Arresting Metaphors: Anti-Colonial Females in Australian Cinema

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“The essence of metaphor,” write Lakoff and Johnson, “is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another” (5). Strategies of resistance in filmmaking draw our attention to metaphorical constructions of power and offer other possible ways of seeing and experiencing them. One way of accessing the ongoing issues attached to colonialism and its aftermath is by attempting to understand the way metaphors of colonial power are deliberately undone in a range of Aboriginal-themed Australian films. This anti-colonial impulse in Australian cinema focuses on the key image of the white home, including the fire within it and the fences outside of it. This paper traces the treatment of this metaphor and its connections to indigenous female agency in a range of Australian films – from Jedda (dir. Charles Chauvel, 1955) to the well known short films Terra Nullius (dir. Anne Pratten, 1993) and Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy (dir. Tracey Moffatt, 1990), as well as the full length features Radiance (dir. Rachel Perkins, 1998), and Rabbit-Proof Fence (dir. Phillip Noyce, 2002). It is not my intention to create a linear teleology of anti-colonial resistance in Australian cinema but rather to explore the changes to and eventual disappearance of the white homestead. No other films of this nature have treated the white home the way these films do. This noticeable pattern of revision, refusal and change is shaped by the complexities of Aboriginal difference, counter-discursive cinematic narratives and mythologies as well as indigenous agency and action.

This article explores such representation as a specifically gendered and spatialised rhetoric of the anti-colonial. Sari Suleri argues against combining the terms “postcolonial” and “women” because together they promote an “iconicity that is too good to be true,” which “closes as many epistemological possibilities as it opens” (756). Although I have argued elsewhere that the positive difference of the female body in Australian cinema often depicts an agency for which conventional
theoretical positioning is unable to account (Lambert 8-15), this discussion is not concerned with identifying particular trends within the often contentious fields of postcolonial feminism. Such an endeavour “almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebration of oppression, elevating the racially female voice into a metaphor for ‘the good’” (Suleri 758-9). Rather than replacing one metaphor with another, the Aboriginal female body in Australian cinematic spaces is viewed as a destabilising influence on the construction of white identity and history that moves beyond the reach of competing definitions of both postcoloniality and space.

Moreover, this article does not seek to map conceptions of indigenous space in any explicit sense. As in my previous work in this area, this discussion is informed by an understanding of space as inescapably contradictory, changing and always multiple (Lambert 91). Foucault has argued, “a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers (both of these terms in the plural) – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of habitat” (149). Australian “space” in the cinema consists of multiple collective and personal journeys and narratives that simultaneously project and contest changing ideas of Australianness. The focus here then is on both the challenges and changes within particular sites through which power has been metaphorically realised.

In this article, I begin by canvassing recent studies and briefly problematising postcolonial perspectives in Australian film. I then gauge some of the ways Charles Chauvel’s Jedda had begun to speak rhetorically of a politics of difference and dissent. This focus is extended to the shift in power relations reflective of the relocation of the white home in Terra Nullius and Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy. I then examine the explicit anti-colonial treatment of the white home in Radiance through the use of fire as a personal and political arresting of the colonial metaphor. Finally, I read Rabbit-Proof Fence in terms of the relationship between the “stolen child” as cinematic motif and the irrelevance of dominant white understandings of house and home. These potent challenges to colonial and personal histories have reshaped notions of Aboriginal identity in the cinema. The homes, fires and fences have shifted in meaning from politically problematic understandings of Aboriginality to personal and collective agency.

It seems an interest in the effects of both ongoing (neo)colonial power and counter-discursive strategies is once again shaping a range of cultural studies responses to indigenous representation and Australian film. Barbara Creed unites Jedda and Night Cries within the themes of “breeding out” blackness, stolen generations and the construction of the body of the Other, through public awareness of the institutional theft of indigenous children, an issue brought to light by the Bringing them Home report. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis place Radiance and Rabbit-
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Proof Fence alongside several indigenous and non-indigenous films (The Castle, The Dish, and Moulin Rouge among them) to form a wave of cinema which “backtracks,” reprising “its role as an arbiter of national identity by going over some old ground” (7). The films are shaped by the so-called “history wars” of the 1990s and placed in the context of the “aftershocks” of the Mabo decision, which overturned the founding fiction of terra nullius. This “backtracking” is viewed as literal but also metaphorical:

It is also metaphorical in the case of a miscellany of films which have a common interest in the problems faced by settler and Indigenous peoples of being at home in Australia, whether home is located in the bush, the suburbs or the outback, or is conceived as local, national or international terrains of action. And whether ‘being at home’ after Mabo is understood in terms of coexistence and recognition of a sovereign First Nation within the Second Nation, on the Canadian model, or post-colonial reconciliation based on a moral rather than legal understanding of Indigenous–settler relations. (7)

Metaphors of home in Australian film are political by their very construction. For Collins and Davis the idea of home is explored within the extremes of sovereignty on the one hand and post-colonial sensitivity on the other. As with Creed (both studies taking an obvious lead from Gelder and Jacobs’ Uncanny Australia), the idea of home in Australian film and culture is unsettled by the political visibility of Aboriginal memory.

The urgency of such work lies in its deliberate placement within the framework of contemporary Australia’s political neo-conservatism. Links can be drawn between the metaphoric representation of Australian homeliness and the discursive effects of contemporary public policy and debate. Meaghan Morris’s recent decision to publish a paper she gave on Night Cries in 1993 was based on the need to speak to the current political context (par 58):

Since the election of John Howard’s government, disavowal and sheer ignorance about Australian culture and history has acquired a respectability unthinkable three years ago; there is renewed fervour for 'roping off' the past and pulling 'rowdy Aborigines' into line; there is, once again, white debate about assimilating Aborigines, and a growing disinclination to hear stories about mothers and the children parted or thrown together by policy in the past.

For this reason Morris restates her argument that in Night Cries the domestic interior has become a “frontier” (par 29). This article extends Morris’s potent
observations into a discussion of indigenous themed and made films that refuse and confuse the colonial power of the house or the home in Australian cinema. Notably, since the *Mabo* decision, not much has changed for Aboriginal males in Australian film. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Tracker*, the type of the mysterious blacktracker has re-emerged (though arguably as slightly more complex), and young Aboriginal males are still being killed off (*Australian Rules*) or reinscribed as criminal outcasts with no place they can “settle” (*Beneath Clouds*). What has changed is the representation of Aboriginal females, and the increasing emphasis on their roles within a particular revisioning of the notions of home and domestic space. No longer are they falling off cliffs (*Jedda*) or the primordial assistants to narratives of becoming for white females (as in *Journey Among Women, Manganinnie, Over the Hill*). Instead, they take an active role in the reconstitution of house and home because this is where, as Morris argues, “state policy impacts on the psyches of black and white women in continuous prolonged abrasion” (par 29).

This realisation promotes a need for both the analysis and execution of anti-colonial strategies in filmmaking that “pose a challenge to the dominant (colonial) modes of representation and power which distance, objectify, decontextualise and disempower” Aboriginal people (Johnson 22). Film, and its particular relationship with culture, provide entry points for this kind of resistance. If we accept that hegemony “refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert total social authority over other subordinate groups” (Hebdige 366), then the hegemonic misrepresentation of histories and cultures is also provisional – wide open to both revision and refusal in representation. To articulate the relationship between hegemony, provisionality and filmic representation in this way does not disregard the “fact” of dominance. Instead, it opens up the kinds of possibilities West envisioned in his “new cultural politics of difference” (203-217) by locating the ways in which the ongoing enactment of colonial power produces resistance in a Foucaultian sense.

Of course, this resistance is not straightforward by any means. Many Australian films tend to “frame marginality by disrupting the very cause they would appear to champion, risking cultural complicity with that which it would attempt to overcome, hence the paradox of its aesthetic integration” (Ward 211-12). This description is particularly true of a number of films produced in the wake of Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda*. Mudrooroo suggests that the possibility of protest and contestation is modified in Australian film by hegemonic discourse as “films seek to be controversial while remaining non-controversial; seek to have social impact while remaining outside the fields of ideological and social con-testation” (260). Film, according to this perspective, attempts to keep a foot in both camps: its protest ultimately reinforces acquiescence, and its contest is undermined by pretensions to
the non-ideological. Mudrooroo promotes theoretical dismembering of the filmic construct in the same way that Hutton suggests the power of filmic analysis to unmask the illusion of cultural unity, and the continuing, sophisticated forms of representational abuse aimed at Aboriginal people (333).

How such attention might be useful beyond classifying which representations somehow “get it right” (as if this were possible) entails a rethinking of how a revolutionary refusal of the less savoury outcomes of postcoloniality itself might be possible. Moore and Muecke have suggested,

In the context of a euphoric revival of Australian film-making, in which some of the most concerted efforts at being ‘progressive’ have been in the area of representations of Aborigines and Aboriginal politics, one must guard against totting up images as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ (in relation to what?) and rather shift the mode of intervention to one of understanding the process by which Aboriginal subjects are constructed and the conditions of plausibility for such construction... An understanding of racism therefore depends on an understanding of shifting relations of domination: the sorts of positions that are set up for Aboriginal subjects represented and positions set up for the viewer to consume the images. (37)

The focus here is on a much-needed shift in analytical perspective in order to account for the oft-implied liberation of postcolonial identity in Australian filmmaking. Furthermore, an emphasis on process and plausibility can identify dominance and resistance.

Indeed, part of the problem is finding the anti-colonial and adequately exploring it. Especially in terms of Australian film, postcolonialism may be “least hampered by its own dogma”

...when it focuses on the rhetorical and poetic content of defining an identity. Then, rather than fixing a definition of ethnicity and drawing boundaries, the focus is upon what Kortenaar calls ‘metaphors that permit collective self-fashioning’ and stress agency in shaping identity. (Ward 211)

Thus, contemporary Australian films offering examples of such metaphors have an important place within discussions of colonialism in a cultural context. They take the white-owned homestead inherited from early Australian film and remodel it. In doing so, they productively explore the multiple possibilities of Aboriginal identity.

With some reservation, I suggest that the seeds of an anti-colonial perspective were sown in Jedda – Chauvel’s iconic story of a young Aboriginal woman brought
up on a white homestead, separated from her culture and ultimately endangered by its complexity when she leaves the homestead. My reservations stem from the observation that while Jedda’s difference asserts irrepressible desire, her death is representative of a politically inevitable outcome.

The film has been the subject of a range of critiques that have focused variously on its “colonialist perspective” (Moore and Muecke 40), its “sickening” and “laughable” racism (Langton 47), or conversely as a revolutionary act (Mishra 165-188). As Cunningham observes, “one might wonder how such a film was made at the time” (26). Jedda marked the beginnings of the exploration of a new political space in the cinema somewhere between the extremes critiqued by Ward of “an Aboriginality frozen in its politics” and the perilous belief that “identity is so transmutable as to be irrelevant” (211). It is an important beginning (though only a beginning) of the thawing out of seemingly “frozen” or fixed positions.

If colonial representations of Aboriginality have sought to “subsume intra-cultural divisions based on class and gender” (Langton 27), Chauvel’s film makes an unsteady start in the opposite direction. Again, I make this observation carefully, especially in light of Jedda’s relationship with her foster parents. Tom McMann’s reference to Jedda as a “little magpie” holds an implicit racist and sexist tone (which extends to Sarah’s calling her “little goose”). The film’s use of the terms “full-blood” and “half-caste,” as distinctions among Aborigines, should also be called into question. As Langton points out, the sixty-seven definitions of Aboriginal people noted by legal scholar John McCorquordale are “mostly relating to their status as wards of the State and to criteria for incarceration in institutional reserves” (28). However, the productive aspect of Jedda’s difference within an anti-colonial rhetoric is found in the way it problematises and confuses both assimilationist and essentialist positions.

One feature of Jedda’s push toward the anti-colonial is the way the film uses Jedda’s own difference as a means of challenging the broader constructions of Australian and Aboriginal identity. From the outset, the film makes it clear that Jedda is different from other people (as in the usual white/ black dichotomy), but asserts further that she is a different kind of female, and then further clarifies she is a different kind of Aboriginal female. The young baby Jedda climbs the front gate and waves as local Aboriginals go off on their walkabout. The fence draws a line between them. This act of watching is repeated through the film. As a young woman Jedda gazes through the window, wondering what the walkabout might be like. The pattern is again heightened during Marbuk’s arrival at the station and after she is led away by him. She watches others in order to understand her difference from them, a difference which inevitably endangers her since the Aboriginal elders of Marbuk’s tribe reject her on the basis that she is the “wrong skin.”
Although Jedda’s movement away from the homestead and further into the land comes at her own peril, it does, for short time, set her free from the neo-colonial stranglehold that precipitates her own displacement. *Jedda* can be seen to perform marginality in the presence of the generically “imperialist.” However, its poetic, chaotic introduction of an Aboriginal female into the centre of Australian cinematic narrative can also be viewed in terms of the film’s effects on subsequent representations of white homes, female indigenous agency and history.

In the white-owned home Jedda is unable to successfully reconcile history with her sense of loss and displacement. In direct contrast, Anne Pratten’s short film *Terra Nullius* essays a young Koori girl’s movement from denial to remembering, discovering and finally accepting her Aboriginal identity. The title “*Terra Nullius*” powerfully merges broadly historical and explicitly personal narratives. Central to the Aboriginal memory of invasion and colonisation are the damage and dispossession wrought in the name of *terra nullius*. This non-Aboriginal way of thinking about the land was effectively a means of nullifying substance. The etymological and semantic implications of this phrase (‘no-one’s land’/ ‘land of nothing’) are no less relevant to the social, cultural, and political changes in Australia over the passage of two centuries. The term conveys a denial and deliberate misreading of that which has gone before, and has particular resonance within colonial and neo-colonial discourses. White Australia began with the brutal privileging of certain relationships to home and ownership, and a deliberate obscuring of those which were already in place. David Tacey’s insistence that “no-one would want to underestimate the devastating impact that European colonisation has had on Aboriginal people” (141) is, as McCreddon believes, “a naïve assertion at best” (128). The doctrine of *terra nullius* ignored and sought to conceal Aboriginal connections to land, history, culture and identity by violently emphasising the primacy of British cultural forces in a way that “rationalised their seizure of the land” (Parsons, Wilson & Versluis 2). Pratten’s film draws upon the notion of *terra nullius* as an arrangement of culture and politics, and of Australian self-description within both.

*Jedda* and *Terra Nullius* both view the central character’s insertion into a white home as problematic, yet this later film proposes that understandings of Aboriginality need not presume the impossibility of existence outside of it. Identity and becoming are not easily teased apart in the film, and this is the point by which *Terra Nullius* makes self-representation and identification possible. It is also the basis of its anti-colonial interaction with *Jedda’s* version of Aboriginality identity as something that cannot survive in a changing world.

Alice (Olivia Pratten) lives with her white-Australian foster parents. Their insistent
denial of her cultural heritage throughout the film, along with the sexual abuse experienced at the hands of her foster father, makes the title clear: here is a film about the negation of substance. Laseur frames the film as one about invasion and denial - invasion of the body/land, and a denial of history, place and identity (par 2). In Alice’s world flashbacks and repetitions are used to communicate visually that terra nullius always carries the weight of the term’s original meaning and significance. The white-Australian home and familial structure are metaphorically (de)constructed. The historical and continuing colonial impulse which invades (cultures and bodies) and destroys (people and land) discursively masks the history of its wrong-doing. The older Alice (Michelle Lacombe) is granted an agency that enables her to filter her childhood through the perspective of Aboriginal adulthood. Her reunion with her childhood self and the welcoming of young Alice into a circle of Aboriginal women on the beach in the film’s ending suggest moments of healing. They also suggest

a form of radical historical documentation. Within a process of political agency, the personal becomes a vehicle through which expressions of autonomy and self-determination are made powerfully present on both a collective and individual level. (Laseur par 12)

As the broken doll of the film’s early sequences, Alice is pieced back together.

The identity of the young girl is associated with domestic and environmental destruction. The gradual cinematic demolition of the home parallels the surfacing of personal memory and understanding. Violation in the white home simultaneously intersects with atomic testing on Aboriginal land. For the body and land to heal, a process of undoing colonialism in its domestic microcosmic form is undertaken through sight and sound. The white home is a combination of toys, a bedroom, a bathroom, a man’s shadow, a kitchen, a ball bouncing hard against concrete again and again. Eeriness pervades the snapshots and lingering deliberations on the harsh and often darkened fragments of domestic space.

There is no stability or unity in this home, but only the shaky illusion of it. The home is full of “things” but empty of legitimacy and spirit. The film points toward the house as the true formation of a terra nullius. The shadow of the man’s (father’s) body as a part of this white-Australian space is an invasion, assault, incarceration and concealment of the Aboriginal body. The image hints at a terra nullius even more sinister and deeply hidden than anything in Jedda’s experience of the homestead. It is only outside of the house itself that young Alice can find out about herself. On the beach, the communal comfort of Koori women soothes and liberates. Home is therefore a re-association with a cultural history in which denial is not an option. Jedda finds the unstable edge of a cliff, and a fall into infinity
outside the white-owned house. Alice finds *terra firma*, and as she rises to the surface, she fills in the *terra nullius*.

This shift in attitude to the white home and Aboriginality is accompanied by shifts in textual strategies. *Terra Nullius* achieves its anti-colonial effects through cinematic fragmentation. Narrative is broken down by sharp, non-sequential and cross-temporal imagery. The white house is exposed as a jumble of broken up images, and the powerful poeticism of Alice’s final sense of belonging is her resistance to a history of abuse and dispossession.

This anti-realist, counter-discursive, and “productive dialogue” with the white home and European traditions is a marked feature of the work of Tracey Moffatt (Muecke 171-2). Her film *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* explicitly reworks the *Jedda* story. In this film, an Aboriginal woman nursing her dying white foster mother (the *dying race* personified here in the white, neo and postcolonial figure). The studio-created landscape suggests an imagined Australia, unstable, surreal and changeable, no longer the reflective artifice of the realist’s window. It is “uncanny”, to use Gelder and Jacob’s interpretation of Freud’s terminology. McLean suggests the film “articulates a genealogy for contemporary Aboriginality in the Aboriginalism of the mid-twentieth century” (147).

While the women in this house have no names, this middle-aged Jedda (Marcia Langton) is very much alive and helping her white foster mother (Agnes Hardwick) through her last days. In this stylised arrangement of symbols, land, identities and memories, the daughter feeds and washes the mother until her inevitable passing. For Langton the scenario has instant anti-colonial resonances:

> Moffatt’s inversion of colonial history is to play out the worst fantasies of those who took Aboriginal children from their natural parents to assimilate and ‘civilise’ them. Perhaps the worst nightmare of the adoptive parents is to end life with the black adoptive child as the only family, the only one who cares. Moffatt’s construction of that nightmare is subversive because the style and materiality of the homestead set is so reminiscent of Aboriginal poverty. (47)

Both Langton, and Kaplin (17), see the subversive qualities of *Night Cries* as an anti-colonial “correction” of Chauvel’s *Jedda*.

The film’s intent and rhetoric can be clarified by attention to the political and poetic relocation of the house as a specifically Australian space. The anti-colonial challenge posed by *Night Cries* and its use of the Jedda figure can therefore be explained in the following terms:
With regard to marginality, the challenge is not so much placed upon the cradling of a dramatic construction which would deny any historical grounding as it is upon unearthing a hidden metaphor of white history with a challenge to convention that is grounded in an aesthetics of political intent. (Ward 216)

_Night Cries_ takes up this challenge by unearthing the cinematic metaphors that attempt to hold hegemonic representations in place. The land and the homestead are not what they once were. The men have not survived and the deserted station is bereft of its grandeur and materiality. Langton comments “Moffatt takes us from the homestead—an exhibition of the wealth extracted from the slave labour of Aboriginal men and women on the Australian pastoral station—to the poverty represented in her sets” (47). Decay and ruin give way to perspective and a process of “filling in.”

The film engages with history via _Jedda_ as an iconic predecessor, while its anti-realist visual strategies locate the political at the level of the “everyday” in its dreamlike constructions of home:

With this contraction of Chauvel's bifurcated world (interior/exterior, woman's film/action film) to one continuous space, “_Night Cries_” [sic] subjects state policy to the temporality of the everyday, domestic life in which policy's consequences are lived out. Moffatt's 'woman's film' puts domesticity, rather than great events, at the core of national history. (Morris par 31)

The battleground of history wars is explicitly localised within the domestic space. The film makes apparent that “social struggles must embrace something of a politics of everyday life” (Maeder 5). This is not to say that Moffat’s “temporality of the everyday” can make the effects of Aboriginalist and assimilationist perspectives entirely knowable:

Resistance takes place at the level of power, and/or at the level of knowledge in the form of counter-knowledge. Since power is exercised at innumerable points it must be challenged point by point, and since it is invested in social practices and relations, efforts to dismantle or alter the regime must address these practices and relations. (Maeder 5)

As Grossman has identified in the writing of Jackie Huggins, here we find again a “counter-discursive form of textuality” that resists the history of “translation” and the concomitant narrative unification of Aboriginal experience (184). In effect, _Night Cries_ uses colour, image, editing and mise-en-scene to bring different and
complex knowledges to bear on what is familiar and taken for granted in Australian culture.

Morris recognises this point-by-point enactment of counter-discursive, domestic visual politics as invoking both the familiar and the unfamiliar within the home itself. Moffat’s “memory triggers” (such as the outdoor toilet, galvanised iron, the golden syrup tin and the banging screen door) make the film “a memory-saturated experience for anyone who grew up in rural, poor, or simply ordinary Australian houses in the '50s and '60s” (par 31). At the same time, the film also uses memory triggers as “interrupters,” such as the close-ups of Langton’s face, the mosquito net and the bed, to “interrupt and block” the “complex impulse to identify wholly with the black daughter in this scenario” (par 31). The house is filled now by evocative impressions and memories that are comprehensible but at the same time deliberately foreign, strange and unattainable.

Night Cries is certainly a film that “interrupts” the too easy and often unquestioned assumptions of Australian home and identity. With the material trappings of an oppressive colonial history unable to survive, the home is colourful yet ghostly. While the avant-garde nature of Moffat’s film critiques “locationism” and “Europeanality,” it is also “an assertion that Aboriginality can include growing up glued to Bonanza as well as having two mothers” (Morris par 34). Hence Night Cries forces a consideration of the way both home and Aboriginality are “produced” through an environment that is “quite a radical departure from the realist McCubbin-like landscapes of much Australian cinema” (Langton 47). From disturbing cartoon-like colours and shapes of sky and mountain to cuts between images of old suitcases and photographs, the film questions the many ways past and the present might be framed through a dematerialised, anti-colonial sense of home and history.

Night Cries and Terra Nullius both use the house to resist the sublimation of Aboriginal memory to the grand myths of white belonging in the cinema. This can be further illustrated by the burning of the family home Rachel Perkins’ film Radiance, and the associations between fire and identity in the film. The attachments of fire to the unforgettable, to the personal and to the notion of change are important foundations for an anti-colonial examination of cinematic identity.

In this house there are three very different Aboriginal sisters — Mae (Trisha Morton), Cressy (Rachel Mazza) and Nona (Deborah Mailman) — who are reunited in their home in tropical North Queensland after the death of their mother. After their mother is cremated, the sisters are free to explore their feelings about “Mum,” their home, and the past. A local white man who kept their mother as a mistress in
the house wants it back. The two elder sisters douse the home in petrol and bathe in the glow of the flames.

This bringing of fire to the white home opens up a further metaphorical aspect of colonial power. For white-Australian homes and characters in early films, fire works within the contexts of “pioneering” and “saving.” The fighting of fires in The Breaking of the Drought (1920), On Our Selection (1920 and 1932), The Squatter’s Daughter (1933), and Thoroughbred (1936) is a testimonial to the survival of the early settlers against the elements, and the pioneering families of these kind of films are seen to have earned their stripes by defending the home against the threat of the flames.

The Aboriginal use of fire in Australian film has often been instrumental in reaffirming the position of Aboriginal people as primitive. Both Uncivilised (dir. Charles Chauvel, 1936) and Jedda emphasise fire (smoke signals especially) as a means of communication, light, warmth, and cooking in what are essentially pre-modern cultures. Outside the context of survival, fire has been used to demonstrate savagery and dark, mysterious totemism. In Jedda, Marbuk sits at his fire chanting, as he “sings” Jedda to him. He then lights a torch from his fire and sets the horse yard fences ablaze; thus, the homestead in Australian cinema is again under threat not just from fire but from a chaotic, unknowable Aboriginality. Contrasting these scenes with the footage of painted Aboriginal males of the central desert area performing a traditional fire ceremony in Miller’s (1997) Whitefellas Dreaming, it is clear that the cinema contextualises the Aboriginal use of fire as either good or bad, but generally attempts to connect it in some way to what Bachelard has termed a “psychology of primitiveness” (103), thus seeking to classify a seemingly imperceptible phenomenon. If fire is used to define Aboriginal people as “savage” or “primitive,” then non-Aboriginal people, as West argues, “are reassured that they are civilised, modern and successful” (Stokes 159). Aboriginal people, he says, “are tired of being used as a sounding board for white society to bounce off ideas about its own identity” (159).

Re-reading fire in this context offers a unique opportunity for an examination of the intersection of memory and history in Australian cinema, and for the multiplication of possible understandings of identity and place. The framing of Marbuk as “primitive” in Jedda is subsequently displaced by viewing as political the act of burning the property of those who define him in this way. Similarly, in Beresford’s Fringe Dwellers (1987), the backyard burning of the white neighbour’s hand-me-down clothing is less an act of ingratitude or primitivity (the female character involved is almost obsessively drawn to modernity) than a burning of a white past, a refusal of its imposition.
Anti-colonial strategies in *Radiance* re-politicise the myths of burning sacrifice and primitivism, effectively extending and transforming earlier themes and images through, in West’s terms, a “disruption from previous forms of cultural critique” (204). The fire, the home, the tall trees, the sugarcane, the sunsets, sand and crystal waters shine with the familiar “radiance” of hundreds of Australian films. The house engulfed in flames, however, marks the “critical point by which cultural continuity is set apart from itself,” as “it provides both a challenge to established reasons and a basis upon which to construct difference” (Ward 218).

The increasing usage of fire throughout the film builds to the climactic disintegration of the home and the simultaneous destabilising of a whole set of generally accepted “truths” and illusions about religion, heritage and whiteness. Although Bachelard freely equates fire with human spirit (104), it is important to understand that the transcendence offered to the women by the purifying fire in *Radiance* is not religious. The seeking and redefining of truth holds no assurance of spiritual transcendence (Ward 220). While mystical to a degree, the burning home is a rather functional purifying of the present through a process of cleansing. Through its “deodorising action,” fire “separates substances and destroys material impurities” (Bachelard 103). The substance of the house is a combination of its material value to its white owner, the significant arrangement of icons within it and the housing of memories and illusions. The editing of this sequence of fiery cleansing therefore calls the usefulness of certain images into question. As the house burns, a series of quick cuts alternates between the blazing frames of Jesus Christ and Mae and Cressy’s own “mother” Mary. Mae finally burns the ghosts that she refers to in the beginning of the film. The image of the slowing burning saviour of the Christian faith is inevitable, given the sexual behaviour of the priest at Mary’s funeral, Mae and Cressy’s removal and relocation into Catholic orphanages as children, and their promiscuous mother’s own bizarre version of Catholicism.

Fundamentally connected to this arbitration of truth is the capacity of fire to illuminate. Light in this way is “a valorisation of fire ... it gives meaning and value to facts that we first take to be insignificant. Illumination is truly a conquest” (Bachelard 19). At the same time, this idea is not a “romance of authenticity” (Brewster 8). The final fire in *Radiance* has no aspirations toward “becoming the white flame, in achieving the dominant value of the whiteness,” which characterises Vignère’s flame of true purification (Bachelard 19). Instead, the film prefers the yellow flame, described as the “antivalue” of celestial light (19), where gods and monsters both burn, and white traditions are effectively discredited as part of a larger regenerative process. White promises are thus revealed to be “white lies,” and whiteness is a constant source of unreliability; the white-owned house that never belonged to the women burns so easily, as does Mary’s unused white wedding dress, Nona’s silly white wig. Concomitantly, romantic notions of
weddings and heroic cowboy fathers are painfully revealed as constructions within a familial *terra nullius*, concealing the truth about sexual misconduct and the bloodlines between mothers and daughters. The warm yellow flames are bold reminders that “truth, rather than being relative, is a matter of regulated perspective” (Ward 221).

The return of fire to the hands of Aboriginal women in *Radiance* exemplifies the compelling historical interventions of Aboriginal female agency. Fire becomes a poetic and specific expression of resistance, working within the framework of West’s new cultural politics of difference “by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing” (203-4). As Bachelard tells us, “the world moves rapidly if it is imagined on fire” (22).

The anti-colonial conquest at the heart of *Radiance* lies in the film’s unqualified appropriation of the house as the colonial and neo-colonial symbol of white ownership, and of the Aboriginal as its unwanted tenant. The facts of sexual misconduct, of dispossession, and of authorised removal of children from their families are illuminated throughout the film. They are fully brought to light in the image of the burning house.

This act of arson challenges and restates the whole history of “pioneering” and “settling” in the cinema, as well as speaks to the oppression of Aboriginal women by both white and Aboriginal men and women. The burning of religious iconography is within the home is connected to a process of “unsettling the colonial foundations.” In this way, *Radiance* is not just a journey from colonial to postcolonial, as Simpson has stated (110), but one taken through the neo-colonial into an anti-colonial “politics of preference,” which “provides for arresting the metaphor” (Ward 219). The house in flames demystifies “the complex dynamics of institutional and other power structures” (West 213).

Fire thus becomes the expression of a corporeal and psychic mobility that serves to destabilise the notion of homeliness both in the film and in the national cinema. As Ward states,

> Bereft of personal instrumentality, marginalised cultures remain marginalised after the festivity. That is, recognition of the problem of discrimination does not appreciably alter the oppressive fact, nor does verbal liberation from a hierarchy dispose of that hierarchical power. Yet personal instrumentality is also a political instrumentality, a means of fighting fire with fire. (222)

The re-politicising effect of Aboriginal fire on the white home brings what Roland
Barthes has termed “revolutionary language” to the metaphor of the homestead (146). It undoes the process by which the home as myth naturalises its political position.

*Radiance* therefore represents the burning of many cinematic houses. Dissolving within the film’s flames is the white home from *Jedda*. In *Terra Nullius* this white home is systematically broken up, through narrative and photographic strategies. In *Night Cries* it is in ruins, poverty stricken, skeletal and artificially caricatured. It is unstable and, in a figurative sense, it is “on the way out.” *Radiance* sees a return to the metaphor of Jedda’s white home, encoded thus by these earlier films, and a cinematic completion of its demise. The film negotiates the house’s personal and historical importance before literally burning it to the ground.

The home then becomes the site for the reconfiguring of historical meaning and familial relations. Its appropriation suggests a means for reclaiming what has been stolen. It is a refusal of “the premise that the only future for Aborigines is to shed their identity, their language, their traditions and their culture” (Manne, quoted in Guillatt 19). The negotiation of the house/nation metaphor by Aboriginal females in the cinema promotes an intersection between the search for identity and the idea of “coming home.” Stolen history and stolen identities provide the “novel” circumstances and conditions “not of one’s choosing,” which require a creative response founded in agency (West 13).

The demise of the white home in *Radiance* positions its female protagonists as stolen children who are now able to *remember*. As with Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, this positioning connects the white home to the historical and social text of the “stolen generation,” a generation of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families and homes as part of official policy from the late nineteenth century until 1970 (Knightley 113). The Aboriginal-themed film has necessarily become a part of this push towards remembering and challenging what Sir William Deane calls a “legacy of unutterable shame” (Guilliatt 19).

Although the “unspeakable stories of Aboriginal memory and their radical subjectivity have emerged at a specific time in global history,” Brewster points out that for a long time Australia’s “history of terror” had “no site upon which it could enter the public domain and no means by which it could be heard in the dominant culture” (4-5). As contemporary Aboriginality became “effective in harnessing the cultural capital of Aboriginal memory” (6), stories began to filter through. Janet Isaac’s documentary *Sister if only you knew* was produced in 1975, and opens with welfare officers ransacking an Aboriginal home while a female voice explains “they just came and took them away from us.” Both *Terra Nullius* and *Radiance* were made before the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report was published. The Aboriginal
trop of coming home now powerfully foregrounds “the discovery of, and return to, cultural origins within the emotionally (and politically) persuasive force of narratives of the quest for identity” (Cuthbert 35).

Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* builds upon the shift in attitude of these earlier films while reframing and contextualising them. The film takes the next step by imbuing Australia’s secret past with a politically modern understanding. It retrospectively prefigures the women of *Radiance* while working within a new cinematic space where the white construction of home can no longer function as the organising principle of Aboriginality. The meaning of home is sharpened and specified. It is made visible through both the stealing and the coming home of indigenous children.

The film does not establish “house” or “home” in terms of non-Aboriginal wealth and control. Here, home is the location of familial connections and traditions, “housing” the bonds between Aboriginal women and children. Based on Doris Pilkington Garimara’s book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the film recounts the epic journey of her mother, Molly, aunt Daisy and their cousin Gracie. They follow the rabbit-proof fence across 1500 miles of bushland and desert – from the Moore River Native Settlement to their home in Jigalong – after the forced removal from their families by government officials. The family camp is an impoverished setting on the edge of the bush where Molly and her family walk and hunt together.

In this sense the white home is foreign and unknown, and the fence of the title becomes a metaphor for white spatial and ecological control. A white male worker tending to the fence tells Molly it keeps the rabbits on the other side and stops them from spreading into the good land. When she asks how far the fence goes, he proudly tells her that it stretches right to the end of Australia and that it is the longest fence in the world. Through Molly’s use of it, the functional and symbolic nature of the fence is infused with a subversive meaning that challenges the imposition of institutional policy within the film, while referring to and reframing the fences and houses of earlier films.

In *Jedda*, for instance, the fence is one means by which the film enforces a “metaphor of place” that functions to “situate characters within their allocated social and cultural domains...When the men and women go on walkabout she watches wistfully from the boundary gate of the station yard” (Jennings 39). The fence holds a similar metaphoric power in Essie Coffey’s 1979 documentary *My Survival as an Aboriginal*. In the closing sequence of the film, Essie voices her final statement about Aboriginal identity: “We have survived, and we will be free.” The accompanying image is a small group of Aboriginal children walking at sunset behind a barbed-wire fence.
In *Rabbit-Proof Fence* Molly asserts that she will “find fence, go home.” In an anti-colonial context she turns both the meaning of the fence in previous films (as incarceration, division, boundary) and its intended purpose within the film (for the containment of a widespread and uncontrolable “pest” problem) inside out. The diminished representational power of the fence to divide and contain underscores the ultimate failure of policy to contain and eradicate Aboriginal difference. The fence for Molly and the other children becomes a symbol of hope and possibility, a liberating connection – across land – between the self and home.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* achieves its visual and ideological position through its use of the camera to enforce the perspective of the young girls. When the girls are taken, the camera literally surveys the Moore River Settlement (where they will be trained as domestic servants for white homes), people, and the unfamiliar terrain, through the eyes of the central protagonists. When Molly is called for skin-colour inspection, the camera emulates her apprehensive walk to Mrs Jessup and Neville (the man they call “Mr. Devil”), looking up at him, making him alien. During the night-time run through bushland, the camera stays with the girls, at their level. When they are almost caught, the camera creates a crouching feeling and child-like view, watching the tracker and authorities through the bush. It is a technique executed in a manner resembling Tal Ordell’s tale of the comic book hero Fatty Finn, in *The Kid Stakes* (1927), which “creates a child’s world partly by adopting such formal strategies as positioning the camera at the precise height of its child protagonist” (Routt 60). Molly’s interaction with Neville resembles Fatty’s world where other characters often have to bend into the frame to interact with him. Camera positioning and editing ensure that both the land and other people are defined in relation to Molly, Daisy and Gracie.

This visual technique emphasises the contemporary shift away from definitions of Aboriginality used as “criteria for incarceration in institutional reserves” to the socially preferable understandings of an Aboriginal person as someone who is “a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal” (Langton 29). Moreover, the perspective of the young girls, and Molly’s resistance in particular, gives rise to the complex notion that “Aboriginality only has meaning when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, when both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal are subjects, not objects” (32). Because the world is seen through the eyes of Aboriginal children in the film, these children cannot be objectified. They are the subjects of the film, and their exchanges with each other and the world around them elude the authoritarian assumptions of difference. Aboriginality has meaning and significance.
The fence itself holds a supplementary set of meanings, further displacing the relevance of the white homestead and accounting for its necessary absence from the constructions of home within the film. After the word soon spreads that the girls are following the rabbit-proof fence, Molly places her hands on the top wire of the fence and looks off into the distance. The film then cuts to Molly’s mother, who is holding the same part of the fence, and looking longingly outward, across the land. The fence connects them. Here it becomes an umbilical chord of sorts, both a historical bloodline and a physical lifeline.

This repositioning of home and fence effectivelyforegrounds “gender-specific strategies of resistance to white racism such as the maintenance of the family and a distinct way of life” in the face of “legal” child removal (Brewster 44). When Molly and Daisy reach the most treacherous part of terrain, the fence stops. Daisy exclaims, “no more fence.” Its reputation as a continuous fence had been an illusion. Molly summons all of her strength and carries Daisy across the desert to the bushland where the fence begins again. It is Molly who completes the fence and not the white male workers. She does so with a sense of home that is non-material and non-physical. It ceases to function as a fence and gives over to its meaning as familial and historical tie, as human bond.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* anti-colonially appropriates the fence as a metaphor for white historical control (Ward 216), refusing the positioning of Aboriginals as objects (Langton 32), and emphasising self-determination through human agency (McQueen 211). All the while, the film “stays attuned to the best of what the mainstream has to offer – its paradigms, viewpoints and methods – yet maintains a grounding in affirming and enabling subcultures of criticism” (West 216). In the theoretical and visual movement away from the organising principles of white selfhood, ownership and control, the home and identity nexus in Australian cinema has begun to articulate the “unutterable.” It is finally able to speak with clarity and volume about the hidden complexities of a shameful past.

The role of Aboriginal women in contemporary social structures is thus mirrored in representations of indigenous females in the cinema. Aboriginal females have assumed roles of “responsibility for the continuation and transmission of Aboriginal practices, and act as a counter to outside influences” (Brewster 44). It is through the anti-colonial female that this paper identifies some of the resistant strategies the treatment of the white home represents:

Structure is more effectively challenged not by the festive nature of the polyphonic voice, but by both figural and semiotic texts of direct political and aesthetic intervention, and the ancillary implications that social redresses should be determined by the degree of exigency and contingency they carry.
The argument here has been that the necessary formation of anti-colonial rhetoric can be found in the poetic “arresting” of colonial metaphors in the cinema. This act is a direct response to the ways in which Australian settlement has been constructed and various ideas of Aboriginality exploited as extensions of both home and identity. The “white home” is no longer able to stand in for the land, the nation or the Aboriginal self.

The journey throughout this article has been determined by both a sense of thematic continuity and necessary points of departure invoked by the strategies of the particular films. The young Jedda swings on the fence as she watches “her people” walk away. Her identity is “housed” in the colonial metaphor. This white home is broken up in *Terra Nullius*, and is then paired back to its poverty-stricken essentials in *Night Cries*. The white home is set aflame and burnt to the ground in *Radiance*, and in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* it is overcome. The fence, which kept Jedda “inside,” is reclaimed as a lifeline taking young Aboriginal girls back to where they belong (the capture of one of the protagonists along the way further emphasises the power of such an achievement). The anti-colonial rhetoric of the cinema has moved from speaking of incarceration and hopelessness to deconstruction, and then to rebellion and freedom. Such rhetoric is founded in the consciously political act of arresting metaphors. It is worth noting that *Rabbit-Proof Fence*’s postscript laments the short-lived freedom of its central figures. This serves to reinforce the point that dominance is just that – dominance. Within the same logic of course we see resistance, as it is, as just that – resistance. The very instability of the one produces the visibility of the other. This is the nature of metaphor. As Shirato and Webb perceptively argue, “it is transformative, rather than communicatively transparent” (120).

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