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Indigenising Australian History: Contestation and Collaboration in *First Australians*

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I would like to reflect on the conference themes of "remaking history" and "remapping cinema" by focussing on the construction of an Indigenous perspective on Australian national history in the recent seven-part television documentary series, *First Australians*.[1] I am interested in the question of why the producers chose to take a national perspective in this series, and I want to consider the implications of this perspective for our understandings of both the nation's past and ongoing relations between black and white Australians. I also want to propose that this particular strategic approach to Australian historiography demands that we rethink the ways in which we conceptualise Indigenous film and television, in particular the way in which Indigenous film and television has been positioned on the scholarly "map" of Australian cinema and television as something that exists at the margins of mainstream production and narratives.

In the past, studies of Indigenous film production and culture have been "haunted" by the question of "whether minority or dominated subjects can assimilate media to their own cultural and political concerns or are inevitably compromised by its presence."[2] The centrality of this question has led to several problematic assumptions in studies of Indigenous media internationally. Firstly, it assumes that indigenous culture is something fixed and, moreover, something that belongs to a pre-colonial past. This assumption has led to a problematic distinction within studies of Indigenous media between tradition-oriented media (in Australia this is generally remote-area, community based media) and forms of urban Indigenous media, with the former often being understood and valued as more culturally "authentic" than the latter.[3]

Secondly, studies of Indigenous media have tended to conceptualise Indigenous forms of "assimilating" media in terms of resistance – strategic acts of "talking back" to the structures of power that have erased or misrepresented indigenous peoples and their interests.[4] In this work, Indigenous media is positioned as something that is always already located at the margins of mainstream media and culture, an oppositional media. But as Faye Ginsburg has suggested in her writings, this view is misleading when we turn to Australian Indigenous media, for in fact for some years now Australian Indigenous filmmakers have been part of what she describes as "a young Aboriginal cultural elite engaged in constituting a vital Aboriginal modernity through a variety of media, including music, visual arts, film and drama." (49-50) Ginsburg argues that in the post-*Mabo* era, this work has helped to "establish and enlarge a counterpublic sphere in which Aboriginality is central and emergent", a view supported by Stephen Muecke in his analysis of Aboriginal film interventions. (50) As cited in Ginsburg, Muecke claims that transformations of the Australian state that occurred in the mid 1990s, such as the Mabo judgement, would mobilize:

> … new ways of positioning Aboriginal history, identity and culture … in which Aboriginal Australians occupy a very different and very crucial site from which new postnational subjectivities can be constituted, in which new stories enable new 'structures of feeling' and of agency that in turn translate into a new politics of nation.[5]

In this paper, I want to argue that *First Australians* is a landmark production in this new kind of media intervention, bringing ideas of Indigenous history and identity out of the shadows of their formally marginal position of "special interest programming" into the centre of mainstream cross-platform media. Operating at the highest-level of national film and TV production, *First Australians* is the largest documentary series to be undertaken in Australia to date. It employs the latest strategies and techniques in cross-platform media, including an impressive Internet portal, DVD distribution, an accompanying book, and so on. It also represents a historic production collaboration: for the first time ever, Australian federal and state film agencies (Film Australia, Film Finance Corporation, NSW Film and TV Office) came together with a national television service (SBS) and a leading Indigenous film company (Blackfella Films) to produce a major documentary series about Indigenous history made in consultation with featured Indigenous communities. The series showcases the work of many leading Indigenous filmmakers (Warwick Thornton, as a cinematographer; Beck Cole, as a director) and non-Indigenous partners (Louis Nowra, as a co-writer; Kim Batterham as a cinematographer). While the scale and success of this cross-platform production has consolidated director, producer and writer Rachel Perkins' place as one of Australia's most accomplished and powerful film and television producer/directors.[6]

What interests me about this project is the questions it raises about what constitutes Indigenous strategic uses of film and video at this high-end level of film and television production. Indigenous media in Australia is now operating at this high-end level across the board, from the transformation of Indigenous Community TV (ICTV) into the national service National Indigenous TV (NITV) in 2007 to new national strategic funding initiatives in feature film production such as the Indigenous Branch of Screen Australia's Long Black Feature Program.[7] The trend toward this kind of production marks a shift away from experimental short film production and community media, calling for a different set of analytical questions.

Should we see productions of this scale and scope as acts of resistance or compromise? Can a national-oriented mainstream project like *First Australians* intervene in the politics of nation or does its mainstream goal of reaching the widest possible audience mean it will inevitably reinforce old ways of thinking? What new structures of feeling and agency might be enabled by these new high-end productions? To answer these questions I suggest we need to develop a new conceptual framework that takes us beyond the terms of resistance and "talking back" from the margins. What is needed instead is a method of analysis that allows us to look at Indigenous uses of film and TV as a means of talking with and indeed from within the structures of mainstream power and how this cross-talk might disrupt, destabilise and reformulate these structures.

The following analysis of *First Australians* attempts to achieve this goal by using the concept of cross-cultural collaboration.

For the past thirty years, cross-cultural collaboration has played a significant role in the development of Indigenous filmmaking in Australia, from its use as a socio-political option by independent filmmakers working with Indigenous activists and communities in the late 1970s and 1980s to initiatives in cross-cultural training and mentorship programmes in the 1990s, to the instigation and implementation of cultural protocols and guidelines for filmmakers working with Indigenous communities, as well as all the many "ordinary" instances of non-Indigenous filmmakers working on Indigenous directed projects in various production roles. I am currently working on a large research project on the history of cross-cultural filmmaking as collaborative practice in Australia.[8] In this paper, however, I want to turn to a more general conception of collaboration.

Marcia Langton's groundbreaking 1993 essay, "*Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television":* an essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things drew on a number of post-structuralist theorists to elaborate a method for analysing the ways in which media in Australia has represented Aboriginality – that is Aboriginal culture and identity.[9] In one section, Langton focuses on the role of collaborative practices in Indigenous media as a productive area for thinking about film as cross-cultural exchange and how film might promote and influence anti-colonialist thinking. She argues that the "actual dialogue" of film work constitutes an intersubjective exchange in which "the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals involved test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as responses are processed to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other." (83) Cross-cultural collaboration can thus be conceived as the activity of working through differences (in skills, talents, points of view, ways of thinking and of course cultural knowledge, philosophies and histories) for the purpose of producing a shared object but also as a way of "comprehending the other", integrating knowledge of the other (and their difference) into what Langton calls "working models" of forms of cultural identity including Aboriginality." (83)

Despite the enormous potential of this insight, Langton's conceptualisation of cross-cultural collaboration has not been developed or widely applied. This may be because while cross-cultural collaboration was a common practice in Indigenous media up until 1993, forms of intra-Indigenous collaboration have since gradually displaced it. Langton was at this time responding to Indigenous media anthropologist Eric Michaels' observations about a generation of non-Indigenous filmmakers then involved in Indigenous media who saw their role primarily as "a catalyst": "providing conduits through which a more Indigenous representation is possible." (83) As a result, Michaels' and other studies of Indigenous media from this period concentrated on the issue of Aboriginal self-representation. But one of the problems with this kind of analysis is that because it tended to downplay or even repress the involvement of non-Indigenous partners, it often overlooks the important (con)testing aspects of film work that Langton so insightfully identified.[10] That is the places where cross-cultural collaboration in film constitutes the work of negotiating and coming to comprehend and understand cultural difference.

What I want to suggest in this paper is that we return to Langton's thesis. Only now instead of applying it to cross-cultural collaboration as a socio-political experimental option (the kind of projects Michaels was referring to) we consider its relevance more broadly in recent Australian Indigenous film and TV production. I also suggest we apply it not only to the forms of cross-cultural exchange that occur in film production but as a conceptual framework for thinking about non-Indigenous spectatorship of Indigenous media. How might this idea about the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people test models of each contribute to our thinking about the kinds of understanding gained by non-Indigenous viewers in the viewing of Indigenous film and TV?

As I mentioned earlier, *First Australians* is very much an Indigenous authored and crafted production. But it does, nevertheless, still involve many strata of cross-cultural collaboration, from its high–level forms of film industry and professional collaborations to its mainstream aim of reaching the widest possible non-Indigenous audience. Most significantly, the series' construction of an Indigenous perspective on the nation's past involved a complex cross-cultural collaboration between Indigenous filmmakers and the largely non-Indigenous historical record of the nation's past. How might we view *First Australians* as cross-cultural collaboration or (con)testing of models of historical knowledge and understanding?

A recent special issue of *Biography* on literary collaborations in the Americas addresses a similar question. Editors Kathleen McHugh and Catherine Komisaruk open their introduction to this issue with a quote by writer Catherine Lord on the power of writing in colonial contexts: "Writing erases the materiality of pre-colonialism", says Lord.[11] "Paper is colonialism, not the record of it – it is it." (iv) From this perspective, Indigenous collaboration with writing is always already something that takes place in the contested spaces of colonial contact. But more than this, it is about recognising that writing has "erased the materiality of pre-colonial cultures". Indigenous peoples seeking to contest the historical record have thus no choice but to write. In Australia too, written history "is colonialism, not the record of it", as the makers of *First Australians* discovered when they began researching for the series. As Perkins explained in a conference presentation on researching for this series:

> One of the greatest challenges we came across was finding Indigenous individuals who were documented in some kind of dimension in the records. Mostly we are known as natives, blacks, savages and at best Aboriginals or Islanders. Because of our oral tradition, Aboriginal people didn't really start writing until the 1940s. The bulk of the written record is therefore from non-Indigenous Australians. So of course whatever snippets of evidence there is or reporting of voices is skewed through a certain view.[12]

And herein lies Perkins' dilemma as a filmmaker. Should she have tried to make a series based solely on Indigenous historical sources? Could such a series have been achieved on the scale that SBS expected and within the time frame of the production schedule? What were the alternatives? As Perkins suggests, in the face of the reality that the colonial historical record has erased the materiality of Indigenous pre-colonial and early colonial experience she was faced with the prospect of making a compromise, which in her words involved, "to use the historical record but to bring a contemporary Indigenous interpretation to those records." (2)

How should we as media analysts view and comprehend this approach? As "collusion" with the powerful structures of Australian historiography? In their discussion of studies of collaborative life-narratives in the Americas, Hughes and Komisaruk argue that those narratives "emerge as a form of both collusion and contestation, as an instrument of domination and resistance." (2) They are shot through with ambiguity and contradiction. I want to suggest something similar about the ways in which this series uses the colonial historical record and how it reappropriates this record for an Indigenous perspective that makes a claim on the mainstream. My aim is not, however, to suggest that forms of ambiguity and contradiction in this series "compromises" its expression of Indigenous history and culture, as if Indigenous culture is completely Other to non-Indigenous cultural forms, knowledge and experience. I see compromise not just as inevitable, but, as this series shows, part of the ways in which Indigenous peoples are socially, politically and historically positioned. My aim is to develop a method of analysis that helps us to explore how *First Australians* can enable a particular recognition of Indigenous history. That is not Indigenous history as an "alternative" history but an awareness of the historical and social reality of Indigenous experience as that which is formed in the contested space that Martin Nakata calls "the Cultural Interface": "the space of ongoing historical continuities and discontinuities as [Indigenous] people discard and take up different ways of understanding, being and acting in a complex and changing environment." [13]

In order to analyse how this is achieved, I look first to the problem of the lack of Indigenous perspectives in Indigenous history and second to how Perkins' and her team "collaborate" with the mainstream historical record to create a unique, groundbreaking perspective on Indigenous history that not only informs us of that particular history but has also changed the face of Australian national history. Finally, in the conclusion I briefly consider the implications of this particular strategic use of film and TV for our understanding of the role and place of Indigenous media in studies of Australian cinema and television.

I: The "problem" of Indigenous perspectives in history

> In making First Australians it has been common for many to ask why hasn't this story been told? The truth is these stories have been told, at least in print, by the historians we feature in our series … Although First Australians cannot hope to be as comprehensive as the work of these historians, it will provide the public (in the comfort of their own homes), a taste of the story that remains to be understood. Hopefully it will spark national interest in the people on whose lands we have made our homes. (Rachel Perkins) [14]

First Australians was widely promoted by SBS television's marketing team as "the untold story of Australia." But as Perkins explains, Australian Indigenous history has in fact been well documented in recent years. The problem this series addresses is not about bringing a body of knowledge to light, as is the case in many historical documentary series. Rather, it is a methodological problem of finding a way to counter the fact that despite there being a wealth of knowledge about Indigenous history many non-Indigenous Australians fail to *understand* this history, mistakenly or, indeed, wilfully choosing to see Indigenous history as a minor chapter in the story of the nation's past. Furthermore, the Indigenous history they do is more often than framed by a non-Indigenous perspective.

This profound misrecognition of the first Australians is perpetuated in and through popular narratives of the nation. Historian John Arnold's survey of the major Australian history texts used in Australian schools and universities in the twentieth century begins, for example, with Ernest Scott's influential *A Short History of Australia*, first published in 1916.[15] A standard school text for more than four decades, the preface to the first edition of this text reads: "This Short History of Australia begins with a blank space on the map and ends with the record of a new name on the map, that of Anzac." [16] As Arnold suggests, this is a clever "legend-creating" opening, "linking the European settlement of Australia with the concept of Australia becoming a nation on the battlefields of Gallipoli." (1) Scott's image of Australia prior to British invasion as "a blank space on the map" is typical of the pioneer narratives that dominated Australian historiography prior to World War II. According to Ann Curthoys, these narratives combined stories of pioneer hardships – "the battler's story" – with legendary accounts of survival and failure (Burke and Wills, lost child stories, Gallipoli, and so on).[17] They are what Curthoys calls "narratives of reversal": histories that serve to *efface* Indigenous ownership of the land:

> Like so many others, from the United States to Canada to Israel and elsewhere, settler Australians have tended to see themselves as victims, not oppressors … They have seen themselves as the rightful owners of the land in contrast to indigenous peoples, perceived as nomads, whose hold upon it is tenuous and undeserved. (7)

As Curthoys explains, from the 1960s onward, Australian historians began to contest these pioneer narratives, bringing to light stories of the nation's history of land seizure, frontier conflicts and massacres, Indigenous dispossession and economic exploitation and other forms of social control of Indigenous Australians. (8) By the mid 1980s, these revised histories had become the new orthodoxy, influencing tertiary and later secondary and primary education. (8) They were the histories that informed the Keating Labour government's policies on Indigenous issues, culminating in Keating's landmark Redfern Park reconciliation speech. [18] Yet, as Curthoys and others remind us, while these histories were accepted in many areas of Australian society they "met bedrock resistance in non-Indigenous Australian popular culture." (9)

When Keating's government was defeated in 1996, the new Liberal party leader, John Howard, set himself the personal task of contesting these histories, fostering a working relationship with conservative historian Geoffrey Blainey, the latter known for helping to popularise the term "black arm-band history" to describe the new orthodoxy.[19] Howard's determination to reinstate a pioneer-type narrative of Australia's past as the official national story marked a major turning point in the popularisation of debates about Australian history that have become known as "the history wars." [20]

This paper is not the place to revisit all of these debates. The history wars do, however, bring us to 2002, when *First Australians* producer, director and writer, Rachel Perkins seized the opportunity to develop an Indigenous history for Australian national television. By the early 2000s the long running campaign against the findings of the *Bringing Them Home* report conducted by the conservative magazine *Quadrant* and a handful of print journalists had resulted in what Robert Manne describes as a noticeable "hardening" in public attitudes toward the question of historic injustices suffered by Aboriginal people.[21] In 2002, attention was shifted away from the stolen generations to the issue of frontier massacres by the publication of Keith Windschuttle's controversial text, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, in which he claims that violence between whites and Aborigines in Tasmania in past histories had been exaggerated.[22]

First Australians was conceived in this atmosphere of heated ideological debate about Aboriginal history. Perkins says that she and co-producer Darren Dale felt the weight of the responsibility of getting their series "right" for future generations.[23] But she also admits that in the beginning they had no idea what shape this history would take. (27) She claims that three conversations played a crucial role in helping them to develop their approach. One of these conversations (and I will come to the other two later) was with Gordon Briscoe, the first

Indigenous scholar to be awarded a PhD in history. Like many other historians, Briscoe contributed to debates in the history wars. But he has also been critical of the ways in which the battles have been fought. In a generally favourable review of non-Indigenous historian Brian Attwood's *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (2005), for example, Briscoe acknowledges the book's important contributions to debates about Aboriginal historiography. He concludes, however, with a simple yet nevertheless pointed statement: "But the problem of Aboriginal perspectives remains." [24]

Briscoe signals both the lack of opportunity for Indigenous perspectives in Aboriginal history, as well as the wider question of what constitutes an Indigenous perspective. In his much-praised recent critique of anthropological knowledge of Torres Strait Islanders, Martin Nakata explains how Indigenous perspectives are very often garnered through collaborative and consultative processes or what he calls "the now well-established 'advise and consult' practices of the reform process." (209) Once garnered, such knowledge is then constructed as supplementary or alternative, that is something to be considered only along side of Western knowledge, thus "managing" its potentially disruptive forces. As Nakata writes, it is essential to develop ways of analysing "how accepted disciplinary practices come to both inform and delimit how we can understand Islanders today." (11)

In terms of historical knowledge production, historians have relied greatly on forms of Indigenous knowledge garnered form oral histories. This material has been incorporated into western histories of Indigenous Australian history, but only after it has been filtered through methods of historical interpretation based on Western principles of evidence and truth-making. What is erased in this process is the Indigenous perspective on the cultural value and meanings of a historical event – an Indigenous sense of what is significant and important about these events.

Tony Birch has addressed this problem from a different angle in his highly original analysis of the history wars. Birch describes much of the later period of the history wars as "waging a war around the footnote".[25] He correctly points out that while it is true that Windschuttle viciously attacked the work and reputations of non-Indigenous historians, the most sustained attack by conservative anti-'black arm-band' critics was targeted at ordinary Indigenous Australians, challenging the credibility and honesty of their testimonies in *Bringing Them Home*. The conservative argument hinged on the idea that a traumatised subject cannot be a reliable historian, rendering all Indigenous people, by nature of the trauma of their historical dispossession, incapable of historical speech and witnessing. Furthermore, Birch argues, the focus on footnotes in the history wars has contributed to a destructive disconnect between past and present events, that is, historians "waging a war around the footnote" while we fail "to recognize the impact of ongoing denials of a history of state violence on young Indigenous people in Australian today." (26) For Birch, an Indigenous perspective on history must prompt people to make connections between past and present forms of colonial violence.

Perkins holds a similar view. In one of her public discussions about researching for *First Australians* she made the important point that the history wars "are not just being fought in the academic world and in the papers. They are also being fought on the landscape across Australia." [26] This is something Perkins has encountered first-hand in her experience of filming Indigenous sites. She recounts, for example, a story about travelling with her crew to Bull Cave in Camden (NSW), "down in Dharawal Country." She says:

> We went to film there because that was where the First Fleet's cattle escaped and they wandered down South and they went into Dharawal Country and the Dharawal people painted this extraordinary image of this massive bull on the cave wall. It is one of the first pieces of contact art, a really important site. We went down there to film and of course, someone has spray painted across it in red letters: "This is bullshit" and painted a big penis across it, so of course we can't film there. (4-5)

From Briscoe, Nakata, Birch and Perkins, we learn that the construction of an Indigenous perspective on Indigenous history is an incredibly complex process. It involves producing much more than a form of supplementary or alternative knowledge. In order to be successful it must express the importance Indigenous Australians attach to historical knowledge of events from our shared past and thus challenge and disrupt the narratives and logics of non-Indigenous historiographies. It must also enable an understanding of the relationship between past and present events. And, finally, it must address contestations over history as something that occurs not only in academia but as that which is very much part and parcel of the everyday life in modern Australia, something that especially impacts on Indigenous experience.

II: Constructing an Indigenous perspective in *First Australians*

> What Islanders "bring down" through the generations informs their standpoint in the present. Whether it satisfies the standards of historical "truth" imposed by Western historians is not the point; how it helps explain the Islanders' view of the present position and what they view as the imperatives and priorities of the future is of interest.(Martin Nakata) [27]

Rachel Perkins is widely recognised in Australian film and television for her versatile use of mainstream genres to tell Indigenous stories to the widest possible audience: melodrama (*Radiance*, 1998), the musical (*One Night the Moon*, 2001; *Bran Nu Dae*, in production) and the biographical documentary (*Emily Kngwarraye*, a short documentary for the U.K.'s Channel 4 Television and the "Freedom Ride" episode of *Blood Brothers*, a series of four one-hour documentaries based on significant epochs of Australian history as reflected through the lives of four Aboriginal men, produced for SBS in 1993). In *First Australians*, Perkins took this strategy to a new, higher level. As I explained earlier, *First Australians* is the largest documentary series to be undertaken in Australia. But how exactly did Perkins adapt the mainstream genre of historical documentary for an Indigenous perspective on Australian national history?

The story of the development of the series is instructive. It begins in 2002, and according to Perkins the impetus came from Nigel Milan, the then General Manager of SBS.[28] She claims that Milan came up with the idea for a series on Indigenous Australians in response to the enthusiastic audience feedback SBS received about their broadcast of the US eight-part documentary series *500 Nations* (USA, 1995). This series, which chronicles the history of Native American peoples, was produced by Kevin Costner and features narration by him and other Hollywood celebrities such as Edward James Olmos and Patrick Stewart. It is a classic historical documentary series in the sense that it tells the story of Native Americans peoples chronologically through the use of archival material and dramatic re-enactment, starting with several episodes that concentrate on the pre-colonial history of American Native peoples, including the ancient Aztecs, Mayans and Toltecs and the Plains Indians. It is the kind of series that encourages a view of indigenous cultures as fixed and as belonging to the past; indigenous culture as dead culture. Or as one reviewer describes the series' representation of the Plains Indians: "the last vestiges of a mighty conglomeration of cultures that were systematically seduced, slaughtered and absorbed by the European settlers that forged this nation." [29]

Perkins has stated that many viewers and critics expected that *First Australians* would focus on Australia's pre-history – the 80,000 years or more prior to the written records that came with the British invasion.[30] But as Perkins says, she and Dale quickly decided against this

course of action. She has offered two main reasons for this decision: Firstly, she says, because there are no photographs or written records to explain what happened in these years. As she puts it:

> Rock paintings and engravings, carved objects such as bone fish hooks, carved trees and ancient pathways … illuminate the lives of the ancient Australians … but any attempt to draw out the relationships, emotions, and intellectual life of those involved is also speculation, however insightful, well-informed and knowledgeable. (27)

Following on from this, she also explains that she was adamantly opposed to the dramatisation of Australian pre-history. Invoking series like the highly successful Rome (BBC/HBO/RAI, 2005), she admits to "loathing" docudramas about other ancient peoples: "We particularly disliked the representations we viewed of people in earlier times, represented by blacked up white actors playing grunting savages with low intellects, hiding in bushes." (29)

Perkins' reasoning needs to be seen as more than a matter of cultural taste, style and technique. *First Australians* difference to *500 Nations* and other documentary series reflects Perkins' aim to develop an Indigenous perspective that could contest racist assumptions about Indigenous peoples that inform most Australian popular histories. As Perkins told *The Canberra Times*, one of the reasons she wanted to make this series was because she wanted to challenge the popular view of Indigenous Australians as "not really Australian":

> Indigenous people are seen as this other small group that no one really knows much about and are not really Australian. Somehow, I think it's really strange. The first Australians aren't really seen as Australians, they're seen as these Aborigines who were different or something. [31]

Postcolonialist theory support Perkins' assessment. Aboriginal "difference" has been systematically produced through Western methods of knowledge production such a history writing to construct Indigenous people as what Nakata calls "artefacts of the past."[32] Nakata argues that theoretically Torres Strait Islanders, and we can, I suggest, add all Indigenous Australians, "were positioned as people from the past who were being catapulted in the present by the presence of intruders into their previously timeless and unchanging lives – not intruders into their present lives but intruders into their lives from the past." (201)

The effects of this complex theoretical positioning continue today. In film, this positioning of Indigenous Australians is reflected in a non-Indigenous fascination with stories and images of Indigenous pre-history – "the Aborigines".[33] Such fascination fuelled the colonial production of thousands of ethnographic films and photographs, designed to capture Aboriginal culture before it "disappeared" along with "the dying race" and can still be found in many contemporary projects.[34] And for insight into the effect of this positioning on Indigenous people, we can turn to Nakata, who writes:

> Once understood a people from the past who needed the benefits of differentiated social policies to bring them into the present, Islanders in the everyday, as actors in the present, begin to be theoretically submerged and marginalised. They begin to disappear as people at the centre of their own lives as they are coopted into another history, another narrative that really isn't about them but their relation to it. (202)

By taking up the opportunity to produce *First Australians*, Perkins must have surely felt like she was walking the same "fine tightrope" Jackie Huggins once described in her discussion of the difficulties of collaborative writing.[35] That is, how to work within the structures of power in such a way that your efforts are "not adding to the problems rather than the solutions." (140) Perkins was after all collaborating with some of the most powerful people in the film and TV industry as well as Australian history to make a series that had the potential to change perceptions and attitudes. But this would occur only if it she could find a way to avoid the series becoming yet another narrative *about* Indigenous Australians, a programme that rendered her people as marginal and distanced from the mainstream. Or to put this another way, she needed to find a way to produce an Indigenous perspective that would give, in Nakata's words, "primacy to the things that Indigenous people do, their daily experiences of a life lived in changing circumstances and how they might see their position within these dynamics." (202)

I believe that *First Australians* has achieved this, and it does so through the use of three main strategies in the adaptation and innovation of the historical documentary genre: personalisation and the telling of Indigenous life stories; the intertwining of Indigenous and non-Indigenous life stories; and the activation of viewers' ethical imaginations.

i) Personalisation and Indigenous experience

First Australians is highly influenced by the work of Ken Burns, acclaimed American filmmaker known for his use of archival footage and photographs in historical documentaries, such as his groundbreaking television series *The Civil War* (1990). Perkins and Dale have openly acknowledged this debt to Burns, whom they met when they were still devising their series. This was the second of the three conversations Perkins says were crucial to the development of this series, for it was here that Burns "in the gentlest of manners" told them that their then fledgling script was "boring", badly lacking "the emotional experiences of people." (26) Perkins herself admits that the script then read like "a series of academic lectures." (26) Following Burns' advice, she and Dale quickly abandoned it in favour of a history told through individual experience.

Each episode of *First Australians* focuses on the stories of several Indigenous individuals from a specific period from 1788 to 1993. These stories combine over seven episodes in a chronological epic narrative that encompasses the entire continent. Many of these individuals are well known Indigenous leaders, such as Bennelong, Doug Nichols and Eddie Koiki Mabo. It also includes stories of Indigenous leaders that deserve to be better known: Barak, Jandamara and William Cooper. In addition, it tells the stories of ordinary individuals whose lives were shaped by historical policies and practices, such as Gladys Gilligan, for example, one of more than 50,000 children forcibly removed from her family nationwide.

One of the common criticisms of the semi-biographical approach is that its techniques of individuation and personalisation de-politicises history. In this series, however, individuation involves complex processes of community and technological collaboration. The project team developed a database of over eight thousand images and collaborated with communities and historians to ensure that the 1500 images used in the series are either correctly matched with the individuals whose stories are being told or are properly contextualised. As Perkins says, "Indigenous groups were usually summarised as 'the Aborigines', never usually identified by their language group, and rarely by individual name." (27) The series reverses this particular racist aspect of historical knowledge production. It collaborates with communities and

descendents in the act of reappropriating so called generic images of "the Aborigines" produced by colonial ethnographers and others by returning these subjects' names to them and allowing their stories to be heard.

ii) Entwined histories

But there is something more going on in this series than the telling of individual life stories. In addition to Briscoe and Burns, the producers also acknowledge a great debt to Marcia Langton for helping them to develop their approach.[36] According to Dale, he and Perkins met with Langton about a year into the project when they were struggling with the problem of what materials to include. In an account of this conversation, Dale says: "Marcia Langton said to Rachel and me that if we deny all the knowledge of historians, then we will be doing the same thing as denying Aboriginal history, which has been done in schools. This is the story of black and white, and it should be told from both sides."[37] As a result, the producers made the profound decision to tell the story of the first Australians as the story of "a collision of two worlds", rewriting Australian national history from an Indigenous perspective.

This perspective is achieved through a narrative structure in which the stories of a large and diverse group of first Australians mentioned above are *intertwined* with the lives of relevant non-Indigenous Australians. The first episode, for example, tells the story of Bennelong, an Aboriginal youth kidnapped and befriended by the colony's first Governor, Arthur Phillip, for the purpose of acting as an interpreter and mediator between the invading settlers and Aboriginal groups. It also looks at the warrior Pemulwuy, who shot and killed a gamekeeper, John McIntyre, revenging the deaths of Aboriginal people killed by McIntyre for stealing cattle and the less well-known collaboration, and some say intimate relationship, between an Aboriginal woman Patyegerang and Englishman William Dawes, a collaboration that led to the first Aboriginal language dictionary.

This structure allows the series to open up well-known historical episodes in new and often more affective ways. Episode five, for example, draws on a series of letters recovered from the archive written by Gladys Gilligan to A.O Neville. These letters express the terrible powerlessness of Aboriginal people living under protection acts. It juxtaposes readings from these letters with interviews with Gilligan's descendents, who bear witness to the ways in which the trauma of separation has impacted on future generations. It is a personal story of an ordinary Indigenous Australian that ends tragically, one of the many used throughout the series to tease out conflicts, complications and contradictions in relationships between black and white Australians. It is also one of the ways in which the series allows us to recognise the relationships between past events and present, and how Indigenous Australians in the present live in and with the aftermath of forms of colonial violence, dispossession and subjugation. As Sam Dinah (Nyoongar Nation), one of the interviewees in this episode says, "One man's so-called dream or whatever it was turned out to be a nightmare, really, for the many wards of the state, which is what I ended up being until the age of 21."

The details of the stories of these entwined lives are provided through more than 80 interviews with historians and individuals from Indigenous communities. This spoken material is pieced together in innovative ways to create a unique Indigenous perspective. For example, a number of interviews with historians are used in episode five to tell the story of Jandamarra, a Kimberly tracker who turned on his one time friend, police constable Richardson, after Richardson arrested and chained elders from his tribe, the Bunuba people. Some of the historian interviewees link this story to a wider national history by emphasising its significance as the first story of Indigenous armed resistance in the frontier wars. The episode also enhances the emotional aspects of this story by drawing on devices of fiction film to dramatise this into a story of torn allegiances and heroic self-sacrifice, making it over into the material of folk legend. But this material is also inter-cut with an account of Jandamarra's story by Dillon Andrews, a descendent and member of the Bunuba peoples.

As with all the Indigenous descendents used in the series, Andrews is identified as a member of his language and tribal group – "Bunuba nation". This device serves to place him not only within a particular location and tribal group. It also introduces Indigenous cultural knowledge and protocols to a mainstream audience by including cultural forms of identification and "authorisation" of knowledge. Extra-textual materials that accompany the series explain how authorisation of Indigenous knowledge in this series was ensured through strict processes of cultural consultation with the descendents of those whose stories were being told. This included: "checking the content of scripts, usually face to face; seeking permission to film in location; showing the rough cut of the film for comment; and showing the film at fine cut." [38]

But the Indigenous perspective on this story comes not only through the inclusion of Andrews' story. It is also achieved through the effect that the inclusion of this knowledge has when juxtaposed to other forms of historical knowledge. As a descendent authorised to tell this story, Andrews, like many of the elders interviewed throughout the series, introduces a different register of historical speech to the documentary genre. It's not for me as a non-Indigenous media analyst to explain this other than to note that as a viewer I recognised a distinct form of objectivity and certainty in this mode of speech that is different to European interpretative modes of historical discourse. This recognition of difference has a subtle disruptive influence in the narrative. Speaking in an objective tone over a shot of Bunuba landscape, Andrews explains how 'Jandamarra will always be a hero to the Bunuba people. 'Doesn't matter how people see it, as good or bad.' As Andrews indifference to white historiography indicates, the story of Jandamarra is not new to his people, it exists outside of a Western historical interpretation.

This is not just a case of juxtaposing one historical interpretation with another, as is routinely done in this genre. Rather, by drawing on – and drawing out – different cultural modes of historical knowledge, the series allows us to know and understand Jandamara's story as part of the national story of Australia (armed resistance) and also as Bunuba history ('killing times"). Moreover it demonstrates how Indigenous people now, like Andrews, exist in a contested space where collaborations such as this project require them to negotiate and explain the differences between the contested forms of historical knowledge and their narratives that shape Indigenous peoples lives and experience.

iii) The ethical imagination

In addition to providing foundational advice about telling this story "from both sides", Marcia Langton also contributes to the series' rewriting of the colonial visual archive through her powerful on-screen presence and use of a distinctive rhetorical device. She is interviewed throughout the series, her presence helping to link the episodes. In each episode she asks viewers in some way or other to *imagine* what a particular event would have been like for an Indigenous person. Most Australians have, for example, seen historic photographic images of Aboriginal men and women chained together.

It is impossible now to recover the names of all these photographed subjects. But it is, as Langton demonstrates, possible to imagine how these subjects may have felt. In episode five, an image of this kind is used to help contextualise a segment from the colonial history of

Western Australia and the story of Rottnest Island prison. Over an image of a dozen or so chained men, Langton's commentary is used to solicit a particular way of seeing the image: "Try to imagine", she says, "the thoughts of one man, in one of these chained gangs, who walked thousands of kilometres across Western Australia, to an almost certain death". And as the camera slowly zooms in on two faces, she suggests: "It must have been absolutely terrifying". This technique serves to activate our ethical imaginations. Langton calls upon us to actively collaborate in the construction of historical meaning by going beyond just *knowing* about Indigenous history. Indeed, knowing this history is not the problem, for these stories are well documented. The problem the series addresses is that despite this knowledge, such stories are not popularly accepted or understood. Langton's commentary combines here with a visual record of this history to invite us to *understand* these stories through the specific work of moral interrogation of the complex social relationships between black and white Australians.

Perkins says that one of the great ironies they discovered while researching this project is that in contrast to the dearth of early primary written Indigenous material there is a vast archival pictorial record. She suggests this is because of the European fascination with capturing what they assumed was a dying race. The concentration of these kinds of images presented in the series is telling of how this colonial procedure served to erase the materiality of pre-colonialism and the forms of post-invasion Aboriginal culture that fell outside of the gaze of "the colonial (ising) camera". The series now collaborates with photo-media technology to not only contest colonial representations but to expose the reality of colonial oppression as in part a lack of access to European technologies of representation and historiography. *First Australians* recombines silent images – images of the *silenced* subjects of colonialism – with spoken history. The voices of Indigenous descendents and historians as well as non-Indigenous historians work together to strategically reclaim these historical subjects for a new *Indigenous* history of the nation's colonial past.

Conclusion: New maps

Earlier in this paper I mentioned John Scott's *Short History of Australia*, which as Arnold suggested, starts with a legend-creating opening that helped to establish what was then a new myth of origin – the concept that Australia became a nation on the battlefields of Gallipoli. *First Australians* has an equally clever and profound opening that helps to guide non-Indigenous viewers to see the nation's past from an Indigenous perspective.

It begins with a sequence of spectacular, some say haunting, images of the Australian landscape: sweeping aerial shots of rugged coastal cliffs and the ridges and valleys of the great red rocky outcrops of central Australian deserts, starry night skies and wide-open spaces. We have of course all seen these landscape images many times before and know them well. They have become the standard repertoire of television advertisements for luxury cars and Qantas airline. But now, in this series, these iconic landscapes that have long since been associated with the national narrative of discovery and brave battling pioneers, are appropriated for a different story.

Backed by the swelling sounds of Indigenous-inspired orchestral music, Rachel Perkins' narration begins by asking us to see something very different in these landscapes, namely the sacred forms of ancestral beings, beings that we are told gave life to this continent. These newly signified landscape shots are then blended with a computer-generated replica of a hand-drawn map of the Australian continent. We watch as the map is animated and gradually overlaid with the many black lines that mark-out the territorial boundaries of the more than 250 tribal language groups that encompassed the entire continent prior to British invasion and settlement. Mimicking the design style of eighteenth-century cartography, the series presents a map that re-draws the European image of pre-colonial Australia, contesting the long-standing idea of Australia as "an empty space". In this one stroke, the series provides a crystal-clear picture of the basis of Indigenous people's claim to sovereignty.

It is difficult to know how this re-writing/re-figuring of national history was received in a television environment that is itself rapidly changing and in many ways has disconnected itself from national perspectives in favour of specialist interests and sensationalist Reality-TV documentary series, such as the high-rating *Border Security* or *RPA*. What is known, however, is that the series tells a compelling story that cleverly calls ideas of Australia as a single nation state into question. In the end, we discover that all the conflicts and complications in the relationships between black and white Australians featured in the series' stories of various well-known and ordinary first Australians tie back to the conflict over land that began in 1788. As the nation's first popular post-*Mabo* history, the past is brought into the present inviting non-Indigenous Australian viewers to recognise the true "untold story" of the series as the unfinished business of recognising Indigenous sovereignty.

Finally, I would also suggest that in doing this *First Australians* provides a template for how we might *remap* Australian cinema and television studies. Just as this series brings Indigenous history into the mainstream to reveal how the nation's past has always been a story of "the collision of two worlds", the series itself can be read as an act of centring Indigenous media production. As an example of how Indigenous film is always already produced within the contested collaborative spaces of black and white struggles over knowledge formation and narratives, this series suggests that *all* Australian film exists within these spaces, whether it directly addresses Indigenous people and their concerns or constructs them as an absent presence within their own country, as so many Australian films continue to do.

Endnotes

[1]
Spelling of "Indigenous" in this paper follows the Australian Federal government Parliamentary *Counsel Drafting Direction No. 2.1 on English usage* (September 2008), "Part 4, Spelling of 'Indigenous'": "34. Always capitalise "Indigenous" when it refers to the original inhabitants of Australia – as in "Indigenous Australians" and "Indigenous communities". It needs no capitals when used in a general sense to refer to the original inhabitants of other countries. http://www.opc.gov.au/about/drafting_series/DD%202.1.rtf (March, 2009).
Research for this paper has been undertaken as part of a larger collaborative project on the history of collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers and writers in Australia. I am grateful to my research partners Nancy Wright (University of Western Sydney) and Brooke Collins-Gearing (The University of Newcastle) who have helped me to shape the wider views that inform this analysis. Parts of this analysis have also been published in my review of *First Australians* in *Metro,* 158 (2008).

I would also like to acknowledge the help of Jodi Brooks (University of New South Wales) for her encouragement and very insightful feedback on an earlier version of this paper. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the very helpful comments provided by the anonymous readers organised by *Screening the Past*.
[2] Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod and Brian Larkin, "Introduction", *Media worlds: anthropology on new terrain* (Berkeley, Cal: University of California Press, 2002) p. 9.

[3] On this problem, see Frances Peters-Little's brilliant analysis, "Nobles and savages: Enduring features in television documentaries", *UTS Review*, vol. 7 (2001), p. 180-189. Also see her book *Return of the Noble Savage: Reflections of an Australian Aboriginal Filmmaker* (Aboriginal Studies Press, forthcoming July 2009).
[4] Ginsburg, et al, p. 7.
[5] Stephen Muecke, "Narrative and intervention: Aboriginal filmmaking and policy", *Continuum*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1994), p. 254.
[6] Perkins serves on the board of the National Indigenous TV service and the board of Screen Australia. She has won five Australian Film Institute's awards, including the prestigious Byron Kennedy Award "for her vast amount and breadth of her work as writer, director, producer, executive producer and instigator across drama, documentary and television; for her dynamism and creativity; for her outstanding ability to inspire others and work collaboratively; and for her passionate championing of indigenous filmmaking and filmmakers".
[7] The Long Black Feature Program is a strategic initiative by Screen Australia's Indigenous Branch "aimed at encouraging and supporting Indigenous filmmakers to work in the longer format, and to bring to the screen feature stories authored and crafted by Indigenous people."
[8] See Therese Davis and Cassi Plate, "'Surrendering control': *Two Laws* as collaborative community filmmaking: an interview with Carolyn Strachan and Alessandro Cavadini", *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2 no. 2 (2008): p. 147-163.
[9] Marcia Langton, "Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television": An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things, (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993).
[10] A notable exception to this trend is Melinda Hinkson, "New media projects at Yuendumu: towards a history and analysis of intercultural engagement", *The power of knowledge, the resonance of tradition,* eds Taylor, L., Ward, G. Henderson, G., Davis, R. and Wallis, L (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), p. 157-68.
[11] Qtd. in Kathleen McHugh and Catherine Komisaruk, "Something other than autobiography: collaborative life-narratives in the Americas – an introduction", *Biography*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2008), vii.
[12] Rachel Perkins, "Documentary research and the archives", key note address, *2Deadly: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network Conference*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 20 November, 2006,http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/conference/conf06/papers/Rachel%20Perkins.doc (March 2009).
[13] Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the savages, savaging the disciplines (*Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), p. 208.
[14] Rachel Perkins, "About the making of *First Australians*", *First Australians* Media Kit (October 2008), 26.
[15] John Arnold, *National inquiry into school history – appendix D: Australian history in print: a bibliographical survey of influential twentieth-century texts* (Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2000),http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/national_inquiry_into_school_history/appendix_d.htm(January 2009).
[16] Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia* (Oxford University Press: London, 1916), as quoted in Arnold, p. 1.
[17] Ann Curthoys, "Disputing national histories: some recent Australian debates" *Transforming Cultures* e Journal, vol. 1, no. 1 (2006), http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/TfC/article/view/187 (November 2008), p. 7.
[18] Paul Keating, "The Redfern Address", 10 December 1992, Redfern Park, Sydney, Australia. A copy of the speech can be accessed at http://www.nswalp.com/redfern-speech (January 2009).
[19] For an overview of the concept of black armband history in Australia, see Mark McKenna, "Different perspectives on black armband history, Australian parliamentary library – research paper five (1997-98),http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/RP/1997-98/98rp05.htm (January 2009).
[20] For an overview of the Australian History Wars, see Stuart McIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*(Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2003).
[21] Robert Manne (ed), *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda: 2003), p. 7.
[22] Keith Windschuttle, *The fabrication of Aboriginal history, volume one: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*(Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002).
[23] Perkins, Media Kit, p. 26.
[24] Gordon Briscoe, "Review of Bain Attwood's Telling the truth about Aboriginal History", *History Australia*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2006), p. 28.
[25] Tony Birch, "'I Could Feel it in My Body": War on a history war', *Transforming cultures* eJournal, vol. 1, no. 1, 2006, http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/TfC/article/view/188 (October 2008), p. 26. This is one of the most original critiques that I know of the Australian history wars. I am not, however, suggesting that Birch would endorse this series. He may see it as an example of what he says needs to end, namely Aboriginal responsibility as the "memory bank" of white Australia's colonial violence.
[26] Perkins, 2006, p. 4.
[27] Nakata, p. 203.
[28] Perkins, 2006, p. 2.
[29] Online DVD review, http://www.chud.com/articles/articles/207/1/DVD-REVIEW-500-NATIONS/Page1.html(March 2009).
[30] Perkins, Media kit, p. 27.
[31] "Unearthing our first voices", The Canberra Times, 14 October 2008,http://www.canberratimes.com.au/news/local/news/general/unearthing-our-first-voices/1333254.aspx?page=3(March 2009).
[32] Nakata, p. 195.
[33] See Chris Healy's provocative and highly informative study of the remembering and forgetting of "Aborigines" in *Australian history, Forgetting aborigines (*Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).
[34] For a critique of neo-colonialism in *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, Australia, 2006), see Brooke Collins-Gearing, Therese Davis and Nancy Wright, "An ongoing dialogue: the realties of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaboration", *Australian Humanities Review*, forthcoming.
[35] Jackie Huggins, "Questions of collaboration: An interview with Jackie Huggins and Isabel Tarrago", *Hecate*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1990), p. 140.
[36] Langton is Professor of Anthropology and Chair of Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University. She is also a well-known and widely respected Indigenous activist and public intellectual. For a sample of Langton's most recent analyses, see Marcia Langton, "Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show", *Griffith Review*, 19 (2008): 145-162. Also see, Marcia Langton, "The end of 'big men' politics", *Griffith Review*, 22 (2008): 13-38.
[37] Dale, as qtd. in Sacha Molitorisz "*First Australians*", *The Vine.com.au,* http://www.thevine.com.au/entertainment/articles/first-australians.aspx (January 2009)
[38] Perkins, Media kit, p. 30.

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