, they take advantage of you.

Film critic Byrnes notes the change in Luke throughout the film. He observes that: “The intervention is taking a toll on everyone, not just the blackfellas.” The dialogue between Charlie and Luke at the Long Grass when Charlie is arrested reinforces their positions as the enforcer and the subject of the law. For Charlie, his interactions with Luke are within the

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Footnotes:

394 de Heer and Gulpilil, Charlie’s Country, Scene 2.
395 de Heer and Gulpilil, Charlie’s Country, Scene 8.
396 This scene provides an intertextual reference with The Tracker, where the Tracker pretends to be “taken by spirits” thereby allowing the Fugitive to gain ground.
397 de Heer and Gulpilil, Charlie’s Country, Scene 26.
398 Byrnes, “Charlie’s Country review: Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil produce a work for the ages.” The term “blackfella” is used colloquially in Australian English, especially in the Northern Territory. It is not necessarily a derogatory or offensive term, although it can be used in this way.
broader context of bureaucratic control on his land. After Luke apologises for hitting Charlie, the dialogue continues:

**Luke:** You know you can’t just sit in the long grass all day and call it the old ways. Times have changed.

**Charlie:** No, they haven’t! You’re still trying to change our culture into your bastard culture.\(^{399}\)

The court scene continues this sense of incongruence as Charlie addresses the judge in his language before translating it into English. Charlie is found guilty and sentenced for the attack on the police car.

The relationships which have any depth or continuity for Charlie are with Bobby, Black Pete and Old Lulu—fellow “insiders.” Misunderstanding and ambivalence characterise his relationships with outsiders. *Charlie’s Country* presents a vision of connection to country that is ongoing. Relationships between First and Second peoples contain a mixture of hostility, ambiguity, and cordiality. The documentaries which feature as part of the “country suite” (*Still Our Country* and *Another Country*) as well as *Twelve Canoes* provide additional insight into the way that Yolgnu people perceive themselves, as well as their invitation to be known by “outsiders” on their own terms.\(^{400}\) To be known and understood on his own terms is essentially Charlie’s message to his friends, the bureaucrats with whom he interacts, and the viewer.

### 4.6 Conclusion

*Charlie’s Country* brings viewers of the Accidental Trilogy into the present. Charlie’s presence anchors the film as we follow him on his country and beyond. In the world of the films, this is the same country that Charlie’s ancestors walked in *Ten Canoes*. The film is thus a meditation on continuity and discontinuity for Yolgnu people. It is also an insight into relationality between First and Second peoples that encompasses the personal and the political. This chapter concludes Part One of this thesis.


\(^{400}\) *Twelve Canoes* opens with the words: “We are the first people of our land. These are some of our stories from where we have lived so long. We welcome you to know about us, about our culture, this way. The Yolngu people of Ramingining.”
Part 2: Theology in Dialogue with the work of Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil

Introduction to Part 2:

Part 1 (chapters 2, 3 and 4) provided analysis of the on-screen components, production histories and reception of *Ten Canoes*, *The Tracker* and *Charlie's Country*. The analysis highlighted vital themes such as the spiritual connection between Yolŋu people and their land; the impact of colonial violence; and the complex nature of contact zones during colonialism and its aftermath. It also drew attention to the intercultural aspects of each film’s production history and critical reception. The themes expounded upon and embodied by de Heer and Gulpilil in the Accidental Trilogy are the point of departure for the theological dialogue that takes place in Part 2.

Willie James Jennings is the main interlocutor for the theological dialogue that takes place in chapters 5, 6 and 7. As demonstrated in chapter 5, he is an ideal conversation partner because his theology interacts with the themes raised by de Heer and Gulpilil in the Accidental Trilogy. Chapter 6 develops Jennings’ insights into the distorted relationality advanced in colonialism and examines possible alternatives arising from Jennings' theological insights in conversation with the Accidental Trilogy and Indigenous theologians. Chapter 7 expands upon the possibilities for reimagining the doctrine of creation in a decolonizing key. This conversation incorporates the Accidental Trilogy, Jennings and Indigenous theologians such as Denise Champion and Terry LeBlanc.
Chapter 5: Willie Jennings and the Accidental Trilogy

The past is always present. The past is always with us. We are all defined by our past.

—Gary Foley
“Duplicity and Deceit: Rudd’s Apology to the Stolen Generations”

5.1. Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Willie Jennings and to provide a rationale for his role as the primary interlocutor in this thesis. Jennings has been chosen because his theology resonates with the themes and issues raised by the Accidental Trilogy. At the same time, dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy contextualises Jennings’ work in an Australian setting. This
process of contextualisation raises specific questions which are discussed towards the end of this chapter (5.5).

Theological engagement with the Accidental Trilogy requires explicit acknowledgement of colonial displacement and violence towards Indigenous peoples. A commitment to Indigenous accounts of life and land is also essential. This chapter demonstrates how Jennings’ theology fulfils these criteria. Jennings draws on the work of Indigenous theorists and the “view from the shore,” to reiterate Barclay’s stated aim of Fourth Cinema. At the same time, Jennings unmasks and critiques the “view from the ship,” as colonial agents entered the lands of others. Importantly, he provides a theological account of the origins of race by telling the story of the displacement of Indigenous peoples from their lands—a crucial point of connection with the Accidental Trilogy.

Jennings’ broad aim is to diagnose why Christianity in the West operates with a distorted vision of relating, both between peoples and between people and the rest of creation. His theological account diagnoses the deep structural, historical and theological issues that have led to a deficient theological imagination regarding life together. He then employs the Christian doctrines of creation and the incarnation, along with the Jewish-Gentile relational matrix, to construct an ecclesial vision of reciprocal belonging and connection between peoples. For those of us living in settler-colonial states, such as Australia, the first step towards communion between peoples is diagnosing the situation through truth-telling—a central aim of both the filmmakers and Jennings.

Following others who have interacted with Jennings’ work, I engage with it through the lenses of theological revisionism and theological construction.401 Theological revisionism, when applied to the works of Jennings, refers to his interrogation of the theology used at particular historical moments in order to challenge prevailing interpretations. For example, in his assessment of colonial history, Jennings argues that Christian theology was used to displace Indigenous peoples and to foster racial categorisation. This differs from a narrative that ignores or romanticises the influence of Christianity in colonialism and the role that Christianity played in the construction of racial

hierarchies. Jennings’ theological construction becomes evident as he outlines what is needed to overcome our inherited patterns of relating to each other and the rest of creation.

Section 5.2 begins by situating Jennings’ work and describing his background. Key themes in Jennings’ theological revisionism that are pertinent to the Accidental Trilogy are discussed in 5.3. Section 5.4 outlines Jennings’ constructive theology and how this engages with the Accidental Trilogy. Some of the questions and limitations of using Jennings’ work in the context of this thesis are then addressed (5.5). This chapter sets the scene for chapters 6 and 7, which further develop “creative crossings” between Jennings and the Accidental Trilogy in two particular areas: relationships between peoples and relationship with the entire creation.402

5.2 Situating Willie Jennings

Willie James Jennings (b. 1961) was appointed to the role of Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School in 2015. From 1990 to 2015 he taught theology and black church studies at Duke University Divinity School. Jennings also completed his doctoral studies in theology and ethics at Duke. His dissertation was titled, _Reclaiming the Creature: Anthropological Vision in the Thought of Athanasius of Alexandria and Karl Barth_. His other degrees were obtained from Calvin College, Grand Rapids (B.A. in Religion and Theology) and Fuller Theological Seminary (M. Div). He is also an ordained Baptist minister.

Jennings’ academic interests and pastoral outlook are evident in his vast body of work.403 His first monograph, _The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race_, was published in 2010 and received widespread critical acclaim.404 _The Christian Imagination_ provides a comprehensive account of the connection between Christian theology, racial oppression and the colonial practice of land theft. Jennings’ second monograph is a

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402 As outlined in chapter 1, “creative crossings” is the methodology used by Sison which I am adapting. Sison, _Screening Schillebeeckx_.

403 Along with two monographs, Jennings has written numerous book chapters and articles in academic publications. He is a regular speaker at college campuses, seminaries and churches and is a contributor to the website Religion Dispatches, a site for critical writing on the intersection between religion, politics and culture for a general readership. These pieces address the issues of faith, justice, race relations, politics, the economy, and the role of Christians in the public sphere.

theological commentary on the Book of Acts. His commentary highlights the radical social transformations that the ministry of Jesus inaugurates, offering unique insight into the biblical text. Jennings is currently working on a third monograph provisionally entitled *Unfolding the World: Recasting a Christian Doctrine of Creation.*

Jennings has been specifically linked with J. Kameron Carter and Brian Bantum, two other “theologians of race” from the “Duke School.” Individually and together, their work has been celebrated as powerful “theological revisionism” that illuminates ways in which “racist ideations have marred western theology.” The Christian doctrine of supersessionism, along with antisemitism, are central to Carter and Jennings’ construction of racial imagination. Both Carter and Jennings examine the negative impact of supersessionist thinking upon Christian self-understanding and relationality with Jews, as well as other peoples who have been racialised through contact with the West. While Carter looks to the influence of Gnosticism and then to the Enlightenment to show the racial calculus at work, Jennings examines the beginnings of modern colonialism heralded by the “Age of Discovery” in the fifteenth century. Both have acknowledged the influence of the other on their work.

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Walter Mignolo is another colleague from Jennings’ time at Duke University with whom he had significant interactions. Mignolo, a highly influential Argentinian semiotician, has written extensively on global colonialisms, the geopolitics of knowledge production, and strategies for decolonial thinking. Jennings acknowledges Mignolo, and other members of the “De-colonial Cosmopolitanism workshop,” for their feedback on *The Christian Imagination*. Jennings also acknowledges the legacy of stalwarts of black liberation theology such as James H. Cone, whom Jennings credits with sparking his desire to be a theologian. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the fact that Jennings also cites Native American theorists such as Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) as informing his thinking. Furthermore, he laments the fact that more Christians theologians are not familiar with Deloria’s important “intellectual testimony.” The contribution of African-American women writers such as bell hooks, Toni Morrison and the theologian Delores Williams can also be seen in Jennings’ work.

Jennings demonstrates flexibility in his use of Western theological sources to both critique the Western tradition (as shown in his case studies in *The Christian Imagination*) and to further his aims. A recent example of the latter is a lecture titled: *Another Knowledge of God is Possible: Barth Among Post-Colonial Epistemologists*. In this lecture Jennings uses the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth in order to amplify Indigenous epistemology and resist the mastery of Western hegemony. He achieved this through creative use of Barth’s conclusions regarding the futility of mastering knowledge of God, alongside a nuanced reading of Barth’s vision of totality in both the political and theological spheres.

The purpose of providing a summary of scholars that Jennings draws on is to show that he is influenced by diverse perspectives inside and outside of theology. As he reads these voices in conversation with one another, Jennings remains acutely aware of the power dynamics that affect the way

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412 For a comprehensive account of Mignolo’s work, see http://waltermignolo.com/
414 Jennings refers to the influence of both Cone and Mignolo in this lecture, Willie James Jennings, “Another Knowledge of God is Possible: Barth Among Post-Colonial Epistemologists” (2018 Annual Karl Barth Conference, Princeton Theological Seminary 2018).
417 Jennings, “Another Knowledge of God is Possible: Barth Among Post-Colonial Epistemologists”.
each voice is received. For example, he finds the maxim that “we all do theology from a particular place or social location” misses the point.418 As liberation theologies demonstrate, power dynamics dictate which voices are privileged over others—a notion which Jennings argues has not been properly integrated into mainstream theological thought. This insight makes Jennings a productive conversation partner for Fourth Cinema, which uses the medium of film to privilege Indigenous knowledge, experience, perspectives and storytelling techniques.

As well as influences from inside the academy, Jennings’ work is informed by his life experience. In the introduction to The Christian Imagination, Jennings outlines his motivations for addressing the issues of race, belonging and connection inherent in Christianity. He begins by describing his childhood. As the last of eleven children, he was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan after his parents, Ivory and Mary Jennings, migrated from the South to the North. Jennings describes in intimate terms his parents’ Christian faith:

Foremost was Jesus. Ivory and Mary loved Jesus. To say they were devout Christians is simply too pale a descriptor. A far more accurate characterization would be, “There were Ivory, Mary, and Jesus.” Woven into the fabric of their lives was the God-man Jesus, who, rather than simply serving as an indicator of their orthodoxy, became the very shape of their stories . . . They knew the Bible, but, far more important, they knew the world through the Bible.419

Jennings also recounts the significance of their garden and the contradictions that came with their “intimate relationship” with the land.420 Tending to the earth represented both the history of agricultural slave labour where a distorted, false intimacy with the land was fostered, as well as the freedom “to be themselves” in their garden.421 Jennings captures this latter reality as he describes his mother moving, “through the garden like it was an extension of her body.”422 The garden was a place for nurturing vegetables, family history and relationships as the following quotation demonstrates:

While in her garden, momma loved to talk about the Native American side of the family, her mother looking and her grandmother being part Cherokee. She had irrefutable evidence for this native lineage, but I could rarely follow all the names,

418 Jennings, “Another Knowledge of God is Possible: Barth Among Post-Colonial Epistemologists”.
places, and events, especially as I was more content with observing how she worked the plants and the dirt with such brilliant efficiency. I was more interested in the corn, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, blackberries, carrots, and other gifts she brought forth from the earth.  

It is in this setting of intimacy and connectedness that Jennings introduces the first of two autobiographical stories of Christian disconnection. One day two white missionaries entered the garden and invited the Jennings family to the First Christian Reformed Church, less than 200 metres from the Jennings' family home. Jennings was aware of the missionaries' church—he regularly played basketball in their car park. However, it was clear that he was not known to the missionaries. The irony of this situation, along with the formality of the missionaries' speech and manner, was that the Jennings family were stalwarts of their local church. This encounter led Jennings to ask the question: what had led to this breakdown in knowing one another?

The second story which Jennings tells relates to his time as a student at Calvin College. He compares the formality of classroom interactions with the response he received after preaching a sermon in the chapel. After his sermon, he was greeted with enthusiastic encouragement, warm embraces and sincere gratitude. These interactions stood out because they contrasted so starkly with the rest of his theological education. The moment after chapel pointed to an “ancient . . . sense of connection and belonging and a freedom to claim, to embrace, to make familiar one who is not.”  

The problem that Jennings identifies is that these moments of embrace and their associated “imaginative capacity to redefine the social” are simply that—moments. It is the “episodic character” of this response amongst Christians that indicates that something is “deeply, painfully, amiss.”

5.3 Jennings’ Theological Revisionism

Using these personal accounts as his starting point, Jennings then launches into the task at hand: to attempt to answer the question of why Christian embodiment in the West is often performed with a truncated sense of belonging and connection. Moreover, Christian discipleship is often
disconnected from the realities of space and place which determine so much of how common life is actually lived.

Addressing this situation of relational deficit involves two interrelated moves: diagnosing what went wrong; and reimagining the propensity for “joining” within Christianity. For Jennings, the incarnation is a crucial foundation for the Christian capacity for communion:

... the central trajectory of the incarnate life of the Son of God, who took on the life of a creature, a life of joining, belonging, connection, and intimacy.427

The “original trajectory for intimacy” became distorted as Christianity entered the lands of others on an unprecedented scale with unparalleled power.428 As is discussed throughout this chapter, Jennings argues that the historical and theological circumstances that allowed “modern Christianity’s diseased social imagination” to take hold can be traced back to the fifteenth century.429

Jennings uses the headings of “Displacement,” “Translation,” and “Intimacy” to uncover the distorted forms of relationality that Christian nations brought to the lands they conquered. In this chapter and chapters 6 and 7, the focus is on “displacement” and “intimacy” because this is a natural trajectory from the film analysis in Part 1. Intimacy is used in the way that Jennings does, that is, “joining” that is characterised by belonging, connection, invitation and reciprocity.430

With regard to the issue of “translation,” the Accidental Trilogy does provide a number of insights into language translation, notably the use of Indigenous languages in feature films. However, a thorough investigation of language translation within Australian contexts that engages with Jennings’ particular arguments is beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, he argues that translation furthered the colonial project by bringing Indigenous languages into colonial linguistic and literary space.431 However, as the documentary The Song Keepers (Naina Sen, 2017) demonstrates, the historical and contemporary issues surrounding translation by the church and government organisations are complex and contain a varied legacy.432 While historically

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431 See chapters 3 and 4 in The Christian Imagination.
432 Episode 4 in the documentary series First Australians (Rachel Perkins, 2008) further explores the history of translation by missionaries in Central Australia. For an account of
language translation contributed to the destruction of Indigenous cultures as new belief systems were introduced, language translation also gave access to Western systems of power to try to effect change (something that Jennings acknowledges). Furthermore, the translation work of missionaries has provided a rich legacy for cultural and language revitalisation in the present. These specific issues of translation are not elaborated upon further with two exceptions. First the filmmakers’ choices regarding translation and the impact that these decisions have on the viewer who is not fluent in the Indigenous language used on-screen and second the political implications of making a film using Yolŋu languages (for example see p.49).

The following sections delve more deeply into aspects of Jennings’ theological revisionism, and indicate how this is conducive for dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy, under the following four sub-headings: Theological Method (5.3.1); The Doctrine of Discovery: Christianity and Colonialism (5.3.2); Displacement: Race and Whiteness (5.3.3); and Gentile Forgetfulness: Supersessionism and Colonialism (5.3.4).

5.3.1 Theological Method

In The Christian Imagination Jennings provides a comprehensive account of the way that distorted Christian social imagination informed colonial expansion in the Americas, Asia, Oceania and Africa. Jennings presents his readers with four case studies drawn from a range of temporal and spatial locations: Gomes Eanes de Azurara (1410–1474), hereafter Zurara, a Portuguese royal biographer; José de Acosta Porres (1540–1600), hereafter Acosta, a Spanish Jesuit missionary and theologian based in Peru; John William Colenso (1814–1833), an English, Anglican bishop and missionary in South Africa; and Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), a former slave from West Africa who became an abolitionist.

Comparing himself to a film director who focuses on individual characters and their vantage points, Jennings describes his method as “theological

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433 For example: The Yirrkala Bark Petitions, written in Yolŋu Matha and English, were sent to the Parliament in August 1963. See Galarrwuy Yunupingu, ed., Our Land is Our Life: Land Rights—Past, Present and Future (St Luca: University of Queensland Press, 1997).

434 I acknowledge that this geographic terminology is problematic due to its origins in European colonial discourse rather than Indigenous naming.
In other words, Jennings examines the theology that informed the Christian convictions of four historical figures. He then demonstrates how their thoughts and actions illustrate the complexities, contradictions and hubris of the colonial mindset in New World contexts. Through these four distinct examples of Christian social performance, he draws a number of theo-political conclusions. His analysis leads to one overarching conclusion: the Christianity that was transported to the New World throughout the colonial period ignored the need to join with others through intercultural connection and belonging. Instead, Christianity was intertwined with broader colonial economic and social agendas.

Jennings’ reference to the role of a director as an analogy for his theological method is apt when considering the context of my thesis on film and theology. Moreover, several parallels between Jennings’ case studies and my research can be identified. For example, in the study of Colenso, Jennings argues that Colenso’s relationship with the Zulu Bible translators with whom he worked dramatically changed his understanding of the impact of colonialism on the Indigenous peoples in Natal. Colenso’s awakening meant that he undertook political action alongside his work in Bible translation. Conversely, the case study of Equiano provides testimony from someone who has been colonised and has to work for liberation within the constraints placed upon him. My case study of de Heer and Gulpilil also provides perspectives from two sides of the colonial experience. The personal and professional relationship of de Heer and Gulpilil exemplifies a particular kind of social performance in contemporary Australia. In chapter 6, I develop this notion concerning de Heer and Gulpilil’s social performance, by arguing that there are theological implications that can be gleaned from a close reading of their partnership.

Elsewhere, Jennings has reflected explicitly on the relationship between the arts and theology. In particular, he has explored how this relationship can be a place for truth-telling and prophetic imagination that calls forth lives joined together in equitable, just and hopeful ways. Jennings situates himself

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435 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 10. De Heer is a good example of Jennings’ description of what a director does. There is a clear sense that he uses certain characters and their vantage points to undertake his own analysis of social performance prior to, during, and in the aftermath of colonisation.

as a Christian theologian and “as a great lover of music, especially Jazz.”

His discussion of the arts and the prophetic are therefore located within a Christian framework. As such, he describes the Spirit of God as the one who works “in and through bodies” in both the artistic and prophetic modes, to give voice to the “depths of divine and human life.”

The arts, according to Jennings, engage the senses and also bear witness to both divine and human life. In addition, the arts attune our senses to sites of suffering and injustice. The prophetic mode of life “sees what is going on and refuses to remain silent about what is seen and known.”

Together, the prophetic and the artistic modes extend “the range and volume of what must be said” and “call us to action and invite us to transformation.” For Jennings, the prophetic and the artistic are inseparable. They fulfil the same function and operate in the same way. In other words, they are the mode by which the Spirit of God calls us towards life and away from death. The Accidental Trilogy draws audiences into the “depths of human life.” Throughout this chapter and the ones to follow I argue that there are also traces of “the depths of the divine life” within the films. Divine life is seen through relationality that enacts “joining” based on truth-telling, belonging and connection. Divine life is also experienced by reconnecting with land and animals through a theology of creation that revels in creaturely existence.

5.3.2 The Doctrine of Discovery: Christianity and Colonialism

Jennings’ theological revisionism provides a lens to analyse the rupture that occurred as Indigenous nations came into contact with British colonial agents—a rupture that is powerfully performed in the Accidental Trilogy. His aim in demonstrating that Christianity was entangled in colonial structures of dominance is to make it clear that Christians in the West will not be able to imagine or embody new patterns of relating until we acknowledge the deformed patterns of relating that we have inherited.

Jennings provides detailed descriptions of the way that Christian theology and polity were inseparable from colonial expansion. A particularly disturbing example is the recount by Portuguese Royal biographer, Zurara. At dawn on
August 8, 1444, spectators assembled to watch the carefully orchestrated scene of human cargo being auctioned. The human cargo consisted of 235 children, women and men who came from parts of Africa previously unvisited by the Portuguese.\footnote{Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 18.} Zurara recorded the Christian ritual that took place as Prince Henry, “following his deepest Christian instincts,” ordered that a tithe be given to God through the church.\footnote{Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 16.} “Two black boys were given, one to the principal church in Lagos and another to the Franciscan convent on Cape Saint Vincent.”\footnote{Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 16.} This act of praise and thanksgiving to God for granting success to Portugal’s maritime power also served to reiterate Prince Henry’s “royal rhetoric” that connected the salvation of souls with this new economic venture.\footnote{Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 16.} Individual accounts such as this one are examples of the pervasive Christian-colonial mindset at play. As Jennings demonstrates, the “colonial moment” cannot be understood without taking into account its Christian underpinnings.

Jennings uses the term “colonial moment” as shorthand for European expansion and colonialism, beginning in the late fifteenth century and continuing into the twentieth century. Geographically it includes initial contact in the African continent and the Americas, and then in Oceania, the Middle East and Asia.\footnote{For Jennings’ use of the term “colonial moment,” see Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 64, 83, 95, 155, 254.; Jennings, “Race and the Educated Imagination,” 61.; Willie James Jennings, “Reading Bodies from Hidden Places: Reflections on Disability in the Christian Tradition,” \textit{Journal of Religion, Disability & Health} 17, no. 3 (2013): 297.} The histories and results of conquest and colonisation of people and place varied due to the policies and strategies employed in different locations at different times. His purpose in using this term is not to eliminate difference. Rather it is to highlight the profound disruption which occurred as Europeans entered the lands of Indigenous peoples and inscribed their Old World worldview onto the New World.\footnote{Walter D. Mignolo, whose work Jennings draws upon, summarises European epistemic and spatial hegemony as follows: “However, during the period of 1500 to 2000, one local history, that of Western civilisation, built itself as the point of arrival and owner of human history . . . The colonization of time went hand in hand with the colonization of space.” Walter D Mignolo, \textit{Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), x–xiii.} The colonial moment terminology allows Jennings to make his arguments across temporal and spatial settings, describing and diagnosing attitudes and actions, including the development of racial hierarchies, which were formed and informed by colonisation.\footnote{The term colonial moment is not unique to Jennings. For example, Jeffrey W. Westover, \textit{The Colonial Moment: Discoveries and Settlements in Modern American Poetry} (DeKalb:}
demonstrate the way colonialism was experienced in certain places in the lives of individuals. The move between the use of theory and case studies creates a dialectic between the particular and the universal within Jennings’ depiction of European/Christian colonialism to further his aim of mapping Christian social performance. Throughout the following chapters, the terms colonial moment, colonial agenda and colonial project are used interchangeably to refer to modes of operation or patterns of thought that were present during the colonisation of Indigenous lands by European nations.

As others have argued, a vital aspect of the colonial project is what has come to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery, also called the Doctrine of Christian Discovery. During the fifteenth century, it became the legal and moral basis for European colonial expansion, land acquisition and slavery.
While Jennings does not use the term Doctrine of Discovery, he explores in detail the Christian foundations for colonial expansion that led to its development. A well-known example is the 1455 papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* (repeating in part the edicts in *Dum diversas*, 1452) issued by Pope Nicholas V, which granted King Alfonso of Portugal the right to possess land and:

> To invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery . . .

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, due to the success of Christopher Columbus’s explorations, the Spanish sovereigns sought “official and legal recognition for their claim to these new lands.” This recognition came via Pope Alexander VI who issued four papal bulls in 1493 confirming Spain’s title to the newly discovered mainlands and islands. In *Inter caetera* II, the Pope, claiming the authority of God, essentially divided the world in two from the North Pole to the South Pole “the said line to be distant one hundred leagues towards the west and south from any of the islands commonly known as the Azores and Cape Verde.” All that was west of the line was Spain’s legal dominion, and all that was east of the line was Portugal’s. This allocation of land was on the proviso that no other “Christian king or prince” was in possession of the said mainland or island that had just been “discovered.”

References to the inhabitants of the lands include that they are “barbarous nations [to] be overthrown” and that they are to be brought into the Catholic faith.

> Wherefore, as becomes Catholic kings and princes, after earnest consideration of all matters, especially of the rise and spread of the Catholic faith, as was the fashion of your ancestors, kings of renowned memory, you have purposed with the favor of divine clemency to bring under your sway the said

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454 *Inter caetera* May 3, 1493; *Eximiae devotionis* May 3, 1493; *Inter caetera* II May 4, 1493. These three bulls are called the Bulls of Donation. *Dudum siquidem* September 26, 1493 supplemented *Inter caetera* II. These treaties are reproduced in Latin and English in Davenport, *European Treaties*, 56–63; 64–70; 71–78 and 79–83. Prior to Columbus’s explorations, Portugal and Spain had sought papal approval for their colonial territories on the African coast on the basis that they were spreading Christianity. The bull *Romanus Pontifex*, cited above, issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1455, granted Portuguese rule over all lands south of Cape Bojador in Africa. Portugal later used *Romanus Pontifex* as the basis for claims to lands in the New World. Spain used *Inter caetera* II to counter Portugal’s claim.

455 *Inter caetera* II in Davenport, *European Treaties*, 77.

456 *Inter caetera* II in Davenport, *European Treaties*, 77.
mainlands and islands with their residents and inhabitants and to bring them to the Catholic faith.\textsuperscript{457}

Within the \textit{realpolitik} of the centuries following 1493, European states established sovereignty in the lands they acquired using principles extrapolated from the papal bulls such as \textit{Inter caetera II}. For example, France and England, not wanting to be left out of the wealth that went hand in hand with the exploration of the New World, followed the principle that a state could claim for itself land they had discovered which was not in the possession of another Christian state.\textsuperscript{458} Furthermore, the English Crown “utilized Christianity as its moral and ethical rationale to justify its claims to lands in the new world.”\textsuperscript{459} In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Doctrine of Discovery took on an increasingly secular meaning in rulings such as \textit{Johnson vs MacIntosh 1823}. This case created the legal precedent in the United States that radical title, also known as sovereignty, was granted to the European power who “discovered” the land. In his ruling, Chief Justice Marshall affirmed that the “Indians” did have the right to occupy their land; however, the discovering European power had the right to “acquire” the land from “the natives” through “purchase or by conquest.”\textsuperscript{460}

In the Australian colonies, “discovery,” and the doctrine of \textit{terra nullius} (“nobody’s land”) formed the legal basis of British sovereignty. Under international law, if land was deemed to be uninhabited, it could be “settled” rather than possessed through conquest or a treaty process.\textsuperscript{461} Larissa

\textsuperscript{457} \textit{Inter caetera II} in Davenport, \textit{European Treaties}, 76.
\textsuperscript{458} See “First Letters Patent granted by Henry VII to John Cabot (March 5, 1496): For John Cabot and his Sons,” in \textit{Religion, Postcolonialism, and Globalization: A Sourcebook}, ed. Jennifer Reid (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 19–20. The Letter Patent grants John Cabot and his sons “full and free authority . . . to find, discover, and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians. We have also granted to them and to any one of them, and have given licence to set up our aforesaid banners and ensigns in any town, city, castle, island or mainland whatsoever, newly found by them.”
\textsuperscript{459} Twiss, \textit{Rescuing the Gospel}, 84.
\textsuperscript{461} Instructions to Captain James Cook, who claimed the east coast of Australia for Britain, issued by the Admiralty in 1768, outlined two courses of action: “You are also with the Consent of the Natives to take Possession of Convenient Situations in the Country in the Name of the King of Great Britain: Or: if you find the Country uninhabited take Possession for his Majesty by setting up Proper Marks and Inscriptions, as first discoverers and possessors.” The instructions also state that “every kind of Civility and Regard” is to be shown to Indigenous peoples, something which was not followed by Cook or by later arrivals. The document can be viewed in full at the National Library of Australia: \url{http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-228958440/view}. Land that was deemed to be uncultivated could also be possessed, even if it was acknowledged that there were Indigenous occupants. See Mark Brett’s discussion of \textit{The South Australia Act 1834} which “asserted that prior to British
Behrendt, a Eualey/Kamilaroi woman and a Professor of Law and Indigenous research, maintains that,

The Doctrine of Discovery was employed by the British in their assertion of sovereignty over Australia but it was the doctrine of *terra nullius* that would be used to continue to support the legitimacy of the actions of the British Crown in claiming the continent. It would also shape the relationship between Indigenous people in Australia and the dominant legal system.462

The Australian High Court’s Mabo decision in 1992, and the subsequent Native Title legislation challenged the injustice of *terra nullius*.463 The designation of Australia as *terra nullius* was overturned and provisions were made for the ongoing existence of Native Title in circumstances where it had not been extinguished by other forms of land title. Native Title legislation includes practical considerations, such as Land Use Agreements, and also the recognition that two systems of land ownership and spatial configurations were, and continue to be, present in Australia.

Native Title remains controversial in some quarters. For example, it is critiqued in terms of Australia’s economic growth, especially in the development of Northern Australian where there have been a number of successful Native Title claims. Some Indigenous peoples also critique Native Title legislation. For example, the academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson of the Geonpul people, argues that Native Title is a framework that requires Indigenous peoples to prove their ongoing connection with their country in terms set out by non-Indigenous people.464

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462  Behrendt, "The Doctrine of Discovery in Australia," 171. For example: *Miliripum v Nabalco* 1971 (also known as the Gove land rights case). Here the Yolnu plaintiffs argued that the mining leases granted to *Nabalco* were invalid because their traditional law and rights to their land had survived British claims of sovereignty. Justice Blackburn of the Northern Territory Supreme Court recognised that Yolnu law existed prior to European contact; however, he ruled that *terra nullius* was the basis for the British assertion of sovereignty and could not be overturned. See Behrendt, "Asserting the Doctrine of Discovery in Australia," 191. See also Yunupingu, *Our Land is Our Life: Land Rights—Past, Present and Future*.


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As Jennings and others have made clear, the genesis of concepts such as the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius have Christian theo-political origins.\textsuperscript{465} Theological revisionism that demonstrates the historic inseparability of Christian theology and polity and the conquest of Indigenous lands is a necessary first step towards challenging the colonial “spatial dynamics” that remain in Australia.\textsuperscript{466} As Pastor Ray Minniecon, a descendant of the Kabi Kabi nation and the Gurang Gurang nation of South-East Queensland and South Sea Islander people, with connections to the people of Ambrym Island, states: “Mabo might have knocked out terra nullius. In the way that policies work in this country terra nullius still exists.”\textsuperscript{467} This tension is alluded to on-screen by Charlie in his repeated refrain, “but it’s my land,” as he navigates various bureaucratic policies.

5.3.3 Displacement: Race and Whiteness

Colloquial Australian language is used to show racial distinctions in The Tracker and Charlie’s Country. “Blackness” and “whiteness” are used as markers of identity in Charlie’s Country in both derogatory and jovial forms. For example, Charlie and the police officer Luke laughingly call each other “black bastard” and “white bastard” when they greet each other. At other times each uses the term in an angry, disparaging way. The distinction between “black” and “white” in The Tracker is a matter of life and death. The Fanatic operates under the assumption that black life is dispensable. These racial distinctions are not present in Ten Canoes. The cast are the Ganalbiŋu people, which means “magpie geese people.” On-screen, identity is located in kinship networks, language and sacred connection to land and waterways.

These observations from the Accidental Trilogy are helpful when considering Jennings’ interrogation of race in Christian-colonial modernity. His argument is straightforward: displacement from land and other markers of identity such as language, animals, geographical features and kinship networks meant that the body became the sole location for identity. Jennings provides examples from Spanish and Italian explorers who drew all human life into racial scales based on physical appearance. Significantly, the point of reference was the

\textsuperscript{465} Jennings does not use the terminology Doctrine of Discovery or terra nullius in The Christian Imagination; however, he describes in detail the theo-political contexts that led to them. See also Whitney Bauman, Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius (New York: Routledge, 2009).
\textsuperscript{466} Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 240.
\textsuperscript{467} Ray Minniecon, “How Do we Think Biblically About Constitutional Recognition - Part 1” (Surrender Australia, Melbourne, 2016).
explorer himself and his European culture. Hence, Jennings argues, a widespread transformation was occurring in terms of measuring human life based on European existence. At the same time spiritual discernment regarding “salvific viability,” in other words who can become a “true Christian” based on cultural and physical traits, was in operation.468

Jennings uses the writings of the Italian Jesuit Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) to demonstrate the “incredible ability to capture all flesh within the logic of black and white existence.”469 As vicar-general and visitor to Japan in 1580, Valignano uses the distinction of “white” and “black” to categorise and compare Japanese and Indian converts:

There is this difference between the Indian and Japanese Christians, which in itself proves that there is really no room for comparison between them, for each one of the former was converted from some individual ulterior motive, and since they are blacks, and of small sense, they are subsequently very difficult to improve and turn into good Christians; whereas the Japanese usually become converted, not on some whimsical individual ulterior move (since it is their suzerains who expect to benefit thereby and not they themselves) but only in obedience to their lord’s command; and since they are white and of good understanding and behavior, and greatly given to outward show, they readily frequent the churches and sermons, and when they are instructed they become very good Christians.470

This is just one example of many that Jennings provides in The Christian Imagination to make his argument that “the story of race is also the story of place.”471 In other words, racialisation occurred as European’s entered new lands, ignored the markers of identity based on situatedness and belonging, and chose to focus solely on physical characteristics.472

The story of race and place in Australia begins with the struggle for land during the frontier wars between settlers and First Nations peoples. Frontier battles between First Nations peoples and European settlers occurred up until the 1920s.473 Indigenous resistance included ongoing attacks on settlers and the spearing of cattle and sheep. Despite Indigenous resistance, “colonization, with its relentless, destructive, logic of displacement and

468 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 32.
469 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 32.
472 Anne Pattel-Gray provides an in-depth study of racism in Australian society and the Church in the past and present. See Anne Pattel-Gray, The Great White Flood Racism in Australia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).
erasure, would continue."\(^{474}\) The destruction took many forms: the introduction of European diseases; the disruption to sacred sites, native animal habitats and water holes; the tacit approval of “punitive expeditions”; and the use of force to “assist the progress of settlement.”\(^{475}\)

When land was given as “compensation” to First Nations peoples in the form of missions, reserves, small plots of land and institutions, connection with particular land was not recognised.\(^{476}\) Throughout Australia, racial markers, such as being “half-caste” or “full-blood,” determined where First Nations peoples should live and work.\(^{477}\) This practice supports Jennings’ argument that colonisation transferred identity from connectedness with land, geographic features, water, animals, kinship networks and language to the body. The bodies of First Nations adults and children were removed from their country, clans and families. This removal was part of an assimilation process consisting of European farming techniques, Christian faith and other markers of “civilisation.”\(^{478}\)

In some instances, missions developed within the lands of the First Nations people and so people remained on their lands even as the autonomy of their lives was affected.\(^{479}\) Yolŋu people were not dispossessed from their land in the same way as other Indigenous peoples. The Arnhem Land Reserve was established in 1931 by the Commonwealth Government. While a physical separation from land did not occur, the claiming of space by the government was still in operation. Yolŋu land rights were not recognised.\(^{480}\) Access to the land was given to missionaries, schools, and eventually, mining companies. Missions and townships, such as Ramingining, were established, and various Yolŋu clans were required to live together.

The dispossession of First Nations peoples, along with claims of British sovereignty and renaming of places, refigured space turning it from “native space” into “British space.” The introduction of European flora and fauna also

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\(^{475}\) Curthoys, "Indigenous Subjects," 86–89.

\(^{476}\) Curthoys, "Indigenous Subjects," 86.


\(^{479}\) For example the Aranda people at the Hermansburg Mission, John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Brentford Square: Concilia Ltd., 1994), 405. See also the film *The Song Keepers* (Naina Sen, 2017).

contributed to the process of redefining space both from an aesthetic and ecological point of view. Moreover, the dispossession of First Nation peoples was compounded due to competition for water and other resources within a depleted natural environment, as a result of the impact of introduced species on soil, water and vegetation. Jennings sees a distorted theological vision of creation in operation during this reconfiguration of space. Chapter 7 contains an expansion of his theological arguments regarding the doctrine of creation. For now, it is sufficient to note that colonial agents transformed the land into private property and in doing so they dislodged “particular identities from particular places” and asked skin colour and physical characteristics to carry the weight of identity.

In essence, Jennings argues that the reconfiguration of space that took place during the colonial moment solidified racial designations such as blackness and whiteness. It is necessary to define the term *whiteness* before proceeding further because it permeates much of Jennings’ argument. Jennings’ purpose is to interrogate the “principality” of whiteness. He reveals the formation of whiteness and its continuous power to define people and place. When Jennings uses the term whiteness, he is not only referring to physical characteristics or skin colour. Whiteness transcends skin colour. Whiteness functions as a conceptual framework that defines and decides what is to be desired, what is true, good and beautiful. In addition, whiteness is a powerful—yet often invisible—reordering of reality. This ability to reorder reality arises from the way whiteness functions as a social and theological imaginary capable of redefining space and people. As Jennings states:

> To speak of whiteness is not to speak of particular people but of people caught up in a deformed building project aimed at bringing the world to its full maturity.

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484 Jennings, “Overcoming Racial Faith,” 7. Australian theologian, Chris Budden argues that “white” is not adequate terminology for Australian contexts due to multiculturalism in Australia. That is why he prefers the term Second peoples, a designation that includes all peoples who have migrated to Australia. Jennings, however, is pointing beyond racial designations and towards a way of viewing the world. Viewing whiteness in this way answers, in part, Paul C.H. Lim’s critique of *The Christian Imagination* for reinforcing the black-white binary in discussions about race. See Budden, *Following Jesus in Invaded Space*, 5. Lim, “An Asian-American Renewal Historical Theologian’s Response to the Duke African-American Nouvelle Theologie of Race.”
486 Willie James Jennings, “Can White People be Saved?": Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness,” ed. Love. L Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, and Amos Yong,
Maturity within the colonial project followed a trajectory away from place-centred identity and towards identity formation defined through the lens of whiteness. The identity forming properties of whiteness are a result of the intertwining of colonialism—justified by the church as the desire to save souls—and the transformation of peoples, land, and animals.

Jennings places his emphasis on whiteness, rather than blackness, because of the totality of whiteness that needs to be understood before it can be subverted. Blackness and whiteness are not two sides of the same coin because whiteness “informs the intellectual, artistic, economic, and geographic stage on which vision and voice are realized and performed.”

This focus runs the risk, which he acknowledges, of further marginalising the concept of blackness and “the voices and visions of all those people designated non-White.” Blackness and Indigenous studies, both in Australia and elsewhere, are crucial for subverting whiteness and the Euro-centric construction of knowledge. With this in view, he chooses to focus on the construction of whiteness, while also intentionally drawing on non-White voices, in order to explore the terrain that formed the Western world and continues to dictate how it functions.

Critical Whiteness Studies is a diverse and growing area of scholarship. Jennings explicitly engages with some of this scholarship in *The Christian Imagination*. While he draws on this scholarship in order to demonstrate the “powerful operation of whiteness and the complexities of racial imagining,” he maintains that what separates his work from other necessary work in this area is a fundamental lack of awareness by other scholars that whiteness emerged as Europeans radically reshaped “human and spatial ecology.” In other words, in order to understand whiteness, place and

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488 Jennings, “Can White People be Saved?: Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness,” Location 571. Jennings’ use of the designation non-White here is deliberate in order to demonstrate the pervasiveness of whiteness.


space must be taken into account, along with the theological nature of what transpired as Christians entered the New World.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Geonpul woman and a critical Indigenous studies scholar, is a scholar who does make the connection between the possession of land and the development of racial designations. She writes from the Australian context and her work intersects with Jennings’ argument concerning race and place. For example,

Most historians mark 1492 as the year when imperialism began to construct the old world order by taking possession of other people, their lands and resources. The possessive nature of this enterprise informed the development of a racial stratification process on a global scale that became solidified during modernity.492

Moreton-Robinson argues that possession of Indigenous land underpins the economic and epistemic foundations of whiteness. Moreover, she contends, a “historical amnesia” in Whiteness Studies regarding Indigenous sovereignty maintains the status quo of the “racial contract” reliant on a black/white binary operating within the logics of white possession, in the United States and elsewhere.493 Jennings addresses this “historical amnesia” throughout his work by including Indigenous connection to place as a central tenet of his analysis of the colonial project.

Jennings makes the connection between race and Christianity explicit: “Indeed, race has a Christian architecture, and Christianity in the West has a racial architecture.”494 As was previously demonstrated (5.3.2), Christianity was complicit in the conquest of lands and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. He argues that to deconstruct race in the West, and to overturn its power as a way of organising communal life, we must understand the factors that have contributed to its development. Factors such as: the forced disconnection from place and its associated markers of identity and the relocation of identity solely in the body, along with the pervasive power of whiteness. If the story of “race is also the story of place” then overcoming race means recovering place—something which the Accidental Trilogy helps us to do. Examples of how this can occur are provided in chapter 7.

5.3.4 Gentile Forgetfulness: Supersessionism and Colonialism

Jennings identifies another crucial element at play in colonialism. Along with the displacement of Indigenous peoples from land that led to constructions of race and the pervasive power of whiteness, Jennings argues that supersessionism contributed to European hubris as Europeans entered the lives of others. The theological trajectory of replacing Israel with the church, technically known as supersessionism, in the context of European colonialism made the white, male body central to the story of salvation. Jennings summarises this move as follows:

If Israel’s election had been the compass around which Christian identity had found its bearings and found its trajectory, now with this reconfiguration the body of the European would be the compass marking divine election. More importantly, that new elected body, the white body, would be a discerning body, able to detect holy effects and saving grace.⁴⁹⁵

Jennings names this act of replacement “Gentile forgetfulness.”⁴⁹⁶ The doctrine of supersessionism is an essential concept in Jennings’ work, and he applies it distinctively. At the heart of supersessionism is the belief that “Israel is a historical moment reflective of a narrow ethnocentric theological vision that has been transcended with the coming of Christ.”⁴⁹⁷ The result of this transcendence is the notion that Israel—and by extension, Jewish people—are no longer the people of God. The demarcation “people of God” now belongs to the church alone.

Jennings uses the terms biblical Israel and living Israel to distinguish between the people of Israel whose stories are told in the Hebrew Scriptures (biblical Israel) and those who practise Judaism in contemporary settings (living

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⁴⁹⁷ Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 340. While “Christians and Christian theology are unintelligible without Israel . . . Christians have interpreted Israel as an antiquated element in the wider revelation of the Christian God who has elected a new people, the Christians.” (251).
Israel). He clarifies that he often refers to biblical Israel as simply Israel. Jennings makes a further distinction concerning living Israel. He is not referring to Zionism, a theo-political movement that joins the practice of Judaism with possession of land in the modern State of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. He does, however, strongly commend a commitment to Christians joining with people of the Jewish faith:

A Christian commitment to Israel does not entail a commitment to Zionism, or to the statecraft of the nation-state of Israel. It does entail, however, a commitment to a witness born of the Jewish Jesus toward Israel and all those whose lives encircle Torah and are encircled by Torah. That witness must present an option beyond assimilation or cultural nationalism. This however remains the unfinished business of the modern church. We cannot hope to present a vision of life together that would capture anyone's imagination if we cannot imagine and enact it ourselves.

In his commentary on the Book of Acts, Jennings expands on the tension in working towards communal life encompassing people of Christian and Jewish faith while at the same time resisting cultural nationalism, including its Jewish and Christian forms.

As Andrew Draper helpfully states, Jennings is not as concerned with a doctrinal treatment of supersessionism as he is with the way it contributed to the imagination of Christians in historical settings. Jennings acknowledges that supersessionism preceded the colonial era and can, in

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500 "The rise of the Jewish nation-state now profoundly articulated through Zionism created a challenging context for the articulation of theological identity. Faithfulness to the Torah appears to be joined to the problem of ethnic violence, death and the temptation of worldly power." Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 285.


fact, be discerned within the New Testament, in early Christian communities, in the Constantine era, and as Christianity spread and processes of vernacularisation took place. From the fourteenth century onwards, however, supersessionism had a distinct role in forming the posture of colonial agents. Rather than transferring a posture of humility as Gentiles who came close enough to hear Israel’s story and were “grafted in,” Christians placed themselves at the centre of the story of salvation that they would narrate in the New World. Understanding this posture is a key element of Jennings’ theological revisionism.

As outlined above (5.3.3) Jennings’ argues that the construction of race is intimately connected to place. Jennings also argues that Gentile reading strategies which interpreted biblical Israel as a race, alongside other races, contributed to the development of racial imagination which placed the white, male body at the top of the racial hierarchy. Colonial dominance and racial hierarchies were informed by supersessionism and suspicion of the Jewish body—“supersessionist thinking is the womb in which whiteness will mature.” As one race among many, Israel’s salvific role could be appropriated by Europeans. Where once stood Israel, European Christians now stood in her place. This situation was facilitated by the diminishment of the “scandal of particularity” of Israel’s election. Jennings reminds his readers that Israel’s election by YHWH was unique and her relationship with the surrounding nations, in terms of judgement and blessing, was unrepeatable.

Christian Europeans claimed for themselves Israel’s commission. They simultaneously brought the gospel to the lands of others and condemned the practices of “idolatry” that they encountered. Rather than bringing the gospel through lives joined and enfolded within the humility of “Gentile remembrance,” missionary endeavours often mimicked the colonial agenda of reframing and claiming the lands and bodies of Indigenous peoples, with the expectation that they would become Christian.

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505 J. Kameron Carter similarly argues that supersessionism was responsible for the construction of racial hierarchies in modernity as the *Rassenfrage* found “its animating centre” inside the *Judenfrage*. Carter focuses on Immanuel Kant to illustrate the development of racial imagination and the prevalence of “Whiteness” within Western thought. Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, 120.
507 Applying a modern lens of nationalism to biblical Israel created similar problems as European nations appropriated Israel and placed themselves at the centre of the biblical drama. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 160, 211. See also Jennings, *Acts*, 20–23.
By way of example, Jennings demonstrates how the elements of supersessionist thinking, along with a posture of cultural and intellectual superiority which Jennings calls “pedagogical imperialism,” were at work in Peru towards the end of the sixteenth century. With reference to the Jesuit missionary and theologian Acosta, Jennings writes:

Acosta reads the Indian as though he [Acosta] represented the Old Testament people of God bound in faithfulness and taught to discern true worship from false. Acosta reads the religious practices of indigenes from the position of the ones to whom the revelation of the one true God was given, Israel.508

Acosta displayed supersessionist imagination operating through an inability to “position himself with the Indians within a history of Gentile (that is, non-Jewish) existence.”509 According to Jennings to do so would have resulted in greater “generosity of spirit” and a willingness to enter further into Andean cultural logics without as readily condemning them as inferior and under demonic influence.510

Jennings argues that this sense of replacing Israel occurred as a result of forgetting that Israel’s formation and salvific role were conceived not on the basis of Israel’s ethnicity, but her election as a people: “they are not ethnoi, but laos.”511 He maintains that the representative character of Israel is the space for divine encounter for all peoples. As he states:

Israel is not simply a people coming into full existence in the presence of the living God, but the human creature in sojourn with the Creator God, striving to hear, obey, and live.512

It is from a space of intimate relationship with Israel that Gentile inclusion through Jesus Christ is located:

There was a man, born of Israel, who faced the needs of all peoples for the sake of many and who offers to Israel and to the Gentiles a similar word, you are not ethnoi, but my laos.513
Reorientation towards Israel though the body of Jesus Christ is a significant point that Jennings is making. The particular application of this reorientation within the Australian context is discussed further below (see also 5.5).

In responding to Jennings’ work, Paul C.H. Lim, a historian of Christianity, finds Jennings’ arguments regarding supersessionist thought compelling as a “theological hook.” As an analytical tool for a historical inquiry, he does have some reservations based on whether cause and effect can be attributed in the specificities of time and place as Jennings argues. Lim’s question has some bearing on contextualising Jennings’ work in Australian settings. Interestingly, Lim seeks to broaden the scope of evidence that Jennings could have used to make the case that supersessionist thinking was at play in English mindsets. For example, English Protestants in the Elizabethan and Stuart period imagined themselves as “the true representatives of God’s will.” Here Lim further affirms supersessionist thinking as part of the overall mindset that fuelled colonisation in Australia.514

However, some specific interaction with Jennings’ theory of the influence of supersessionist thinking in the Australian context is also worth noting. For example, the postcolonial scholar, Roland Boer, has demonstrated that a predominant trend for European explorers was to align Aboriginal peoples with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible and, in one example given, with Jewish people in Acts 22:23. Contra Jennings, when Boer refers to “implicit Israelites” he is referring to the European perceptions of Aboriginal peoples, rather than to European self-perception.515 Parallels between Israelites and Indigenous peoples were made based on cultural practices such as burial, rituals, carrying children, reverence for Elders, cooking, hunting methods, housing and bodily ornaments.

In terms of Jennings’ argument about the classification of the people of Israel on racial lines, Boer does point out the racialised connections that were made between Aboriginal peoples, ancient Israelites, and in some instances, Jewish people. The journals of explorers reveal an overarching assessment that Aboriginal peoples and Israelites were joined as relics of the One” for “the many” and the sole location for reconciliation between all humanity. Mark Lewis Taylor, “Major Reviews: The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race,” Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology 66, no. 3 (2012): 324.

515 Boer, Last Stop Before Antarctica, 62.
past on the lowest rung of the evolutionary scale. Explicit vestiges of antisemitism were also present. The explorer T.L. Mitchell, writing in 1839, describes an Aboriginal face in terms of “features decidedly Jewish, having a thin aquiline nose, and a very piercing eye, as intent on mischief, as if it had belonged to Satan himself.” On the other hand, the explorer George Grey, writing in 1841, commended the Aboriginal people he encountered for keeping the Mosaic law with particular reference to sanitary and sexual practices.

Jennings’ thesis is broad in its application across time and place. The particularities of explorer diaries in the mid-nineteenth century in the Australian colonies reveal a fluid appropriation of Israelite identity. Elements of “Gentile forgetfulness” remain, however, in the ease in which the explorers transported the uniqueness of Israelite identity into their new settings and the racialisation that this move enabled. Furthermore, Boer’s examples are not necessarily representative of the theological posture that all those involved in the colonial project embodied in Australia. Additional examples are discussed below (5.5).

5.4 Jennings’ Theological Construction

The discussion above outlined Jennings’ diagnosis of Christianity’s “diseased social imagination.” Jennings also offers proposals for Christian communities seeking to live with a different social imagination to the one on display in colonialism. The following overview of Jennings’ theological construction is shorter than the sections discussing his theological revisionism. This succinctness is not because theological construction is any less important. Rather, it is because Jennings gives some broad principles which he encourages Christians to apply in their specific locations. Chapters 6 and 7 further develop ways in which Jennings’ proposals for life together might be interpreted in dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy.

Jennings’ vision of life together contains a few key elements. First, it requires taking seriously Christianity’s role in forming segregated and racialised spaces and bodies. Challenging structural and personal sin and racism while working for racial reconciliation and liberation are not sufficient without also coming to terms with the transformation of space that occurred

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516 Boer, Last Stop Before Antarctica, 71.
517 Boer, Last Stop Before Antarctica, 72.
in the colonial moment. Truth-telling about the history of particular places is essential for Christians in churches, local communities and academic institutions.

Second, in order to ensure just access to resources, participation in the geographic planning of communities is required. Geography is an ethical and social issue. In his North American context, Jennings has also advocated for reparations for past injustices.

Third, as people who believe “in a God who creates,” having a more robust doctrine of creation that expresses discipleship spatially as well as temporally is crucial. Listening to Indigenous peoples tell their stories of place and space is an essential component of this task in order to reclaim a sense of connectivity and shared relationality with land, animals and with each other. Jennings summarises this point as follows: “What we need is a stronger sense of relationality (the kind that came with place-centered and animal-related identities) that would allow a sense of shared habitation to inform theological reflection.”

Fourth, a reorientation towards “God and his creation through the particularity of Jesus, who is not an abstraction of Israel’s God, but who is bound up with God’s people, place and space” is needed. The incarnation draws diverse peoples into the reality of God’s revelation in Christ and the new life and community he creates.

Fifth, there must be a reclaiming of Gentile existence as a posture that “overhears” and enters the space and stories of others with humility and respect.

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521 Jennings, "Creating Redemptive Places: Why Geography Matters to God—A Lecture by The Rev. Dr. Willie Jennings.”
523 Borneman, "People, Place, and Race: Situating Jennings’ Christian Imagination in Contemporary Context.”
524 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 263.
Sixth, the creation of “spaces of communion and joining” where lives are mutually enfolded is essential. Jennings summarises all of the above in the following quotation that outlines his vision of life together:

I noted in *The Christian Imagination*, supersessionism combined with colonialism robbed Christians of the greatest aspect of our legacy as those whose lives are found in the Jewish Jesus. We are those who may enter the ways of life of others without destroying them and without being lost or consumed in the lives of others. Rather we are those who through Jesus know how to enter in love and for the sake of love. We join. Rather than this beautiful legacy, we inherited the way of the colonizer, which is the way of forced assimilation, suppression, and eradication of things we deem strange, alien, different. Christian faith is a creative faith that creates new disciples and new forms of discipleship to Jesus. This newness is a reality of the life-giving Spirit who makes faith possible and life livable. We are yet to appreciate the newness of the Spirit that lives in our faith.

Jennings acknowledges that his vision of life together risks being construed as “idealistic.” However, he is convinced that once we begin to take place seriously, our capacity to reimagine the social will follow. To further this goal, Jennings articulates the need for interdisciplinary conversations between geography, theology, postcolonial theory, race theory, ecology and Native American studies. I would add to this list, Fourth Cinema and Intercultural cinema as places where we can engage in truth-telling and reimagination of place, space, identity and community. Chapters 6 and 7 further develop these possibilities, particularly through the doctrine of creation and naming and subverting the legacies of Christianity’s role in colonialism.

5.5 Issues Arising from a Contextual Reading of Jennings

Jennings' theological revisionism compels his readers to see the devastating impact that colonial dominance had on Indigenous peoples and their lands. He also wants us to see more clearly the impact of supersessionist thinking on Christian self-understanding and relationality with others. In this section, I bring Jennings into a closer conversation with voices from the Australian context. In particular, this conversation questions what it means for Christians to reorientate towards biblical Israel in and through the body of Jesus, given Australia’s violent colonial history. The emergence of

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526 Jennings, “A Response to Mary McClintock Fulkerson.”
Indigenous Christian theology is also relevant in answering the question of orientation towards Israel. The following two sections extend Jennings’ theological construction as I begin to develop what it means to do theology in an Australian context, as a non-Indigenous person who is attentive to Indigenous testimonies of faith expressed through theological, historical and cultural dynamics.

5.5.1 Orientation Towards the Land of Israel

As outlined above in 5.3.4, Jennings argues that Gentile Christian imagination needs to be orientated towards the election of Israel. Joining with Israel is necessary in order to delegitimise competing claims of divine election held by European nations in the colonial moment. This aim is admirable and is useful in so far as it subverts the dominant narrative of Christianity in Australia as an English import. There is a problem, however, in Jennings’ interpretation of the Exodus and conquest narratives when reading from the perspective of those who have been displaced from their lands. Jennings puts a theological boundary around the conquest narratives in order to limit them as a source of justification for colonial conquest of land, citing their misappropriation as another example of supersessionism. He states,

Gentiles may never claim for themselves what was true only for Israel. The theological justification for conquest was an unrepeatable act. What was repeatable, however, was the clear implication for Gentiles: YHWH announced divine claim from the land of Israel on all land and all peoples . . . At the threshold of Israel’s land, in the presence of Israel’s God, the story of every people ruptures, cracks open, revealing a second layer, an underlying layer of reality bound to this God.529

Jennings argues that the violent conquest texts are not divine sanction for the machinations of nation states—ancient or modern. Instead it is YHWH using violence in an unrepeatable way to create Israel’s space, which was in fact YHWH’s space: “all those who entered Israel’s land entered the space of YHWH’s claim.”530 He argues that this is emblematic of the claim YHWH has on all space and hence a reorientation of the created world towards God. Jennings’ response to the redeployment of the conquest narratives in colonial settings is to “establish a specific theological limitation” along with a Christological qualification:531

This was only for Israel, and any further claim to it, even by Israel, was collapsed onto Jesus himself. That is, Jesus presents a way forward from violence for Israel and the entire world.532

Jennings' theological reading of the conquest narratives reinforces the finite and partial nature of them in terms of YHWH's overall revelation to both Israel and Gentiles.533 Furthermore, the texts are to be read on the basis that while the land is still part of Israel's identity, her primary relationship is with YHWH.

The issues surrounding land conquest and displacement of Indigenous peoples are complex, both within the biblical narrative itself and with the misappropriation of biblical texts in colonial contexts. Jennings is arguing that the theological meanings of these texts are incommensurate with any form of colonial appropriation. While I find Jennings' account convincing in terms of constructing a theological meaning of the conquest narratives, on its own it is an insufficient explanation for the divinely sanctioned violence and dispossession found in the texts such as Joshua 1 or Deut. 20:10–18.534

533 Paul Taylor provides a strong critique of Jennings' account of the relationship between Israel and the land, notwithstanding Jennings' qualifications that he is not espousing Jewish nationalism in its modern form, arguing that Jennings cannot provide "an effective critique of Israeli national chauvinism" and Palestinian experience of "the Israeli nation's replaying of Western colonial violence" which is the very thing that Jennings is condemning in other contexts. Taylor continues, "For all its differences from the white racist and anti-Semitic forms of U.S. Christian Zionism today, Jennings' theology risks a similar revivifying of mythic narratives that sacralise Israeli national identity at the expense of Palestinian and other peoples. Jennings' theology cries out for some address of the Palestinians' site of colonial anguish, especially because of the theological ratification he gives to a Jesus who is linked to the land of Israel." Taylor, "Major Reviews: The Christian Imagination," 324–325. Rachel Havrelock provides a robust demonstration of the direct correlation between the modern State of Israel and the book of Joshua made by Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. This direct correlation continues in the discourse of the current Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Rachel Havrelock, "The Joshua Generation: Conquest and the Promised Land," *Critical Research on Religion* 1, no. 3 (2013), https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303213506473. See also Michael Prior who argues that there is a need for exegesis that considers moral and ethical evaluations of the text in light of the way the conquest narratives have been "deployed in favour of various colonial enterprises, including Zionism." Michael Prior, "Ethnic Cleansing and the Bible: A Moral Critique," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 1, no. 1 (2002).
534 For two examples of alternative accounts to the one Jennings provides concerning the use of divine and human violence in the conquest narratives in the book of Joshua, see Paul N. Anderson who argues that the texts emerged from a particular tradition relating to Israel's need to explain the "sinful" influence of their neighbours with whom they still shared the land, that is, God told us to eradicate them and we disobeyed hence their presence is our fault not the fault of God; and Kwok Pui-Lan who adopts a reading strategy from the position of the Canaanites in the text. Paul. N. Anderson, "Genocide or Jesus: A God of Conquest or Pacificism?" in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.*, ed. Harold. J. Ellens (Westport: Praeger, 2004); Kwok Pui-Lan, "What about the Canaanites? Re-Reading the Bible?" in *Wrongs to Rights: How Churches can Engage the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Steve Heinrichs (Canada: Mennonite Church Canada, 2016). Andrea Smith's history of reception of the conquest narratives within North American Indigenous Christian literature is interesting because it reveals a range of reading strategies including condemnation of the Canaanites, identification with Rahab, and reading strategies which disrupt a colonial interpretation of the Bible. Andrea Smith, "Decolonizing Salvation," ed. Love. L Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-
This insufficiency is particularly glaring in the Australian context where such texts have been used to justify the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. For example, The Rainbow Spirit Elders (a collaborative group of Indigenous theologians) express their deep sorrow at the injustice of being forcibly displaced from their lands. Non-Indigenous biblical scholar, Norman Habel frames the act of displacement specifically within the conquest narratives:

Little was said (by the missionaries) about the indigenous people of the land whom the Israelites conquered. No questions were asked about whether Joshua’s scorched Earth policy was what God really wanted for the indigenous people. Today’s Joshua mode of operation sounds to us very much like that of the British colonial conquerors. Did the British have to follow Joshua’s way?

Habel provides a further example in his account of German missionaries and settlers in South Australia. The Barossa Pioneer Memorial erected in 1992 to commemorate one hundred years of German settlement, contains the words, “The Lord has given us this land. Joshua 2:9.” The biblical text is used to explain Germans settling in the land at the expense of original Indigenous inhabitants. Habel provides a corrective to this interpretation. He argues that within the biblical narrative, it is Abraham’s example of respecting the Canaanites’ land, culture and Creator Spirit (El Elyon), rather than the conquest narrative in Joshua, that should be the template for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of relating.

Jennings briefly interacts with Habel’s 1995 publication, The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies. In this work, Habel argues that the polyphonic nature of Scripture and land traditions reveal that the conquest narrative is one among many and therefore not a dominant discourse. While Jennings acknowledges that the violence in the conquest narratives has been used to sanction colonial violence, he remains committed to his reading of theological limitation.


Norman Habel, Acknowledgement of the Land and Faith of Aboriginal Custodians after Following the Abraham Trail (Reservoir: Morning Star Publishing, 2018), 9. Habel notes the irony of the reference being to words spoken by Rahab, a Canaanite woman.

Habel, Acknowledgement of the Land and Faith of Aboriginal Custodians, 24–33.

rather than to further interrogate the texts and their reception along Habel’s line of inquiry.\(^{540}\)

Contra Jennings’ reading, interpretations of these texts should include a history of reception in order to acknowledge where they have been used to justify violence. For example, Andrea Smith, a First Nations scholar, pointedly summarises the situation within her North American context: “As Canaanites, Native people had a one-way destination to destruction to allow for the ‘New Israel’ of whiteness in what would become the United States. The only people worth saving were Europeans.”\(^{541}\) Close readings, such as Rachel Havrelock’s, that demonstrate the rhetorical function of Joshua in promoting a particular nationalist agenda are also needed.\(^{542}\) Nationalistic agendas should be interrogated both within the text and wherever they have led to the justification of nation-states at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Rejecting nationalistic agendas is also Jennings’ aim. However, Havrelock applies an ideological rather than a purely theological lens to the texts—something which Jennings is reluctant to do.\(^{543}\)

An ironic twist on identification with the Exodus story is provided by stories of Aboriginal resistance in Australia. For example, the Woiwurrung and Taungurong people in the 1850s used the imagery of “promised land” as they petitioned the government for land that eventually became Coranderrk Mission in Victoria. Australian biblical scholar Mark Brett notes that the Bible in the hands of Aboriginal peoples has “emancipatory possibilities” as seen in the example of the Woiwurrung and Taungurong people.\(^{544}\) As Jane Lydon notes the “figuring of Coranderrk as promised land is an ironic inversion of this pattern [of conquest], for the Aboriginal people by no means became the triumphant conquerors who took possession of Canaan”\(^{545}\). Rather, they had to fight to have access to land in order to create a livelihood.

The Exodus and conquest narratives had diverse interpretations in discourse about colonisation in Australia. Overall, however, Australia does not have the

\(^{540}\) See Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 344.
\(^{541}\) Smith, “Decolonizing Salvation,” Location 885.
same dominant narrative of the Exodus story, along with promised land and conquest narratives, that the United States does. Instead, multivalent uses of scriptural images were used to interpret the place of Europeans in Australia. I will briefly discuss other forms of biblical imagery used in Australia such as expulsion from Eden, exile, divine providence, the peaceable kingdom and migration in the tradition of Abraham. Australian historian Ann Curthoys, argues that when Exodus narratives were employed, they were used in conjunction with these other biblical themes such as expulsion and exile. For example, drawing on the work of historian Andrew Lattas, she cites an excerpt from the Australian *Catholic Leader* of 5 June 1988:

> For some of us Australians, our forefathers forsook the green fields and teeming cities of Europe and beyond, setting out like Abraham and Moses to find a promised land. They knew Exodus and Exile, condemnation and chains, desert wanderings and struggle, inequality and injustice, the crucible of tragedy and suffering, the childbirth of a new people.

In addition, Curthoys draws on the influential works of postcolonial critic Edward Said and English professor Regina Schwartz, to interrogate the way that the Exodus and conquest narratives have functioned in white Australia. Curthoys argues that the “rhetoric of victimisation” whereby the previous suffering justifies the acquisition of land was a feature of convict and “pioneer” narratives in forming a new national identity in Australia. Roland Boer provides further examples of biblical metaphors. For example, the doctrine of creation was understood as “subduing” the land. Boer uses the historical record to explain the causes of Aboriginal “extinction” (here quoting the missionary Lancelot Threkeld in 1892) and “replacement” that was cast within the “providence of God.”

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cultivate the land or as punishment for an “unknown evil” in the same vein as the Canaanites.\textsuperscript{550}

The following summation by Curthoys’ depicts the Australian situation, where the diverse biblical imagery used by settlers obstructs the perspective of Indigenous peoples:

And so it is that in Australia, as in other settler societies, the trauma of expulsion, exodus, and exile obscures empathetic recognition of indigenous perspectives, of the trauma of invasion, institutionalisation, and dispersal. The self-chosen white victim finds it extremely difficult to recognise what he or she has done to others. The legacy of the colonial past is a continuing fear of illegitimacy, and an inability to develop the kind of pluralist account of the past that might form the basis for a coherent national community.\textsuperscript{551}

This statement by Curthoys resonates strongly with the rest of Jennings’ depiction of the colonial moment where he interrogates the colonial legacy from a theological and relational as well as historical standpoint (see 5.2.3).

The examples given above are illustrative rather than exhaustive. These examples bring the Australian context into conversation with Jennings’ overall narrative regarding land, conquest and “Gentile forgetfulness.” The use of biblical motifs in Australia was multifaceted. At the same time there is no doubt that even as humanitarian arguments were made regarding the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples, both by churches and the colonial office, the impetus to take Aboriginal land was ongoing and was fuelled by a desire to conquer both the people and the land. In this context, Jennings’ theological limitation on divine sanction to conquer stands, albeit with the injunction provided by other commentators that additional interpretations that wrestle with the violence in the texts and their reception are necessary.

5.5.2 Orientation Towards the People of Israel—Indigenous Perspectives

As part of a contextual response to Jennings’ argument that supersessionism was a significant contributor to colonial imagination, Indigenous portrayals of connection with biblical Israel will be explored. Some Indigenous Christian theologians express a strong affinity with biblical Israel. This affinity is both cultural and theological. Yolnu theologian Djiniyini Gondarra discusses

\textsuperscript{550} A further example is found in Harris, \textit{One Blood}, 30. “Were the Aborigines, asked William Hull in 1846, degraded descendants of the nations driven out by divine command to the uttermost parts of the earth and the islands of the seas? Is it not simply that like ‘the Hittites, the Jebusites and the Aboriginal Canaanites’ that had been left to the natural consequences of the effects of not retaining the natural knowledge of God, but ‘that of all peoples in that condition the Aborigines were judged to be on ‘the lowest scale of degraded humanity.’”

\textsuperscript{551} Curthoys, “Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology,” 19.
connections between Israelite law and Yolŋu law. As an example, he compares sacred sites and sacred objects with approaching the stone tablets of the law and the Ark of the Covenant. Aboriginal Christian leader Charles Harris states that God was present with Aboriginal people before the arrival of missionaries. He asserts that “The Aboriginal law is almost identical to the Mosaic law.” Through the giving of law, Harris maintains, Aboriginal people interacted with the Creator God. An example of this in Ten Canoes is rituals analogous to Levirate marriage and protocols for justice and punishment.

Harris’s testimony is supported by the Indigenous Elders who collaborated to produce Milbi Dabaar: A Resource Book. This book contains a creative interplay between being “Gentiles” whose cultures are affirmed and having a connection with the people of Israel. For example, reference is made to St Paul’s dual-missional strategy to Jews and Gentiles. As the authors state:

With his own people, the Jews, he showed that Jesus fulfilled and completed all the law, teachings and hopes recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But when he went to Gentiles (non-Jews) as in the Greek city of Athens, he found a connecting point within their own traditions, and an altar inscribed: “To an unknown God.”

He then connected this traditional thinking to the God who made “heaven and earth and everything in it” (Acts 17:24). In the same way, we connect our stories of ancestor beings with the Creator Spirit of all peoples together with the way that God revealed himself through the people of Israel, like this:

Genesis — Old Testament — prophets

Dreaming — Traditions — elders

Jesus

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552 Djiniyini Gondarra, Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology (Darwin: Bethel Presbytery, 1986).
553 “God was already here interacting with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and they interacted with the Creator God, thereby receiving the law, values and customs which have great biblical significance, for instance the system of caring and sharing.” Charles Harris, “Guidelines for So-Called Western Civilization and Western Christianity,” in Aboriginal Spirituality: Past, Present, Future, ed. Anne Pattel-Gray (Blackburn: HarperCollins Religious, 1996), 67.
554 “The system of Payback [for example, the Makarrata ceremony] has a positive side as a system of punishment and justice within Aboriginal Law that aims to restore relationships. We can relate this to the Old Testament ‘eye for an eye’, to Western justice systems and to the forgiveness through Christ to bring peace.” David Thomson, ed., Milbi Dabaar: A Resource Book from Wontulp-Bi-Buya College (North Cairns: Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, 2004), 36.
555 Thomson, Milbi Dabaar. Milbi Dabaar means ‘good news’ in the Guugu Yimithirr language. The Elders involved in this project were: Dennis Corowa, Ray Minniecon, Jim Leftwich, Lala Leftwich, Joan Hendriks, Evelyn Parkin, Peter Smith, Gertrude Massey, Bill Coolburra, Alex Gater, Dan Joyce, Lena Craigie, Neil Fourmile, Eileen Fourmile, Michael Connolly, Valma Connolly, Eddie Law, Renata Brown, George Rosedale, Maud Rosendale.
556 Thomson, Milbi Dabaar, 29. My emphasis.
In the diagram above, the biblical testimony of God acting in and through the people of Israel is not replaced, rather Israel is read alongside Indigenous culture which is seen as another bearer of revelation. The diagram provided by the authors of *Milbi Dabaar* provides an interesting comparison with Jennings’ diagram of Bishop Colenso’s reading of Jewish/Gentile relations in his colonial context. In his commentary on Romans, Colenso proposes that St Paul’s audience are Jewish believers. He then proceeds to read “salvation history inside settler-Zulu relations” in Natal. Jennings outlines Colenso’s move in the following way:

![Diagram of Colenso's Reading](image)

Drawing parallels between these groups is part of Colenso’s overall move to “render the particularities of identity inconsequential to Christian existence.” Colenso does this first by arguing that the particularities of Jewish identity as the chosen people must give way to a universal vision of God’s concern of all peoples in Jesus Christ. According to Jennings, Colenso’s St Paul “negates any soteriological character to Jewish identity.” Israel becomes the “foil of faith” and the “carrier pigeon for the gospel” who reveal to all people a God of love and righteousness. Colenso’s “blind spot” is to ignore that biblical Israel embodies a specific history which makes God’s righteousness “intelligible.” Colenso supplants the particular with the universal. The irony is that “Colenso’s own vision of civilization grants to Britannia what he refuses Israel, namely, the refashioning of a people’s way of life for theological reasons.”

This discussion revels a tension between Jennings’ portrayal of supersessionism and Indigenous theologians finding cultural and theological analogies with biblical Israel. Jennings’ examples of supersessionist thinking—Colenso reading settler-Zulu relations inside of Gentile-Jewish relations; Acosta reading scripture and his context as if he were part of the Old Testament people of God; and the hymns of Isaac Watts (where the nation of England takes the place of Israel as the locus of salvation history)—all

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displace Israel. By comparison, Indigenous theologians, such as those cited above, do not conflate, and therefore displace, their people with Israel. Distinctions and the integrity of both traditions are maintained. Furthermore, both traditions become the location of revelation, particularly regarding the giving of the law. The Indigenous theologians whom I have cited express a sense of continuity with the presence, person and work of Jesus Christ within their culture. They maintain the validity of Indigenous law and its compatibility with Christian faith, albeit with discernment—as in the case in any culture.\textsuperscript{564} At the same time, as the authors of \textit{Milbi Dabaar} testify, the sense that Jesus fulfils the law, teaching and hopes of the Jewish people in a specific way is maintained (the nexus between Indigenous culture and Christianity is explored in greater detail in 6.3.4).

Jennings’ final case study examines the life of Obadiah Equiano, a former slave who became an abolitionist. Equiano also compares the customs and laws of his people with those of the Jewish people. By arguing that his people came from the Jews, directly from the seed of Adam, he situates his black body next to the Jewish body. This move is designed to reorientate his white readership towards kinship through shared humanity. Placing the black body in the lineage of Abraham and Sarah “drew the African into a direct salvific line” and circumvented some of the discussion that placed the black body in the lineage of Ham, the cursed son of Noah.\textsuperscript{565} Using scripture to support his argument such as Acts 17:26–27, which presents a common human ancestry, and Isaiah 55:8–9, which places God’s wisdom above the human mind, Equiano asserts the common origins of all people and claims that notions of black inferiority based on intelligence are false.

When Equiano and First Nation theologians draw parallels with Israel, it is a statement of affirmation and agency that uses the Christian tradition to include Israel rather than supplant it. Through the body of Jesus, which is joined with the people of Israel, and the invitation of the Holy Spirit, Gentile Christians are invited into “Israel’s house,” to use Jennings’ phrase, while retaining and affirming their cultures in all things compatible with the gospel. Problems arise when “Israel’s house” is overrun by new owners as in colonial hermeneutics.

\textsuperscript{564} For an extended discussion of Native American perspectives on affinity with Israel, see Mark G. Brett, "\textit{Canto ergo sum}: Indigenous Peoples and Postcolonial Theology," \textit{Pacifica} 16 (2003).

\textsuperscript{565} Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 190.
The issues discussed in this chapter are pertinent as the church in many parts of the world grapples with the colonial legacy and the enculturation of Christianity. Increases in Indigenous agency in narrating their own experiences of faith and culture have changed the theological and ecclesial landscape. Jennings’ case study of Equiano is an early case in point. Equiano inherited a diminished vision of Christian relationality in terms of the “mangled intimacy that flows out of the dialogic between Christian and colonial identities.” And yet he still grasped enough of the intimacy that is required between believers joined in the body of Christ to chastise those who supported the slave trade. In a similar way, Indigenous theologians critique the colonial Christianity that governed their lives while also using Christianity as a tool for their liberation.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter provides an introduction to the theology of Willie Jennings and an initial dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy. It has outlined aspects of Jennings’ theology, including his theological method and critical themes such as the way supersessionism and the redefinition of people and place characterised the colonial project. It has also demonstrated where the work of Indigenous theologians provides an additional perspective to some of Jennings’ insights. This dialogue further contextualises the interpretive work undertaken throughout this thesis.

Jennings not only narrates what has gone wrong in Christian relationality, but he also provides insight into ways forward where a “space of communion” is created for joining and belonging. Considerable space in this chapter has been spent outlining where Jennings diagnoses distortion in Christian relationality. Chapters 6 and 7 continue this revisionism while also beginning the process of recovering and reimagining what relationality between First and Second peoples and with land and animals might entail. As is discussed in the next chapters, “overhearing” Indigenous Christians and their expressions of theology is a step towards lives that are drawn together in connectedness, belonging, truthfulness and prophetic empowerment.

Chapter 6: Modes of Relating and Becoming

‘Scuse me, Pastor.
Yes, David?
Pastor, is God a blackfella?
He just look at me . . . real strange.
If I miss Sunday School they say to me, ‘Where you been, David, eh? The devil took you away.’
I say, ‘No. I bin dancing . . . I done a lotta dancin’.’

- David Gulpilil and Reg Cribb, Gulpilil

Figure 6.1 Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil on the set of Charlie’s Country. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.

6.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter continues the discussion of Jennings’ theories on Christian-colonial social performance. Chapter 5 discussed Jennings’ theological revisionism regarding the transformation of place and the development of race. Jennings further develops his critique through the analysis of three “agents of colonialism”—the merchant, the soldier and the missionary. His analysis of the agents provides a “creative crossing” with the Accidental Trilogy. As is demonstrated in this chapter, the modes of relating espoused by these agents are both performed and subverted off-screen and on-screen.568

The chapter is organised into three sections. Section 6.2 outlines Jennings’ three agents of colonialism. Section 6.3 discusses the intersection between the agents of colonialism and the on-screen world of the Accidental Trilogy. Section 6.4 contemplates the modes of production involved in the Accidental Trilogy.

In this chapter I propose that the relationship between de Heer, Gulpilil and the community at Ramingining offers an alternative mode of relationality to that of the colonial agents. The Accidental Trilogy disrupts the modes of relating espoused by the merchant, the soldier and the missionary, thereby providing a cinematic “space of communion” where history, memory and place are acknowledged and “compelling gestures of connection, belonging, and invitation” are enacted. The collaboration between de Heer and Gulpilil is an example of the kind of joining that Jennings encourages his readers to embody in their own contexts: joining that disrupts “pedagogical imperialism” and whiteness in order to reimagine life together. Section 6.5 brings together the world of the films and the world in front of the films to discuss the makarrata ceremony and the implication for relationality that arise from its usage in the past and present.

6.2 Agents of Colonialism: the Merchant, the Soldier and the Missionary

Jennings’ theological method in The Christian Imagination relies on case studies of individuals to narrate Christian social performance. In a chapter titled, “Disfigurations of Christian Identity” Jennings uses broad categories to further develop his thesis concerning Christian relationality and the intersection of race, displacement, private property and supersessionism. He defines three agents active in the colonial moment: the merchant, who created private property and the commodification of people and place in new lands; the soldier, who protected and enforced the boundaries established by the merchant; and the missionary, who participated in the transformation of space through importing European culture along with Christianity. Jennings aims to identify broad patterns of relating which the merchant, the soldier and the missionary established during modern colonialism, the effects of which are still present today.

As Jennings’ personal experience and the case studies used in The Christian Imagination demonstrate, the experience of human lives—which are full of

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contradictions and vicissitudes—do not always fit within neat categories. However, on a theoretical level, the agents remain useful for revealing patterns of *relating* and *becoming* within colonialism which have implications for theology in the present. Jennings examines not only the transformation that took place through these modes of *relating* but also the ways the three agents transformed what it meant to *become*. In other words, what to desire, how to belong and identities to which to aspire.

As demonstrated in chapter 5, Christian theology and polity influenced colonial agendas. As colonial agents, the merchant, soldier and missionary performed interconnected, yet distinct, modes of *relating*. Drawing on trinitarian imagery, Jennings describes the “distinct but not divisible” actions of the three agents as *perichoresis*. The Christian-colonial bodies of the three agents performed modes of *relating* and brought about the transformation of spatial configurations in new geographic settings.

Two characteristics marked the merchant, the soldier and the missionary as they undertook their duties in new lands: courage and greed. The papal bulls, along with the Letters Patent issued by English royalty, depict possession of the other in terms of both land and souls. For example, Jennings cites the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex*, 1455, which sanctioned the acquisition of new lands—and therefore papal control over space—with the subsequent goal of gathering sheep into the “single divine fold” so they “may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls.”

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570 Italics are used for “relating” and “become” to emphasise that these are Jennings’ concepts with specific meanings.
573 Greed and courage are descriptors used for James Cook, Captain of the first European vessel to reach the east coast of Australia. Noel Pearson, writing from within a contemporary Australian context refers to his courage: “Whatever the ideological and symbolic villainy he represents to Aboriginal people, there is no mistaking Captain James Cook’s extraordinary courage and stature as a seafaring explorer.” Noel Pearson, “A Rightful Place: A Road Map to Recognition,” in *A Rightful Place: A Road Map to Recognition*, ed. Shireen Morris (Victoria: Black Inc., 2017), 46–47. Indigenous elder, Hobbles Danaiyarri, using Aboriginal English for the benefit of his audience, attests to the greed that Jennings identifies: “You, Captain Cook, you the only one bringing in new lotta man. Why didn’t you give me fair go for my people? . . . Should have askem about the story. Same thing, I might go on another place, I might askem. I might stay for a couple of days. You know. That’s for the me fellow Aboriginal people. But you, Captain Cook, I know you been stealing country belong to me fellow. Australia, what we call Australia, that’s for Aboriginal people. But him been take it away. You been take that land, you been take the mineral, take the gold, everything. Take it up to this Big England.” Hobbles (as told to Deborah Bird Rose) Danaiyarri, “The Saga of Captain Cook,” in *Australia’s Empire*, ed. Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 31.
Jennings broadens his examples of the agents of colonialism to others such as the statesman, the citizen and the peasant (for the Australian context, I would also add: the convict, the settler, the explorer and the migrant).

According to Jennings, these categories of people all exist within or evolve from, the interconnected modes of *relating* and *becoming* embodied by the merchant, soldier and missionary. These three agents are connected by their participation in the transformation of space which had ramifications for *relating* with the Indigenous other. At the same time, each agent has unique goals and methods that I examine in turn. Sections 6.2.1, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3 also provide brief examples from Australia’s settler-colonial past and present which demonstrate the actions of the agents of colonialism.575

6.2.1 “The Way of the Merchant”

The commodification of people and place is the basis of Jennings’ “way of the merchant.”576 People and place were used for utilitarian purposes without considering the consequences for either land or First Nations peoples.577 Land theft—justified by *terra nullius*—and individual land ownership became the defining paradigm for relating to land. This imported form of land ownership was divorced from the history, story and sacred custodianship enacted by First Nations peoples. Jennings summarises this mode of relating as follows:

575 My approach in providing this historical background is illustrative rather than exhaustive. In agreement with Stephen Gray I acknowledge that the retelling of history in Australia is a contested and complex area. As an example of the complexity, Gray states that the protection and assimilation eras in the Northern Territory from 1863 to 1972 took place in settings where “good intentions” and the protection of vulnerable First Nations peoples, particularly women and children, were present in government policy and Christian mission practice. Gray’s research, however, paints a picture of policies informed by social Darwinism and eugenics, pastoral employment practices akin to slavery, massacres and brutality and control of the “half-caste” population “by absorbing the coloured population into the white.” Furthermore he argues that policies which used the guise of protection had other motivations such as assimilation and control of people and land. Stephen Gray, *Brass Discs, Dog Tags and Finger Scanners: The Apology and Aboriginal Protection in the Northern Territory 1863–1972* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2011), 2–3, 71.

576 Settler-colonialism in contexts such as Australia was originally defined by Patrick Wolfe as being predicated on the “logic of elimination” (both physical and cultural) of Indigenous populations in order for settlers to repopulate the land. It was thought that in settler-colonial societies labour was imported whereas in other forms of colonialism the use of labour was the key motivation. Historians such as Ann Curthoys, Angela Woollacott and Tim Rowse have challenged this perception. Each have argued that the situation is more complex and nuanced, and that Indigenous labour was an important factor in settler-colonialism in Australia. Moreover, Indigenous peoples survived through adapting and making their skills valuable in the new context that was forced upon them. I mention this broader conversation because it affirms Jennings’ theoretical approach about the connection between the commodification of people and land, while still accounting for distinctions in the Australian context. See Patrick Wolfe, “Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409; Tim Rowse, “Indigenous Heterogeneity,” *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 297–310.

577 For an overview of the commodification of land in Australia with consideration of the role of small and large scale pastoral industries and their relationship with British manufacturing, see Waterhouse, “Settling the Land,” 61.
The merchant mode enforced the material reality of individualism. If you had the money in the New World, you could own the earth. This was an absurdity made truth. It did not matter what people existed there, what history shaped that space, what ancestral voices echoed through that land—you could nevertheless own it. So the merchant mode invited people to live oblivious to the deep histories and textures of specific places, of animals and plants and peoples. Economic concerns based on the acquisition of land became the defining way to relate to place and space. In this context, place refers to geographic locations that are significant for cultural, historical, spiritual or practical reasons. Space refers to land, sea and sky which colonial agents did not recognise as the place of others—seeing what was available for their usage only. Stephen Pickard, a non-Indigenous theologian, describes this distinction as follows: The result is the collapse of place into space. Place as such vanishes . . . Australia was essentially a colonial space to be tamed and inhabited . . . The doctrine of Australia as Terra Nullius—empty place—relies on such conceptuality. It belongs to the dynamic of conquest and assimilation of foreign places as ‘non-place’ or as a place in the process of construction. Yet even this is construed as an issue of transplantation rather than inculturation.

This way of relating severely disrupted the connectivity and relationality between people and place which had existed before the merchant’s arrival. First Nations’ modes of connection are based on: kinship networks; reciprocity; and trading and exchange partnerships between clan and language groups. In the Australian context, Indigenous labour was commodified based on race in domestic and pastoral settings. In most cases, this exchange resulted in poor conditions and rations rather than wages. Struggles for land occurred as the land was claimed either by squatters operating outside government regulation or through government-controlled land grants for large and small-scale producers. Officers and convicts were

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581 Ann Curthoys describes a diverse but ultimately unequal picture of Aboriginal employment in the pastoral industries where Indigenous peoples both adapted and made their skills indispensable and also lived in conditions of “brutal slavery.” Curthoys, "Indigenous Subjects," 97. In 1964 the Gurindji stockmen and their families at Wave Hill Station and Newcastle Waters along with the Northern Australian Workers’ Union campaigned for equal wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers. The initial strike action over pay and conditions culminated in a land claim and propelled the Land Rights Movement. Felicity Meakins, "Conditions under the Vesteyes," in Yijarni: True Stories from Gurindji Country, ed. Erika Charola and Felicity Meakins (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2016), 182–186.

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transported from their homes and required to adapt to a foreign space, with the latter used as forced labour in the market exchange established in the colonies.582

By the late nineteenth century, Yolŋu people had encountered the way of the merchant. The pastoralist company McCartney’s (1885) and the Eastern and African Cold Storage Supply Company (1899 and 1903) leased the land near the present-day community of Ramingining for cattle. The segment “First White Men” in the documentary Twelve Canoes describes the source of conflict when “McCartney walked straight onto our land” without understanding Yolŋu law. Yolŋu law taught that any cattle on Yolŋu county were considered to belong to them. As a reprisal for cattle spearing, poisoned horse meat was deliberately distributed to Yolŋu people. Massacres of Yolŋu men, women and children also occurred during this time. Yolŋu people resisted. In the face of this resistance, coupled with a lack of knowledge of the land, eventually the pastoralists “got up and left.”583 This was a temporary reprieve, and the Yolŋu fight for land rights would require perseverance throughout the twentieth century.584

In terms of relating, Jennings states that: “The merchant sought to bring peoples into an ever-expanding network of exchange.”585 Networks of exchange are a diminished form of relating which replaces kinship relations with contractual relations. This form of “joining” (to use Jennings’ terminology) was comprised of voluntary and involuntary networks of exchange which overrode relationality based on cultural logics of connection. Instead, people were drawn into exchange networks based on being producers, consumers or “as tools to be employed by others.”586

Linking this way of relating explicitly to the African continent and the slave ship, Jennings argues that racial identity “emerged as a commodity form” as black bodies were transported and bought and sold.587 In agreement with

582 Waterhouse, “Settling the Land,” 55. The third strand in Australia’s story consists of people who have immigrated from all over the world. This group has also been removed from place; however, markers of identity with place are often retained and celebrated. Their place in the Australian community is often framed in merchant terms. For example, migrants comprise one-third of small business owners. Cara Waters, “From refugee to runway: How migrants are transforming Australian small business,” The Sydney Morning Herald, January 22, 2018. http://www.smh.com.au/small-business/growing/from-refugee-to-runway-how-migrants-are-transforming-australian-small-business-20180118-h0k7im.html.
583 People of Ramingining, “Twelve Canoes.”
Jennings’ analysis which identifies similarities in colonial logic in various locations, the historian Richard Waterhouse argues that not only was Australia founded as a penal settlement, it also mirrored British experiences in the Americas and the Caribbean where the potential for the acquisition of wealth was a driving force for migration.\(^{588}\) Jennings summarises this sharply: “The way of the merchant was to come to new places, encountering new peoples and asking the basic question, ‘what can I use these people for?’”\(^{589}\) This question became a guiding assumption for framing human connection.\(^{590}\)

Within this matrix of exchange, freedom of movement and other freedoms such as whom one could marry, employment, residence and the care of children were controlled by Aborigines Protection Boards under the legislation such as the *Aborigines Protection Act 25/1909* in New South Wales.\(^{591}\) Spatial boundaries through Aboriginal reserves, institutions or missions run by government or churches existed to control physical space and relational space.\(^{592}\) Jennings’ schema fits the Australian situation in terms of the way economic, spatial and relational domains intertwined to reconfigure people, identity and space within the colonial moment and its aftermath.\(^{593}\)

Along with the disruption of the relationship between land and people, new ways of *becoming* were also enacted. The merchant answered the question,

\(^{588}\) “In New South Wales the European occupation of the interior thus reflected a significant measure of continuity with the complex story of the plantation colonies of the Americas.” Waterhouse, “Settling the Land,” 55. Hannah Middleton argues that attitudes about the inferiority of black people that resulted in indiscriminate killings of First Nations people in Australia were formed through the European experience of the slave trade. Hannah Middleton, *But Now We Want the Land Back: a History of the Australian Aboriginal People* (Sydney: New Age Publishers Pty. Ltd., 1977), 53.


\(^{590}\) As David Olusoga points out, early European expeditions in the “Age of Discovery” may have been concerned with finding new trading partners and acquiring new goods; however, the desire for land and labour soon took over. David Olusoga, *Civilisations: First Contact/The Cult of Progress* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2018), 13.


\(^{592}\) For a detailed account of reserves and institutions along with testimony from First Nations people who were institutionalised during the protection era, often as children, see Harris, *One Blood*, 568–602.

\(^{593}\) Francis Markham and Nicholas Biddle link Australia’s colonial history with current levels of economic disadvantage experienced by First peoples. “The impacts of violence, dispossession and other forms of colonial domination on Indigenous economies are undeniable. Indigenous people were systematically and violently deprived of access to economic resources, especially land, a process that continued until well into the second half of the twentieth century. And though Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engaged with the settler-colonial economy in many diverse ways, underpayment or theft of wages were systematic in many parts of the country until the 1950s and 1960s. This colonial legacy endures into the present.” Francis Markham and Nicholas Biddle, *Income, Poverty and Inequality* (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences, 2016).
“what may people become?” with “people may become significant.”  Here Jennings is referring to the original semantic trajectory of the idea of significance bound to signification or meaning-making. In the colonial context, networks of meaning operated along global lines of production and consumption. Local identities were subsumed within these global networks. This occurred in two ways. First, identities calibrated by place and associated transitions to adulthood associated with the acquisition of skills such as weaving, hunting and fishing, were disrupted due to land theft and dispossession. In its place emerged “a racial calculus built within a scale of whiteness to blackness that collapsed identity onto the body and forced indigenes to negotiate a vision of the self with its new racial symbiote.” Second, the merchant dictated what was “significant” as architecture, dress, manner, gesture, ritual, food and animals were “approximated” in new places leading to judgments about what was desirable and beautiful.  A seemingly egalitarian invitation to significance ensued; however, it was encased in a framework which required moves towards assimilation.

Jennings uses the example of land ownership as a primary marker of significance “showing the new global trajectory of becoming.” The power to shape one’s identity and destiny is asserted through private property. Specifically, land ownership is the basis of the construction of masculine identity within the mode of the merchant. All other identities are subsumed in the merchant’s construction of a white man who “embodies self-sufficiency, control of his destiny, and is the creator of his world.”

6.2.2 “The Way of the Soldier”

The way of the soldier is closely related to the way of the merchant. The merchant commodified and segregated space, a process which resulted in “territorialized space.” The soldier enabled the creation of boundaries and privatisation of space through the “execution or even the threat of military power.” The soldier constructs and defends territory through the establishment and control of bodies in spaces which are determined by boundaries. Differences which are perceived as dangerous are eliminated. The

595 Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 76.
596 Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 76.
597 Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 76.
598 Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 77.
way of the soldier is more reductionist than the way of the merchant. If one refuses to exist within networks of exchange, they are either the enemy or a competitor and are subjected to discipline. Spatial dynamics are a crucial aspect of this way of relating.

From the colonial moment forward, these modes of relating required the reconfiguration of place in order to ensure their life. They required the control of space and the ability to designate places as market zones or militarized zones.602

Control of physical space also meant control of relational space. The market and security concerns dictated where people, animals and things should and should not be located. Forms of relating were anticipated and controlled to these ends through “the capture and control of space and the intentionality of spatial design.”603 The soldier, in the form of marines and officers and their families, featured in the British invasion of Australia as part of the First Fleet in 1788. The way of the soldier expanded in colonial Australia to include the police force and government officials who were given the task of enforcing government policy concerning the control of the lives of First Nations peoples.604

Jennings’ subsequent question about what becoming looked like in the way of the soldier is addressed in the performance of collectivity. From the body of the soldier “flow the wishes and anxieties of family, people, culture or a nation.”605 The training and discipline of the body in the military become an accessible space for solidarity and significance. In military settings, the fraternity of white men opens to include others who wish to participate in the form of conformity which is chosen and not enforced and therefore “bound to self-making.”606 There are limitations to this solidarity as gender and racial logics outside of wartime can override the collective desire for security within times of conflict. For example, in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers experienced racist recruitment regulations, quarantined wages and discrimination upon returning from service.607

604 For example, police were involved in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families in order to place them in institutions. Harris, One Blood, 578–579.
605 Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 78.
The way of the soldier is performed in narratives of protection and security, not only of physical space, but also the imagined space of a “way of life” and “Australian values.” An invitation to be part of this collective identity is offered on the condition that one conforms with the dominant narrative of victory born out of the sacrifice and the “self-making” of the “imagined fraternity of white men.” In recent decades, counter-narratives which challenge perceptions surrounding the egalitarian and cohesive nature of the defence forces have become more prevalent. These have included the contribution and challenges faced by Indigenous peoples and women in the defence forces.

6.2.3 “The Way of the Missionary”

The way of the merchant and the soldier was accepted by all who came to the “New World” intending to acquire land. This included missionaries who not only accepted the modes of relationality of the merchant and soldier, but brought them “into theology as a mode conducive to evangelization and salvation.” Jennings’ assessment of missionary performance discerns two modes of missionary relationality: the missionary who is situated by and between the merchant and the soldier, and the missionary presence that is capable of new ways of life alongside the peoples whose lives they have entered. Jennings views this second kind of missionary as participating in the Gentile trajectory where “the performance of commitment to Jesus” can operate “inside the cultural logics of people not our own.” In his one-man play, Gulpilil provides a poignant critique of the first way of missionary relating.

Then the Methodist Missionaries came to Arnhem Land. From long way across the sea. They brought the Bible without findin’ out who the hell we was and what we was about. They never ask what our Ten Commandments were. The missionaries thought we were savages and our culture was a sin. They wanted to destroy our culture. They wanted to make us British and Christian. We started eating their foods and feeding our babies and children golden syrup, flour and sugar. They got real fat and real sick.

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608 Jennings, “Disfigurations of Christian Identity,” 79. An example of this in Australia is ANZAC Day rituals which use the discourse of “mateship” and “one of Australia’s founding stories.”

609 For example, reports of sexual assault within the defence forces. Anne Goyne, “Abuse of power and institutional violence in the ADF: a culture transformed?,” Australian Defence Force Journal, no. 201 (2017).


Jennings’ framework provides a lens through which to view the diversity and complexity of mission history. The limitation to his binary framework is that individual stories of missionaries and trends in mission history often reveal a mixture of ways of relating over time as missionaries responded to the circumstances around them and the expectations of mission, ecclesial and political bodies.\footnote{Michael Gladwin describes the complexity of the relationship between missionaries and colonial organisations. Michael Gladwin, "Mission and Colonialism," ed. Joel D.S Rasmussen, Judith Wolfe, and Johannes Zachhuber, The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Christian Thought (Oxford: Oxford Handbooks Online, 2017), 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198718406.013.4. For a discussion by Indigenous Christians about diverse experiences of missionaries, see Pattel-Gray and Brown, Indigenous Australia: Dialogue about the Word Becoming Flesh in Aboriginal Churches, 29–48. See also Peggy Brock, "Setting the Record Straight: New Christians and Mission Christianity," in Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change, ed. Peggy Brock (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005).} Jennings’ case study of Bishop John William Colenso whose attitudes and actions changed throughout his time in Southern Africa is an example of this complexity.\footnote{Colenso’s change in attitude came through his close relationships with his Zulu translators. He challenged colonial atrocities towards Zulu people and due to this was ostracised by colonial society. There is resonance between Jennings’ case study of Colenso’s story and the findings of Robert Woodberry in terms of bible translation, education and advocacy. Robert D. Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," American Political Science Review 106, no. 2 (2012).}

Jennings’ first way of missionary relating is typified by the Jesuit José de Acosta Porres who disembarked from a Spanish ship in Lima, Peru in 1572.\footnote{Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 65–116.} He embodies the epistemic vulnerability which accompanied missionaries in foreign lands as they encountered the new, coupled with the “unprecedented power” of world transformation as space was reframed.\footnote{Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 73.} Jennings acknowledges that missionaries were not in control of the transformation of space in the same way that the other agents were, but they were “deeply embedded in its normalization.”\footnote{Jennings, "Disfigurations of Christian Identity," 74.} Furthermore, they were instrumental in creating “holy space.”\footnote{Harris includes this example: the missionaries Rev. William and Mrs Ann Watson and Rev. Johann Handt who were accompanied on their journey across the Blue Mountains to Wellington by a military detachment. The mission was housed in government buildings where soldiers, convict labourers and the missionaries lived together. The Frontier War in the Bathurst region had had a detrimental effect on the Wiradjuri people. “Although the missionaries’ clear association with the military would have convinced local people that they were closely aligned with the colonial authorities, and part of the new order, the remaining Wiradjuri people of Wellington had already been reduced to accepting charity where they could find it.” While complicit in the transformation of Indigenous space, the Watsons were also counter-cultural within their context. They publicly criticised the sexual abuse of Wiradjuri women and children by settlers and they gave medical care to Wiradjuri people who were suffering from European diseases. Over time this did set them apart from other settlers. Harris, One Blood, 63–64. See also 327–333} “Holy space” dictated what was acceptable in terms of spiritual and cultural practices. Salvation and sanctification were inseparable from the remaking of Indigenous peoples in the image of...
European culture. The designation of “holy space” as “mission space” was at the expense of relationality based on the bodily alignment of the missionary toward Indigenous ways of life. Instead, “holy space” and “mission space” were formed by missionary presence and the subsequent spatial realignments.

In Australia, the construction of “holy space” is seen in the creation of missions which schooled First Nations children and adults in European agriculture and customs. This model for Christian mission resulted in the transformation and domestication of place, as “native space” was transformed into “missionary space.”

“Native space” was deemed culturally deficient or imagined as filled with the demonic. The mission historian John Harris provides examples of this attitude in his expansive account of Australian mission history. Missionaries aimed to convince Indigenous people of the superiority of European agricultural practices and thus a “settled life.”

Drawing on the example of the Wellington mission established in 1832, Harris writes:

. . . the Wellington missionaries faced many material difficulties. Drought ruined their crops year by year. Not only did this extend the mission’s total dependence on outside support, it frustrated the missionaries’ attempt to demonstrate to Wiradjuri people what they considered to be the advantages of settled farming life. This was to be a burden to most missionaries for well over another century. They desperately wanted to prove to Aboriginal people the desirability of a European peasant farming community as a Christian lifestyle. Not only did this wrongly tether the gospel to arbitrary social change; it was also very difficult to achieve agricultural success in drought-prone western New South Wales.

Missionaries differed in ways of responding to Indigenous religious practices and ceremonies—although ceremonies were often discouraged, monitored or prohibited. Harris records instances where over time and due to the sharing of space and lives, individual missionaries changed in their attitudes to

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619 The Benedictine brothers at New Norcia are examples of missionaries who initially shared in the labour, food, camps and poverty of the Noongar people before deciding that an itinerant ministry was not as effective as a permanent mission. Brother Rosendo Salvado wrote: “Thus the practical study of the language, laws, traditions and customs of the natives made us realise, among other things, that the very demanding wanderer’s life which we had first adopted was only of doubtful use.” Harris, One Blood, 284.


621 Harris, One Blood, 538–539.

622 Harris, One Blood, 65.

623 For example, the missionary Fred Eaton at the Nebabunna mission from 1936 in South Australia objected to aspects of the Adnyamathanha initiation ceremony on religious grounds. He refused the sacrament of the Eucharist to any Adnyamathanha Christian who attended ceremonies. See Harris, One Blood, 566–568.
Indigenous cultural and religious practices. The complicated settings in which missionaries participated in the transformation of space should also be noted. For example, some missions provided sanctuary to First Nations peoples from the violence and abuses of settler society. The irony of trying to convert First Nations peoples to Christianity in this context of settler violence and abuse was not lost on missionaries or those they sought to convert.

Jennings’ second way of missionary relating which displays openness to the culture of the other can be seen in the latter part of his case study of Colenso’s life, as he joined with his translators in responding to colonial atrocities. Jennings’ example of “bodily alignment” and “joining” where new ways of being in the world are performed is found in Jewish followers of Jesus who expanded “holy space” to include Gentile bodies and Gentile space. Expansion “grew directly out of the incarnate life of God” which through the body of Jesus drew two peoples into a new alignment with each other. This type of joining is also seen in mission history as missionaries developed deep connections with those they served. In some cases, these connections led to an appreciation of the culture, languages, ceremonies and lore of First peoples. It also led to a critical appraisal of the detrimental influence of Western culture on First Nations peoples and to a commitment to fighting for the rights of Aboriginal people.

Along with modes of relating, Jennings addresses the modes of becoming in the way of the missionary. Despite instances where missionaries were able to enter the way of life of those they encountered, Jennings argues that the primary marker of becoming for Indigenous peoples was dictated by the “pedagogical imperialism” of the missionaries. The missionary entered the space of Indigenous peoples imagining it to be shaped by fundamental deficiencies in the social, intellectual and cultural spheres. This was “a Christianity and Christian theology encased in evaluative mode” that resulted in an irreversible asymmetrical mode of relating where Indigenous Christian life was “never in the position of teacher.”

624 Harris, One Blood, 363.
625 Harris, One Blood, 65.
627 Harris, One Blood, 318. The missionary Daniel Matthews was an influence on the prominent Aboriginal rights campaigner William Cooper. See Bain Attwood and Andrew Markus, Thinking Black: William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines’ League (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).
The following advertisement, for a Methodist missionary in 1836, reveals the sense of erroneous superiority which Jennings identifies in the way of the missionary.

We think no heathens more worthy of compassion of Britons, for we believe that it is the universal opinion of all who have seen them that it is impossible to find men and women sunk lower in the scale of human society. With regard to their manners and customs, they are little better than the beasts that perish . . . And when we look around and think how many thousands of these poor dark benighted creatures are wondering around in the woods . . . ignorant of God and of the Saviour who died for them, deprived of the blessings of civilisation, and every domestic comfort . . . we pray that the Lord of the harvest may send forth from your Society more labourers into his vineyard.630

Harris contends, however, that this sense of superiority was coupled with the missionary belief that salvation was available to First Nations peoples. This indicated shared humanity with Europeans and the possibility of redemption through civilisation and Christianisation, a stance that was not universal amongst all their contemporaries. As such Harris’s assessment of the typical sentiment of Christians of all denominations in Australia in the nineteenth century was that they were “both wedded and yet not completely wedded to the spirit of the age.”631

Jennings challenges the deficit discourse nurtured by Christian theology which disproportionately placed the burden of alignment and adaption onto Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples were required to align themselves with a faith “that slowly drained the earth, animals, landscape, and places of their signifying power and turned it all into underdeveloped private property and underutilized foodstuffs.”632 For First and Second peoples who are Christians, the challenge that Jennings offers to practise multiple kinds of alignment and joining will take different forms.633 One of the central tenets

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630 Methodist Church, WA Petition for a Missionary, 1836 cited in Harris, One Blood, 269.
631 Harris, One Blood, 269.
633 Measuring the pedagogical asymmetry contained in the way of the missionary is not straightforward in Australia. Variables at the denominational and congregational level include approaches and commitment (or lack thereof) to Indigenous leadership, Indigenous employment in the church, the funding of Indigenous ministry, theological education, Indigenous theologies and enculturated forms of ministry and worship. Christians have led and participated in acts of Reconciliation. The work is ongoing and reparations still need to be addressed along with the overcoming of pedagogical imperialism. Using theological education and formation for ministry as an example, how many reading lists or core subject requirements for students include Indigenous theology not as an add-on to “theology proper” but as a fundamental component of Christian education and formation? Recent developments in this area include an Indigenous Studies subject as a core subject in Charles Sturt University’s Bachelor of Theology and the partnership between NAIITS: an Indigenous Learning Community and Whitely College and the University of Divinity. Garry Deverell
of Jennings’ work, the trajectory of Gentile Christian existence, where discipleship leads us into cultural logics that are not our own, but as people willing to learn, requires some caution in postcolonial settings. It does not, for example, mean appropriation of the other by Second peoples or negation of cultural identity by First peoples. Rather the goal, according to Jennings, is a new form of belonging that transcends but does not erase other markers of identity.

6.3 The Way of the Accidental Trilogy

The challenge for Christian theology, which has been complicit with the modalities of the merchant, the soldier and the missionary, is to overcome the “obliviousness” to the spatial and relational structures in which it participates. Jennings describes “the painful loss of imaginative possibilities for identity formation within Christian theology.” Moreover, theologians have not adequately critiqued the disjuncture between a Christian vision of joining—the Creator joining with the creation, the calling of Israel, the Incarnation, and the Holy Spirit drawing Jews and Gentiles together—and the actual performance of Christian relationality in colonial settings and their aftermath. He argues that the three agents established a disfigured “created order” through their social performance. Western Christianity is still caught in the orbit of these modes of relating.

The Accidental Trilogy challenges the gaze constructed by the agents of colonialism as it positions the viewer to see from a First Nations perspective. This way of seeing acts as a counter-narrative to the gaze constructed by the agents of colonialism. Close-ups of Gulpilil frequent the screen in The Tracker and Charlie’s Country and his voice-over permeates Ten Canoes. Borrowing Jennings’ terms of “alignment” the viewer is invited to align themselves with the Yolŋu ancestors in Ten Canoes, the men on a mission in The Tracker (specifically the Tracker) and Charlie in Charlie’s Country.

On-screen, “outsider” contact with First peoples is either non-existent (Ten Canoes), critiqued for its violent impact (The Tracker) or treated with ambivalence (Charlie’s Country). The screening of Indigenous cultural practices and perspectives disrupts the European position as being the sole

addresses some of these issues in his recent publication: Garry Worete Deverell, Gondwana Theology: A Trawloolway man reflects on Christian Faith (Reservoir: Morning Star Publishing, 2018).

measure and aspiration for alignment. The content of the Accidental Trilogy is not explicitly Christian, although there are references to Christianity. As the following analysis will show, engagement with the Accidental Trilogy, viewed through Jennings’ framework, can illustrate examples of disfigured Christian identity. Engagement with the films can also illustrate alignment with ways of relating that espouse respect, listening, learning, belonging and reciprocity.

6.3.1 Ten Canoes

Ten Canoes provides an audio-visual performance which challenges the “evaluative mode” of the missionary. Viewers are invited into a hospitable cinematic space of dialogue and exchange. Ten Canoes frames the time before the imposition of the way of the merchant, soldier and missionary. It presents a vision of pre-contact life where Yolŋu lore determined modes of relating and becoming. For example, the makarrata ceremony aims to restore relational harmony between the two clans after the murder of the stranger.636

The viewer observes relationships which relied on networks of reciprocal exchange necessary for survival. Ten Canoes uses the marriage system as a source of humour while also showing tenderness in the relationships. Contemporary audiences might find this aspect challenging; however, its inclusion in the film can lead to a greater cultural understanding of Yolŋu society and survival pre-contact.637 It is a reminder that missionaries and merchants entered a culture which had intricate systems of relating and becoming which were disrupted by their very presence.638 It is also a reminder that cultures are not static and that the “old times” reflected in Ten Canoes require ongoing adaption which is not always straightforward and should not be romanticised.639 Ten Canoes aims to be a conduit for cultural understanding and exchange. The use of humour transforms the film from

636 See 6.5 for further elucidation of the makarrata ceremony.
637 Middleton explains the way that co-wives of an older husband in his forties who was a skilled hunter, along with “levirate” marriage where a widow married her husband’s brother, gave protection to women and children. Middleton, But Now We Want the Land Back: a History of the Australian Aboriginal People, 34–36. An example of this mode of relating in the present is demonstrated off-screen where the moiety kinship system determined casting. A Dhuwa woman can only be married to a Yirritja man and this was honoured on-screen. The Balanda and the Bark Canoes records some of the tension this caused for Mingulu who gave one of his roles to another actor so that this system could be honoured.
638 Harris gives examples of missionaries interfering with traditional marriage practices. Harris, One Blood, 203.
639 See Barbara Glowczewski, Desert Dreamers (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2000).
being solely an ethnographic text into one which is enjoyable for a broader audience.

6.3.1.1 Overcoming “Pedagogical Imperialism” in *Ten Canoes*

The expression of Christianity in and through culture requires navigation by all Christians. However, Jennings’ model outlines a power imbalance that exists due to the alignment between European culture and the Christian faith. He argues that Indigenous Christians have inherited a diminished form of Christian imagination in the way of the missionary. It was Christianity that required alignment with whiteness. In response, Jennings argues that Indigenous Christians can embody Christian practices through “native religious and cultural performance enacted in Christian form.”

*Ten Canoes* is not an example of Yolŋu and Christian performance. Rather, part of its contribution to Christian theological dialogue is as an audio-visual performance of Yolŋu culture, humour and spirituality which overcomes the deficit discourse found in the way of the missionary.

The transmission of knowledge is depicted on-screen through the interactions of Mingululu and Dayindi. The audience is also invited to adopt Dayindi’s posture of a learner as they too enter the story. *Ten Canoes* shares with audiences that the land has a story. This insight establishes modes of relating and becoming that are different from the ways of the merchant, soldier and missionary. The “pedagogical imperialism” of the way of the missionary is subverted by David Gulpilil’s creation story and other Yolŋu cultural and religious practices on-screen. As noted in chapter 2, film analysts Kim Clothier and Debra Duduk state that the non-Yolŋu viewer is invited and guided into every aspect of the film by the Storyteller and the subtitled dialogue.

The exception to this is the scenes depicting Ridjimiraril’s death dance. The Storyteller continues to instruct the viewer regarding what is happening. There are, however, people who will always know more than the non-Yolŋu viewer—people who do not need to be told how to respond to what has taken place:

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642 Dudek, “Opening the body: Reading *Ten Canoes* with critical intimacy.”
**Storyteller:** And the people know . . .

(Small groups of people begin to emerge from different parts of the bush, all coming in the same direction)

**Storyteller:** See? They know. They come out from the bush, from everywhere. They are coming for Ridjimirail.643

The singing and wailing scenes during Ridjimiraril’s death dance do not contain subtitles. This has the effect of positioning non-Yolŋu Matha speakers as outsiders whose audio-visual participation in this ceremony is limited. The cinematic experience of coming close to the ceremony but with limited comprehension can overcome the “obsessive evaluative gestures born of the missionary.”644 This, along with the Storyteller’s insider knowledge, schools the viewer in waiting for knowledge to be revealed and accepting the discomfort of limited comprehension. The film’s unresolved ending also contributes to this sensation. The “happily ever after,” a conventional ending in Western stories, is disrupted:

**Storyteller:** And they all lived happily ever after . . . (laughs). No, I don’t know what happened after that. Maybe that Dayindi found a wife. Maybe he didn’t. It was like that for my people.

The ending mirrors the disruption to the conventional Western beginning in Scene 1:

**Storyteller:** Once upon a time, in a land far, far away . . . (laughs) No, not like that. I am only joking. But I am going to tell you a story.

This playful approach to Western storytelling conventions is contained within a framing device for the entire film, which privileges the Storyteller and his knowledge. The effect of Scene 1 and the final scene, Scene 153, mirroring each other is that they remind viewers of their place as an outsider who are invited into the narrative world of the Storyteller. The three versions of *Ten Canoes* also become relevant at this point. The storyteller’s voice-over in English and the Yolŋu Matha version with subtitles act as an invitation to a broader audience while the Yolŋu Matha version without subtitles is a further reminder that there is knowledge that requires translation for our comprehension. Another example of this mirroring is in the Storyteller’s introduction and conclusion:

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Scene 1 Storyteller:

It’s not your story... it’s my story... a story like you never seen before. But you want a proper story, eh? Then I must tell you some things... of my people, and my land... Then you can see this story, and know it.

Scene 153 Storyteller:

But now you’ve seen my story. It’s a good story. (The breeze blows through the reeds, the sound of magpie geese echoes across the swamp). Not like your story, but a good story all the same.

This stance of coming close to the story and “knowing” it through the invitation of the storyteller further subverts the “pedagogical imperialism” of the way of the missionary. The networks of exchange in the way of the missionary are also reimagined so that the knowledge bearer retains ownership of their story and offers it to the audience in the form of a gift which is shared. Ten Canoes provides a space to practise the posture of sharing, of coming close to the other without possessing the other.

The way of the missionary can be further transformed as this posture is transferred to the world in front of the film. First Nations theologians such as Djiniyini Gondarra, Djungadjunga Yunupingu and Dhanggal Yunupingu discuss their experience of being Yolŋu and being Christian with balanda (European/non-Aboriginal) Christians:

We see spirituality as having shaped Aboriginal people in the way that something is put together as an arrangement of parts and built as a framework. Our faith grows stronger when we have ceremonies, song and dance, when our people are close to us every day of our life, mainly in ceremonies, and there is a feeling of unity and wholeness. What European missionaries taught us did not respect Yolngu ways of life; we were as one tree cut in half. Wholeness came only when we could express our spirituality in a Yolngu way.645

Listening to Yolŋu theologians broadens and redefines the way of the missionary to one of reciprocity and the assertion of—rather than the reduction of—Indigenous agency (this point is further developed in 6.3.4).

The postures of sharing and receiving in the mode of reception are not passive ones. As previously noted, (in 2.4.2), Lyn McCredden argues that dialogue is a necessary component in the exchange between film and viewer.

The dialogue which takes place between living cultures—represented on and off-screen—as differences are named and negotiated is the first step in a respectful exchange. She contends that engagement with Ten Canoes will not consist solely of “patient silence, or enshrinement of all that is seen to be represented by the other.” McCreddon does not draw universal conclusions concerning how audience members will respond to the representation of difference in Ten Canoes. Difference encompasses the dynamic between the past and the present as well as differences between cultures. For both Yolŋu and non-Yolŋu audiences, Yolŋu ways of being and relating raise questions about how to integrate alternative ways of relating and becoming in contemporary Australia. Ten Canoes is a statement of cultural survival, agency and adaption. For Second peoples, it is a poignant reminder that alternative modes of relating and becoming are part of the Australian story in both the past and the present.

6.3.2 The Tracker

The Tracker uses archetypes which simplify and amplify the thoughts, actions and traits associated with each character. This cinematic construction draws on the historical record without replicating the specifics of one time or place. On-screen the Fanatic affirms the deformed colonial “created order” formed by the merchant, the soldier and the missionary. Conversely, the Tracker disrupts and acts outside of the assumptions and ways of relating and becoming which are placed on him. The Follower undergoes a movement between these two positions which concludes with him constructing a different form of relating with the Tracker where asymmetrical power relations are deconstructed and reimagined.

6.3.2.1 “The Way of the Merchant” in The Tracker

The way of the merchant reduces relationality to the exchange between producers and consumers. In addition, the way of the merchant “was to

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648 Kathryn Tanner provides an account of the dynamic and multivalent nature of culture from an anthropological and theological perspective. Her assessment largely relates to (mis)conceptions of a single “Christian culture.” This intersects with the different modes of Yolŋu cultural expression represented in Ten Canoes and with Indigenous theologies that make explicit the cultural mediation which is implicit in all Christian expression. Kathryn Tanner, Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
649 For example Yolŋu land management techniques, drawn from centuries of seeing people and place as connected, can be instructive for shared life and ecological survival on our continent today. Peter Djigirr and others talk about their role as rangers in preserving the Arafura Swamp, see Peter Hannam, “’Smoke Money’ offers an unexpected solution,” The Sun-Herald, November 5, 2017. See also the clip “Nowaday Custodians” in Still Our Country.
come to new places, encountering new peoples and asking the basic question ‘what can I use these people for?’ The Fanatic uses the Tracker as part of his government mission. The First Nations family groups which the party encounters are outside the networks of exchange and private property. Their status in this way of relating is contested and vulnerable. The Fanatic does not apply the same standards of justice for their murder that he applies to the Fugitive. The Fugitive’s victim was a white woman. Whiteness has value in the colonial network of exchange and within the European legal system. In terms of signification she represents the good and the beautiful. On the other end of the scale of signification is the judgment of the Fanatic that the Aboriginal victims are “cannibals,” “treacherous” and ironically, given his unprovoked attacks resulting in deaths, “murderers.” The Fanatic states: “They’ll kill a white man in broad daylight.”

The Tracker’s inner monologue is communicated in English and Bundjalung through the song, *My People*, during the first massacre. “In this land long ago. We lived our own way. Now we’re no longer free. We are dispossessed. People of mine.” These lyrics present a counter-narrative to the way of the merchant. Here land, ways of life, language and relationships are the identity markers for people, not the acquisition of private property, racial classifications or participation in networks of unequal exchange.

The merchant, the soldier and the missionary have contributed to “nation building” in physical terms and in terms of the creation of national identity. Jennings describes the self-sufficient man who is shaped by colonial logic where the autonomy and mastery of one’s domain is a primary value. Narratives surrounding the European explorers, early settlers and missionaries include notions of survival against the odds in barren and hostile environments. Their success in “conquering” the land is celebrated as a great feat. The spatial configurations of the merchant and soldier are challenged in *The Tracker*. Both the land and the Tracker himself resist enclosure. Even as he is put in chains, his agency dominates the plot and brings it to its dramatic conclusion. The Tracker further subverts colonial control of his body and space by returning to his country at the end of the film. Widescreen and high angle shots give the impression that the police party are adrift

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651 de Heer, *The Tracker*, Scene 27.
653 Boer, *Last Stop Before Antarctica*. 
within a landscape that is working against them. Notions of private property and “taming” this landscape seem equally futile.

6.3.2.2 “The Way of the Soldier” in *The Tracker*

The soldier’s role in Jennings’ schema is to protect the spatial and relational boundaries and enclosures established by the merchant. On-screen, the boundaries are not the physical boundaries and enclosures of private property. The boundaries which need protection relate to “natural justice” in the form of European law. The police take on this role in *The Tracker* as they pursue the Fugitive. Within the vast terrain, the police party is convinced that the boundaries of British law that have been imported as part of “civilisation” can be maintained. Across the same terrain, “tribal law” is also in operation and is successful in punishing the Fugitive for the crime of rape, which he did commit.

The scenes of “tribal justice” as the Fugitive is punished for his crime are a contrast with the unprovoked massacres undertaken by the police party. The body of the Fanatic stands in for the soldier. De Heer includes in his script a reversal of a liturgical motif. After the first massacre scene, the Fanatic’s actions as he says *Sic transit gloria mundi* (so passes the glorious world) are described in the script as follows: “The Fanatic points the revolver several times at the corpses, as if in benediction.” This “anti-blessing” reveals the murderous reality of colonialism in Australia and alludes to the role of the church in colonialism.

The Fanatic is eventually brought to justice as the Tracker uses elements from the Indigenous and British law system in the Fanatic’s trial and execution. The Fanatic’s final speech is a caricature of a racist, white, colonial police officer. His soliloquy, delivered at an almost surreal moment in the film as the Tracker prepares the noose for the Fanatic’s trial and execution, conveys several of Jennings’ notions: descriptions of identity using racial characteristics rather than connection with place; the way of the merchant where aspiration is aligned with European cultural norms of private property; and references to service of “Almighty God” in undertaking to “civilise” Aboriginal peoples.

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The four men in the police party are voluntary or involuntary agents of colonialism. The Tracker occupies a liminal space within the police party. He is simultaneously one of the four on a shared mission and also separated by his indigeneity, subordinate position and divided loyalty. This demonstrates the tension within the way of the soldier as the guise of conformity is challenged. The Tracker discards items of his uniform throughout the film, symbolically demonstrating that his allegiance is different to the colonial agenda of western law enforcement. His inner monologue in the song *Far Away Home* “there the hunt leaves no blood on my hands,” alludes to two different types of hunting: the hunt for animals and the violent actions of the police party during the “hunt” for the Fugitive. Guilt is attached to the latter but not the former. This is de Heer’s critique of the way of the soldier where boundaries are enforced with bloodshed and brutality with no regard for the humanity of the victims. The evocative soundtrack, Peter Coad’s paintings and on-screen depiction of the violence of the way of the soldier, combine to draw the viewer to a place of truth-telling, lament, memorial, mourning and contrition.

### 6.3.2.3 “The Way of the Missionary” in *The Tracker*

*The Tracker* is set in a “contact zone” where the frontier was not only a place of violence, asymmetrical power relations and discrimination but also a place of physical proximity, cross-cultural exchange and interdependence. In this context, the Follower changes throughout the film as the Tracker’s knowledge and skills challenge the “evaluative mode,” found in the way of the missionary. Close-up shots of the Tracker’s knowing looks signal to the audience that his knowledge is superior in this context. These looks occur when the white officers are shaving or shooting randomly in open terrain after their pack horse is deliberately speared.

The Tracker’s delivery of absolution in Latin invites multivalent interpretations. One such interpretation is that the use of Latin represents an imported Christianity that would undergo a transformation as linguistic and Christian “holy space” was extended to the bodies, languages and

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656 For insight into the complex and conflicted roles of trackers and Native Police, see Langton, “Out From the Shadows.”

657 The concept of contact zone was used in chapter 2. The contact zone was coined by Mary Louise Pratt to describe places of cross-cultural encounter which fostered greater understanding of the other in colonial settings. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* For Australian examples of the contact zone see, Tracy Spencer, “Getting Off the Verandah: Contextual Australian Theology In-Land and In Story,” *Pacifica* 19 (2006). Spencer’s work is discussed in section 6.4 of this chapter.

cultures of First Nations peoples. Jennings argues that Latin was instrumental in homogenising and controlling literary and ecclesial space at the beginning of modern colonialism. It was the language that “joined multiple peoples to the thinking of the church.” Latin remained a “crucial language for intellectual commerce” well into the nineteenth century; however, the Protestant Reformation and the introduction of the printing press had already opened new literary space in the vernacular. By giving absolution in Latin, the Tracker expands Christian holy space to include his body in a role usually reserved for priests. He is an enigmatic figure on the margin of society and yet positions himself in the centre of the liturgical action.

The Tracker gives absolution at two points in the film. First, for the Veteran who plays the role of a bystander and second, to the Fanatic who is undisputedly a perpetrator of violence. The Veteran uttered “sorry” when he placed the neck chain on the Tracker. The Fanatic, however, remained unrepentant to the end. Both are given absolution—a symbol of forgiveness and restoration—immediately after or at the point of death. The liturgical act of absolution by the Tracker stands in an ambivalent relationship with the moments of repentance, unrepentance, retribution and recognition which are present in the film.

The ambivalence is due to the fact that The Tracker raises the issues of justice, punishment, redemption, atonement and forgiveness for the sins of colonialism without a definitive resolution. Rather, as film critics Felicity Collins and Therese Davis argue, the audience is left with a sense of “shock” that brings the past into the present. The absolution by the Tracker raises the issue of whether “colonial guilt” can be absolved and whose role it is to offer any such absolution. Wiradjuri journalist Stan Grant is not convinced absolution is the responsibility of Indigenous peoples. In the case of the Fanatic’s death, his execution (followed by absolution) occurs after the Tracker has read the charges against him—an important part of that scene. The fact that absolution only comes after death signals that de Heer has not separated truth-telling and judgment from the act of absolution on-screen.

660 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 227. For an account of Bible Translation in Australia, see Harris, One Blood, 805–830.
661 Collins and Davis, “Disputing History.”
The coupling of judgment and absolution is stark in the film and acts as a reminder of the complex, contested and unfinished business of Reconciliation and justice in Australia. One of the reasons Reconciliation is a contested concept is due to the fact, starkly portrayed in *The Tracker*, that the initial relationship between First Nations peoples and those who invaded and stayed was one of violence and bloodshed.\textsuperscript{663} Reconciliation usually implies that there was a harmonious relationship to begin with, as in the case of siblings reconciling. *The Tracker* makes it clear that the initial relationship was not harmonious. This is why calls for truth-telling, in local and national contexts, remains one of the central pre-cursers to genuine Reconciliation.\textsuperscript{664}

The Tracker again broadens “holy space” by including his law inside, rather than outside, the mind of God in the film’s coda. “God respects Aboriginal law as much as he respects white law man’s . . . maybe more.”\textsuperscript{665} This statement subverts the way of the missionary which sought to exclude rather than include First Nations culture inside “holy space.” This scene is a performance of the move by Indigenous theologians who similarly discern within their culture that which can be celebrated and affirmed as part of their Christian belief (see 6.3.4 below). The Follower’s actions and changed attitude throughout the film are analogous to Jennings’ notion of “Gentile positionality”—a posture which stands alongside overhearing the cultural logics of others with a willingness to be challenged and transformed by the encounter.

### 6.3.3 Charlie’s Country

This section draws on *Charlie’s Country* and the two documentaries which form part of the “country suite,” *Another Country* and *Still Our Country*. Together they bring the ancient past of *Ten Canoes* and the colonial past of *The Tracker* into the present. Echoes of the way of the merchant, soldier and missionary are still present; however, they are more subtle as a complex reality with competing influences is presented on-screen.


\textsuperscript{665} de Heer, *The Tracker*, Scene 118.
6.3.3.1 Ways of Relating and Becoming in the Past and Present

In 2013, the sharing economy that enabled survival before European contact is still in operation. For example, the viewer observes Charlie’s $300 paycheque being distributed to three people in the process of buying his groceries. In *Another Country*, Gulpilil addresses a balanda audience. He contrasts his culture with balanda culture and identifies differences in approaches to money, food, possessions, social and spatial organisation. These differences impact residents of his community in Ramingining. “Self-determination,” according to Gulpilil, resulted in the government relocating people from their lands to a centralised location:

This place is all wrong for our culture. No one is living in their own land anymore. All people living together who shouldn’t live together. All different languages mixed up. And no way to go back. Too many people now to live like old times. That way we all starve to death just like you white fellas in the bush (chuckles). We had to learn to live whitefella’s way. Shopping, money, motorcars, driving licence, everything! And always people on top of us telling us what we had to do and what we can’t do.

*Charlie’s Country* shows drug dealers, bureaucrats who represent the NT Intervention, and the community store as the ones who engage in the way of the merchant in 2013. Charlie scoffs at the food on display in the shop, “Same old junk food, same old prices. Where’s all the decent food? The food in prison is better than this.” Will Stubbs, who is the coordinator at the Buku-Larrngay Mulka centre in Yirrkala Northern Territory, frames the acquisition of food in terms of both the market and health. In an introduction to a collection of paintings by Yolŋu artist Mulku Wirrpanda


667 In an intertextual connection that transcends the off-screen and on-screen world of the Accidental Trilogy, Damon Gameau, who plays the Follower in *The Tracker*, included a section on remote Aboriginal health in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara region in his documentary *That Sugar Film* (2014). Gameau traces his initial desire to research the effect of sugar to a visit to Gulpilil’s home and family after filming *The Tracker*. Gameau found hunting and “living off the land” with Gulpilil, “magic.” However, he was shocked by the amount of Coca Cola that was consumed in the community. Gameau’s film showed the difference that having a nutritionist employed through the Mai Wiru (good health) project in the community of Amata made. The employment of a nutritionist was disbanded due to cuts in government funding. Gameau has since established a foundation that has supported the Indigenous-run organisation Mai Wiru to continue their work in other communities. Long-time community consultant, John Tregenza, was initially wary of participating in Gameau’s documentary. He agreed on the basis of “Ngapartji Ngapartji [the idea of returning a favour]... that is if the film was a success, he would set up a foundation to help the people to understand the sugar message.” See Kent Gordon, “That Sugar Film: Documentary maker Damon Gameau pays back Indigenous health initiative,” 2016, accessed January 4, 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-05/that-sugar-film-filmmaker-shares-health-message/7811230.
and balanda artist John Wolseley who have collaborated to paint Mulkun’s country at Yirrkala, Stubbs writes:

The human genius to do ‘less for more’ allows deep-fried chips with chicken salt to become the ‘tuber’ of choice among young Yolŋu. And these Yolŋu are dying faster than the ancient knowledge itself on a diet that results in obesity and diabetes. The market dictates that selling canned and frozen fatty, salty, sugary products offers the best return for the outsiders who sell to remote communities. And thus Yolŋu children are raised on Coke and red lollies.668

Stubbs then refers to the paintings of plants in the area painted by Wirrpanda and Wolseley: “This collection of paintings is a love poem to those delicious and bounteous foods which surround the children even as they are being poisoned.”669 Access to this bounteous food is also the case for Charlie when he can live in the bush. Doctors, legislators and bureaucrats represent a neo-colonial workforce who attempt to help but, like Charlie’s ill-fitting dentures, never quite achieve the desired outcome.

Gulpilil’s commentary on the performance of Christianity in Ramingining in Another Country includes his interpretation of the perichoressis of the relationality embodied by the merchant, soldier and missionary.670 The extended quotation below, from Another Country, is included because he outlines the disruption that took place as each agent—represented as bosses, cattle owners, police, government and missionaries—impacted his community in a variety of ways:

And that’s what other people don’t understand. We Yolŋu people around here we lived thousands of years our own way. We owned all the land around here. Small groups on different parts. On our land we minded our business. We had no bosses. No one telling us what to do and no one telling us what not to do.

Think about that! No Australia government. No Territory Government. No Council. No Police. No God or Jesus or Centrelink or Headmaster. Just us in the bush in charge of ourselves. We were free. We could live our own way.

Then white man came with cattle. If we didn’t do exactly what they wanted us to do on our own land those cattle men would shoot us or poison us.

So we fought them until they went away.

Then later on the missionaries came. They gave us sugar, flour, tea and tobacco. They tried to tell us what to do. They didn’t shoot us or poison us so we let them stay. Mostly we still lived in the bush the old way. I was born in the bush under a tree. When we still lived like that. Some of the missionaries learnt our language. They taught us things too. Like building houses and reading and writing.671

Gulpilil’s voice-over narration accompanies a montage of footage shot in the community: a kangaroo being captured, cooked and eaten; people at the Ramingining store; images of the bush and swamp, sometimes with horses in the frame. It is the same country as Ten Canoes; however, life now involves navigating two cultures instead of one.

6.3.3.2 Critiquing the Prison and Charlie’s Country

The way of the soldier enabled the creation of boundaries and privatisation of space through the “execution or even the threat of military power.”672 This section addresses Jennings’ examination of the prison. The aims of the prison overlap rather than correlate with the aims of the soldier. In his commentary on Acts Jennings writes:

The prison has never been about criminals but about societies. As this story of Paul and Silas indicates (Acts 16:25–40), the prison is a tool for control and containment. The question we must continually ask is, Who desires to use this tool?673

When de Heer and Gulpilil started to write Charlie’s Country, Gulpilil was in prison on assault charges. De Heer has stated that prison acted as a circuit breaker in Gulpilil’s life, which enabled him to address his alcohol addiction. However, Gulpilil’s story exists within a context where First Nations peoples are over-represented in prison populations. The statistics and testimonies relating to Aboriginal deaths in custody also tell a story of systemic racism in the judicial system.674

673 Jennings, Acts, 169.
674 Guardian Australia, "Deaths inside: Indigenous Australian deaths in custody," 2018, accessed May 2, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2018/aug/28/deaths-inside-indigenous-australian-deaths-in-custody. In the past ten years there has been an eighty-eight per cent increase in the number of Aboriginal and
On-screen, police presence in the community and Darwin regulates what Charlie and his friends can do and where they can go. Eventually, Charlie is arrested and brought into police custody. The camera is focused on Charlie, as his hair is shaved in an action of enforced submission and uniformity. His eyes look directly into the camera, conveying Charlie’s humanity and his sorrow.

Figure 6.2 Charlie in prison. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.

Throughout the Book of Acts, as Jennings makes clear, Luke the evangelist repeatedly returns to the scene of the prison because the way that bodies are treated matters to disciples of Jesus. Furthermore, an angel of the Lord breaks open the prison and, in the process, dismantles the correlation between being guilty and being incarcerated. The arrest, conviction and sentencing of Jesus similarly reveal this truth. The disciples of Jesus “cut through the quick and easy alignments of crime and punishment.” What constitutes a crime is constructed at the interface of “public policies, government actions or inactions, and concealed public interests.” Furthermore, racism and access to resources play a crucial role in

675 Jennings, Acts, 168.
676 Jennings, Acts, 169.

determining who is arrested, charged, tried and convicted. Jennings takes the position that prisons are neither natural, necessary or neutral for maintaining social order. For Christians, this means we “resist the collapsing of our moral vision into the moral language that surrounds judicial systems and imprisonment.”\textsuperscript{677} According to Jennings, this is where the imperative to be present in prisons originates (Heb. 13:3). A Christian presence in the prison bears witness to the false morality of the system, along with bearing witness to those incarcerated of a God who is familiar with “confinement and torture, disrespect and abuse.” Christians should also be present in places where laws and social policies are made to ensure equal access to resources.

The initially affable relationship between the police officer Luke and Charlie eventually deteriorates into reciprocal violence. The arrest and incarceration scenes in \textit{Charlie's Country} are pre-empted by scenes where Charlie is frustrated by infringements such as having both his hunting rifle and spear confiscated. These scenes, along with the court scene where Charlie addresses the magistrate in one of his languages, do not give easy answers to complex issues. The inclusion of these scenes, viewed in conjunction with Jennings’ imperative to critique the function of the prison and the way of the soldier, however, reminds viewers to be present and alert to systemic injustices that First peoples face in the justice system where each inmate has a story that is not necessarily heard or understood.\textsuperscript{678}

\textbf{6.3.3.3 Easter in Ramingining}

The second and third instalments of the “country suite”, \textit{Another Country} and \textit{Still Our Country}, depict expressions of Christianity in Ramingining. Balanda church support workers reside in the community; however, their presence is not encountered on-screen. Christianity is mediated directly to the viewer by Yolnu people which reverses the “pedagogical imperialism” of the missionary. In the section titled: “Ramingining Warrior: Dawu Travels in Many Directions” in \textit{Still Our Country}, Michael Dawu shares his testimony of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{677} Jennings, \textit{Acts}, 169.
\item \textsuperscript{678} The documentary \textit{Prison Songs} (Kelrick Martin, 2015) takes viewers inside Berrimah Prison (where Gulpilil served his time) and tells the stories of inmates using interviews and a range of musical genres. The prison was built in 1979 with a capacity for 115 prisoners. In 2014 more than 800 prisoners were incarcerated. The prison was decommissioned as an adult prison in late 2014; however, it is now a site for the controversial Don Dale Juvenile Detention Centre. At the time of filming \textit{Prison Songs} thirty percent of citizens in the Northern Territory were Aboriginal and yet eighty percent of the inmates in Berrimah prison were Aboriginal.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
his dramatic encounter with Jesus in hospital after a heart attack. A mid-shot of Dawu’s speaking directly to the camera is interspersed with scenes of: him playing the stranger in *Ten Canoes*; traditional dancing; a fluorescent cross lit up; and close-ups of Jesus in the passion play in Ramingining at Easter. As is the case within the rest of the documentary, individuals speak about their experience without explicit verbal commentary from a filmmaker or narrator. This kaleidoscope of images leaves the interpretation of Dawu’s profession of Christianity open to the viewer. Dawu’s uninterrupted and emphatic speech directed at the camera gives agency to his testimony. It features alongside the other accounts of life, traditions and culture in Ramingining in the past and present.

*Another Country* contains eleven minutes of footage of the Easter parade through the streets of Ramingining. Gulpilil again reverses the evaluative mode of the missionary and instructs the viewer regarding what is happening:

> It is Easter time. The crucifixion and the resurrection. Even in Ramingining . . . My friend Dawu. He had a heart attack, in hospital he found God. Dawu is now organising the grand Easter parade. People get themselves ready in their own way . . . For this one day many of us are Christians, but what most of my people believe is not the same as what most white people believe. If we have a Jesus he is black. He’s not all powerful from above. He’s not in charge of us. He’s one of us.

The voice-over in this part of the film accompanies images of pouring rain, children riding bikes and doing backflips over deep puddles, and the parade moving through the streets. Christian worship music is played over the loudspeaker. Young women wearing matching clothes surround the cross and participate in liturgical dancing. A Yolŋu man plays Jesus. Christian space and missionary space have been opened to include his body, representing Jesus’ body, in Ramingining. Here Gulpilil’s Christological insights, that Jesus “is black,” and he is “not in charge of us” rather he is “one of us,” contrast with his previous narration (6.3.3.1 above) about Jesus, God and missionaries telling people what to do and also bringing new knowledge, such as houses, to the community. These two statements are held in tension. The first statement describes a colonial form of missionary *relating*. The second is a statement revealing the “joining” of God in Christ with all people, experienced in this instance in Ramingining.
Gulpilil’s statement that Jesus “is black” resonates with the corrective issued by black liberation theologian James Cone.\(^{679}\) Cone rejected the “white Jesus” associated with white supremacy and oppression. Instead, he famously affirmed that “Jesus is black” due to his identification with the poor, the suffering and oppressed and his status as a Jew living under Roman occupation.\(^ {680}\) For Cone, Scripture reveals a God who elects Israelite slaves as God’s people and chooses to become the “Oppressed One in Jesus Christ.”\(^ {681}\) His theology included an emphasis on the particularity of experience—in his case being black in America—along with God’s identification with the poor, the humiliated, the suffering and the oppressed wherever they are.

Cone’s theological insight adds extra poignancy to the interpretation of the scene of Easter in Ramingining and to Gulpilil’s narration.\(^ {682}\) For example, in the Australian context the church is often envisioned as a British import. How then might “Jesus is black” be understood in an Australian context? Along with a commitment to justice, liberation and self-determination as Cone teaches, the answer lies, in part, in taking the teachings of Indigenous theologians seriously. Listening to Indigenous theologians is a step towards overcoming “pedagogical imperialism” and the forms of knowledge production and relationality that the “way of the missionary” brought to Australia.

Indigenous theology is a form of Indigenous agency. Christianity in Australia is no longer only the imported form that arrived with the British. As the church has grown here, Christianity has changed. In its concrete form the church is embodied through real lives and experiences. This is not to deny that there are powerful, dominant colonial discourses at play. Jennings and others have made it clear that there are. However, it is also crucial not to deny that Indigenous agency has changed the church. Indigenous peoples are part of the church in these lands we now call Australia, and this has changed the church. It is not the same as it once was.

The following section concentrates on Indigenous theologians’ testimonies of God at work in their cultures. Here the particularities of their experience and context are the starting point for theological reflection. Using the same

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\(^{681}\) Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 67.

\(^{682}\) Further interpretive work with Cone’s theology and the use of violence against Aboriginal people in \textit{The Tracker} is an area for further study. James Cone, \textit{The Cross and the Lynching Tree} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011).
perspective as the Fourth Cinema camera, First Nations theologians are narrating their Christian experience within their cultural frameworks. The discussion below draws on particular Indigenous theologians to show their enculturation of Christianity. Overhearing, as a Second person in this context, is a decolonising move that is a step towards the “joining” without imperialism that Jennings proposes. The discussion begins with Jennings’ notion of intercultural joining to describe how participation in “other ways of life” as part of the Spirit’s work in the world might be imagined.

6.3.4 “Culture as Locus of Divine Activity”

The issues of cultural expression and Christian revelation are present throughout Jennings’ theology, with different aspects emphasised at specific points. The heading for 6.3.4, “Culture as Locus of Divine Activity,” is borrowed from Nestor Medina in a paper he wrote in response to The Christian Imagination. Medina is sympathetic to Jennings’ aim of critiquing the imposition of “the ‘white’ racialized universal messianic views as the telos and orientation for the rest of the world.” However, Medina questions whether Jennings is in fact reinscribing a “white” “pseudotheology” by “subsuming people’s ethnocultural identities under the divine covenantal relationship with Israel as enacted in the Israel event.” Medina’s critique is related to the questions raised in chapter 5 (5.5) regarding Jennings’ orientation towards Israel’s land and Israel as a people. Rather than being subsumed by the “Israel event,” Medina proposes:

. . . that the focus on the particularity of Israel should not necessarily lead to valuing one ethnocultural tradition at the expense of all others; rather, it must result in the celebration of the multiple ethnocultural traditions of the world . . . I insist that the Jesus event must be interpreted instead as inclusion and upholding of other distinct ethnocultural horizons as spaces . . .

683 In using the identifier “Indigenous” before theologian to refer to a particular way of approaching theology done by particular people, I acknowledge Jennings’ critique of the compartmentalisation of theology. He argues that identifiers such as orthodox, liberal, evangelical, as well as contextual identifiers such as womanist, feminist, Asian and African, miss the opportunity to reflect the reality of living together which should be at the heart of Christian community. “Such a Christian community would reflect in its work the incarnate reality of the Son who has joined the divine life to our lives and invites us to deep abiding intellectual joining, not only of ideas but of problems, not only of concepts but of concerns, not only of beliefs and practices but of common life, and all of it of the multitude of many tongues.” Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 202.

684 There is an internal dialogue within The Christian Imagination. On the one hand Jennings encourages “theological generosity,” in his case study of Acosta, where he advocates for a missional encounter that resists the urge to name Indigenous spiritualities as idolatrous and instead look for points of connection. On the other hand, Jennings insists that Colenso was mistaken in stepping outside of “theological history” with his conceptions of the universality of the Fatherhood of God. Jennings argues that Colenso’s theology regarding Zulu religion presents a disembodied universalism divorced from the spatial and temporal realities of Christian common life. Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 166.

of divine activity and disclosure (the cultural as \emph{locus theologicus}); the divine act of incarnation thus embodies the possibilities for the creation of a pentecostal pneumatological interculturality.\footnote{Medina, "Transgressing Theological Shibboleths," 433.}

Medina’s insights are helpful for further setting the scene of the contextual work undertaken by Indigenous theologians. In response to Medina’s critique, a close reading of Jennings is needed. A close reading reveals that Jennings rejects any theological move that envisages “new life in Jesus Christ” as the possession of one group of people. When Christianity belongs to one group of people the result, according to Jennings, is cultural nationalism. In response to this claim, Mark Brett argues that Jennings’ conception of cultural nationalism is too narrow and does not account for Indigenous agency within settler-states where the language and practices of “nation-building” within the nation-state are a source of healing, resilience and resistance.\footnote{Mark G. Brett, \textit{Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World} (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 145.} This omission raises questions regarding exactly how Jennings envisages a non-supersessionist Christianity that can still make room for cultural difference.

Jennings also rejects Colenso’s universal theology of the Fatherhood of God. Colenso’s cross-cultural work led him to envisage a universal religious consciousness which could be translated into any culture without the need for lives joined or for the particular revelation of divine presence in time and place. By rewriting salvation history as the history of human consciousness, the soteriological component of Jewish identity is erased and replaced with the English settler, missionary and bureaucrat.\footnote{Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 141.} Jennings’ summary towards the end of his chapter on Colenso makes this point clearly, while still making room for Christian expression in a variety of contexts.

The point here is easy to miss. The tragedy is not contextual reflection; the tragedy is the way divine entrance is imagined among peoples. God’s history is missing—no Israel, no Jesus, no apostles, no material struggle, no divine walking through time and indeed space, real space. Such a walking, such an entrance would be messy, carrying forward Israel’s election and carrying forward many peoples, places, voices, ways of life bound to the Jewish Jesus, always announcing that God is with us.\footnote{Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 167.}

Jennings does not want to diminish the template and impetus for joining or to enable a situation where the activity of God is envisaged outside of

biblical Israel, the Jewish Jesus and the communion of believers. Furthermore, Jennings does not envisage “separate but equal ethnocultural horizons or spaces.” Rather, the body of Jesus enables new forms of intercultural life. “Jew-Gentile existence, theologically speaking, draws us to a complex journey of joining.” This form of joining moves beyond “cultural eradication and assimilation.” Instead, Jennings uses the image of “quilting” as “peoples, ways of life, forms of joy, rituals of memory, and life-strategies for mutual thriving” are drawn into relationship by the Spirit of God. In dialogue with Jennings and with Fourth Cinema, overhearing the testimony of Indigenous theologians is a step towards life together that makes room for different “ways of life” and expressions of faith in a “multitude of many tongues.” As stated above a tension remains as to how Jennings’ reflections on Christian revelation and contextualisation might work in practice. For example, when “divine entry” is imagined amongst peoples with a culture extending back 65 000 years. Indigenous theologians provide unique perspectives on this question which are elaborated upon in the following section (6.3.4.1)

6.3.4.1 “God the Creator was always there...”

The heading above is borrowed from the journalist Paul Daley’s interview with a Yolŋu woman, now passed, who described the connection between Christianity and Yolŋu culture in the following way: “God was there in the beginning and we always believed in the spirit. God the Creator was always there and it’s there in the songlines and in the stories of the land. And he has been reintroduced to us again through the missions. It is not complicated for us.” In terms of Western chronology, Ten Canoes reveals 65,000 years of human habitation in the continent now called Australia. From a Yolŋu perspective the film reveals human habitation since the beginning of the Dreaming. The preamble to Milbi Dabaar, a book written in consultation with several First Nations theologians, also addresses, from a Christian perspective, the question of God’s activity in the land before colonisation: Our ancestors knew God in their own way through story, land and relationships. In rediscovering who we are today, we

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discover the Spirit of God within this heritage and acknowledge its fulfillment in the revelation of the Creator in the person of Jesus Christ. We continue our life with Christ, strengthened by his Spirit, reaffirmed in our Aboriginal identity, and united with all creation in Christ.695

This statement describes continuity between God’s activity in the past through the Spirit of God and the particular way that God is made present in Christ. The authors of Milbi Dabaar point to Christ’s “hidden” presence in “the creative processes behind their country and tradition” (John 1:1-4, Hebrews 1:1-3).

Jesus is no longer an outsider, but one who has been with them from the beginning and is now revealed through the gospel as a brother and Saviour who fulfils all the aspirations of their cultural life.696

In the context of Milbi Dabaar where this statement is found, the sense of “rediscovering who we are today” is based on the desire to be Indigenous Christians who are strong in their identity and able to discern for themselves which parts of their culture they affirm and which parts they reject. Discernment also involves healing from the deficit model and emphasis on cultural assimilation often practised by missionaries. Adnyamathanha theologian Denise Champion reflects this sentiment:

That is so different to how I grew up as a young kid going along to Sunday School and growing up in church. A lot of what we were being taught was “your culture is evil and demonic and you shouldn’t have anything to do with it.” Now I have been challenged to look at our stories with the knowledge that this country is not a young country; it’s a very, very old country. I started thinking about how we have stories that go right back to creation, and I started thinking about this memory, this long memory, that we as Aboriginal people have of God in this country. It goes back beyond 200 years and we have not been allowed or never really had the space to tell those stories and to see Christ in them.697

In this quotation, Champion bridges the on-screen world of the Ten Canoes (“it’s a very, very old country”) and Christian theology in a unique way. Christ is in her stories and the “long memory” of the Adnyamathanha people. Champion also provides a first-hand account of “the way of the missionary” in evaluative mode (“your culture is evil and demonic”).

695 Thomson, Milbi Dabaar, v.
696 Thomson, Milbi Dabaar, iv.
Aboriginal theologian Graham Paulson foregrounds Indigenous spirituality, knowledge and practices in his theological reflection. For example, Paulson, writing in collaboration with Mark Brett, expresses notions of the presence of God, and Christ, in creation and in Indigenous stories, traditions, law, languages and rituals prior to colonisation. One of the ways Paulson constructs his theological argument is to draw on the plurality of religious expression within Israel’s theological linguistic schema. For example, the invocation of “God Most High,” El Elyon in Hebrew, was the name of an Indigenous Creator God in Canaanite religion (Gen 14:18-23).

The use of El Elyon represents a form of joining undertaken by Abram where God can be known through different names. Unlike other Canaanite gods, especially Baal and Asherah, there is no explicit critique of El. This name for God as an aspect of Canaanite culture, along with their priesthood and ownership of the land, is joined with Abram’s understanding of YHWH. This plurality creates room for other Indigenous peoples to bring their own names and expressions of the Creator into conversation with Christianity. Translation is not a straightforward exercise by any means; however, it should not be disregarded as Jennings seems to in his chapter on Colenso, especially when Indigenous theologians themselves undertake the hermeneutical moves.

In addition, according to Paulson, the Indigenous cultural assumption that nature is a source of spiritual revelation is analogous with the testimony of Scripture. Citing Job 12:17–10 where nature reveals God to Job, and Psalm 19:1–2 he argues that:

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700 For examples of this argument elsewhere, see Habel, Acknowledgement of the Land and Faith of Aboriginal Custodians.
701 See also, Brett, Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World, 8.
703 Denise Champion provides examples from within the Adnyamathanha language. See Denise Champion, Yarta Wandatha (Salisbury: Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, 2014), 10. Moreover, this challenges Jennings’ notion regarding the validity of naming God from within the host culture’s language. See also Brett, Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World, 155.
704 Jennings’ main contention in terms of translation is that it was another tool in the colonial arsenal for assimilation. Moreover, he argues that translation eventually leads to cultural nationalism. For discussion of some of the complexities of biblical translation into Indigenous languages in Australia, see Roland Boer’s chapter “Dreaming the Logos” in Boer, Last Stop Before Antarctica. See also Moore, "Altjira, Dream and God." See also Champion, Yarta Wandatha, 10.
The scriptures provide a challenge here to those who believe that God did not speak in Australia until the Bible arrived with Captain Cook. On the contrary, God was always here and speaking through creation.\footnote{Paulson and Brett, "Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible Through Aboriginal Eyes," 205–207.}

Paulson’s integration of his Christian faith with his Aboriginal knowledge broadens the testimony of the way God is at work in the world. As will be further explored in chapter 7, where I use Jennings’ argument that creation was reframed in the colonial moment, Indigenous theologians remind us that creation itself is evidence of God’s presence and activity in the world.

Charles Harris critiques Western Christianity on the basis that it does not care for creation and idolises money, materialism, monuments and inhumanity. In the following quotation, Harris names the God of “this land” using biblical imagery (“matriarchs and patriarchs”) as well as Aboriginal spirituality (“Dreamtime”). Recognition of the multiple ways of naming and encountering God, he argues, is part of the path to healing of the past.

> Desert your idolatry and your paganism and return to the true and living God, the God who was in this land long before 1788, the Aboriginal Creator God who is the eternal God and the God of the matriarchs and patriarchs of old. Return to the Creator, the God of the Dreamtime, and the Creator will right the wrongs in your lives. God will rectify the past.

The theologians whom I have mentioned work within the Christian tradition and their own cultural contexts as First Nations people. Each refers to the presence of God in the land and the lore prior to the arrival of missionaries. There is diversity in the language and concepts used to express this conviction. What is clear, however, is that there is continuity between divine presence before missionary contact and after. The authors of Milbi Dabaar, and Denise Champion cited above, also maintain that the incarnation of Jesus Christ is a distinctive act of the redemptive work of the Creator in the world which they connect with through their cultural lens. Hence, the “disciplining presence” of particular revelation that Jennings refers to is also present. “God’s history” is not missing, rather it is held in relationship with the presence of God experienced in the land and in the Dreaming, and in the mixed blessings of encounters with missionaries.\footnote{Champion, Yarta Wandatha. See also Tracy Spencer, "'We had to give them everything': Andynamathanha Agency in the Economy of 'Whiteness'," ed. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey, and Katherine Ellinghaus, Historicising Whiteness: Transnational Perspectives on the Construction of an Identity (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing in Association with the School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2007).}
This discussion is part of a much larger conversation about Indigenous expressions of theology in Australia that seek to bypass Western culture as the sole carrier for Christianity. Instead, room is made for the formulation of theology and forms of worship within Indigenous cultural frameworks—a move that overcomes the becoming and relating found in the way of the missionary. Dialogue and openness to “the sacred world-view of others” become the modus operandi for relating rather than “pedagogical imperialism.”

Dialogue in settler-colonial spaces must also account for the disruption to Indigenous cultures and the influence of the agents of colonialism on theology and Christian practice.

6.4 The Way of the Filmmaker(s)

As a further response to Jennings’ agents of colonialism, I propose another way of relating and becoming arising from the Accidental Trilogy—the way of the filmmaker(s). The discussion will focus on de Heer and Gulpilil as collaborative filmmakers. Rather than being agents of colonisation, together they have decolonised filmmaking practices off-screen and Indigenous representation on-screen. Decolonisation occurs through their approaches to filmmaking and their commitment to friendship and creative partnership over the past sixteen years.

Jennings’ agents of colonialism each embody disfigured ways of relating. At the same time, the tension between the two kinds of missionaries that Jennings identifies—those who could imagine new ways of creating holy space through joining with others and those who could not—must be maintained. The way of the non-Indigenous filmmaker has similarly had a mixed history of relationality. Filmmaking does not have the power to reconstruct literal space. However, it has the power through the creation of cinematic worlds, to either normalise practices of domination and displacement or to challenge and subvert them. The processes of film production and distribution can include voyeurism, exploitation and stereotyping. Alternatively, non-Indigenous filmmakers can engage in a genuine desire to collaborate in order to tell counter-narratives which privilege Indigenous voices and experiences. As Barclay and others have

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707 McCredden, "Ten Canoes: Engaging difference," 54. Reflecting on the cultural norms of the dominant culture is part of the dialogue.

708 In a research seminar at St Mark’s National Theological Centre, Andrew Errington articulated the term “way of the filmmaker” in response to my broader argument concerning Jennings’ agents of colonialism and the decolonising filmmaking practices of de Heer and Gulpilil.
articulated, the way of the Indigenous filmmaker embodies a commitment to telling Indigenous stories which accurately represent the community they are portraying and provide a revisionist perspective on the telling of Australia’s history and First Nations stories.\footnote{The movement between filmmakers as agents who reinforce cultural norms and those who challenge them can be seen in the films \textit{Jedda} (Chauvel, 1955) and \textit{Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy} (Moffatt, 1990). \textit{Jedda} (released in the United Kingdom as \textit{Jedda the Uncivilized}) is a classic Australian example of the normalisation of settler-colonialism in its depiction of life on a cattle station. Aboriginal people are allowed to maintain cultural practices within a context that made clear that the land, and their labour, belonged to the European station bosses. Within Jedda’s body this dissonance intensifies as Sarah McMann (Betty Suttor) raises Jedda (Rosalie Kunoth-Monks) within European space, culturally and physically separating her from other Aboriginal people on the station. In response to \textit{Jedda}, Indigenous filmmaker Tracey Moffat produced \textit{Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy} which challenges colonial constructions of Aboriginal identity and place. \textit{Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy} engages the viewer in a confronting and moving exploration of the ambivalent relationship between Jedda (Marcia Langton) and her frail and aged adopted mother (Agnes Hardwick).} The collaborative filmmaking practices of de Heer, Gulpilil and the community at Ramingining, discussed at length in chapters 2, 3 and 4, enact a distinct way of \textit{relating} and \textit{becoming}.

As Jennings argues throughout his writings, joining marked by belonging and connection should be the \textit{modus operandi} of Christian witness. Attentiveness to Gulpilil and de Heer’s example of joining is warranted in order to expand and inform Christian imagination of where and how joining may take place. By including Gulpilil and de Heer as a theological analogue of joining, the intention is not to claim for them Christian conviction which they do not explicitly claim for themselves. Rather the aim is to demonstrate the way their relationship models joining, through the art of filmmaking, in the particular context of postcolonial Australia.

Chris Budden, a non-Indigenous theologian committed to the development of Second peoples’ theology and to justice for First peoples, provides some additional rationale for theological engagement with filmmakers who work towards the decolonisation of film production. Filmmaking is part of the “social and political reality” that forms the context in which Second peoples in Australia “do” theology.\footnote{Budden, \textit{Following Jesus in Invaded Space}, 66.} Budden argues that “entry points” for theology in Australia can be found in the following areas: the social location of the church; listening to multiple voices including Indigenous voices; taking issues of justice seriously; retelling history accurately; and solidarity with the marginalised.\footnote{Budden, \textit{Following Jesus in Invaded Space}, 67.} Engaging the Accidental Trilogy provides an audio-visual platform for consideration of each of the “entry points” which Budden identifies.
A further “entry point” for theological reflection can be found in the collaborative filmmaking of Gulpilil and de Heer. Their motivations and experiences along with their collaborative partnership reflect Jennings’ desire for joining through “spaces of communion” which acknowledge the significance of history, place, belonging, intimacy, connection and a willingness to be changed by an encounter with another.\textsuperscript{712} The way of the collaborative filmmaker embodies a particular mode of belonging which is malleable in both geographical and historical contexts and is attentive to the other. In this way de Heer and Gulpilil become a model for Christian relationality where joining, intimacy, reciprocal hospitality, forms of Gentile remembrance and belonging are integral parts of communal and individual discipleship.

Paying attention to the collaborative and intercultural relationship between de Heer, Gulpilil and the community at Ramingining also resonates with the work of Tracy Spencer. Spencer’s work in narrative theology proposes that “lives immersed in inter-cultural relationships provide . . . productive material for a contextual Australian theology.”\textsuperscript{713} The key to Spencer’s argument is that in order for a decolonised, contextual theology undertaken by Second peoples to emerge, an “immersive encounter in the country and on the terms of Indigenous Australians” is necessary.\textsuperscript{714}

Spencer’s theological method overlaps with Jennings’ method in the sense that they both use case studies. Spencer, however, focuses on case studies of non-Indigenous people and Indigenous people who have been immersed in “contact zones” and intimate encounters rather than “passive observation or polite distance from the events and people who share this history.”\textsuperscript{715} She argues that these intercultural stories from the Australian contact zone can function as parables. In the same way that biblical parables use stories and accessible language, Spencer’s stories engage with readers in such a way that “new understandings of humanity begin to answer pressing ethical and moral questions confronting Australians.”\textsuperscript{716} She encourages her readers to listen to the case studies she provides and to then locate themselves and the “Spirit of Christ” within that story.\textsuperscript{717} Her theology develops out of the stories of

\textsuperscript{713} Spencer, "Getting Off the Verandah," 341.
\textsuperscript{714} Spencer, "Getting Off the Verandah," 323.
\textsuperscript{715} Interestingly Spencer’s two case studies are Rebecca and Jack Forbes and Jim Page who all lived among the Adnyamathanha people of the Flinders Ranges (where *The Tracker* was filmed).
\textsuperscript{716} Spencer, "Getting Off the Verandah," 341.
\textsuperscript{717} Spencer, "Getting Off the Verandah," 341.
people who have had immersive intercultural encounters. These encounters, she argues, have the potential to “enlarge the meanings of doctrines like incarnation and redemption with images and phrases that resonate with Australian experience.”

Alongside Spencer’s case studies, I contend that the relationship between de Heer, Gulpilil and the community at Ramingining also contains images of incarnation, redemption and relationality arising from “immersive intercultural encounters.” Specific examples of how their relationship embodies a model of joining which challenges colonial modes of relating in the Australian context can also be discerned and are discussed below.

6.4.1 Transforming Networks of Exchange

Off-screen, de Heer and the community at Ramingining entered into networks of exchange where the needs of both parties were met. De Heer met his contractual obligations with the community and with the film distributors. A film was made which served the community’s two aims: a film for their children and for global audiences. Statements from cast members indicate that exchanges with “outsiders” which have been posited as mutually beneficial have not always been the case. For example, de Heer and cast members refer to the influence of mining, which is a contentious issue in Indigenous communities. Mining is contentious because it evokes conflicting narratives surrounding land protection versus economic benefit and job creation for the community.

*The Baland and the Bark Canoes* includes sound recording of a meeting between de Heer and representatives of the community. Cast member Johnny Pascoe says: “It’s why we’re making this film. For the future, for our kids. We don’t want the mining company, we want the acting.” This meeting also included some opposition to the film and disagreement between members of the community. The opposition included statements such as being “used” by de Heer, that he was lying, and did not know the culture. The vote for the film resulted in a “resounding yes.” This exchange, however, indicates that the intentions of people coming into the community need to be tested.

6.4.2 Overcoming “Pedagogical Imperialism”

Throughout his career, David Gulpilil has been committed to sharing his culture with the broader Australian community and with the rest of the world. Sharing culture was also a motivation of the Yolŋu cast and crew of *Ten Canoes*. The desire to share culture has arisen from a need to overcome a deficit model of Aboriginal cultures and also as a move towards greater understanding and Reconciliation. Gulpilil and the community at Ramingining have shared their cultural knowledge with the intention that it will increase understanding between them and Second peoples. For example, in 1978, Gulpilil stated in an interview:

> I want to do something not only for me but I’m doing it for Australia and for my people and for our culture . . . I want to share to the Western world and I’m not doing it for myself. I’m doing it for black and white to know better that we have culture and history still existent and I’ll keep trying.

His commitment to sharing culture through theatre, dance, writing and film disrupts the pedagogical imperialism and the evaluative mode found in the way of the missionary that sought to erase and diminish aspects of culture such as language, kinship structures and ceremony. The sharing of Yolŋu culture with the rest of Australia is both a mark of survivance and a gift for Second peoples. If this gift is accepted with respect, it can transform ways of relating and becoming due to greater understanding and recognition of the other. Furthermore, accepting this gift resonates with Jennings’ posture of Gentile remembrance where Gentiles acknowledge that they enter the story and culture of others in order to overhear and join through reciprocity rather than oppression.

Pedagogical imperialism was also challenged during screening. For example, at specific points throughout *The Tracker*, the Fanatic speaks Yolŋu Matha words to the Tracker. Gulpilil taught these words to Gary Sweet (The Fanatic). Rolf de Heer needed to cede control to Gulpilil and other cast members in this area due to his own limited comprehension of the languages being spoken.

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720 For an example of Gulpilil’s writing, see David Gulpilil and Mary O’Toole, *The Rainbow Serpent* (South Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd., 1987).
721 De Heer explains the situations involving language in the following way: 1. David taught Gary what to say, I didn’t question the language but understood it to be one of David’s prime languages. 2. I couldn’t figure myself what was going on between David and the Arrernte mob. My suspicions at the time were that they sort of half understood each other and largely spoke their own languages, with some words in common. 3. The conversation
6.4.3 Subverting Whiteness

Throughout his filmmaking de Heer has intentionally subverted the stance of the merchant who deemed himself to be “the creator of his world” and by implication the creator of the worlds of others. Rather, de Heer has taken intentional steps to limit his creative control in the films that he has made with Gulpilil and with the community at Ramingining. He has ensured that Gulpilil and the community were instrumental in guiding the processes involved and were satisfied with the final product. De Heer’s aim in the making of Ten Canoes, The Tracker and Charlie’s Country was to tell stories from the perspective of the community at Ramingining, of the fictional Tracker, and of Charlie.

In 2007, de Heer reflected on his filmmaking practices in a piece entitled Personal Reflections on Whiteness and Three Film Projects. In this piece, de Heer describes his “unconscious considerations” and “instinctive actions” which he used when working in Aboriginal communities to develop film projects. These considerations and actions included building relationships slowly through the modes of communication which occurred in the community rather than imposing his expectations for how communication would occur. His approach involved practical changes such as waiting to be included in conversations, waiting for information to be revealed to him and consensus-based decision making. It also involved a change in posture:

... if I was going to work successfully with this community (or for that matter any other), it would only happen if I threw off the shackles of my white privileged existence and approached things in a manner consistent with their way of doing things.

Chapter 2 discussed various critical responses to the nature of the collaboration between de Heer, Gulpilil and the community at Ramingining. While de Heer’s authorial presence can be detected in Ten Canoes, the majority of critics who have engaged with Ten Canoes celebrate it as an intercultural success story where a Yolŋu story is told in a Yolŋu way.

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with the hands is David talking with himself in two different voices. In this case also I simply made the assumption that David was using one of his own prime languages.” Personal email communication October 26, 2017. See also Darlene Johnson’s documentary One Red Blood where the director of Rabbit-Proof Fence, Philip Noyce explains how Gulpilil had to instruct him on the skills of a tracker which resulted in a script change in order to make it more plausible.

723 de Heer, “Personal Reflections on Whiteness and Three Film Projects.”
The issue of de Heer’s directorial voice in films told from an Indigenous perspective is also relevant to *The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country*. For example, de Heer notes that his decision to write the songs which Bundjalung man Archie Roach sang in *The Tracker* was critiqued on the basis that he was narrating what is essentially the trauma and displacement of First Nations peoples. As previously cited (3.4), de Heer responded to this critique by quoting Roach’s endorsement of the songs and his sense of ownership of them as well as his appreciation of what de Heer was trying to achieve with *The Tracker*. In post-production interviews for *Charlie’s Country*, Gulpilil has repeatedly stated that, “This is MY movie, it’s about me.” The consistent theme throughout the Accidental Trilogy is that Aboriginal characters and experience are amplified and privileged. This has been a deliberate action on de Heer’s part.

The production history of *Charlie’s Country* began when de Heer went to visit Gulpilil in Berrimah prison. When David requested that they make a film together, de Heer said that there was no question that he would honour his friend’s request with the one thing that he felt he had to offer him—his skills as a filmmaker. When the interviewer goes on to say that de Heer had become David’s saviour, de Heer strongly rejects this, stating that David had been the agent of his own transformation through giving up alcohol and other drugs. De Heer pointedly stated: “Gaol saved his life. The film saved him as a human being.” Gaol broke the cycle of Gulpilil’s alcohol addiction; however, it was through the process of filming that Gulpilil was reconnected with his community and ancestral lands after living in Darwin for eight years.

### 6.4.4 The friendship between Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil

In an interview with prominent Australian film critic Margaret Pomeranz, Gulpilil provided his own assessment of his relationship with de Heer:

**Margaret Pomeranz:** Who’s the director that you’ve most enjoyed working with?

**David Gulpilil:** Rolf. Because he’s in me and I’m in him. We say one red blood and you too and everyone. I’m blackfella, you’re whitefella. Whatever you are we’re one red blood. I loved Rolf, my brother. Because he know people there, my family.

There is undoubtedly a deep sense of affection and reciprocity between de Heer and Gulpilil. However, this does not mean that there has not been

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725 VPRO Cinema, "Interview with Rolf de Heer (Charlie’s Country)."
726 The Wheeler Center, "David Gulpilil in conversation with Margaret Pomeranz."
tension in their relationship. The tension was most notable during the early stages of *Ten Canoes* when David left the community and in the making of *Charlie’s Country*. In my interview with him, de Heer also expressed the emotional toll that making *Charlie’s Country* took on him. De Heer states that there were extreme highs and lows in making the film due to David’s mental health at the time of filming. De Heer is candid in recounting both the difficulty of working with David and also the instinctive connection that they shared on set, which de Heer says he has only experienced before when working with his daughters.  

My intention is not to romanticise the relationship between Gulpilil and de Heer. Both men have flaws that are on display and open to scrutiny due to their public profiles. Their frustrations with each other are perhaps exacerbated by cross-cultural miscommunications and the cultural lens that each brings to the relationship. However, I am proposing that their relationship is an example of Jennings’ theological joining, grounded in lived experience, that embodies belonging, intimacy and communion. Their relationship is also an example of Spencer’s model of “immersive intercultural experience” with people and place. Gulpilil and de Heer model a commitment to truth-telling and intercultural engagement and empowerment. In a sense, both Gulpilil and de Heer have experienced living in “two worlds” and what it means to communicate and live in each one. At the same time, their experience is not identical because de Heer only visited Ramingining for a period of time. For Gulpilil, living in two worlds is necessary for his very survival. Gulpilil uses symbolism to express the phenomenon of living in two worlds:

I am David Gulpilil. I am born with my two legs. But my two legs in different worlds. This leg here . . . in Balanda world. Whitefella’s world. And this leg here . . . it stands in my country. I put these toes in champagne and caviar and these toes in the dirt of my Dreamtime.  

*Ten Canoes* was born through Gulpilil’s generous invitation to make a film in his country with his people and de Heer’s acceptance of that invitation. *Charlie’s Country* reveals de Heer’s commitment to Gulpilil and Gulpilil’s trust in his friend. Their relationship is an example of making space to include and learn from, rather than control and redefine, the other. The professional and personal friendship of Gulpilil and de Heer, including the tensions and

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727 Both of de Heer’s daughters featured in *The Quiet Room* (1996).
limitations, is an example of joining which First and Second peoples are invited to overhear and embody in their contexts.

Brooke Prentis, a Christian theologian from the Wakka Wakka peoples, draws on her personal experience to make the connection between friendships, such as de Heer’s and Gulpilil’s, and following in the way of Jesus. Prentis writes,

Friendship is always something bigger than ourselves, because it involves another person—the other . . . It is through friendship that we find and build community and follow Jesus, where he sits in friendship beside the least, the last, and the lost. It is through friendship that we build God’s Kingdom.729

Prentis uses friendship as a paradigm for interpreting the ministry of Jesus. This emphasis on friendship connects Tracy Spencer’s “images of incarnation” (see 6.4) with the intercultural encounter between de Heer and Gulpilil. In a reversal of Jennings’ testimony of disconnection described in 5.2, Prentis describes her own experience of friendship based on equality and respect with a non-Indigenous woman. This friendship led to an invitation to church that started her journey in the Christian faith. By focusing on the interpersonal, I am not diminishing the need for commitment to structural change and for challenging injustice and “pedagogical imperialism” in society and in the church. Prentis’s experience is helpful here in making the connection between friendship and the broader work of social justice. She writes from within her particular background in the Salvation Army:

Did you know that 70 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples identify as Christian? It is not a friendship where Aboriginal peoples are approached as a project, a dark soul to be won.

For me, it is a friendship where we can create a different Australia built on truth, justice, love and hope. An Australia where friendship is built between non-Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal peoples. It’s an Australia I would love The Salvation Army to lead us to. It’s an Australia found in William Booth’s words, “I’ll fight”.730

Friendship and the possibility for “a different Australia” begins with seeing, knowing and hearing the other on their own terms.731

730 Prentis, “Vision of reconciliation worth fighting for.”
731 See also Jennings, “Embodying the Artistic Spirit.”
6.5 Makarrata: Coming together After a Struggle

The final section of this chapter briefly considers the implications of the makarrata ceremony for relationality. Ten Canoes and The Tracker both include a makarrata ceremony. Traditionally the ceremony was a process that involved a spear in the leg. Its purpose was restoring relational harmony between groups or individuals. In 2017, the word and its modified meaning re-entered public discourse. Yolŋu elders gave permission for the word makarrata to be used during a meeting of 250 First peoples at the Constitutional Convention held at Uluru. The Convention called for: a constitutionally enshrined Indigenous advisory “voice to Parliament”; a Makarrata Commission to oversee the facilitation of regional, state-based and national agreement-making (or Treaty and treaties where possible); and national and regional truth-telling.

The principles of makarrata, rather than a literal application of spearing, were brought forward by Yolŋu Elders such as Galarrwuy Yunupingu and members of the Referendum Council. These ancient principles include: “bringing disputing parties together to speak calmly and carefully about the issue”; “seeking understanding together”; “a symbolic reckoning that demonstrates the dispute is settled”; and “a commitment to peace rather than vengeance.” Yunupingu describes what happened in “past times”:

. . . a man came forward and accepted a punishment, and this man once punished was then immediately taken into the heart of the aggrieved clan. His wounds were healed by the women of the aggrieved clan, and he was given gifts and shown respect—and this former foe, who had caused pain and suffering to people, would live with those whom he had harmed and the peace was made, not just for them but for future generations.

This is a vision of truth-telling, healing, harmony and joining which acknowledges the past in order to move into the future. Yunupingu describes the way clan leaders would send a gift of cycad bread to request a meeting peacefully with another clan. He sees the final Referendum Council report with its recommendation of the principles of makarrata as a similar sign “of
friendship and a call to make peace."736 The question remains whether Second peoples can accept the invitation to recognise the “rightful place” of First peoples and walk with them into a shared future.737 Walking together will require a form of “joining” which arises from Jennings’ call for “a radical remembering of place, a discerning of histories and stories of those for whom that land was the facilitator of their identity.”738 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to make a thorough case for constitutional change and various levels of treaty-making called for by the Referendum Council. It is, however, necessary to highlight that truth-telling that leads to “joining” between First and Second peoples is not only about shared understanding. “Joining” arising from truth-telling also involves various forms of power-sharing, recompense and reparations.

Again, a thorough treatment of these notions—power-sharing, recompense and reparations—are beyond the scope of this chapter. I mention them because they have far-reaching implications for new modes of relating in all facets of Australian society, including churches.739 By way of example, Dr Rosalind Kidd has uncovered the stolen wages of Aboriginal peoples which the merchant and the missionary relied upon to prosper.740 A recent court case in Queensland has awarded $190 million in a class action to Aboriginal plaintiffs in recognition of unpaid wages.741 Luke Pearson has similarly argued that apologies to the Stolen Generations without compensation (and changes in the current systems of child protection) fail to adequately address what happened.742

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736 Yunupingu, “Foreward,” x.
739 See Neville Naden, “Aboriginal Land and Australia’s First Peoples: Calling for Treaty, Recognition and Engagement,” in Postcolonial Voices from Downunder: Indegenous Matters, Confronting Readings, ed. Jione Havea (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2017). The Anglican priest Peter Adam has been a leading non-Indigenous Christian voice on what it means for the church to take seriously the prosperity it enjoys from stolen land. For example, Barney Zwartz, “Get out or pay up, says reverend,” The Age, August 11, 2009.
740 For example, Rosalind Kidd, Hard Labour, Stolen Wages: National Report on Stolen Wages (Rozelle: Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, 2007).
6.6 Conclusion

The Accidental Trilogy provides a vision of ancestral time and the colonial past, as well as the contemporary moment, and presents a challenge for viewers today to assess their modes of relating and becoming. Together the films provide a cinematic space to explore what is at stake. On-screen and off-screen, the Accidental Trilogy broadens the possibilities for relating and becoming by offering alternatives to the colonial ways of the merchant, soldier and missionary. Land and people are connected in all three films. Friendship and the exchange between teaching and learning about cultural practices, lore, and survival on the land are signifiers for reimagined forms of relating and becoming, rather than a global network of commodified exchange.

Chapter 7 further considers how relationality can be reimaged within the broader scope of relating to the entire creation through shared creaturely existence.
Chapter 7: Mediated Visions of Creation

Wangkayarla nguruku, kapungku nguruju pina wangkami-jarla
Speak to the land and the land will speak back.
— Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick

I live in the land and land lives with me. We live together.
— David Gulpilil, Still Our Country

Figure 7.1 Ten Canoes. Photograph by James Geurts.

7.1 Chapter Overview

Chapter 6 argued that Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil’s partnership is an alternative to the modes of relating and becoming embodied by Jennings’ agents of colonialism. This chapter extends the notion of relationality beyond human-to-human encounters to include connections with the more-than-human world—land, water, sky and animals.

The audio-visual world of the Accidental Trilogy invites a dialogue with creation theology. Each film uses story, image and sound to communicate particular insights into the world as creation. Interactions with the natural world in each film, and the built environment in Charlie’s Country, reveal


much about the plight of the protagonists. In each film the setting is not incidental; rather it is central to the films’ plotlines and production histories. As this chapter demonstrates, each film is conducive to dialogue with creation theology. Once again, Jennings’ theological thought is the starting point for my analysis. This chapter then extends the conversation beyond Jennings to include Indigenous Christian theologians and their analysis of creation, colonial disruption and relationship with place.

Section 7.2 outlines Jennings’ distinct contribution to creation theology. He argues that the theologically inspired postures of overhearing and joining are necessary aspects which any doctrine of creation needs to consider. His narration of social performance in colonial contexts includes a deep-seated conviction that we have inherited a distorted Christian doctrine of creation. Distortion is visible in the disconnection between people and place, the prevalence of race as a definer of space, the use of private property as the primary lens to view space and place, and the commodification, extraction and denigration of the earth. Dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy provides a compelling audio-visual accompaniment to Jennings’ convictions regarding the work that a Christian doctrine of creation should do in a world still haunted by the legacies of colonialism. The antidote that Jennings offers to overcome the colonial gaze is to listen carefully to Indigenous peoples in order to rediscover how to inhabit the earth in communal rather than destructive ways.

Sections 7.3 and 7.4 expand the dialogue and the potential for “creative crossings” between the Accidental Trilogy and theology by discussing Indigenous creation narratives and the work of Indigenous theologians such as Denise Champion, Terry LeBlanc and Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann. Discussion with these theologians provides an invitation to see and hear the interconnected worldview that Indigenous theologians bring to creation theology and to appreciate more deeply what the Accidental Trilogy is communicating. The work of these First Nations theologians contradicts a theology of extraction as outlined by Jennings. Instead a theology of attentiveness to the stories of the land, waterways, plants and creatures that inhabit particular places is provided.

Throughout this chapter, the Yolnu creation story and cosmology within Ten Canoes and Charlie’s Country, and the Aboriginal connections with country represented in The Tracker retain their integrity and are not subsumed within Christian theology. There are points of both connection and
difference between the films and the Christian theology expounded in this chapter. New insights and “creative crossings” are illuminated in both the films and theology. These insights are made through theological dialogue and reciprocal interpretation.

Jennings and the Indigenous theologians discussed insist that the Creator spiritually animates the whole creation in ways that differ from a dominant Western colonial view of creation as something to invade, control, extract and exploit. I contend that the Accidental Trilogy and the creation theologies of Jennings and Indigenous theologians, when viewed together, provide a corrective to a colonial view of creation. They also reveal some deep insights from within the Christian tradition that have been overlooked due to a Western cultural lens dominating the interpretation of Judeo-Christian texts and tradition. In essence, this chapter is an invitation to overhear Jennings’ and Indigenous voices from within the Christian tradition;

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745 My purpose is not to defend one particular theology of creation over another or to enter into debates about the “orthodoxy” of certain doctrines of creation. For example, I am intentionally avoiding the terms pantheism, panentheism and animism. Within the study of religion these terms are helpful for categorising certain ways of viewing and interacting with the world. For example, anthropologist Mike Smith argues that the Dreaming is a major religious system that exhibits a highly developed form of animism where a “unique landesque ideology acts to intimately link people and place . . .” Mike Smith, “The Metaphysics of Songlines,” in Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters, ed. Margo Neale (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2017), 218. In terms of Christian theology, the issues at stake when pantheism, panentheism and animism are used can usually be summarised as the distinction and nature of the relationships between the Creator and creation. In relation to my thesis, the importance, depth and nuance of the work of Indigenous theologians can be diminished, overlooked or side-tracked through categorisation using these Western terms. The following quotation from Mi’kmaq/Acadian theologian Terry LeBlanc demonstrates both the nuance in Indigenous Christian theology and also where the use of imposed categories can prevent listening and learning:

Experience with both the biblical text and life itself tells us that all of creation is possessed by a spiritual nature—and all is the focus of God’s redemptive activity in Jesus. Christian theology, particularly evangelical theology in the USA, has struggled to comprehend this, assigning the labels pantheism or panentheism to a more inclusive understanding of the nature of the spiritual which includes the rest of creation as a concomitant focus for Jesus’ work on the cross. To be sure, human spirituality is augmented, and therefore differentiated from the rest of creation by the gift and impartation of God’s image and likeness—now marred by the collapse of creation’s harmony. But this does not diminish the spiritual nature of the rest of creation, rendering it as inanimate ‘stuff.’

and through their work, viewed in tandem with the world of the Accidental Trilogy, to overhear creation itself.

7.2 Overhearing and Inhabiting Creation

The discussion of Jennings’ doctrine of creation and the Accidental Trilogy is organised under six inter-related headings: Creation and Colonialism (7.2.1); First and Second Readers of Creation (7.2.2); “Gentile Remembrance,” Creation and the Accidental Trilogy (7.2.3); A Theology of Extraction (7.2.4); Reclaiming Creaturehood (7.2.5); and Creaturely Connection and Built Environments (7.2.6). Through the engagement with Jennings and the Accidental Trilogy “creative crossings” emerge which enrich and affirm Jennings’ theological program, while also offering a theological response to the Accidental Trilogy.

7.2.1 Creation and Colonialism

Jennings constructs his theology of creation within his broader theological schema. His schema takes seriously the vast disruption that colonialism wrought on people and place, the legacy of which, Jennings argues, theology has not yet grasped. The framework, outlined in The Christian Imagination, addresses an overarching feature of colonial logic: land was conceived in terms of private property and production with little regard for the original owners and custodians.

For Jennings, the impact of colonialism on peoples and land cannot be overestimated. Colonial agents dramatically altered the lands they encountered in both literal and figurative ways. Imported animals and crops changed the composition of soils and the movement of water. Native animals faced new threats from introduced species. Land which contained stories, lore, memories and the basis for identity was redefined based on its potential for revenue from private property, resource extraction and European methods of farming. As discussed in chapters 5 and 6, First peoples were classified and commodified through racialised lenses; their worth

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746 Jennings’ aim is to construct theological thinking which can account for the profound changes wrought by European colonialism. Accounting for this change requires moving beyond searching resources from the past for adequate resources for the present time. Jennings challenges creation theology which, “functions as an unbroken conceptual chain reaching back to ancient theological writers through medieval thinkers, then early modern and modern intellectuals and right through to us at the present moment.” He does acknowledge that theology also needs to address perennial questions such as: the Creator/creature relationship and distinction, divine providence, the origins of the world and how different aspects of time can be understood. Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.

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calculated based on what they could produce. A soteriological lens further entrenched classifications of people as “saved” and “unsaved” thereby legitimising the colonial endeavour and locating it explicitly within Christian frames of reference.747

The extended quotation below demonstrates Jennings’ demarcation of “before modern colonialism” and “after modern colonialism” as the colonial arm stretched around the globe and redefined Indigenous peoples and land.

Instead the new worlds were transformed into land—raw, untamed land. And the European vision saw these new lands as a system of potentialities, a mass of undeveloped, underdeveloped, unused, underutilized, misunderstood, not fully understood potentialities. Everything—from peoples and their bodies to plants and animals, from the ground and the sky—was subject to change, subjects for change. The significance of this transformation cannot be overstated. The earth itself was barred from being a constant signifier of identity. Europeans defined Africans and all others apart from the earth even as they separated them from their lands.

The central effect of the loss of the earth as an identity signifier was that native identities, tribal, communal, familial, and spatial, were constricted to simply their bodies, leaving behind the very ground that enables and facilitates the articulation of identity. The profound commodification of bodies that was New World slavery signifies an effect humankind has yet to reckon with fully—a distorted vision of creation.748

Descriptions of colonial interactions with the environment, such as Jennings provides here, are not unique; however, his contribution is particularly relevant to this thesis because his analysis is both historical and theological.749 Having established the indisputable disruption that colonialism caused for Indigenous peoples and their land, Jennings then explores the way that creation theologies were at work forming and informing colonial age and
das. In essence, Jennings unpacks the theological mindset that was in

748 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 43.
749 Eco-theology, a strand within Christian theology, also grapples with the effects of over-consumption of resources and the exploitation of land and peoples. Eco-theologians have articulated where Western Christian theology has contributed to the decimation of Earth’s resources. They have also imagined new ways of understanding key doctrines of Christian theology in order to meet the current environmental crisis. For a recent compilation of eco-theology writings drawing on Western and non-Western women’s voices, see Grace Ji-Sun Kim Kim and Hilda P. Koster, eds., Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). For a recent introductory text, see Celia Deane-Drummond, A Primer in Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017).
operation as the world symbolised in *Ten Canoes* was catapulted into the contact zone shown in *The Tracker*.

### 7.2.2 First and Second Readers of Creation

Chapter 5 included a discussion of Jennings’ notions of overhearing and joining between Jews and Gentiles and between Indigenous peoples and Europeans. This current chapter examines the specific application of overhearing and joining in Jennings’ doctrine of creation.

Jennings argues that supersessionism contributed to the hubris of the colonial project. Supersessionism is not merely an “idea that floats in and around Christian thought.”[^750] Instead it is a “framework within which to deploy Christian thought and practice.”[^751] The effects of supersessionism in the doctrine of creation are seen and felt in several ways.[^752] The primary effect within Christian discourse is the erasure of biblical Israel’s prior claim as “the first to see the world as the creation of their own God and the first to lay claim to the identity of that Creator and their identities as creatures.”[^753]

In addition to overhearing and joining, Jennings introduces the terminology of first and second readers.[^754] In his initial analysis, first readers refer to biblical Israel and second readers to Gentiles who are invited into Israel’s story. Using the influential writings of Melito of Sardis (died ca 190) as an example, Jennings argues that the “Christological insight” that biblical Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah was conflated with the rejection of Israel’s knowledge of the Creator. Melito takes Israel’s rejection of Jesus, a concept found in the New Testament, and develops it in such a way that Israel’s place as the “first readers” of creation is obscured. The logic of this move proceeds as follows: if Christ is the Creator of all things, then to reject Christ is to reject all knowledge of the Creator and the ability to “see the creation as God’s creation.”[^755] Jennings describes this move as an “epistemological rupture” because Israel is not only condemned for the crime

[^750]: Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
[^751]: Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
[^752]: Jennings’ test for a doctrine of creation that is not supersessionist in its execution is whether Israel as a people, and not only Israel’s Scriptures, are included in developing Christian concepts of God and creation. Scripture, tradition, experience and reason are all eagerly employed, while the “drama of Gentile exclusion” and the implications of this are largely ignored. Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
[^753]: Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
[^754]: Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.

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of murdering the Messiah, their relationship with the Creator of the universe is also erased.

Israel moves from first readers to second readers and Christian reading practices become inverted so that both the scriptures and the world were read from the position of first reader, that is as though Gentile Christians were the first eyes to behold the word of God materialized in the quotidian realities of daily life, in food, water, animals, earth and sky all illuminating the creation.\textsuperscript{756}

The result of this historic inversion between first and second readers, Jew and Gentile, is that Gentiles saw themselves as the only ones who knew who the Creator was and who were, therefore, able to approach the world as God’s creation. In short, Jennings is suggesting that Gentiles are second readers who join with Israel as they are invited into Israel’s story.

In addition, what Jennings calls an “\textit{unmediated} vision of the world as God’s creation” has become the “defining characteristic of Christian doctrines of creation to this very moment.”\textsuperscript{757} An unmediated vision of creation takes root as European Gentiles placed themselves in the position of first readers of creation, rather than as second readers who encounter the creation and the Creator through the “mediation” of Israel’s testimony and witness as a people. The argument for mediation is not to suggest that there is a hierarchy in the relationship between Jew and Gentile. For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth has dramatically included Gentiles in the story of the God of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob. Creation, exodus, exile and return, and the words of the prophets are also part of God’s revelation to Christians and inform Christian identity. The point that Jennings is making is that Gentile Christians were not the first ones to hear or receive these stories or to live as creatures in relationship with God.

Significantly for this thesis, Jennings then takes this mode of relating as first and second readers and establishes a precedent for entering the lives of others. Jennings goes so far as to argue that joining with others and experiencing the creation and the Creator through them are in fact features of a Christian doctrine of creation.

There is little to no sense that we Christians are people who have entered the stories of another people and in this way entered the complex work of seeing a God and that God’s creation as second readers. These modes carry elements that are authentic to any Christian doctrine of creation but as

\textsuperscript{756} Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.

\textsuperscript{757} Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”. Original emphasis.
modes they lose sight of exactly what an articulation of a doctrine of creation must do—situate us as creatures in process of joining other creatures in and through life with God whereby we constantly enact second readings that build with and within the way others see the creation. Second reading in this regard is the way of the creature that attends carefully to the ways of other creatures, listening and learning from them of the reality of this world and of God's life with the world.758

Gentiles are those who are joined with Israel. From this initial and distinct encounter with Israel, Jennings further develops his thesis. He transfers the posture of “Gentile remembrance” to European Christians who encountered peoples in the lands they colonised.759 The opposite of “Gentile remembrance” is of course “Gentile forgetfulness.”760 This deep forgetfulness began as Gentiles forgot their place as outsiders who had been included in Israel’s story. Jennings’ narration of colonial modernity finds this deep forgetfulness vividly on display as the agents of colonialism—the merchant, the soldier and the missionary—entered the lands of others and reframed people and place.761 If, following Jennings, a Christian doctrine of creation includes enacting second readings of creation then there is much that can be learnt about creation from the cinematic world of the Accidental Trilogy. These insights are further expounded throughout this chapter.

A Christian doctrine of creation, according to Jennings, not only positions us as ready to learn from others about creation and the Creator but also to join with them. Joining implies a sense of reciprocity and dynamism as peoples and their insights mutually inform one another. It needs to be emphasised that a particular kind of joining which honours and respects the other is being advocated. In short, joining is not assimilation.762

Jennings specifically singles out First Nations peoples, and First Nations Christians, as having insights into the created world which need to be part of the formation of creation theologies.763 A posture of “reading after”

758 Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”. Original emphasis.
759 Jennings makes this point with particular reference to the Jesuit missionary José de Acosta and his missionary work in Peru. Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 98.
761 Jennings, “Disfigurations of Christian Identity.”
762 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 62. Jennings’ concepts of first and second readings can seem to imply that the teaching and learning between the two groups is one-directional. However, he is not negating a sense of reciprocity between peoples. For example, Jewish and Indigenous peoples can be equally open to new insights about the creation. However, by bringing a lens of “second reading” and “overhearing” to the Accidental Trilogy I am intentionally countering the colonial posture which assumed the position of first readers.
763 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 293.
begins “with listening to the ways of others in the world in order to hear the world in and through them.” This way of reading does not require a monolithic, static, or idealised view of Indigenous peoples. Instead, a “sober recognition” that Christian history exhibits the twin failure of not listening to the earth, “because we have not listened to enough co-inhabitators of the earth.”

Jennings’ movement from Jew/Gentile to Indigenous/non-Indigenous is helpful for the analysis taking place in this chapter; however, there is not an exact correlation between these categories. On the one hand, Jennings’ lens positions non-Indigenous peoples as second readers of the creation in Australia, in the same way that Gentiles are second readers in relation to the people of Israel. This approach privileges Indigenous and Jewish voices on the basis that they have historically been discriminated against and marginalised. At the same time, Jennings encourages us to see what colonial agents failed to see. That is, the Gentile identity of both Europeans and Indigenous peoples. Both of these relational aspects of Gentile remembrance reposition Second peoples as guests and not hosts in settler-colonial contexts—a theme present in each film in the Accidental Trilogy.

A further issue to clarify when thinking about Gentile remembrance is the need for discernment when entering into the stories of others. A Christian approaching Israel in order to overhear wisdom about the Creator and the creation is not identical to Christians approaching the Accidental Trilogy. What Jennings does help us to see, however, is that the posture of overhearing and joining is transferable to new situations. In other words, the posture of joining as second readers embodied by Gentiles as they were included in Israel’s story provides a precedent for approaching others to see what might be shared about the creation and the Creator.

7.2.3 “Gentile Remembrance,” Creation and the Accidental Trilogy

Viewing the Accidental Trilogy with Gentile remembrance as a lens reminds me as a non-Indigenous person that I live on a land which is embedded with other peoples’ stories, lore, languages, ceremonies and cultures. Each of the films in the Accidental Trilogy communicates this in distinct ways. Specifically, regarding creation theology, each film also has something to
communicate about approaching creation, which challenges colonial ways of seeing.

7.2.3.1 Ten Canoes

*Ten Canoes* invites viewers into a world before the colonial moment; visually and aurally articulating a Yolŋu way of seeing and hearing creation. Of the three films, *Ten Canoes* is the most explicit example of a “creative crossing” with Gentile remembrance and creation theology. The Storyteller’s people and land are inseparable from knowledge of the story.

But I am going to tell you a story. It’s not your story . . . a story like you’ve never seen before. But you want a proper story, eh? Then I must tell you some things . . . of my people, and my land . . . Then you can see this story and know it.766

In *Ten Canoes* people and place are connected from the opening scene. The land and water that the camera follows have been created through the movement of Yurlunggur, the Great Water goanna whom the Storyteller explains, “gives us life.” The mourning and funeral ritual in the film includes the use of leaves, fire, dirt and body paint depicting the land and animals. In addition, the wide-angle shots of the Glyde River and the bush position Yolŋu country as featuring in the film alongside the actors. In some frames, such as the iconic ten canoeists, the *mise-en-scène* immerses the actors within the environment, illustrating their connectedness.

The Storyteller’s description of connection with the waterhole at conception and returning there after death demonstrates his connectivity and co-habitation with the land and with ancestors762 As this narration is taking place, the camera glides through the waterhole capturing the sunlight shining through the trees as sounds from within the landscape are heard, creating an atmosphere of aural and visual intimacy. The Storyteller spends over four minutes sharing this information about himself and his land before judging that the audience is ready for the story to start. A precise movement between teaching and learning is being communicated. This movement has pedagogical implications for both the viewer who is invited to see and hear and the Storyteller who is sharing his knowledge. Using Jennings’ terminology of joining, the Storyteller invites the audience to join him in engaging with his creation story, his land and his people.

The Tracker

The opening scene of *The Tracker* contains Peter Coad’s painting titled *The landscape – the beginning*. The land shimmers as the painting transforms into the cinematic version of the same landscape. This shimmering is the first indication that the land itself is an active presence in the film, hiding and revealing information at various points. At all times, it is the Tracker who is the one who is in communion with the land, the plants, the sky, the animals and the waterholes. The Tracker knows the land and is connected to it in ways that elude the police party. The success of their mission is dependent on the Tracker’s knowledge of the land. The two images below signify this difference in ways of seeing and relating to the land. The Tracker remains energised and alert throughout the film. The Follower and the others in the party tire and lose their supplies when they are attacked by the unseen assailants, making them more dependent on the Tracker.

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*Figure 7.2 The Tracker. Photograph by Matthew Nettheim.*

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768 This insight came from Brooke Prentis, an Aboriginal Christian leader from the Wakka Wakka peoples.

769 At the end of the film the Follower says that he can find his own way home. The film is silent about exactly how the Follower plans to do this! See Probyn, "The Ethic of Following."
The film’s images communicate the horror and bloodshed that scar the landscape. Sacred places and stories are alluded to in the waterhole on the left of the painting *Hanging of the Aboriginals*. The film’s artist Peter Coad states that the Arkaroola Waterhole was created in the Dreaming by the great serpent Akurra who drank Lake Frome and slid down from the mountains “his body cutting the Arkaroola Creek, his heavy weight crushing the rocks to sand where he rested he made springs and finally the Waterhole.” The water on the left of the screen in both the moving image and the painting in this scene allows the painting to act as commentary and interpret what has taken place. The tall trees connect the earth, water and sky. Their presence becomes a witness to the atrocity that has taken place.

The use of camera work also communicates knowledge of the land to the audience. For example, the camera cuts between a close-up of the Tracker and the Fugitive running in the distance. The rest of the police party remain oblivious to this. The Tracker’s ability to see and hear in his surroundings allows him to subtly control the mission. By the end of the film, the

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770 Coad, *Paintings and Drawings for the Film The Tracker*, 18.
Follower’s survival is safeguarded as he begins to overhear and join with the Tracker in a respectful rather than coercive way.

### 7.2.3.3 Charlie’s Country

Fundamentally, Charlie teaches the audience about identity and belonging to people and place. Land, language, kin, lore and ceremony form the basis of Charlie’s identity. These aspects of identity have undergone a transformation and require negotiation in settler-colonial Australia in the twenty-first century; however, each of them can still be observed in the film. *Charlie’s Country* holds together the invitation for theology to overhear the custodians of the land, along with the land itself. Overhearing is accompanied by the unavoidable knowledge that a vast, unresolved disruption has taken place.

Through the medium of film, *Charlie’s Country* provides a unique, mediated, sensory encounter with Charlie’s story and with his country. The evocative sights and sounds of the birds and rain immerse the audience with Charlie in the landscape. In the bush, he experiences both joy—as he hunts, cooks and dances—and discomfort as the rain sets in and he needs to be rescued. Unlike *Ten Canoes*, there is no direct reference to a creation story or creation being who transforms the land. However, the presence of ancestors, communicated through the cave drawing and a particular sound effect, is a sign of the spiritual presence that connects Charlie to the land.

The Yolŋu Matha word *wäŋa* includes the semantic range of home, place and land.771 Off-screen, Heer in the *Charlie’s Country* press kit shares the sense of “coming home” that Gulpilil experienced at his birthplace, Gulparil (also spelt Gulpulul), during pre-production. De Heer commented that after Gulpilil’s time in prison, it was as if the land was bringing him back to life.772 On-screen a sense of homecoming is also poignantly communicated through Charlie’s longing to return home at the end of his prison sentence. The scene begins with a close-up of Charlie looking out of his cell. The camera then slowly follows the perimeter of the prison wire. The only sound is the musical leitmotif which adds to the isolated feel of the prison at night-time. The camera then returns to Charlie in his cell. Silence descends. Charlie

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772 Vertigo Productions, “*Charlie’s Country* Press Kit.”
speaks to the camera, directly addressing the audience. “I want to go home now . . . back to my own country . . . where my place is.”

As soon as he is finished speaking, bird sounds enter the soundscape providing a juxtaposition with the silence of the prison. The prison cell fades and is replaced by daytime scenes of waterways and close-ups of insects. Each of the frames contains subtle movement giving the impression that creation is active and alive. The next shot shows Charlie sitting by his fire. One by one, he removes cigarettes from behind his ear and tosses them into the fire. His hair has grown, and the clothes are his own and not the prison regulation uniform. The next scene shows Charlie making jokes about the food in the community’s take-away shop. The paradox is that for all the struggles and issues which need addressing, there is a connection to country that remains. The telling of the story through Charlie’s eyes once again casts Gulpilil as the faithful storyteller and guide, inviting the audience to see and hear his country on his terms.

7.2.4 A Theology of Extraction

The Accidental Trilogy and Jennings provide a provocative and inviting vision of creation as connected and communicative, yet one in which creation has also undergone profound disruption. Neglecting a posture of overhearing and instead relying on an unmediated view of creation became the dominant lens for Europeans as they entered new lands—remaking everything in their image. Jennings identifies a “theology of extraction” emerging from this worldview. A “theology of extraction” sees the value of the land as only genuinely present through the divinely sanctioned work of occupation, extraction and modification performed by humans. This, in turn, signified “the death of the world” as an “animate and communicative reality for Christians and so many others.”

Jennings identifies this theologically-inspired colonial gaze of extraction in the writings of José de Acosta Porres, a Spanish Jesuit missionary who

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773 de Heer and Gulpilil, *Charlie’s Country*.
774 Kärkkäinen’s theological task is similar to Jennings’ as he seeks to construct a theology of creation for a postcolonial, plural world which includes western scientific knowledge and insights from Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Buddhism within a Christian framework. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Creation and Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).
776 Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.

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arrived in Peru in 1572. Greed and desire for the abundant natural resources were understood as God luring the Spanish to Peru, as a father trying to marry off an ugly daughter, to convert and civilise the peoples of these remote, “inferior” places. The colonial desire for resources was justified by the belief that God—rather than human action—was the instigator of the colonial mechanism. Acosta records the following:

But it is a circumstance worthy of much consideration that the wisdom of our Eternal Lord has enriched the most remote parts of the world, inhabited by the most uncivilised people, and has placed there the greatest number of mines that ever existed, in order to invite men to seek out and possess those lands and coincidentally to communicate their religion and the worship of the true God to men who do not know it.

In Acosta’s mind, the earth is animated only through the “God ordained work of extraction.” Acosta records an alternative vision, that is, the one that the Andeans possessed where the earth, sky, water, animals and plants are interrelated and communicative. Instead of recognising this as an alternative way of relating to the creation, Acosta classifies this as a demonic influence, which leads to idolatry.

There is a further implication of a theology of extraction in the Australian context. Settler-colonialism was partly justified on the basis that the land in Australia was uncultivated. The British did not recognise Indigenous ownership where there was no evidence of the land reaching its “potential” through cultivation. Bunurong historian Bruce Pascoe has convincingly argued that the land, in fact, was extensively managed before colonisation. He presents evidence of sophisticated hunting, food storage, irrigation, sowing and harvesting techniques used by Indigenous peoples across Australia. The ceremonial and spiritual connection with land and animals was interconnected with interactions with the more-than-human world. As Aboriginal pastor and scholar Graham Paulson explains:

Each clan is responsible for the stewardship of the flora and fauna of their area as well as the stewardship of the sacred sites attached to their area. This stewardship consists not only

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779 Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
of the management of the physical resources ensuring that they are not plundered to the point of extinction, but also the spiritual management of all the ceremonies necessary to ensure adequate rain and food resources at the change of each season.\textsuperscript{783}

In other words, it is not human labour or extraction, that gives the land value. Stewardship has both an economic and a spiritual component. By 1860, British settlers had destroyed the evidence of the agricultural practices that Pascoe documents. Destruction denied the Indigenous peoples their rights to their lands and maintained the fabrication that Australia was \textit{terra nullius}, land belonging to no-one.\textsuperscript{784} The notion of \textit{terra nullius} allowed the British to create their colonies in Australia \textit{ex nihilo}, even though the land was populated and managed.

On-screen and off-screen, the Accidental Trilogy, the accompanying documentaries and the testimony of Gulpilil and de Heer challenge a theology of extraction. For example, as shown in \textit{Ten Canoes}, the magpie geese are not hunted merely for food. The documentary \textit{Twelve Canoes} explores the way that magpie geese also form part of clan identity. The Ganalbiŋu clan, a sub-group of Yolŋu people, who were instrumental in making \textit{Ten Canoes} are literally “magpie geese” people. Magpie geese are a vital part of artistic and ceremonial life. They have inherent spiritual value, rather than being purely objects for consumption. Gulpilil is succinct in describing the different ways of relating to land:

\begin{quote}
Balanda can have land passed down from great, great, great grandparents. They can rip it up, plough it up . . . They can do what they like to it. But as soon as it stops givin’ ya what you want from it, no more money, or maybe they run outta water . . . they just walk away from that land. My people can’t do that. Everything we are is in this earth and even if it wants to kill us, we aren’t going nowhere. We’ll sing it and love it till we die. Every rock and every tree. That’s our way.\textsuperscript{785}
\end{quote}

The way that Charlie relates to his country in terms of it being more than a utilitarian commodity reveals similar insights. Prior to the heavy rains, being “on country” is profoundly healing for Charlie and he takes great pleasure in hunting and fishing. Returning to his community after his time in gaol also signals a form of healing as he is reconnected with both people and place.

\textsuperscript{783} Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology,” 314.
\textsuperscript{784} Pascoe, \textit{Dark Emu}, 17: 149–156.
\textsuperscript{785} Cribb and Gulpilil, “Gulpilil: A one-man show about the life of David Gulpilil,” 22. Gulpilil’s totem is the crocodile, hence the reference to animals that “want to kill us.” See also \textit{Crocodile Dreaming} (Darlene Johnson, 2007) starring Gulpilil.
Conversely, being “off country” is seen as detrimental to emotional and spiritual health. The sadness conveyed in the close-up of Charlie’s face as he watches Fat Albert catch the medivac plane to Darwin and in the hospital ward when the two meet again convey the adverse effects of being “off country.” As mentioned above, de Heer observed a sense of healing in Gulpilil as he returned to his country. These observations do not deny the complexities of contemporary life in remote communities. For example, while access to country and the expression of cultural practices and language might remain high, physical health outcomes are well below national averages.\(^786\)

The point is that land holds far more profound significance for Yolgnu people and other Indigenous peoples than a theology of extraction allows. Humanity’s action does not animate the land. Instead, land, and the rest of the more-than-human world, are alive and communicative due to a spiritual component. Again, Paulson provides an Aboriginal account of this worldview, which he integrates with his Christian faith:

> An authentic Indigenous Christianity will need to pay respect to the spirituality that has long been attuned to the divine presences in this land, rather than seeing the earth as an adversary to be subdued, or a reservoir of resources to be exploited, or a terra nullius to be divided up at whim.\(^787\)

According to Jennings, the ability of non-Indigenous peoples to participate in the communicative reality of the creation has been diminished by a theology of extraction and greed as land was occupied, manipulated and fragmented. Jennings contrasts two visions of creation. First, the colonial which viewed the transformation of land and the land’s inhabitants as containing potential which was only recognised through the God-ordained work of extraction. Second, an Indigenous view of creation which sees the world as relational and “never silent, never passive, but always already actuality, speaking in and through creatures, including the human creature.”\(^788\)

Jennings argues that a further disjuncture between these two ways of viewing creation occurred at the point of colonial contact. Indigenous visions of creation were denigrated and downplayed as mere projections onto the

\(^{786}\) *Charlie’s Country* shows some of the reasons why this is the case such as smoking, alcohol abuse and unhealthy food in the shop. Kowal, “Is culture the problem or the solution? Outstation health and the politics of remoteness.”

\(^{787}\) Paulson disrupts a derogatory hermeneutic of Indigenous spiritualities and instead critiques the effects of the colonisers. “‘Animistic’ spirituality has shaped respectful attitudes to the created order, which can hardly be seen now as inferior to the abusive theologies of the colonisers.” Paulson, “Towards an Aboriginal Theology,” 311.

\(^{788}\) Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
world, rather than being a valid testament to a complex spiritual reality.\textsuperscript{789} Discussion of the work of Indigenous theologians in section 7.4 will further explore the communicative reality of creation.

\subsection*{7.2.5 Reclaiming Creaturehood}

The language and concept of creaturehood are important to Jennings for several reasons. Acknowledging our creaturehood reminds us that we are participants rather than masters of the earth. Furthermore, “life as creatures” is interdependent with, and related to, fellow human-creatures and also the more-than-human world.\textsuperscript{790}

To analyse colonial perceptions of creaturehood, Jennings compares the dominance of colonial racial logics with influential twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s account of humanity’s creaturely interdependence—in particular, the contrast Barth makes between humanity’s interdependence and God’s independence. Jennings argues that colonial racial logics contorted the notions of interdependence and independence. Mutual interdependence between peoples was not denied, rather it was organised around white bodies:

\begin{quote}
European colonists in acts of breathtaking hubris imagined the interlocking nature of all people and things within their own independence of those very people and things.\textsuperscript{791}
\end{quote}

This posture of independence exhibited by colonisers included attitudes to land and animals, as well as people. Throughout \textit{Christian Imagination} and elsewhere, Jennings cites Vine Deloria Jr who was a public intellectual and member of the Standing Rock Sioux (Lakota) nation. Deloria describes his people’s interconnection with the land, rivers, valleys, mountains and animals in terms of a community of family members. Indigenous peoples, including Deloria, often express a moral imperative to listen to all creatures. Deloria contrasts this with the relationship to the world embodied in European settlers:

\begin{quote}
The spiritual reality of the Dreaming and relationship with land, plants and animals is beautifully conveyed by Yawuru man, former Catholic priest, public figure and Western Australian senator Patrick Dodson. Patrick Dodson, "The Land Our Mother, The Church Our Mother," \textit{Compass Theology Review} 22 (1988).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{789} The spiritual reality of the Dreaming and relationship with land, plants and animals is beautifully conveyed by Yawuru man, former Catholic priest, public figure and Western Australian senator Patrick Dodson. Patrick Dodson, "The Land Our Mother, The Church Our Mother," \textit{Compass Theology Review} 22 (1988).

\textsuperscript{790} For this reason, Jennings critiques the separation in the academy of theological anthropology from creation theology. Jennings, "Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation". See also Randy Woodley’s excellent account of Indigenous-Christian views of creation: “Only a worldview encompassing the interconnectedness between Creator, human beings, and the rest of creation as one family is adequate. Such a worldview is fundamentally indigenous and biblical.” Randy S. Woodley, \textit{Shalom and the Community of Creation} (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), Location 973.

\textsuperscript{791} Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 61.
The white man, where viewed in this context, appears as a perennial adolescent. He is continually moving about, and his restless nature cannot seem to find peace. Yet he does not listen to the land and so cannot find a place for himself. He has few relatives and seems to believe that the domestic animals that have always relied upon him constitute his only link with the other peoples of the universe. Yet he does not treat these animals as friends but only as objects to be exploited.792

Jennings reads Deloria’s insights alongside Barth’s to argue once again that settlers brought with them a distorted theological vision of creation. Not only did they conceive of themselves as independent of Indigenous peoples, animals and the land itself, but they also conferred upon themselves the independence that belongs to God alone as they performed the refashioning of landscapes and categorisation of peoples.

The archetypal characters in The Tracker perform this disjuncture in ways of seeing the “specific realities” of land and animals.793 The Tracker pays close attention to the land as he follows the Fugitive’s tracks. He is permanently listening while his companions are often unaware of what is happening around them.

Close-ups of plants and animals throughout Charlie’s Country and Ten Canoes give the impression that the landscape is alive, and the people are interconnected with it. The particularities of the Arafura wetlands influence daily life for the Yolŋu peoples in terms of seasonal patterns of food collection. The particular life-forms in the swamp also shape their ceremonial life, which participates in creation’s maintenance and renewal.794 Ten Canoes uses sight, sound and story to present the Arafura Swamp as life-giving, animated and part of the Storyteller’s identity. Donald Thomson’s photographs, that form part of the creative background to Ten Canoes, can be seen to capture a sense of Jennings’ theological vision of the interconnectedness of people and place and Yolŋu ways of knowing where identity is constructed in relation to waterways, plants, animals, sky and other features of the landscape. As mentioned in chapter 2, Rutherford describes Thomson’s work as containing a “cacophony of textures” and the sense of interconnection between people and their environment.795 She also notes the “masterful soundscape” of Ten Canoes which produces “a sonic

794 See the mini-documentary Ceremony in People of Ramingining, “Twelve Canoes.”
texture with a phenomenological density of its own” that can produce a sense of immersion into the environment of the wetlands.\textsuperscript{796}

One-third of \textit{Charlie’s Country} is set in the bush. Charlie speaks to the fish as he prepares to eat it. Jennings argues that extending our way of seeing is important if we are going to begin to rediscover what it means to be interconnected with fellow creatures.

\textbf{7.2.6 Creaturely Connection and Built Environments}

\textit{Ten Canoes} depicts pre-colonial representations of people and place. As \textit{Ten Canoes} shows, Yolŋu people adapted to their environment and organised their communities in order to be sustainable. The built environment in \textit{Ten Canoes} is organised to maintain familial relationships. The film does not idealise or romanticise pre-colonial times. For example, conflict and death are present in the world of \textit{Ten Canoes}.

Fast forward to 2013, where \textit{Charlie’s Country} addresses the complexity of a postcolonial context. The effects of colonisation are still experienced and there are new social realities to negotiate. Jennings is aware of this. He knows that there is no return to a pre-colonial world.\textsuperscript{797} Instead, his task is to describe the circumstances that led to racial imagination and to diagnose where the destructive effects of racial imagination and the control of space are still felt today.

For Jennings, the way that space is constructed in built environments to create and sustain racial divisions needs to be addressed as part of any doctrine of creation.\textsuperscript{798} Greater awareness of the relationship between space, race and place is needed to inform how we live together. In other words, Christian discipleship needs to consider the moral, and not just the economic, components of real estate on both a global and local level.\textsuperscript{799}

The world as creation was lost, Jennings contends, with the emergence of a way of seeing which transferred identity from land, water, sky and animals to the body. As previously discussed (chapters 5 and 6), this transference had the effect of creating two symbiotically related forms of enclosure: new world private property, and racial existence. These two are interrelated as race is “fundamentally a matter of geography. Racial existence came into

\textsuperscript{796} Rutherford, "Ten Canoes and the Ethnographic Photographs of Donald Thomson," 114.
\textsuperscript{797} Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 64.
\textsuperscript{798} Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 293.
\textsuperscript{799} Jennings, \textit{The Christian Imagination}, 287.
being at the site of geographic enclosure.”

Private property, as an enclosure, is responsible for a “geographic unconscious” that is not only haunted by race—and in the case of settler-states first occupancy—but it also “desensitizes us [that is non-Indigenous peoples] to place, to plants, animals, and earth.”

Christian doctrines of creation, Jennings argues, must challenge the formations of distorted “geographic life.” Jennings addresses the question of how this can occur if Christianity has been part of the construal of the racial and spatial demarcations of contemporary life. His answer lies in the theological move encased within the posture of being second readers, those who “read after.” Crucially, as those who read after, our senses are attuned to what has already been discovered by others. He reiterates the connection between reading after and Gentile remembrance:

We are always inside the Jewish matrix of creation, sensing secondarily, sensing behind others, and this secondary position attunes us to sense even in the wake of enclosures, racial and spatial.

Applying Jennings’ posture of “reading after” to the built environment in settler-colonial Australia does not provide straightforward answers. The context of each region, city, town, suburb and street will differ in terms of how space is used to enhance or diminish life. Being attentive, sensing and “reading after” can, however, be as simple as asking questions about who has access to services and resources in each of these specific contexts. Charlie’s Country depicts one such context. Indigenous and non-Indigenous lives are segregated within the remote community and for the “Long Grassers” in Darwin. In urban areas of Australia, such as Darwin, race, socio-economic status and gender intersect to determine where people can afford to live and the services and resources that are provided. Charlie’s Country provides a cinematic representation of one particular setting. When viewed alongside the documentary Another Country, Charlie’s Country encourages the audience to ask questions concerning the policy decisions, such as the Northern Territory Intervention, that have affected remote communities, rather than to rush to quick and easy answers that reproduce social and racial inequalities.

See chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of these issues.
Remote Indigenous communities are a unique space in terms of Jennings’ theory on the creation of racialised geographies.\textsuperscript{804} In the case of the Yol\'u people, this is because the dispossession was not so much a physical displacement, although this did occur, as a loss of agency and identity.\textsuperscript{805} On the one hand, the built environment in \textit{Charlie’s Country} and the interactions that Charlie has with non-Indigenous workers, both in the community and in urban Darwin, reflects years of the “historic desire to create communities that normalize white dominance.”\textsuperscript{806} Charlie is continually frustrated by the restrictions he faces. Police officer Luke is also frustrated.

Jennings’ challenge to imagine new ways of living together includes taking the context and the history of place into account. History and context, as alluded to in the Accidental Trilogy, raise a number of issues when translating Jennings’ insights to the Australian context. For example, linking private property to racialised space, as Jennings does, is not a straightforward correlation in remote communities. For example, personal private property is not the overarching framework in remote communities. Rather communal Native Title that recognises Indigenous land and sea rights is employed which adds another layer of complexity.\textsuperscript{807}

Furthermore, the permit system in remote communities, although tenuous, allows the community, via the Land Councils, to regulate who can enter the community.\textsuperscript{808} The interrogation of racialised space in Charlie’s context is not as much about segregation of peoples as it is about access to goods and services. The social, political and theological response therefore includes a commitment to providing adequate services to remote communities and the protection of the rights of Indigenous peoples to have autonomy over their lands, natural resources, sacred sites and cultural practices. In addition, the form of joining and relationality between First and Second peoples is open to interrogation. Joining between First and Second peoples in Australia in the context of remote communities must be “respectful

\textsuperscript{804} See also Jennings, “Creating Redemptive Places: Why Geography Matters to God— A Lecture by The Rev. Dr. Willie Jennings.”
\textsuperscript{805} Yunupingu, ”Rom Watangu: The Law of the Land.” Ramingining is part of Arnhem land which was proclaimed an Aboriginal Reserve in 1931.
\textsuperscript{806} Jennings, “Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation”.
\textsuperscript{807} Housing within remote communities, as shown on \textit{Charlie’s Country}, is rented through government agencies. Housing in remote communities remains a significant issue and some Indigenous leaders such as Noel Pearson argue that private ownership is the way to address housing needs.
joining” which respects the ongoing connection to country and sovereignty of First peoples. Creative, long-term partnerships such as the friendship of de Heer and Gulpilil are one way forward. However, systemic forms of relationality, as demonstrated in the Northern Territory Intervention (see 4.5) also require critique in order for the underlying assumptions of “pedagogical imperialism” and control of land and people to be uncovered.

7.3 Identity, Place and the Doctrine of Creation

The discussion above contains Jennings’ theological revisionism regarding creation theology. It also begins the work of theological construction through dialogue with the Accidental Trilogy. This section continues both these tasks with a particular emphasis on Jennings’ argument concerning the way the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* contributed to the displacement of identity. Indigenous narratives of creation provide a corrective to this misuse of theology by reinforcing place as a marker of identity.

7.3.1 Creation Reframed and the Doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*

According to Jennings, the displacement of Indigenous peoples by Europeans was fuelled by the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, “the creation by the Creator of all things out of nothing.”809 Envisioning the world as *creatio ex nihilo*, when coupled with colonial agendas, led to two interrelated hermeneutical principles. The first concerns a characteristic of the creation itself, the second concerns the identity of the Creator.

Jennings’ use of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is specifically within the context of colonialism and his broader picture of the way Christian doctrine was used as part of the colonial project. He is not defending or denying the doctrine. Instead, he is arguing that the doctrine was *misused*:810 By accepting Jennings’ insight regarding *creatio ex nihilo*, we see that the theology informing the colonial project extended beyond the desire to “save souls” and into the realm of the doctrine of creation, albeit in a disfigured way.

810 See also Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius*. Jennings’ contribution is part of a broader conversation about *creatio ex nihilo*. See, for example, the contributors to a special edition of *Modern Theology* who defend the doctrine. Janet Martin Soskice, ed., *Creation ‘Ex Nihilo’ and Modern Theology*, vol. 29:2 (*Modern Theology*: 2013). Catherine Keller is an example of a Western theologian who argues against *creatio ex nihilo* and for reclaiming creation from “the deep” as a crucial hermeneutic for the creation narratives in Genesis. Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).
Particular misuse, according to Jennings, arose from the view that creation was marked by an inherent variability whereby “all things are contingent and held together by God.” The contingency of creation means that there is an aspect of impermanence and instability in both the created world and human existence. Viewing creation as impermanent and contingent is not problematic in and of itself. However, when the depiction of creation as impermanent intersected with colonial logics in the fifteenth century, diverse peoples and their identities and connection to place were also rendered impermanent.

In other words, colonial agents could displace and define Indigenous communities without recourse because Indigenous identities were incorrectly perceived as contingent and not connected to particular places, languages or kinship structures. At the same time as the displacement of Indigenous peoples was occurring, an ironic essentialism was being enacted. Rather than essentialism determined by racial essences, as would later occur, the essentialism in operation at the dawn of modern colonialism was one that drew all of humanity together into one category. Particularity associated with language, geography and family was erased in the process.

This essentialising move is marked by the “conceptual glue” that Christianity provided for the colonial project: the need to seek the salvation of others and bring them into the “paternal-ecclesial care” of the church. Nicholas V’s desire for Indigenous peoples to obtain “pardon for their souls” through the colonial endeavour severed Indigenous peoples from their pre-existent identities and transported them into a “universal” framework of humanity determined by the bodies of European Christians. Jennings states this point as follows:

The pope granted Portuguese royalty the right to reshape the discovered landscapes, their peoples and their places as they wished. These actions inscribe the contingency of creation itself within the will and desire of church and colonial powers. The inherent instability of creation means that all things may be altered in order to bring them to proper order toward saved existence. Church and realm, represented in this moment by Nicholas V and Prince Henry (and King Alfonso), stand between peoples and lands and determine a new relationship between them, dislodging particular identities from particular places. Through a soteriological vision, church and realm discern all peoples to exist on the horizon of theological identities.

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Here Jennings identifies an initial theological move taking place at the beginning of colonial modernity as creation’s dependence on the Creator is transferred to creation’s dependence on the church and colonial powers. In addition, Jennings’ second hermeneutical principle concerning *creatio ex nihilo*—the identity of the Creator—comes to fruition through the action of Pope Nicholas V. As Christ’s representative on earth, Nicholas V commissions Prince Henry with the divinely inspired task of continuing the mission of Christ. The mission of Christ becomes inseparable from the acquisition of people and their lands. In a distorted way, this imperial move mimics the actions of Christ who enters time and space and anchors the world “in the beginning” as both the point of stability and as the one to whom creation belongs.\(^{814}\) Pope Nicholas co-opted Christological truth and transferred the role reserved for Christ to Portuguese royalty.

The notion that the world and her peoples are contingent and can be reconfigured by Christ’s representatives on earth became the ground that allowed the racial imagination to take root and grow. The separation of people and place created a vacuum that allowed human existence, no longer tied to land, place and spatial boundaries, to be determined by racialised comparative scales. As was shown in 5.3.3, all bodies—European and Indigenous peoples—were configured within a “boundary-less reality” and drawn into a schema of “unrelenting aesthetic judgments” based on physical characteristics.\(^{815}\)

As a further example to those given in 5.3.3, Jennings demonstrates the way that racialised scales were constructed using examples from Christopher Columbus’s third voyage to the New World (1498–1500), specifically when Columbus anchored at the south-eastern tip of Venezuela near Trinidad. For example, Columbus writing to his royal patrons to inform them of his achievements wrote:

> The next day there came from the east a large canoe with 24 men in it, all of them young and bearing many weapons . . . As I said, they were all young and fine looking and not negroes but rather the whitest of all those that I had seen in the Indies, and they were graceful and had fine bodies and long, smooth hair cut in the Castilian manner.\(^{816}\)


\(^{816}\) Christopher Columbus, “Account of the Third Voyage. La Historia Del Viaje Qu’el Almirante Dom Cristóval Colón Hizo La Tercera Vez Que Vino a Las Indias Quando Descubrió La Tierra Firme, Como Lo Embió a Los Reyes Desde La Isla Española,” in Accounts and Letters of the Second, Third, and Fourth Voyages, ed. Paolo Emilio Taviani, Consuelo
Jennings views this statement as a “down payment on things to come.”  

Importantly, Columbus’s prior knowledge becomes his point of departure. This in itself is not surprising or unexpected. However, the “power of Columbus’s description lies in its comparative range. It connects the bodies of the new land (Africa) to the bodies of the other new land (the Americas), through the exercise of an aesthetic with breathtaking geographic flexibility.”

Racialised comparative scales that grew out of this testimony, and others like them, transcended the specifics of place and were applied irrespective of geography. In addition to linking the colonial expansionism with the doctrine of creation, Jennings argues that the development of racial scales which were eventually “superimposed over all bodies” was a theological move because Europeans were mimicking the nature of the gospel. The gospel, when it is embodied in the “acts of faithful Christians,” is not confined by space. Jennings describes the gospel as “quintessentially moveable, elastically stable over vastly different locations.” Jennings is arguing that what is valid for the gospel was usurped and misappropriated by Europeans who equated spreading the Christian faith with the acquisition and commodification of Indigenous lands and bodies.

As incorrect assumptions about the transferability of Indigenous identities—from land and place and onto the body—were made by Europeans a disfigured doctrine of creation emerged. By enacting this transference, colonial agents mimicked the act of creation, casting themselves as the Creator who could create “out of nothing.” Within the Australian context, a

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820 Jennings provides the example of Christopher Columbus as one who frames exploration and colonialism within soteriological purposes. “The Holy Trinity inspired Your Highnesses to undertake this enterprise of the Indies and through His infinite goodness made me His envoy on account of which I came with this plan into your royal presence, you being the most noble Christian princes toiling for the faith and its propagation.” Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 31.

821 “European Christians, from the Iberians through the British, saw themselves as agents of positive, if not divine, change, as it were, the markers of creaturely contingency. They saw themselves as those ordained to enact a providential transition. In so doing they positioned themselves as those first conditioning their world rather than being conditioned by it. They performed a deeply theological act that mirrored the identity and action of God in creating.” Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 60.
misappropriation of *creatio ex nihilo* is seen in the colonial construction of *terra nullius*—“nobody’s land”—when it clearly was somebody’s.\textsuperscript{822}

The films in the Accidental Trilogy perform a “creative crossing” with the insights from Jennings discussed above. For example, they reinforce Jennings’ proposal of colonial misuse of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which viewed the connection between people and place as impermanent. As the films show, Indigenous identities are deeply related to the spirituality of the Dreaming, place, language, culture and kinship.\textsuperscript{823} This is not to say that Indigenous identity is fixed and unchanging. Rather, it acknowledges what the cast and crew of *Ten Canoes, The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country* convey; Australia’s First peoples and their cultures transcend the definitions that colonial agents placed upon them. Instead they are defined by custodial relationship with place, language, kinship, lore and ceremony.

*Ten Canoes, The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country* challenge the colonial logic that Indigenous identity is malleable, transferable and easily erased. An example of colonial logic from *The Tracker* is the Fanatic’s monologue before his death when he suggests, “collect(ing) the blacks” to feed and clothe them as part of his service to “Almighty God.” Here Indigenous identity (in the Australian context) is reduced to the collective “black” and can be relocated at the whim of colonial officers. Service to God is a convenient cover for deciding the location and fate of particular peoples.

The opening scene of *Ten Canoes* challenges a misuse of *creatio ex nihilo* in a particular way. The Storyteller invites the audience into the world of the film, a world which does not exist in a universal “land far away.” Rather, it is the Storyteller’s land and people whom we accompany:

. . . A story like you’ve never seen before. I must tell you something of my people and my land. This land began in the beginning. Yurlunggur, that great water goanna, he travelled here. Yurlunggur made all this land—he made the water and he

\textsuperscript{822} Pascoe, *Dark Emu*; Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius*.

made the swamp that stretches long and gives us life. I come from this waterhole.\textsuperscript{824}

The opening scene of \textit{Ten Canoes} disrupts the colonial misuse of the doctrine of \textit{creatio ex nihilo} because the audience is invited to a particular place.\textsuperscript{825} The narrator’s creation story is linked to this swamp. The Storyteller invokes “my people” and “my land” as he addresses the audience. His identity is literally grounded in place.

7.3.2 Narratives of Creation and Connection with Place

The creation story and the particularities of the land formations and waterways are evocatively portrayed on-screen. Gulpilil’s creation story is an example of an Indigenous creation story which is inseparable from particular features of land, sky and water.\textsuperscript{826} The curve of Yurlunggur’s body travels through space and forms the land and water of the Arafura swamp.\textsuperscript{827} Land, water and the Storyteller are intimately connected in a “sacred cosmology of kinship.”\textsuperscript{828} The curve of the swamp that the camera tracks in the opening scene is followed by the Storyteller’s voice-over. As we hear about the movement of the great water goanna travelling and creating the land and water, the audience remembers the aerial view of the swamp. The creation story and the particularities of the land formations and waterways are evocatively portrayed on-screen.

\textsuperscript{824} de Heer and the people of Ramingining, \textit{Ten Canoes Post-Screenplay}, Scene 1.

\textsuperscript{825} Although the Storyteller’s words in \textit{Ten Canoes}, “this land began in the beginning,” seems similar to the Christian mystery of creation from nothing, in general Aboriginal Dreaming stories speak about land, already in existence, undergoing transformation due to ancestral beings or Creative Spirits. For example, the Adnyamathanha creation story, \textit{The Euro and the Kangaroo} begins: “Once upon a time the whole country was flat. There were no hills at all.” Dorothy Tunbridge, the Nepabunna Aboriginal School, and and the Adnyamathanha people of the Flinders Ranges, \textit{Flinders Ranges Dreaming} (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), 35.

\textsuperscript{826} Another example is the Seven Sisters creation story, a songline which covers the entire Australian continent. The story changes as it moves through different geographical areas; however, it retains key features in each area. The story is connected with the sky, as it is associated with the Pleiades constellation. The story is also “written in the land.” For example, the “villain” in this story, Nyiru, changes form as he travels through different landscapes turning into flowers or a snake to trick the sisters he is pursuing. At Kuru Ala in Western Australia, Nyiru’s piercing eyes can be seen in the rock escarpment. The formation in the rock face of a nose and two eyes is evidence of Nyiru’s presence. Margo Neale, ed., \textit{Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters} (Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 2017), 124–125.

\textsuperscript{827} The story of Yurlunggur is Gulpilil’s creation narrative. For discussion of other Yolnu creation narratives, see Djon Mundine, “The Land is Full of Signs: Central North East Arnhem Land art,” in \textit{Art from the Land: dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal art}, ed. Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 1999); Wally Caruana, "Wagilak and Djang'kawu: Ancestral Paintings in the Public Domain," in \textit{Art from the Land: dialogues with the Kluge-Ruhe Collection of Australian Aboriginal Art}, ed. Howard Morphy and Margo Smith Boles (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 1999).

Off-screen, the setting of *The Tracker* provides another example of a sacred stories relating to place. Elsie Jackson and Annie Coulthard tell an Adnyamathanha creation story, *The Euro and the Kangaroo*, that recounts how the Flinders Ranges—where *The Tracker* was filmed—was formed and then separated from the adjacent plains. The kangaroo called Urdlu and the euro (also known as a wallaroo) called Mandya were arguing and fighting over food sources. As Mandya tried to sleep, he noticed that his hip was wounded. The sore on his hip contained a stone. He picked up the stone and blew on it. Immediately hills came up from the plain. As Mandya kept blowing several ranges of hills came up. Urdlu saw that this was happening and knew he needed to act, or he would no longer have a place to live. With a big sweep of his tail, Urdlu pushed the ranges back and created the plain called Urdlurunha-Vitana which means kangaroo flat. Hearing this story adds a deeper dimension to viewing *The Tracker* as knowledge of the stories of the land, so evocatively captured in the film, are shared with non-Adnyamathanha people.

Creation stories, such as *The Euro and the Kangaroo*, which are intimately connected with a particular landscape and people, subvert the colonial assumption that the created world can be reframed at whim. Indigenous spirituality, as shown in the Yolŋu and Adnyamathanha creation stories, cannot be divorced from the surrounding material realities. The creation stories describe various landforms and provide moral guidance for how to live in right relationship with country and with fellow creatures. The connection between spiritual and material realities challenges the colonial mindset, which did not acknowledge the connection between people and place. I have demonstrated here that Jennings’ insight, concerning an imported and misguided creation theology arising out of *creatio ex nihilo* and colonial hubris, is directly challenged by Indigenous creation stories which are inseparable from the landscape.

7.3.3 A Place-centred Reading/Viewing of Genesis 1 and 2

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This brief retelling does not do justice to this intricate Dreaming story. There are many further dimensions to this story such as the naming of particular plants, waterholes, the explanation of the features and habitats of the euro and kangaroo, and the inclusion of the Aboriginal skill of tracking. The spirit of Mandya remains in the hill called Thuduphina making the Dreaming a present reality. The detailed reproduction in *Flinders Ranges Dreaming of The Euro and the Kangaroo* told by Adnyamathanha storytellers Elsie Jackson and Annie Coulthard in Yura Ngawarla (Adnyamathanha language) includes photographs, maps, and geographical, botanical and linguistic information. Tunbridge, *Flinders Ranges Dreaming*, 35–39.
Native American theologian Randy Woodley, of the Keetoowah Cherokee people, reminds his readers that “the Scriptures are written from a worldview that does not easily categorize creation into animate and inanimate realities.”

Thus, rereading Genesis 1 and 2 in dialogue with *Ten Canoes* highlights certain aspects of the biblical account. For example, Gulpilil’s creation story in *Ten Canoes*, which is firmly connected to a particular place rather than a universal account of creation, resonates with the second creation story in Genesis (Gen 2:4–25). In Genesis 2, Eden is described using place names (Havilah and Cush) and the names of rivers (Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates). The biblical account connects the creation story to particular geographic features, and evocative imagery of the flow of the rivers is used (Gen 2:10–14). Even without claiming that we can know where Eden is located, the author of Genesis 2 is attempting to locate the story within the physical world. As theologian Miguel A. De La Torre writes: “The garden of Eden, whether real or mythical, is connected to our physical earth.”

The emphasis on land and water connects Gulpilil’s story with Genesis 2. A critical difference between the two accounts is that the human being comes from the ground (*adamah*) in Genesis whereas the Storyteller’s origin in *Ten Canoes* is the waterhole, part of the swamp which Yurlunggur has created (see also 7.4.1 below). Genesis 2 and Gulpilil’s account stresses the immanence of the Creator. Yurlunggur travels in the Storyteller’s land. The LORD God in Genesis forms the man, breathes life into him (2:7), plants the garden (2:8) and walks in the garden (3:8).

In this cross-textual reading/viewing between Genesis and *Ten Canoes* the naming of, and connection with, place is emphasised. Other issues require deeper exploration. For example, how best to speak of Yurlunggur and the LORD God in Genesis 2 in a way that respects the integrity of both traditions (see 6.3.4). The Rainbow Spirit Elders, speaking from their own contexts, provide insight into this issue of naming and conceptualising the sacred activity of creation. They describe the multivalent activity of the Creator Spirit, who creates in different ways. For example, the Creator Spirit commissions the activity of ancestral creation beings unique to each country and language group. Creative activity also includes the Rainbow Spirit or

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830 Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, Location 756.
832 See Paulson and Brett, “Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible Through Aboriginal Eyes.”
Rainbow Snake whose movement can be discerned across geographic areas. A range of opinions was expressed within the group of Elders as to how to integrate Christian understandings of God the Creator with the Creator Spirit and ancestral creation beings. Some were comfortable conflating the two and others were not.

The non-Indigenous biblical scholar Norman Habel proposes a reading of Genesis 1 and 2 in dialogue with Aboriginal Dreaming stories within the context of his work with the Rainbow Spirit Elders. In particular, he connects the multiple depictions of creation in Indigenous theology with the multivalent descriptions of creation in the Scriptures through the Spirit of God (Gen 1:2), Wisdom (Proverbs 3:19–20) and the Word (John 1).

Habel also argues that Genesis 1 resonates with the Indigenous conviction of spiritual presence contained in land and animals and the relatedness of all creatures. For example, the vegetation in Genesis 1:11 comes from the earth, the implication being that the earth itself has “hidden powers lying deep within the land” that God reveals.

Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. (Gen 1:11, NRSV)

Similarly, the waters (2:20) and the earth (2:24) contain life-forces within them. Living creatures emerge from the waters and the earth, called forth by the Creator Spirit. This reading of Genesis 1 interacts with concepts from the Dreaming where the land, animals, plants and waterways are all connected, sacred and blessed. The Adnyamathanha story of the Euro and the Kangaroo recounted above, includes a reference to Urdlu (the kangaroo) and Mandya’s (the euro) favourite food—the wild pear root (ngarndi wari). Therefore, as Adnyamathanha people eat this particular bush food, they connect with and participate in the Dreaming. Colonial agents dismissed this sense of connection and relatedness. The Accidental Trilogy communicates this sense of connection and relatedness on-screen aurally and visually,

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perhaps most profoundly in the early days of Charlie’s sojourn in the bush where both his hunting and eating convey joy, restoration and connection.\textsuperscript{835}

This process of bringing the traditions together is accompanied by a sense of questioning and dialogue as well as a deep sense of integration. Section 7.4 below further explores this process of integration with further references to Genesis 1 and 2. As Jennings argues, being attentive to these insights from Indigenous Christians as examples of the “movement towards faith” within Indigenous “cultural life and spatial logics” is only possible through adopting a posture of overhearing and joining as second readers (discussed above in 7.2.1).\textsuperscript{836}

7.4 Indigenous Christian Theologians

Jennings argues that due to colonialism something fundamental has been lost in Christian doctrines of creation. The loss of the connection between people and place has not been adequately recovered. Part of his solution is to engage in the practice of overhearing creation through the wisdom and experience of Indigenous Christians. It is to this task that we now turn through discussion of works by Denise Champion and Terry LeBlanc.

7.4.1 Denise Champion

Denise Champion is an Adnyamathanha woman of the Ararru (north wind) moiety and an ordained pastor in the Uniting Church. As she explains, “Adnyamathanha” is made up of two syllables and means “rock (adnya) group (mathanha).” Her identity is located in her land and also her family. Her Adnyamathanha name, Warrikanha, indicates that she is the second born and female in her family.\textsuperscript{837} Her work is important to this thesis because her country, Adnyamathanha country (the Flinders Ranges), is where The Tracker was filmed. The Tracker provides an audio-visual companion to Champion’s theology. A particular focus on Champion’s account of the animated and connected nature of land, animals, sky, water and people is provided. “Knowing” country and “caring for” country remains important for Adnyamathanha people. At the same time, Champion also expresses lament

\textsuperscript{835} This concept of the sacred and life-giving properties of Yolŋu food is beautifully conveyed in Will Stubbs and John Wolsey, eds., Midawarr/Harvest (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2017).

\textsuperscript{836} Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 98. This approach resembles Henderson’s discussed in 2.5.2.

for land and people due to the colonial disruption which has taken place.\textsuperscript{838} She describes her people as exiles and refugees in their land. This tension between relating to the land and the colonial atrocities which have taken place are also powerfully communicated in The Tracker.

In her book, \textit{Yarta Wandatha}—“the land is speaking”—Champion expresses her Adnyamathanha culture and language alongside her identity as an Adnyamathanha Christian pastor.\textsuperscript{839} Her storytelling, which brings together her Adnyamathanha culture and Christian faith, demonstrates that her Christian belief is not limited to European ways of knowing. Champion speaks honestly about her Christian, Adnyamathanha and Australian identities. She records some of the struggle for identity she experienced in mission contexts, such as when Elders decided to stop Adnyamathanha ceremonies because the knowledge of how to do them properly was disappearing due to colonisation.

Champion describes relatedness with land and place in familial terms. This aligns with Jennings’ call for learning from Indigenous Christians about ways of relating to land and fellow creatures that disrupt a utilitarian understanding. The quotation below demonstrates Champion’s theological method where she weaves together her relationship with her land and the biblical account of land as the source of life and divine connection in Genesis 2.

\begin{quote}
We are not separated from the land our mother. We always talk about the land as our mother, which fits very closely with the story of Genesis of the Lord God forming humankind from clay.\textsuperscript{840}
\end{quote}

Champion affirms the in-depth knowledge that creation holds and speaks to us if we are ready to listen.

\begin{quote}
I always say Australia is like one gigantic storybook. There’s a story in every part of the land and sky and sea. When we, as Adnyamathanha, gather and tell our stories we always say \textit{yarta wandatha} – ‘the land is speaking.’ We also say \textit{yarta wandatha ikandadnha}. The people are speaking as if the land is speaking. So the land is speaking to us and through us in these stories. There’s a oneness there.\textsuperscript{841}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{838} This disruption continues in the world in front of the film as Adnyamathanha country is a site for a proposed nuclear waste dump. See the documentary, \textit{Nuclear Waste Land: Indigenous Australians fight radioactive dump plan} (Thomas Large, 2016).

\textsuperscript{839} Champion, \textit{Yarta Wandatha}.

\textsuperscript{840} Champion, \textit{Yarta Wandatha}, 19. For an extended theological discussion of the land as mother, see Woodley, \textit{Shalom and the Community of Creation}, Location 798.

\textsuperscript{841} Champion, \textit{Yarta Wandatha}, 29.
The “gigantic storybook” that Denise refers to includes the Adnyamathanha Dreaming stories. These stories explain how to live in right relationship with the Creator, the creation and with other humans. Dreaming stories incorporate hills, rocks, waterholes, plants and animals, explaining how each one came to be. The particularities of land formations are evidence of the Creator Spirit and ancestral creation beings who traversed the landscape during the Dreaming. The spatial reality of the Dreaming tracks connects the past with the present. “Land is the outward expression of the spiritual dimension.”842 For Adnyamathanha people, a spiritual dimension remains present in the land which is why land autonomy and the preservation of sacred sites (places where particular activity from ancestral beings in the Dreaming can be discerned) are essential.

Champion also recognises Adnyamathanha peoples’ “long memory” of the Creator God in their stories and their land.843 She includes Christ as hidden in the Adnyamathanha stories and therefore hidden in the land. For example, the story of Yurnda Akananadha: The Creation of the First Day explains the daily movement of the sun. Christ, like the sun, is dependable and provides the light needed to see and to grow. Champion reads John 1 and Psalm 119 alongside Yurnda Akananadha to explore the meanings of light and dark and the guidance that God provides.

There is no explicit reference to Adnyamathanha stories in The Tracker; however, we get a sense of the land as animated and as an important element in the film.844 The landscape that seems barren and oppressive to the police party is a source of nurture and sustenance for the Tracker. It is almost as if the land is on the Tracker’s side. The Tracker can find food easily and uses plants medicinally. He hears and sees things to which the others in the police party remain oblivious. The power dynamics that are so central to the plot of the film ultimately come down to who can survive in the environment. The police party are aware that despite their guns and

842 Tunbridge, Flinders Ranges Dreaming, xxxv.
843 Champion, Yarta Wandatha, 29.
844 Following Indigenous filmmaker Ivan Sen, I have referred to the land as an element in the films and not a character. Sen states: “Well, for me, the land is the stage. I don’t really refer to it as a character because all the characters play on top of that stage and for me our environment informs who we are and also the decisions we make and that defines us as characters.” Chris Singh, “Sydney Film Festival Interview: Director Ivan Sen talks Goldstone, Corruption and Indigenous Representation,” The Iris See More (2016). http://iris.theaureview.com/sydney-film-festival-interview-director-ivan-sen-talks-goldstone-corruption-and-indigenous-representation/.
supplies—which are ultimately futile and finite—it is the Tracker who is key to their survival.

The soundtrack of *The Tracker* is an essential and evocative element of the film. The haunting songs function as part of the script. These songs become the inner voice of the Tracker, once again positioning him as central to the story. *The Tracker* is a lament in the sense that it involves truth-telling, naming injustice and speaking about the unspeakable. The songs convey a sense of lament in a particular way. The soundtrack includes Archie Roach singing in English and in his father’s language Bundjalung. These songs of lament are also a sign of the continuity and survival of people, language and culture. For example, a portion of *My People*:

In this land long ago  
We lived our own way  
Now we’re no longer free  
We are dispossessed.  
People of mine.

The connection between land and people has been broken, and this is a cause for lament. This sense of lament for the broken relationship between land and people is also seen in Denise Champion’s work. She has written an Adnyamathanha lament paraphrasing Lamentations chapter 1. Lamentations uses vivid language and imagery to depict Jerusalem’s destruction and the exile into Babylon. Champion’s Adnyamathanha lament grounds the cry of dispossession in her country:

Strangers have come and taken the land of our  
Fathers and Mothers,  
away from Adnyamathanha children.  
But where can we go?  
We have nowhere to go!  
Now strangers in our own land,  
The Adnyamathanha suffer much,  
made to work hard for the new owners.  
She lives among the nations but has no rest.  
Ngaingka! Who will hear us crying?845

Champion’s Adnyamathanha lament and the songs from *The Tracker* speak of dispossession. They are laments arising from the land we now call Australia. Echoing Jerusalem in Lamentations (Lam 1:12) Champion asks her readers “Who will hear us crying?”846 The viewer of *The Tracker* becomes a witness to the colonial atrocities that took place. *Hope Always*, the final song in *The Tracker*, reminds the viewer that the effects of history linger in the present:

Hope’s all we have until we find our way, for all around to respect what we say, Chain our hands, take our lands, we stay. It’s where our future goes searching for those who will carry the burden with us. Always we hope.

Both *The Tracker* and Denise Champion’s writing and ministry include a commitment to truth-telling and an invitation to Second peoples to “carry the burden” as the song suggests. For Champion, hope lies in a sense of return after exile and in the person of Christ. Christ is not only a “safe place of refuge,” but also “a sacred place” whose presence is experienced in the stories of the land (see above) and in the biblical witness, for example in Mary’s song in Luke 1 where justice and freedom are proclaimed.847

7.4.2 Terry LeBlanc

Terry LeBlanc is a Mi’kmaq/Acadian theologian. He is a founding member of NAIITS: an Indigenous Learning Community, an organisation committed to developing Indigenous theology in North America and with Indigenous communities globally.848 LeBlanc is included as a voice in this chapter because of his creative and compelling articulation of Christian belief within an Indigenous worldview. LeBlanc is dissatisfied with the dominant western framework which has been applied, almost exclusively, to Christian theology.

He asks a question which echoes Jennings’ concerns:

Can we look back at the framework of theological understanding that has led to countless cycles of colonial mission, the haphazard devastation of the rest of creation—the whole of which is the focus of Christ’s redemption on the cross—and a stunted theology of salvation, to finally understand where we are so that we might gain some perspective about where to go from here?849

LeBlanc argues that a significant step in answering this question lies in applying Indigenous traditions, philosophical understandings and worldviews to crucial Christian doctrines. LeBlanc provides pertinent insights in the areas of creation theology, Christology and pneumatology.

In terms of Christology, LeBlanc challenges Western theology’s anthropocentric models of salvation. He argues that reference to Christ’s

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848 For more information about their mission and scholarly pursuits, including the NAIITS journal which is published annually, see https://www.naits.com/
reconciliation affecting “all creation” (Col 1:20) means exactly that—all.\textsuperscript{850} Christ’s redemptive work on the cross has primarily been conceived in terms of a restored relationship between God and humanity and within human-to-human relationships. This conception is not incorrect—LeBlanc affirms humanity’s need for a saviour.\textsuperscript{851} However, according to LeBlanc, the all-inclusive nature of Christ’s redemption of all creation has been diminished and reduced to a “blood price.”\textsuperscript{852} The implications of a truncated understanding of redemption are present in mission history. As he argues, the zeal to “bring God” to new lands does not make sense if you believe that not only is God’s Spirit present and active in all places and at all times but also that God in Christ has redeemed all creation—including the “New World.”

LeBlanc traces the cause of this problem to an over-emphasis on Genesis 3 at the expense of Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis 1 and 2 provide a picture of interdependence and interrelatedness between each part of the creation. In addition, each part of the creation is linked “spiritually” and “intuitively” with the Creator.\textsuperscript{853} The creation’s goodness has been distorted, Le Blanc argues, by the entry of sin into the world (Gen 3)—rather than the good being eradicated. The effects of the curse have, of course, been far-reaching. There is now a fracture in the relationship between God and humanity, humanity and other spiritual beings (represented in the serpent), humans with each other and humans with the rest of creation, and yet all of creation has also been reconciled through the cross of Christ. Moreover, all of creation lives in the tension of the “now and not yet” nature of the Christ event. LeBlanc summarises the effects of the curse and the nature of redemption as follows:

\begin{quote}
And for humanity . . . relational intimacy with the One who made them is subjected to distorted yearning for transcendence and meaning, punctuated regularly by an idolatry that misrepresents the intended relationship between humankind, the Creator and the rest of creation. This is the curse. All of creation, Paul emphatically notes, not simply human beings, is subjected to its effect. All, he enthusiastically observes, awaits their future, full redemption.\textsuperscript{854}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{851} LeBlanc, “New Old Perspectives,” 174.

\textsuperscript{852} LeBlanc, “New Old Perspectives,” 174.

\textsuperscript{853} LeBlanc, “New Old Perspectives,” 172.

\textsuperscript{854} LeBlanc, “New Old Perspectives,” 173.
Along with LeBlanc’s Christology and creation theology, careful attention to his pneumatology is also warranted. In the area of pneumatology, LeBlanc provides a creative and compelling account of the animation and spirituality of the creation. Indigenous worldviews and philosophies have traditionally been more appreciative of this reality, while Western worldviews have tended to operate with dualisms which have separated humanity from the rest of creation. LeBlanc’s contribution is to approach the Scriptures directly through his Indigenous lens. The result is that he emphasises the Spirit of God relating to and within all of creation, and not just humanity. LeBlanc uses a few specific examples to highlight the Spirit of God within the whole of creation. Creation contains the “gifts of the Spirit” and consistently manifests these gifts. He does not read references to creation in the Psalms (for example, Psalm 96:11–13) and Job 12:1ff anthropomorphically or as personification, rather these verses indicate the wisdom of creatures living intuitively in response to their Creator. This wisdom is available for our instruction. In addition, LeBlanc names the groans of creation in Romans 8:22, and the groans of humans waiting for redemption, as the activity of the same Spirit. In short:

... we are expected to demonstrate right relatedness with all of creation because the Holy Spirit has animated all and placed within all a spiritual nature which, while qualitatively different from that which is instilled in humanity, is nonetheless clearly present in all if we will but look and listen.

Looking and listening are crucial aspects of Indigenous frameworks for relating to the rest of creation. LeBlanc’s insight resonates with the writings of Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann from the Ngangikurungkur people of the Daly River in the Northern Territory. Ungunmerr-Baumann shares with non-Indigenous peoples the concept of *dadirri*, which is deep listening, stillness and waiting. She compares *dadirri* to the western notion of

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855 Franciscan spirituality is a notable exception from the Western Tradition. See Ilia Delio, Keith Douglass Warner, and Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation: a Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2008). LeBlanc also affirms moves to engage with Eastern theology which has tended not to use such stark dualisms.

856 LeBlanc states that he is leaving to one side Romans 8:20–21 which states that the creation has been subjected to “futility” by God. Although the emphasis in this chapter of my thesis may imply that creation has only been distorted and disfigured through colonial processes, there is theological work that wrestles with the “fallenness” of creation as LeBlanc does in his account of the effects of sin in his reading of Genesis 1–3. For an example of the broader conversation on the issue of suffering within creation, see the chapter “Ecology and Theodicy” in Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (Winona: St Mary’s Press, 2008).


contemplation. Dadirri is a multifaceted concept that includes recognising the sacred nature of all of life. Deep listening includes listening to the wisdom of Elders and to the ceremonies and stories of her people. As a reflection of her Catholic spirituality, dadirri also includes listening to the Word of God—known most fully in Jesus Christ—and to the “great Life-Giving Spirit, the Father of us all.”

Ungunmerr-Baumann’s reflection on dadirri connects with LeBlanc’s convictions about the need to listen to the creation for spiritual wisdom. The name of her people, the Ngangikurungkurr people, literally means “the Deep Water Sounds” or “Sounds of the deep.” In her reflection, she refers to the deep springs within her people and the ways that stories and ceremonies “sink quietly into our minds and we hold them deep inside.” Ungunmerr-Baumann also refers to the natural world as a place to encounter the Creator and to learn wisdom. Her people are river people. They know that a river cannot be hurried. Rather, “we have to move with its current and understand its ways.” Learning from the river implies a stance of overhearing rather than coercion and control. Ten Canoes shows the annual magpie goose hunt is dictated by the seasons and by understanding the ways of the geese. Bunurong historian Bruce Pascoe is working with farmers to revision crops and agriculture in Australia using native plant life which is sustainable in terms of water use and soil preservation. In other words, listening to the land can still be part of life in industrial societies.

Prentis provides a pertinent insight into the need to listen to the “call to country” which the Creator issues to all who call Australia home, both First and Second peoples. She invites Second peoples to overcome “spiritual deafness and blindness” in order to “see country, and to hear country.” In this extended quotation, Prentis articulates the physicality of the land, plants, animals and as an interconnected and sacred source of revelation:

> In preparation to write this paper I went on Wakka Wakka country. The country of my ancestors, the country where 60,000 years of footprints, from my family, have been left, the country with 2,000 generations of story, my family’s story. The country that has had the presence of Creator Spirit since time immemorial. My country.

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859 Ungunmerr-Baumann, "Dadirri," 5.
863 Pascoe, Dark Emu.
As I looked out across the mountains, the Bunya Pines and the native grasslands, as I listened to Easter Whip Birds, Green Catbirds, and Kookaburras, and as I waited at sunrise, for the sun to peek its head above the horizon, I remembered rightly the Creator. I could hear the beat of the clapsticks as though in rhythm with my creation, my being. I could see the songs of creation, I could feel the stamping of feet so softly in dance on creation. I remembered rightly of the Sun—the giver of life. I felt free . . . I had heard my call to country, and I had followed that call.

The call was from Creator God, and as I stood on the mountains, beside the living rock—I listened to God sing to me through the wind rustling through the 200 year old Grasstrees in a beautiful symphony like a Psalm, and He spoke like Aboriginal Elders that say, “Care for country and country will care for you.”

Audiences of *Ten Canoes*, *The Tracker* and *Charlie’s Country* are given an insight into this sense of connection and communication that Prentis articulates. As the global community grapples with increasing environmental destruction, the implications of this kind of overhearing and paying attention—both to Indigenous theologians and to the creation itself—are significant. Attentiveness to the creation includes an awareness and response to the interconnection of different elements of creation. It also involves paying attention to particular features of place as Prentis does in her reflection above. The particularity of place is also seen in the opening sequence of *Ten Canoes*. Attentiveness by Second Peoples involves hearing First Nations stories and the histories of the places where we live and work. Not as stories in some abstracted form but in the context of their connection to actual creatures and places.

Listening to creation and expecting a response can make one vulnerable to accusations of panentheism, pantheism, animism or spiritism. In response, LeBlanc calls for a new language to be developed and for the need to move “beyond the name-calling.” LeBlanc challenges his readers to move beyond propositional and reductionist truths about the Spirit’s work and manifestation and instead be open to the Spirit of God in and through the creation. At the same time, he acknowledges the need to maintain “the authenticity of the Christian faith” and the “fine balance between our understanding of the transcendence and immanence of the Creator.”

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864 Brooke Prentis, “Dangerous memories in the land we NOW call Australia. Do the Exiles hear the call to country today?” (Morling College, Sydney, 2017).
865 See footnote 744 in this chapter.
866 LeBlanc, “New Old Perspectives,” 175.
terms of the broader conversation within this chapter, LeBlanc demonstrates within a Christian framework how all of creation is spiritual, animated, interdependent and relational. In turn, the Accidental Trilogy complements Indigenous theology by performing the sacred and relational nature of all creation. At the same time, *Ten Canoes* inhabits a Yolŋu world which the audience is invited to join on the film’s own terms.

The exploration of creation theology that has emerged from the dialogue in this chapter can be situated within the broader context of works from Western theologians, such as Sallie McFague and Jürgen Moltmann, who over the past three decades have been urging Christians in the West to reclaim the immanence of God’s relationship with the entire creation. Their works set forth the idea that God makes room for the creation through ongoing and deliberate acts of kenosis.\(^868\) In addition, they argue that all creation is sacred due to the Spirit’s embrace and the creation’s participation in the life of God.\(^869\) As the global community faces real threats from environmental degradation, theological voices such as McFague and Moltmann become more urgent. Jennings’ contribution in the broader conversation of eco-theology and earth-centred biblical hermeneutics is to include the colonial project, the relationship between race and place, and supersessionism as crucial determinants in diagnosing the current environmental, social and theological situation in which we find ourselves.\(^870\)

Indigenous theologians such as Champion, Prentis, and LeBlanc resonate with theologians such as McFague, Moltmann, and Jennings due to the shared affirmation that all of life is created and therefore sacred.\(^871\) However, there are distinct differences. Indigenous theologies emphasis the specific nature of particular places, animals and land formations and are connected with millennia of contextual knowledge. Indigenous theologians such as those discussed in this chapter locate the activity of the Spirit—and here Christian discourse is being referred to as Champion and LeBlanc do—in specific places. Throughout this chapter, the fact that Indigenous spirituality is a land-based spirituality has been highlighted. The argument has been made that the Accidental Trilogy provides an audio-visual invitation into Aboriginal

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\(^{870}\) For example, the Earth Bible Series edited by Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst.

\(^{871}\) See also Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*, Location 962.
spirituality both explicitly (in the case of Gulpilil’s creation story and Yolŋu ceremony) and implicitly due to the films’ location on Yolŋu and Adnyamathanha country.872

The use of the cinematic medium to mediate a land-based spirituality has both advantages and limitations. The distinct advantage is the accessibility, education and communication, which films such as the Accidental Trilogy can offer a broad audience. The land, animals, plants, birds and geographic features are presented in such a way that the audience is immersed in the visual and aural world of the films’ settings. The limitation comes because the cinematic medium is a representation of the physical land, and the audience does not feel, taste, smell or see and hear the land firsthand. If the land itself is a source of revelation, as Champion, Prentis, Ungunmerr-Baumann and LeBlanc testify, then the audience has to acknowledge the partial nature of their experience. On the one hand, this seems evident due to the partial nature of all cinematic encounters. However, in terms of the mediation of creation by First Nations people, this is a specific point that Second peoples who are overhearing need to remember.

7.5 Conclusion

The Accidental Trilogy provides an audio-visual companion to Jennings and to Indigenous creation theology which increases the accessibility and visibility of new ways of seeing, hearing and experiencing creation. This chapter has discussed the Accidental Trilogy with particular reference to creation theologies which amplify creation’s voice and agency and also take seriously the ongoing disruption of colonialism. The focus has been on “creative crossings” with Jennings, and then a broader conversation that included Denise Champion and Terry LeBlanc, two First Nations theologians.

In short, all of life is animated and connected and in need of a theology of attentiveness rather than a theology of extraction.873 Terra nullius has been overturned as a legal concept. Creation theology must also guard against an unconscious theological terra nullius, by ensuring that Indigenous theologies are not just an add-on to an established canon of Western theological truth.

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872 An example of the explicit connection between the literal and spiritual landscape is seen in Ridjimiraril’s funeral ritual as the river is painted on his torso to lead his spirit back to the waterhole where it will await rebirth. David Strange, “Rolf de Heer’s Ten Canoes: Real, remembered and imagined landscapes,” mETAphor, no. 3 (2015): 41.

Rather, Second peoples can overhear in order to redefine the dominant theology as one tradition among many. On its own, the Western theological tradition cannot address the ecological, social, political and theological issues we are currently facing.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

We cannot turn back time. Aboriginal people cannot wish away the past 200 years. But we are a haunted nation; tormented still by that first injustice, from which all other injustices flow. Our writers, our storytellers and artists, our judges know this and in our bones we—all of us who call this place home—know it too.
—Stan Grant, *Australia Day*

8.1 Seeing and Hearing Differently

While completing this research, I encountered two artworks which summarise the arguments that I have made throughout this thesis. Each artwork relates to a particular place. The first is a mosaic on the outside wall of St Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Cathedral in central Wollongong, New South Wales. The second is a permanent installation in the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, Australia’s capital city.

8.1.1 “In This Sign We Conquer”

Figure 8.1 Mosaic outside St Francis Xavier Cathedral, Wollongong. Photograph by Katherine Rainger.
The mosaic (figure 8.1) and the accompanying plaque (figure 8.2) are found on the lands of the Dharawal people. In the mosaic, St Francis Xavier stands with a cross in one hand. The other hand rests over two children who represent students from the adjacent parish school. The plaque next to the mosaic states that the motto “In This Sign We Conquer” points to the “Cross of Jesus.” The plaque states that, “the land and water in the background represent our journey in the Illawarra.” No mention is made of the Dharawal people. Similarly, the title on the plaque “Honouring Our Journey 1838–2011” is exclusive in the sense that it erases the presence of those who were in the land before 1838 and whose cultural connection with the land remains.

The words in the mosaic “IN THIS SIGN WE CONQUER”—written in capital letters—initially captured my attention. Regardless of the intended meaning or history of this phrase, when read in the context of this thesis, it takes on a very specific meaning. The church-in-colonialism all too often had an attitude of “conquering” when it came to Indigenous peoples, their cultures and their lands. When read in collaboration with Jennings, Indigenous theologians and *The Tracker*, the words and image have a jarring effect.
Colourful ribbons are tied to the fence next to the mosaic (figure 8.3). These ribbons, part of the ‘Loud Fence’ movement, are a symbol of solidarity and protest in response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The two images of the fence and the mosaic, side-by-side, represent two of the challenges for revisioning the role, mission and ministry of the church in Australia today. The first challenge concerns how the church responds to the survivors of child sexual abuse and moves forward with transparency and accountability. The second challenge, which I have addressed throughout this thesis, is how the church responds to the legacy and ongoing effects of colonial invasion. The latter can be addressed through truth-telling and theological revisionism, which acknowledges the colonial project and the role that Christianity played. Part of the response is imagining new ways of relating between First and Second peoples, and with the rest of creation. Listening to the wisdom and perspectives of Indigenous theologians is a crucial part of this task.
8.1.2 The Aboriginal Memorial

Figure 8.4 Ramingining Artists. Ramingining, Northern Territory, Australia.

The Aboriginal Memorial is located in the forecourt of the National Gallery of Australia on the land of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples. The Memorial, completed in 1988, contains 200 memorial poles (hollow log coffins used for storing the bones of the deceased). The poles symbolise 200 years of dispossession since 1788 when the First Fleet landed on the lands of the Gadigal clan of the Eora Nation (Sydney). Forty-three male and female Yolŋu artists from different clans, who now live in Ramingining, made the memorial poles. Each artist used their specific ancestral designs. The poles are situated according to the location of the artists’ country along the river.

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674 The names and clan designations of the 43 artists are recorded on three plaques on walls adjacent to the artwork: Djarrie Ashley; Joe Patrick Birriwanga; David Blanasi; Roy Burmyila; Mick Daypurryrun; Tony Dhanyula; Paddy Dhathangu; John Dhurrikayu; Jimmy Djelminy; Tony Djikulu; Dorothy Djukulu; Tom Djumburpur; Robyn Djunginy; Charlie Djurriritjini; Elizabeth Djuttara; Billy Black Durrugumba; Gela Nga-Mirraitja Fordham; Tony Gabalga; Daisy Ganyila; Philip Gudthaykudthay; Neville Gulaygulay; Don Gundinga; George Jangawanga; David Malangi Daymirringu; Jimmy Mamalunhawuy; Terry Mangapal; Agnes Marrawurr; Andrew Marrgululu; Clara Matjandatjpi (Wubukwubuk); John Mawurndjul AM; Dick Smith Mewirri; George Milpurrurrri; Peter Minggulum; Jack Mirritji; Jimmy Moduk; Neville Nanytjawuy; Victor Pamkal; Roy Riwa; Frances Rrikili; William Watirri; Jimmy Wululu; Wurraki 2 and Yambal Durrurrnga.
and its tributaries. The path through the Memorial imitates the course of the Glyde River estuary which flows through the Arafura Swamp to the sea. A viewing platform on the first floor of the gallery provides an aerial perspective of the work which shows the curve of the river—mirroring the perspective of the aerial shots in the opening scene of *Ten Canoes*.

![Image of The Aboriginal Memorial](image.png)

Figure 8.5 Aerial view of The Aboriginal Memorial. Photograph by Rebecca Hilton.

Viewing and walking through this artwork with the Accidental Trilogy in mind reinforces the themes that have been discussed. Yolŋu culture and connection with place are communicated with the viewer. It is also a political statement that symbolises the grief and injustice of murder and dispossession. The Conceptual Producer of *The Aboriginal Memorial* was Djon Mundine OAM, a Bundjalung man who was an Art Advisor at Ramingining in the 1980s. He explains that the Memorial commemorates the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who were killed in the process of colonisation:

> Since 1788 at least several hundred thousand Aboriginal people were murdered in the colonisation of this continent. They weren’t necessarily warriors. They were just your average Aboriginal families, men, women, children, older people—living
in peace with the land. For these people, these unsung people, this Aboriginal Memorial was created.875

The Memorial commemorates the lives of Aboriginal people, such as those represented in The Tracker, who were killed during the large-scale dispossession and murder of First peoples. At the same time, the Memorial testifies that Yolnu culture has survived invasion and the processes of colonisation. Yolnu Elder Galarrwuy Yunupingu maintains that the spirituality of the land has also survived. Colonial agents, settlers and migrants may have disrupted the land’s spirituality, but it has not been erased:

This land is not being lost to anyone. Captain Cook merely came and raised the flag and declared it belonged to the king. It does not go deeper than that—somebody in England mucked around with a piece of paper and a stamp; the king signed it, and that was it. But you cannot fight that Spirit. You cannot change the Spirit of this country. It is still here.876

In contrast with the mosaic of St Francis Xavier (figure 8.1), The Aboriginal Memorial is an exercise in truth-telling about colonial history and Indigenous survivance. The Memorial stands as a permanent reminder of the survival of Yolnu culture and the ongoing spiritual relationship with the land and waterways, as well as a commemoration of Aboriginal lives destroyed by colonial violence. The task for theologians in Australia—in our shared yet distinct existence between the ship and the shore—is to continue to wrestle with the explicit and implicit messages of these two artworks.

8.2 Overhearing the Storytellers

Through the stories that they tell, de Heer, Gulpilil, Jennings, and the Indigenous theologians with whom I have engaged, issue profound invitations to see and hear differently. This thesis is also an exercise in naming the haunting and the “first injustice” that Stan Grant refers to in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. As Jennings argues, Western societies cannot expect to experience new forms of relating between peoples, or with the rest of creation, until they acknowledge the history and conditions which continue to foster racial imagination and disconnection. In the preceding chapters I have examined some of the conditions that were present during colonisation: the separation of people from place, supersessionist thinking,
racialised scales with whiteness at the top, pedagogical imperialism and a distorted doctrine of creation.

The dialogue between Jennings and the Accidental Trilogy is reciprocal and mutually illuminating. Employing the Accidental Trilogy as a lens to read Jennings has contextualised his work. As such, specific questions and issues have arisen regarding the place of biblical Israel in Christian self-understanding. At the same time, Jennings’ portrayal of Jesus as a “new storyteller” provides new ways of relating between Jews and Gentiles (and by extension between diverse groups of Gentiles). As Jennings observes, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is a template for joining that maintains rather than erases our own stories:

Jesus reveals a wholly new determination for the life of a child of the covenant. He is defined by his people, yet determined by his God. He is one with their story, but he has become the new storyteller.877

*Ten Canoes* also features a Storyteller who invites viewers into his ancient story of land and lore. Likewise, the Tracker and Charlie have stories to tell about who they are as they navigate contact zones in colonial Australia and the present in remote and urban contexts. The Accidental Trilogy invites viewers into an on-screen world which “refuses the closure of the settler-colonial past, rejects the despair of a ‘benighted now’ and bypasses complacent promises of ‘a better future.’”878 The Accidental Trilogy in dialogue with Jennings has opened up a theological conversation which similarly addresses the past, affirms the ongoing connection between people and place and proposes what is needed to imagine new ways of belonging.

Indigenous theologians, such as Denise Champion, Brooke Prentis and others whom I have cited throughout, are an essential part of the theological conversation in Australia. They too are “storytellers” who embody a position similar to that of the Fourth Cinema camera. The stories that they tell are a theological response that engages the past, the present and the future. Their stories are places where truth-telling and connection with culture and country are integrated with Christian discourse. These storytellers speak from within the Christian tradition and their own cultures to call for lament, repentance, the pursuit of justice and the celebration of survival.

878 Felicity Collins, “Blackfella Films: Decolonizing urban Aboriginality in Redfern Now,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 7, no. 2–3 (2013): 233. Collins draws on Deborah Bird Rose’s work of paying attention to the present to avoid creating a ‘benighted now.’ Collins’ quote refers to the television series *Redfern Now*; however, her observations also apply to the Accidental Trilogy.
In chapter 1, I outlined my social location as an aspect of this research. My seeing and hearing have been transformed as I have engaged with the multitude of images and voices that have been part of this thesis. My perception of both the recent and ancient history and the land on which I live has been sharpened. Part of my answer to my question “what does theology have to learn from Charlie’s Country?”, and by extension the rest of de Heer and Gulpilil’s body of work, is that theologians need to grapple more extensively with the notion of place, particularly in the ambivalence of a settler-state such as Australia. Moreover, there is a breadth and depth to creation theology that has been diminished due to the dominance of Western ways of thinking regarding space and place. Relationship with place and joining as First and Second peoples are interconnected. As David Gulpilil says in his one-man play, “This is what David Gulpilil reckons. You wanna teach us . . . you welcome. But you gotta learn our language first. Then we might be speakin’ the same language, and together we understand the land.”879

8.3 Areas for Future Research

The extended focus on Jennings and on Gulpilil and de Heer’s body of work has provided a unique perspective on contextual theology. Below I offer four suggestions for future research arising from my study.

1) The theology of Willie Jennings has more insights to offer theological thinking in Australia than I have been able to explore here fully—particularly in terms of how the church in Australia has conversations about race, racism and identity.

2) Further explorations in theology and Fourth Cinema from the Australian context would continue the conversation that has been started. The works of Indigenous directors such as Rachel Perkins, Beck Cole, Trisha Morton-Thomas, Catriona McKenzie, Warwick Thornton, Ivan Sen and Wayne Blair would prove fruitful for theological dialogue. The work of Indigenous female directors, such as those mentioned above, could be prioritised in order to hear female perspectives. Television series such as Redfern Now, Cleverman, The Gods of Wheat Street and The Heights could be part of the dialogue as they are a platform for compelling storytelling. As Therese Davis argues, these works need not be pigeon-holed within the category of “Indigenous films/television.” Instead, they can be explored as stories of place,

redemption, community, family, belonging, connection and disconnection, spirituality and “coming of age” narratives in the same way as other audio-visual texts are used in the film and theology studies. The cultural component of these works should not be ignored; however, their appeal and reach can be extended if they are included as films studied for particular reasons, rather than an afterthought in order to include Indigenous content.  

3) An in-depth investigation of Indigenous and Western forms of justice as they are portrayed in the films in conversation with theological conversations regarding justice is another area for further research.  

4) Theological reflection on the phenomenon of audio-visual representations of land and the sensory experience of actually being on the land is warranted. The guidance of traditional custodians would enhance reflection. It is important to remember that my focus has been on Adnyamathanha country and Yolŋu country; however, all of the lands that we now call Australia have a story to tell if we are willing to listen.

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