'Nobles and savages' on the television

Frances Peters-Little

> *The sweet voice of nature is no longer an infallible guide for us, nor is the independence we have received from her a desirable state. Peace and innocence escaped us forever, even before we tasted their delights. Beyond the range of thought and feeling of the brutish men of the earliest times, and no longer within the grasp of the 'enlightened' men of later periods, the happy life of the Golden Age could never really have existed for the human race. When men could have enjoyed it they were unaware of it and when they have understood it they had already lost it.*
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> JJ Rousseau 1762[1]

Although Rousseau laments the loss of peace and innocence; little did he realise his desire for the *noble savage* would endure beyond his time and into the next millennium. However, all is not lost for the modern person who shares his bellow, for a new *noble* and *savage* Aborigine resonates across the electronic waves on millions of television sets throughout the globe.[2]

Introduction

Despite the numbers of Aboriginal people drawn into the Australian film and television industries in recent years, cinema and television continue to portray and communicate images that reflect Rousseau's desires for the *noble savage*. Such desires persist not only in images screened in the cinema and on television, but also in the way that they are discussed. The task of ridding non-fiction film and television making of the desire for the *noble* and the *savage* is an essential one that must be consciously dealt with by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal film and television makers and their critics. Yet, moving beyond the *noble* or the *savage* remains a difficult task. With underlying desires for the *noble* and the *savage* seeping into the colonial sub-conscious for centuries it is improbable such notions are likely to disappear after only three decades of Aboriginal self-determination and government policies on Aboriginal broadcasting.

What I intend to demonstrate are several examples where film and television makers use images and concepts that reflect Rousseau's *noble savage* to describe Aboriginal people's co-existence with and/or resistance to colonisation. This is not an essay that means to attack the works of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film-makers, but to more-or-

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1. JJ Rousseau 1773, *The social contract and discourses*, cited by Gibson 1984: 144.
2. Peters-Little, forthcoming.

less raise questions about why we perfunctorily slot Aborigines into *noble* and *savage* stereotypes. While it is generally thought that film and television makers underpin racist stereotypes,[3] I say it is more complex than that for I am yet to meet anyone who makes a film for the sole purpose of inciting racial hatred. This is a point well noted by Aboriginal scholar Marcia Langton who contends that 'racial discrimination, while a problem, is not necessarily intentional but is a particular factor underlining specific and/or general encounters between Aborigines and film-makers'.[4] While I intend to explore the *noble* and the *savage* stereotypes, I also maintain that what has become problematic in recent years is that the *noble* or positive pole has intensified in opposition to years of apparent negative representations of Aborigines as *savages*. Nevertheless, I assert that focusing on the *noble* pole is just as harmful as the *savage* pole, simply because Aboriginal people are neither *noble* nor *savage*.

Film critic Carol Lasaur states that Langton traces the history of representations of Aboriginal images, pointing out diversity of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal production techniques, aesthetics and politics as an alternative to the way non-Aborigines make films about Aborigines.[5] I am not convinced of this argument. I believe that the production of Aboriginal film and television making have more in common with non-Aboriginal film and television making than we may imagine. After three decades of self-determination policies, and Aboriginal people arguing that they live with the problem and therefore know their own solutions,[6] I think it is time to revisit the issue of Aboriginal self-representation in television from a different perspective that revives us from the self-determination rhetoric of the 1970s and the run-of-the-mill 1980s resistance approach.[7] Various Aboriginal film and television makers assert that only Aboriginal people are capable of telling authentic Aboriginal stories,[8] however I am prone to agree with the alternative theory expressed by Roland Bathes, that 'realism is, and has been from its very inception, something subjected to the creator and the personal choices they make'.[9] I argue that filmmaking or storytelling can be a very personal thing, and that there is an attainable middle-ground, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film and television makers to be capable of telling real Aboriginal stories, on the proviso that they make the conscious decision to avoid the pendulum swing between the *noble* and the *savage* representations.

In my attempt to critique the binary framework of *nobles* and *savages* that meet with long-standing colonial desires, I will demonstrate why *noble* and *savage* imagery has endured, and how it is an ever present reflection in Australian film and television making. This is not to say that fictional drama/cinema is more successful at excluding

3. Foley 1999: 2.
4. Langton 1993: 27–28.
5. Lasaur 1993: 4.
6. Bayles 1989.
7. Batty 2001 talks about the resistance model.
8. The issue of what is a 'real' Aboriginal film continues to divide Aboriginal film and television makers. For example, film-maker Darlene Johnson's documentary *The Making of Rabbit Proof Fence* was excluded from an Indigenous film festival in Adelaide in March 2002 on the basis that the film was about a 'white' film-maker. Johnson's film was excluded even though she is Aboriginal and the subject was Aboriginal actors in the film.
9. Barthes 1973.

stereotypes. On the contrary, I consider non-fiction mainstream television is the more progressive of the two genres. In this paper, I try to bring attention to the serious neglect of research and analysis of Aboriginal non-fiction broadcasting in the mainstream and ask why this should be the case. I am also curious as to why experts have preferred to engage in research and public discussions on the topic of Aboriginal drama and cinema (the highbrow culturally *noble*) and remote Aboriginal broadcasting, while clearly neglecting the role and the important contribution of mainstream non-fiction television (the lowbrow politically *savage*) Aboriginal program-making in south-eastern states of Australia. While I do not attempt to offer a recipe for the perfect Aboriginal film (and I would challenge anyone who thought that they could) I maintain that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film-makers are expected to replicate *noble/savage* images and concepts in their film-making for various reasons that need serious discussion and scrutiny. I base this on the fact that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal television makers operate within a postcolonial society that rewards those who replicate such imagery and analysis, thus catering to the *noble* and *savage* demands from their audiences and readerships.[10] I admit this as one who has made documentary films for television. I know that even I have tried to convert audiences and convince them of the importance of understanding Aboriginal history and people's concerns, and, at times, naively dallied with promoting Aborigines as *noble* beings in my own film productions. However, this is something that I now think, while perhaps appropriate for its time during the late 1980s, is no longer a functional way to proceed into the future. I will demonstrate why I believe this to be the case. This point is perhaps the key to understanding the overall emphasis of this paper. I draw from my personal experiences as a black film-maker who grew up in a multi-cultural society and has learnt to observe those colonial values I have internalised and/or resisted, with all the muddy parts that exist between the two. I also observe other good film-makers, who at some time in their filmmaking lives shared these same good intentions that I once had.

Terminology

To define a few key words: I will be referring to 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' as those who are of Aboriginal descent and those who are not in preference to using the term 'Indigenous'. Some people choose not to use the word 'Aborigines' because they think it is offensive, with the only difference being that one is a noun and the latter an adjective. Occasionally I will refer to Aborigines as 'black-skinned and 'brown-skinned', and non-Aborigines as 'whites' especially where there are references to 'skin-colour'. The issue of skin-colour is important to discuss in a visual medium such as film and television. The term 'mainstream broadcasting' refers to public television broadcasting such as the ABC and SBS and the commercial networks. 'Network' refers to the commercial channels privately owned and controlled. An 'Aboriginal documentary' is a film that could be made by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film-makers, but the content and subject must be Aboriginal. The term 'non-fiction program' can refer to various non-fiction formats such as magazine, documentaries and news and current affair items. Although there are examples where people make the distinction between the independent documentary and the television documentary, independent documentaries are documentaries made by film-

10. In chapter 3 of my forthcoming book, *The return of the Noble Savage: by popular demand*, I discuss how funding and training become available for Aboriginal productions, what is being made, and who it is being made for.

makers not employed by the broadcaster. Since it is rare to see non-fiction programs anywhere other than television, I will occasionally refer to non-fiction films as television programs. Nor will I be making a distinction between 16mm or 35mm film, SP betacam, and/or various video or other digital formats. All formats are referred to as films, programs and/or items.

The noble and the savage

I focus on the significance of the term 'the noble savage' to highlight the paradoxical meaning that oscillates between the *noble* pole and the *savage* pole. It is an ambiguous and variable term used to define perceptions of the 'other' so I will therefore not be referring to it in terms of its scientific meaning. I will argue that it is precisely because of its fluidity and ambiguity that I suspect the notion of the *noble* and *savage* has endured for several centuries, long before and after Europeans set foot on Australia's eastern shores. I examine the term in its parts because I want to understand why Europeans were able to revere or wish to preserve the *noble* while despising and hoping to destroy the *savage*. I am also fascinated with irrational European observations that confined the world's population to such simplistic binary terms of good and evil, north and south, black and white, real and unreal, and in many ways continue to do so. To do this I have divided themes that were characteristic of 18th and 19th century images and literature illustrating the *noble savage*, sometimes used to represent Australian Aborigines, into five themes: 1) 'patrons of nature's gifts'; 2) 'infantile creatures of innocence'; 3) 'black naked brutes'; 4) 'torn between two cultures' and 5) 'doomed for extinction'.

Although many have thought Jean Jacques Rousseau coined the term, Cranston argues that authors and explorers referred to the *noble savage* (or the characteristics of the *noble savage*) as early as the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. Proponents of the idea in one form or another included Christopher Columbus, Michel de Montaigne, Desiderius Erasmus, and Sir Walter Raleigh, who was particularly fascinated by the way *savages* obtained their food.[11] Seventeenth century poet John Dryden referred to the *noble savage* when he wrote, 'I am as free as nature first made man, Ere the base laws of servitude began, when wild in woods the noble savage ran.'[12] By the 18th century the French meaning of the word *savage* conveyed an uncorrupted innocence. Rousseau's statement, quoted above, demonstrates that the *noble savage* was a concept in which Europeans romantically viewed other cultures in ideal terms and envied them. Maurice Cranston says the concept of *noble savage* gained popularity at a time when Europeans felt they had lost the ability to make use of nature's gifts, and were instead trapped in the tangled world of letters, magistrates, politics and commerce.[13]

Interestingly, the motivations of 18th and 19th century scientists and artists, who ventured into new worlds looking for solutions to their own society's over-commercialisation and corruption, are not that unrelated to some of the rationales used by

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11. This parallels nature and wildlife studies/programs about Aboriginal hunters and gatherers where there is a white presenter/protagonist who studies the diets and cooking skills of Aborigines. See discussion below.
12. J Dryden, *The Conquest of Granada, Part One, 1670*, cited in Jones 1985.
13. Cranston 1991. See also Schaer, Claeys and Tower Sargent (eds) 2000. Both books stress in great detail many complex reasons for European desires for utopia and for the noble savage in European societies throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

contemporary documentary film-makers about other cultures. Although there were other motivating reasons for 18th and 19th century scientists and artists to study other cultures and colonies, the impulse to find a solution for one's societal problems by exploring other people's culture is not uncommon. For example, documentary filmmaker Gary Kildea boldly suggests that white film-makers could afford to sail through exoticism by making films about Aborigines because in most cases they did not have to carry the political and social burden of responsibility that Aboriginal film and television makers seem to do.[14] I am also interested in the notion that white film-makers are as interested in making films about other cultures because they are frustrated with 'their' own society. In my interview with cutting-edge film-maker Alec Morgan, I wondered why white film-makers would want to make a film about Aborigines. His reply was that in part he made *Lousy Little Sixpence* because he wanted to 'make sense of a white superficial world that greatly valued materialism, Gallipoli and jingoisms, but when it came to Aborigines they were yet to be treated as human beings deserving of justice and recognition'.[15] But is it fair to say that Aboriginal film and television makers are exempt from having the same interests in exoticisms? Probably not, since Aboriginal film and television makers are just as capable of being attracted to the same cultural iconographies and symbolisms and can find them just as fascinating when filming Aboriginal communities other than their own, especially when aiming to address white audiences.[16]

Just as 18th century Europeans thought Utopia was located in a greater southern hemisphere, an inversion of the Eurasian landmass, balancing and contrasting the corruptible and tangled world of the north,[17] contemporary portrayals see Australia's outback as the real heart of Australia. When Europeans first encountered Aboriginal people on the Australian continent, they saw them through a double vision[18] under the guise of objectivity. They saw Aboriginal people in the same way they saw the two hemispheres, that is, through a framework supporting a simplistic dichotomy of opposing poles. The world for them at that time required that one was either civilised or uncivilised. No matter how enlightened they imagined themselves to be, Europeans could not shake off their double lenses on the world, maintaining their racist supremacist attitudes over those they sketched, wrote about, and recorded. By exalting those they had met, they perhaps thought themselves acting in a most *noble* manner themselves.

With no such excuses as their 18th century predecessors, 21st century Australians still resort to binary terms when discussing Aboriginal people, for example Aboriginal people living in settled Australia, opposed to Aboriginal people who are traditional owners living on their land. This perception is touched upon by Toby Miller, who discusses how the world ceases to find Australia interesting when Australia became modern.[19] The

14. Discussions arising at the Cross-cultural Round Table, convened by David and Judith MacDougall, Braidwood, NSW, February 2000.
15. F Peters-Little, interview with Alec Morgan, Bondi Beach, November 2001.
16. For example, the film *Malangi* is a documentary I researched for Aboriginal director Michael Riley, about 'a day in the life' of Aboriginal artist David Malangi, who starts the day hunting and gathering with his extended family. On the shoot, Riley discussed how he was particularly fascinated with the traditional lifestyle but was somewhat pleased that his own life was not as hard going in Sydney where he lived and worked.
17. Gibson 1984: 2-3.
18. Thomas and Losche (eds) 1999.

trend to see Aborigines in the north, supposedly possessing a traditional culture that is worthy of saving, but urbanised black culture is not as authentic, and unworthy of research was encouraged by North American scholar Eric Michaels. According to anthropologist Melinda Hinkson, he inspired a small industry of scholars to write about Aboriginal television making in remote Australia.[20] This peculiar outback fixation has not escaped everyone's attention. Megan McCullough, an enthusiastic anthropology student at New York University wrote:

> It is possible to see how [Marcia] Langton's dismissal of mainstream television in Australia was perhaps hasty. The Aboriginal programs unit at the ABC demonstrates that Aboriginal mainstream television can effectively and interestingly juggle identity politics with the nuts and bolts of production, reception and distribution without compromising the complexity of the Aboriginal political positions and cultural positionalities ... [Langton] appears to judge independent cinema and remote Aboriginal media associations more valuable, more worthy of both the title and state funding.[21]

The implications of dividing mainstream Aboriginal television-makers from remote Aboriginal television-makers has even affected Aboriginal film-makers themselves. This is demonstrated in the events leading up to the newly formed National Indigenous Media Association of Australia, (NIMAA) who in 1991 initially sought to ban Aborigines working in the ABC and SBS from membership with the national organisation because Aborigines working for mainstream television were thought to not be producing 'real' Aboriginal television.[22]

Patrons of nature's gifts

> *From what I have seen of the Natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched People upon Earth; but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans, being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous, but with the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them ... The Earth and the Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life. They covet not Magnificent Houses; Household stuff; they live in a Warm and fine Climate, and enjoy every Wholesome Air ... in short they seemed to set no Value upon anything of their own nor any one Article we could offer them. This in my opinion Argues, that they think themselves provided with all the necessarys of Life, and they have no Superfluities.*
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> Captain James Cook 1770[23]

Perhaps the most common image of the *noble savage* emerges in many nature and wildlife documentaries. This is where audiences are able to go on 'white man walkabouts'. Reminiscent of the early observations of Captain James Cook, who clearly admires Aborigines living in harmony with nature, many nature and wildlife documentary pro-

19. Miller 1994: 1.
20. Hinkson 2002.
21. McCullough 1995: 15.
22. F Peters-Little, interview with former secretary of NIMAA, Greg Eatock, Sydney, 2001.
23. J Cook, *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his voyages of discovery*, cited in Reynolds 1987: 96.

grams uphold the notion that 'real' Aborigines have a natural affinity to land, in other words, live like native flora and fauna, with very little need for anything that may exist in the modern world. Programs that do this are *Walkabout;* the first documentary series on television featuring Aborigines, produced by Charles and Elsa Chauvel in 1958 and aired for 13 weeks on the ABC, and Vincent Serventy's *Nature Walkabout* which ran for 26 weeks on the Nine network, in the same year. The *Nature Walkabout* series followed Vincent Serventy and his young family travelling across the continent.[24] Continuing in the same format of families on their personal expeditions in the Australian outback the *Leyland Brothers World* series went into production at early as 1961 for the Seven Network, producing over 40 episodes for the network throughout the 1970s.[25] A regular feature of Seven's *World Around Us* series during the late 1970s was *Malcolm Douglas' Adventure* series on the Seven Network, which featured Aborigines who would almost invariably be one of Douglas's friends or guides.

Voiceless Aborigines, like other flora and fauna, are used in many nature and wildlife documentaries as backdrops. Their part becomes apparent when an Aboriginal 'friend' passes on knowledge to white protagonists supposedly teaching them how to survive harmoniously with the land. The white protagonist in nature and wildlife documentaries, as my mother said 'always looked somewhat unnatural in bare feet, pretending to be at one with nature, until they are able to reunite with an invisible camera-crew and 4WD and a chartered flight back to some swanky Sydney editing room'. Commencing in 1976 another 'friend' of the Aborigines was Harry Butler, who was a Tasmanian naturalist and conservation expert who became famous for his fanatical interests in plants and animals. *Harry Butler in the Wild* was a popular 26-episode series produced by the ABC and repeated several times during the mid-1970s. Both Butler and crocodile farmer and film-maker Douglas ditched the earlier family expedition format and made personality-driven protagonists a popular style.

Appearing on television in the 1980s, the ABC reclaimed their stake on nature and wildlife programs with the highly popular series *Bush Tucker Man,* filling the gap that the successful *Harry Butler in the Wild* series had left behind. The *Bush Tucker Man,* sharing Sir Walter Raleigh's fascination for the diets and eating habits of the native peoples, aired 26 episodes on the ABC and was repeated several times. Les Hiddens, who was the *Bush Tucker Man,* was most noted for wearing army fatigues and a strangely modified Aussie slouch hat. He was an environmentalist like Butler, but had a more robust personality and was a connoisseur of edible native plants and animals.

The Aboriginal 'friend' filmic theme of 'white-man storytelling', was recently cleverly parodied by actor/comedian Glen Robbins. Appearing as Russell Coight, the presenter of an eight-part one-hour 'mockumentary' series airing on Channel Ten, *Coight* is a fictional character created by Robbins who travels and meets with black and white people living in the outback. Often describing the people he meets as his great 'mates' or Aboriginal 'friends', Robbins allows us to see Coight's somewhat ostentatious imaginings of his so-called popularity amongst the locals. This becomes clear when Coight introduces the camera to his 'mates' or 'friends' who are never quite as

24. F Peters-Little interviews with Catherine Serventy, one of the children on the Serventy series, November 2001.
25. F Peters-Little, conversation with Seven Network's archivist.

awestruck about him as he is of them. When Robbins edits the story together we see the same close-up 'handshake' between a 'black' hand and a 'white' hand. The shot is then repeated showing the same close-up black/white handshake even though the wide-shot reveals Coight to be shaking hands with white men. Whether Robbins intends to comment on relationships between Aborigines and non-Aboriginal presenters, Robbins is sending up one of Australia's most repetitive images between blacks and whites. In fact, the close-up of the black/white handshake is prevalent in many films, including a film by Aboriginal filmmaker, Richard Franklin, *Harry's War* (1991), where Harry, an Aboriginal soldier shakes hands with his white army friend.[26]

Infantile creatures of innocence

> *In all questions of morality and in all matters connected with the emotional nature the blacks were mere children.*
>
> CS Wake[27]

Darwinians believed adult European people passed through the stages of human evolution while growing up. They considered that Aborigines were still at the childhood stage. References to Aborigines as childish are too numerous to mention. The notion that Aborigines are childlike underpins the foundation stone for most Aboriginal policy, past and present. Barrister Noel Pearson continues to argue that the resultant paternalism and welfare chain Aborigines to their own social and cultural demise.[28] While represented as voiceless in nature and wildlife documentaries, the notion that Aboriginal people are childlike and incapable of taking control or speaking for themselves was challenged by film-makers in the 1960s who opposed the use of white narration or white presenters. A 60 minute documentary called *A Changing Race* made by documentary filmmaker Robert Feeney, aired on the ABC in 1964, a year before the freedom rides.[29] It was presented by Aboriginal singer Jimmy Little. It was an attempt to illustrate an Aboriginal voice presenting Aboriginal opinions to non-Aboriginal Australia. Besides this one-off, white narration over black images dominated until the 1980s when documentary film-makers came to struggle with the problematic issues of the 'voice of god' style of film making. Commenting on his own filmmaking style, Ian Dunlop says 'it's a constant struggle to use narration and subtitles over the translations of one language to another and with the tidying-up of Aboriginal Kriol'. As a result, Dunlop admits that many of his films have no sound at all.[30] Nevertheless, today Dunlop is the exception and since the late 1980s it has become conventional for documentary filmmakers who make Aboriginal documentaries to use presenters like Jimmy Little in the *A Chaning Race* documentary, or Aboriginal narrators.[31]

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26. *Harry's War* is a 27 minute short drama Franklin wrote on the life of a young Aboriginal soldier who leaves Condah Mission to fight for his country in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. The film is based on the experiences of his uncle Harry Saunders who fought and died in the beaches of Gona in 1942.
27. CS Wake, *The mental characteristics of primitive man, as exemplified by the Australian Aborigines*, 1872, cited in Reynolds 1987: 118.
28. Pearson 2000.
29. Borchers 2001.
30. Ian Dunlop, Round Table discussion at the Cross-Cultural Film-makers Conference, Braidwood, 2000.

Perhaps the most familiar portrayal of Aboriginal people involves the problem of alcoholism in the community. Overall, documentary film-makers tend not to treat the issue of alcoholism amongst white men in the same way that they treat male Aboriginal alcoholics. Film-makers are more likely to sympathise with an Aboriginal male alcoholic than they are able to express sympathy for a white male alcoholic. Well-known documentary films that do this are Margaret Lattimore's *Genocide* (1990) and Denis O'Rourke's *Couldn't Be Fairer* (1983), as well as many others. In these films, we view the problem of violence against women in the Aboriginal community and highlight the self-mutilation, self-destruction of society, culture and tradition, from domestic violence to deaths in custody. However, what is interesting in most accounts is the Aboriginal men accused of perpetrating violence against Aboriginal women are also seen to be victims of colonisation. So that in one sense audiences focus more upon the oppression and despair of Aboriginal men who become alcoholics, and understand less about what they do, or about Aboriginal women, who have long been the victims of colonisation, alcoholism and domestic abuse dished out by the men.

Another example of treating Aborigines as 'creatures of innocence' is found in many of the films highlighting the issue of Aboriginal stolen generations, such as Darlene Johnson's exceptional film *Stolen Generations* (2000), the Alec Morgan film, *Lousy Little Sixpence* (1983) and to a degree, David MacDougall's *Link-Up Diary* (1987). The impact of the Morgan film was powerful insomuch as it was the first time Australians took the slightest notice of the history of removal of thousands of Aboriginal children, forcibly or otherwise from their natural families. The innovative Johnson film was very timely, and made an important statement at a crucial time in Australian political history. Johnson's film aired on the ABC on 26 May 2000, the month following the federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, Senator Herron's public challenge on television of the notion of stolen 'generations'; needless to say the media ran amok. As a follow-up, Channel Nine's *Sunday* program[32] conducted interviews with two of the women from Melville Island used in *Movietone* footage featured in the Johnson documentary. Asked if one of the women felt she had been stolen, her reply was that she had grown up grateful to have been raised by white parents, and did not feel stolen in any way shape or form. In an extract from the interview, Dalley interviews Marj Harris who tells a disturbing story of her life, and how she was grateful to have been fostered out to a white family.

DALLEY: And when you were born, how did your own mother feel about you?

HARRIS: Well she had another 'half-caste' child, who is my sister Molly, and she was badly treated by her family and tribes or clans.

DALLEY: Your mother was? For having a coloured child?

HARRIS: Yes, for having a coloured child. So she thought that next lot that come along she wasn't going to keep them, as simple as that. So a brother was born and she done away with him at birth.

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31. For example, Sean Kennedy, director of *Jimmy Little's Gentle Journey* 2003, who insisted on using Aboriginal actor Aaron Pederson for narration.

32. *Sunday Program*, Helen Dalley interview, with Lorraine Deutsher and Marj Harris, Channel Nine, April 9 2000.

DALLEY: Your mother did away with her son at birth?

HARRIS: Yeah, it was always mother only.

DALLEY: How did she do that?

HARRIS: Oh, she hit him on the side there. This was what my grandma told me. Then of course when I came along, we had same father, Irishman, and when I came along and mum had same thing in mind, to do away with me too.

DALLEY: Did she try?

HARRIS: Yeah she tried, hitting me there, that's it, missed the main part there and hit me there.

DALLEY: How come she didn't succeed?

HARRIS: My grandmother grabbed me, she was beautiful, she grabbed me, according to what she told me, she grabbed me and held me against her breast and said 'no don't kill this one, I want this one, I want her for me'.

DALLEY: So did this go on a lot, this treatment of coloured children?

HARRIS: Oh yes, a lot of mothers done away with their children, and reason was their own clan didn't accept them for having a white child, as they called us.

In the case of the *Link-Up Diary* film, historian Peter Read stated in a presentation at a film discussion night at *Screensound Australia* in 1999, at the time they had been filming in 1987, there were many cases where he attempted to reunite people, but some were not as enthused about reconnecting with their Aboriginal heritage as we may think. He stated that he felt that the concept that all Aboriginal children who had been fostered out were eager to reconnect with their heritage became more popular following the unveiling of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 *The Bringing Them Home Report*. It is left open to debate as to whether there needed to be more attention given to the topic. I believe documentary film-makers may want to pay more attention to this part of Australia's tragic history in order to bring a fuller story to the fore. At the risk of sounding like an apologist for the right, I think this is preferable to having people think that all Aboriginal children were stolen from their families solely on the basis of racist policies: in many cases, Aboriginal children were taken away for other reasons and these other reasons may need further explanation, if not only for historians or politicians, but for the stolen children themselves.

The other side of Aboriginal innocence is white guilt, however there is a long history of whites reacting against guilt, which could well mean that for some Aboriginal people that the more they become empowered, the more whites may well strike back. We see this, for example, in the attempted undermining of the impact of the stolen generations in the media-hype surrounding the *Bringing Them Home* report. On ABC TV's *7.30 Report*, 3 April 2000, reporter Tim Lester reported that Senator Herron stated that there was no such thing as 'a stolen generation', simply because Herron hypothesised that 'there simply were not enough children taken to warrant that word "generation"'.

Historically, there has been a long history of whites feeling badly done by blacks, and so justifying their retaliations, no matter how brutal or furtive. This is seen in the quicksilver change of attitude by early 19th century colonial authorities, from 'romanti-

cising blacks to eradicating them'.[33] Woolmington argues Aborigines were initially perceived as *noble* until such time that Aborigines began resisting the land grabs by new white settlers in their efforts to graze and cultivate land. By 1850 they were perceived as rural pests, and treated as *savages*.

The curious white response of 'playing victim to their victims' is not new, but was perhaps most publicly recorded and strengthened after the television screening of the then One Nation Party leader Pauline Hanson in her maiden speech to parliament on 10 September 1996, where she stated to the nation that in 1955:

> Hasluck's vision was of a single society in which racial emphases were rejected and social issues addressed. [And] ... I totally agree with him, and so would the majority of Australians. But remember, when he gave his speech he was talking about the privileges that white Australians were seen to be enjoying over Aboriginals. Today, 41 years later, I talk about the exact opposite – the privileges Aboriginals enjoy over other Australians.

So it appears that Aboriginal people who present an moral upper hand, even in the media, can not always expect sympathy or acknowledgement from white audiences, but may expect to meet with indignation and revenge, particularly when seen to receive support from whites who are more educated, wealthy or open-minded than the audience. Having this in mind, I wonder if film-makers addressing the inequities and injustices experienced by Aborigines, might think more carefully about anticipating such reactions from those more prone to indifference to Aboriginal concerns than the film-makers themselves are. For there surely must be one thing more disconcerting than Aborigines who take the high moral ground, and that would have to be other whites who take the higher moral ground on the behalf of Aborigines against other whites.

Black naked brutes

> *They are ungrateful, deceitful, wily and treacherous. They are indolent in the extreme, squalid and filthy in their surroundings, as well as disgustingly unpure amongst themselves.*
>
> W Wilshire[34]

The idea of Aborigines as close to nature has its nasty *savage* side. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Aborigines were seen as practically non-human. The observations of artists and scientists were fraught with European double visions and value judgments, prejudices and discriminations, equating Aborigines as sub-human and animalistic. The examples of statements about Aborigines as possessing ape-like characteristics are abundant. During the 19th century Melanesian, Polynesian, Indian and Caribbean groups although stigmatised with ape-like comparisons, it was thought the blacker the skin colour the more animalistic: Melanesian and Aborigines were less civilised than brown-skinned people like the Polynesians or Caribbean groups, who were considered more attractive, intelligent, sociable and so on. Darwinian scholars and 19th century anatomical scientists extended their studies to the Australian Aborigines, branding Aboriginal society as not having sovereignty and devoid of governance, law

33. Woolmington 1988.
34. W Wilshire, cited in Reynolds 1987: 109.

and civilization. While Wilshire's statement was made in the 19th century, such views about Aboriginal people as filthy, indolent and ungrateful were found to exist and fit in with the basic assumptions of white Australians in the 1950s by researcher Malcolm Calley. He found that many white Australians thought Aborigines to be dirty and foul smelling with no concept of hygiene, riddled with diseases and sexually promiscuous. Calley's research also revealed whites believed Aborigines drank more alcohol than they did, and handled it badly. They also believed Aborigines were lazy, unpunctual, thriftless and unreliable characteristics compounded by an incessant gambling addiction, all of which proved them mentally inferior to whites.[35] Yet, what is so interesting in Calley's report is that he conducted his research before television was broadcast in Australia, especially on the north coast of New South Wales, proving that such assumptions were already developed.

More recently, we can see how the question of Aborigines living in squalor and filth appears in the now infamous *Sixty Minutes* episode in which Pauline Hanson asks Tracy Curro to 'please explain' the meaning of xenophobia.[36] In this episode, Hanson visits the Aboriginal community on Palm Island, stating how very hard she found it to sympathise or want to do anything for Aborigines if they do not seem to care about the garbage and sanitary problem on the island. It is clear in the episode that Hanson is unable to differentiate between poverty and keeping tidy. Media scholar Steve Mickler argues that comments made by Hanson and others, suggest that Aborigines have to 'earn their rights and entitlements as a sovereign people – that they have to prove their moral fitness to enjoy rights that for other peoples, are accepted as being inherent'.[37]

The supposition that underlines Aborigines as having an innate desire for filth, indolence and being incapable of taking care of anything material is unquestionably embedded deep within the colonial consciousness. When conveying their values through colonial discourse, an issue such as the need for land is so often inadequately communicated by film and television makers and those they interview. From the anti-land rights advertisement campaigns and the stereotypes of Aborigines as unproductive lazy brutes, very few Australians are able to understand what the land rights debate is. They instead imagine land rights in the 1970s as something that gives permission to groups of unemployed, lazy, or apartheid-driven activists seeking to literally sit in the dirt and 'dream' of a culture that is lost.[38] Thirty years later, the stereotype is still present, and so I wonder how film-makers should address the issue today, especially when there are parliamentarians who blatantly remain unconvinced of Aborigines rights to the land. This is indicated in a statement given by *One Nation* member David Oldfield who stated in the New South Parliament as recently as 4 December 2003:

> I acknowledge that the Aboriginal people, as a people in the past, are an anthropological oddity and are no doubt significant and worthy of study. Perhaps the

35. Calley 1957: 190–193.
36. Pauline Hanson appeared on *Sixty Minutes* and responded to the question 'Are you xenophobic?' with 'Please explain?'. The move was calculated to make Pauline Hanson look stupid and uneducated. It worked – she did. It also made interviewer Tracy Curro look like a member of the intellectual elite. It is argued that Pauline picked up many votes that night. See http://bovination.com/cbs/xenophobia.jsp
37. Mickler 1997.
38. Peters-Little 2001: 12.

> House should be reminded that prior to white settlement Aboriginal people, through their various practices, ignorant as they were, managed to wipe out approximately 500 species of flora and fauna, that is, make it extinct ... And had white settlement not come along, what would the Aboriginal people be doing with the land today? They would be doing the same as they had always done: hunt, fish and set it on fire. Aboriginal people need us to help them make it into the twenty-first century.[39]

The question of who has the ability to successfully articulate the relationship that Aborigines have to land is complex and vague. With notions that the land is our 'mother', a concept whose origins are debatable,[40] is it little wonder why 'catch phrases' such as 'the land is my mother' or sacred sites being equated to churches, are concepts that remain misunderstood or frowned upon. I once screened a film to a group of students in which one Aboriginal character compares the destruction of an Aboriginal sacred site to the destruction of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. The feedback from one white student was that, while he admitted that he was a supporter of Aboriginal rights he felt the analogy was insufficient because he knew that he, like many others, would delight in the destruction of St Mary's Cathedral, and such a comparison had failed to help him understand the Aboriginal sacred connection to land. I left that afternoon thinking how important it was to be able to communicate 'sacredness' more effectively in films, rather than hooking onto catch phrases or rhetoric that may have worked a decade or more ago.

A powerful film that I thought tackled the issue of land and dispossession successfully at the time was *Munda Nyringu*, co-produced by Jan Roberts and Robert Bropho, a Nyoongah man from Western Australia in 1983. It was a documentary about the Western Mining Corporation and the local Aboriginal people around Kalgoorlie. Images of traditional owners between shots of sub-standard housing conditions and the goldmines themselves, inter-cut with detailed graphics demonstrating the statistics of mining finances against the dispossessed Aborigines in the film. Although a personal favourite of mine, this film may prove unconvincing today, or even worse, be accused of political correctness, a term that has become completely ambiguous in the last decade. In Darlene Johnson's film *Gulpilil*, where Johnson carefully avoids this problem, we witness a combination of Gulpilil's frustrations with having no land rights while living under harsh conditions. We understand, through the film, that though it is a choice he has made to live on his mother's and his father's country, it is fraught with hardships. Gulpilil's viewpoints are clearly understood even though he continues to reject the usual white aspirations. He is proud of his 'full-blood' blackfella birthright, whilst angry with the denial of land rights, even though he has 'made it' as a successful international movie star.

It is little wonder that so many film and television makers try to make Aborigines 'worthy' characters, nevertheless, I try to avoid these statements, and question if other film-makers, especially other Aboriginal film-makers, are just feeding into a white superiority mindset. In my own experience of editing, I recall interviewing Aboriginal

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39. New South Wales State Parliament Legislative Council on December 4 2003, during the debate on the establishment of the Natural Resource Commission and the Catchment Management Authorities (from Hansard).
40. Gill 1987.

actor Pauline McLeod, who stated that Aboriginal storytelling is equally relevant for children and for adult audiences. The part of her interview I left on the cutting room floor has her saying 'if white people really knew Aboriginal people they would learn to love us and see us as human beings'. My director, who was Torres Strait Islander, thought the statement was very effective and represented how McLeod felt and that it would appeal to white audiences. I on the other hand left the statement out because I thought it was a ineffectual example of blackfella's begging for white approval of their worthiness, which is something I hoped we had moved beyond, yet it is a relatively common thing to hear Aboriginal people saying. For example, an episode of *Art Review* was concluded by Bob Maza, a famous Aboriginal actor saying 'Aboriginal people just wanted to be equal with whites'.[41] Fed up with hearing this sort of statement on air I eventually wrote to *Art Review* asking the producer 'which white person did she think Maza was hoping to be equal to?' My letter went on to say that I thought it was particularly patronising of the producer to use such a clichéd statement as this to end the segment, particularly since there were probably stronger statements that could have been used. The producer was Aboriginal, and someone I had worked with in the past. However, it is somewhat unfair to continually blame producers for some of the things Aborigines people say in front of the camera, especially when the Aboriginal talent/subject, is imagining his/her audience, and is trying to reach that audience.

Nakedness was another indication of Aboriginal people as the 'sub-human' creatures of the *noble savage* kind. It was an important feature for artists and writers to record. John Hawksworth wrote in 1773 'All inhabitants that we saw were stark naked, they did not appear to be numerous nor to live in societies, but like the other animals were scattered along the coast and in the woods'.[42] Nakedness of black and brown bodies seemingly closed off from sexual voyeurism. Nakedness is tolerable if discussed in a cultural context but somewhat unscrupulous if discussed openly in a sexual context, since observers ought never be openly attracted to black bodies and risk admissions of their own desires. For example, when photographer Kolodny removed the tops of Aboriginal women's dresses to reveal their breasts, Kolodny justified it was simply to accentuate their racial differences.[43] Likewise Leni Riefenstahl, who strongly argued her films had not been the visual-architect of Nazi aesthetics, also denied her erotic voyeurism of black nakedness when she portrayed Nubian men of Africa.[44]

From the early 18th century the issue of skin colour has shifted between the *noble* and *savage* poles. Where black-skinned Melanesian was considered more *savage* than brown-skinned Polynesian, in addition to the civil rights movement and the rise of the Black Panther movement of the 1960s, which espoused slogans of 'black is beautiful', black skin has become *nobler*, particularly in Australia, even though blackness is not as visible in Australia as it is in the United States or United Kingdom. White or fair-skinned Aborigines throughout Australian history have suffered the difficulty of issues

41. Bob Maza, in an interview with Susan Coombs, producer for *Art Review* program, ABC TV, 1993.
42. J Hawkesworth, *An account of the voyages undertaken by the order of his present majesty for making discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, London, 1773, cited in Gibson 1984: 34.
43. Peterson 1985: 176.
44. Adam 1995: 20.

relating to their level of authenticity, or fears of being 'stolen' away from their natural families, or live with the stigma that they are the children of a white parent who disowned them or the product of sexual abuse. Fair skinned blacks are the *savage* bastards of the Aboriginal community who are most likely to be associated with treachery and inauthenticity. Such is the case for Tasmanian Aborigines accused of not being Aboriginal enough, because they have blonde hair and blue eyes.[45] While it was the 'full-blood' Aborigine who was regarded as treacherous on the frontiers of settlement, the 'mixed-race' Aborigines later took on this role, the more it was thought that the 'full-blood' blacks were becoming extinct. At the turn of the 19th century, colonists began romanticising the black-skinned Aborigines as the pure and authentic *noble* bushman, and 'hybrids' carried the bad in both white and black races.[46] Aborigines as the main group in Australian society with black skin, have a history of being divided into caste systems of blackness and brownness.

Where the camera's lens confines people with black skin to a traditional cultural or environmental context, rarely do we see them in kitchens, or in public spaces like coffee shops and supermarkets, going to work in their offices or in the ordinariness of the day. Aboriginal people with fairer coloured skin or brown skin on the other hand are not restricted to these same environments, but it is unusual to see brown-skinned people in a non-political or cultural context. Black people or brown people supposedly do not occupy the same public sphere as white people. This is why I made my film *Oceans Apart* (1991). In this film, I place Aboriginal women in the public sphere, in railway stations, in classrooms, sipping tea in the dining room. The film was a response to a comment I heard from someone who said that where she lived in Bondi she never saw an Aboriginal person. I imagined that her oversight was because she had been unused to recognising what an Aboriginal person looked like outside a stereotypical visual context.

People with black skins are often not from an English speaking background. Those with brown or fairer skins often are. Black skin people are seen with narration or subtitles. Brown or fairer skins are sometimes seen as subtitled, but they are seen to have a slightly better command of the English language. Non-Aboriginal people are less likely to hear or distinguish an Aboriginal accent. They are more able to listen to an American accent than an Aboriginal accent. Aboriginal people are able to tell where one comes from even if they are speaking Aboriginal English.[47] In any case, it is still difficult for non-Aborigines to listen or appreciate the authority of an Aboriginal voice; in much the same way female broadcasters try to give authority to their voices by sounding more like men. As someone who has worked in radio, and with music, I have always found the tone of the male Aboriginal voice generally softer than white men's voices that boom on the television screen and radio, and therefore less demanding.

45. Mansell 2002: 2.
46. Keen 1988: 197.
47. There are different accents on different vowels or the drawl that a speaker has. For example, in the film *Blackfellas* by James Ricketson, whites may pronounce 'blackfellas' with the 'e' as one uses it in 'egg'. Other whites may say 'blackfellows', whereas the Aboriginal actors in the film have a different emphasis on the 'e' and say 'blackfullas', pronouncing the 'u' as one would use it in 'cup'.

Triumphing over the stereotype of Aborigine as black naked brutes is perhaps a long way off. Nevertheless I hope that what can be achieved in the long term is that stories about Aborigines can be made personally, honestly and confidently in spite of the ignorant blathering from folks like Oldfield, Hanson and many others in the public domain. We need to continue to tell our stories while being mindful of not trying to waste our energies presenting ourselves as perfect human beings worthy of white acceptance.

Torn between two cultures

Another enduring theme in *noble savage* literature is the idea of the tortured *savage* torn between two cultures. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) all depicted 'modern men' (white men) struggling to learn humility and tolerance for his fellow but outcast (*savage*) 'brother'. The tortured *savage* is an anti-hero but befriends white men who ultimately betray or try to save or convert him, the *savage* always driven to extreme measures usually ending in his/her demise. This classic dramatic format from 18th century literature continues to be used in many films about Aborigines, who are always 'torn' between two cultures and loyalties. In William Thomas Moncrieff's 1831 operatic three act drama tragedy *Oh Van Dieman's Land!* an Aboriginal woman, Kangaree, is torn between choosing the love of a white man over the love of a black man. A century and a half later, Aboriginal characters in feature films like Bruce Beresford's *Fringe dwellers* (1986), Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955), Fred Schepesi's *Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978), James Rickertson's *Blackfellas* and Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971) are all films that highlight Aboriginal characters who are torn between cultures.

The notion of Aborigines being 'torn' between cultures acts as the explanation for the demise of Aboriginal characters, rather than a situation where the whites themselves take an active role in the Aborigines' 'inevitable doom'. Rather than accept responsibility, it is easier to blame blacks for being lost between two worlds. Furthermore, this is problematic for blacks only: it is irrelevant to whites. Whites theoretically do not move between two worlds, but are seen to be capable of accommodating and integrating their pasts and futures, good and evil, positives and negatives without dying or losing their values, identity and lives. Whites think themselves capable of living within a multicultural society while maintaining their whiteness. It is only non-whites who supposedly do not know how to do this. Only Aborigines are supposedly traumatised and diminished by integration, interaction and assimilation. If they do accommodate and integrate different cultures successfully, then they are not authentically Aboriginal. They become polluted or contaminated. Aboriginality when polluted dies, and so does the Aboriginal character or signifier in these plays and films. One example of non-fiction films focusing on the 'two worlds' theme is Curtis Levy's *Sons of Namatjira* (1975).

Doomed to extinction

While Desiderius Erasmus wrote of the 'happiness of the simpleton and blockhead for they are devoid of knowledge of their own death' as early as the 16th century,[48] Aus-

48. cited in Reynolds 1987.

tralian writers in the 19th century thought Aboriginal people were doomed to extinction. As Henry Reynolds points out, writers of that time used an abundance of metaphors to describe Aboriginal people as variously fading away, fading out, decaying, slipping from life's platform, melting away like the snow from the mountains at the approach of spring, perishing as does the autumnal grass before a bush fire. Reflective of Keith Windschuttle's extravagant claims that more Aborigines were killed by 'natural causes' than warfare, Herman Merivale argued in 1839 that the declining Aboriginal population was not due to warfare, spirits, new epidemics or the destruction of game. There were 'deeper and more mysterious causes at work; the mere contact of Europeans is fatal to him in some unknown manner'.[49] For it is remarkable that people like Windschuttle and Merrivale should find it more uplifting if Aborigines are killed by disease or prostitution than musket fire, is surely absurd if not offensive. Herman Merivale's view that the disappearance of blacks (or black skin) is mysteriously echoed in the 1993 documentary *Black Man's House*. Steven Thomas' film focuses on a group of contemporary Tasmanian Aborigines searching for their ancestors' graves so that they could be finally put to rest in a culturally appropriate manner, at the Wybalenna cemetery. When this occasion takes place, it is perhaps the most uplifting and high-spirited moment of the film. For the rest of the film Tasmanian Aborigines are presented as morbid people whose skin-colour is not the same as that of their ancestors. The fiery and political savvy of well-known fair-skinned Tasmanian Aborigines like Jimmy Everett (who is in the film) is notably missing. This is a film where Thomas also uses the fair skin of the people in the film to his advantage, making a connection to white audiences. The music described as a funeral dirge is continuous, and stories of the Aborigines are juxtaposed against a repetitious graphic of Benjamin Dutterau's 19th century painting of the 'Conciliator' of George Augustus Robinson shaking hands with the natives at Wybalena in 1840. Each time the graphic appears the camera zooms further and further into the clasping black/white handshake. The black/white handshake, that I mentioned earlier, has become a very powerful symbol in the Reconciliation movement, but nonetheless, represents unwritten negotiations between black and white men or 'mates' only. *Black Man's Houses* took out the award for best documentary at the Sydney and Melbourne Film Festivals. Also nominated for best documentary at the Australian Film Institute Awards in 1997 was Matthew Kelly's *Last of the Nomads* (1997) told in the classic style of Daisy Bates's *Passing of the Aborigines*.[50] This film follows five white men led by an Aboriginal 'friend' into the then uncharted western Gibson Desert to locate two elderly members of the Mandildjara tribe, Warri and Yatungka, who of course eventually die after coming into contact with white society.

Reflective of their anthropological obsessions with preserving the culture from extinction and doom, a wave of attention focussing on Aboriginal research in the northern and central Australia has dominated. This has made my own research for Aboriginal film and television making in the southern and eastern regions more difficult. Apart from Tracy Moffatt, there is very little written on the other 40 or so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders that have been making television programs in the southern and eastern states, particularly after Eric Michaels' research became widely

49. Reynolds 1987: 122.
50. Bates 1938.

recognised in film and academic circles. This is perhaps why I have found the work by Faye Ginsburg the most innovative, especially in her article 'Stations identification' where she points out that Aboriginal people at the ABC were producing more Aboriginal documentaries per year than any other production house but had virtually no recognition outside Australia, despite the quality of their work. In this Ginsburg asks us to 'bear consideration in terms of form, substance and reception as a precedent-setting model for indigenous people as their concerns in the televisual imaginary of the nation state and beyond'.[51]

Film-making that is obsessed with maintaining and recording traditional culture dominates the number of films made about Aboriginal people. Finding material on southern and eastern Aboriginal film-making is much more difficult than locating films or research material on Aborigines living in central or northern Australia. For example, the audiovisual archives in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) are one of the world's most recognised collectors of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film and video with just over 1623 items, but these mostly focus on the remote regions of Australia or films that have been produced by scholars. So for anyone conducting research on Aboriginal television produced by and about Aborigines living in urban communities, AIATSIS would not be the best option, although it ought to be since it is a very costly process to purchase archives from broadcasters.[52] However, AIATSIS is not an isolated case. The archives at *Film Australia*, which is primarily a production house, stores over 178 films currently catalogued as 'Indigenous films' (which include 44 films on Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands). Yet 82 of the 134 films feature central and northern Australia, and the remaining 52 films are divided into biographies or other films that are non-specific to location and/or feature urban Aboriginal life.

Of the 1819 items catalogued in Mura at AIATSIS, there are only 10 that were produced by the Aboriginal producers at the ABC. Although the ABC archives holds over more than 19,500 items on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and SBS holds over 2000 items, AIATSIS only holds one documentary program that has been produced by the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) and three programs from the *Blood Brothers* series that screened on SBS TV. Therefore, the majority of the ABC programs are produced by white film-makers and journalists such as news and current affair programs such as *Four Corners* and *Chequerboard* that have been produced by white film-makers and journalists. Nevertheless, AIATSIS holds 26 copies of the ATSIC funded *Aboriginal Australia* program, produced by Aboriginal producers Trevor Ellis and Karla Vista at the National Recording Studio in Canberra. Screensound Australia on the other hand boasts an Indigenous catalogue of 12,000 items, although more than two thirds of these are stories about Aborigines living in remote regions. They hold ten series of *ICAM* (Indigenous Cultural Magazine programs) from 1996 to 2001, produced by the Indigenous Programs Unit at SBS, and made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film-makers. *Screensound* is currently revising their own access programs and sensitive moral and legal copyright issues with Aboriginal people from the community.

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51. Ginsburg 1993: 92.
52. AIATSIS has an agreement with ABC archives via an access program to transfer or distribute copies of ABC programs for previews and/or possession.

Other series produced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teams in the APUs at the ABC and SBS were *Blackout 1-7, First in Line, ICAM, Kam Yarn, Messagestick, Storytellers of the Pacific, Living Black* and *Songlines. Blackout* ran for seven years, producing over 60 episodes. *First in Line* produced over 22 programs for SBS. The *ICAM* series on SBS ran from 1996-2002. *Kam Yarn* ran two seasons from 1994-5, other mini-series like *Songlines* ran nine episodes, and the *Storytellers of the Pacific* in 1995 was a four one-hour international documentary series. In addition to this, the *Many Nations One People* series in 2001 ran eight episodes, and SBS commenced its first season of the dynamic *Living Black* program in April 2003. *Messagestick,* which began in 1999, continues to produce and air between 12 and 33 programs per year and operate an online service called by the same name that has regular visitors to their website totalling 40,000 people, many of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in remote and urban centers.

Given that the Indigenous units at the ABC and SBS use Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander producers and directors, one can see that there are literally hundreds of films and videos being produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living and working in film and television in the southern and eastern states. And what is more interesting is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film-makers in the southern and eastern states are less concerned about making films that are about preserving and recording a 'dying' culture, but are about social, historical and political injustices. It is as if the dominant stories about Aborigines in the north are *nobler* stories, about a race that is doomed to extinction, while stories about Aborigines in the southeast are stories about Aborigines who are *savage* and belligerent.

In terms of reading material, the vast majority of the 94 articles catalogued by AIATSIS under the heading 'Aboriginal television' focus mainly on Aboriginal television in central Australia, even though the majority of programs are produced by urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film-makers working for mainstream television.[53] Of the total number of articles listed in the Murdoch Reading Room bibliography on Aboriginal television,[54] the overwhelming majority of articles emphasise a focus on community television in remote northern and central Australia. Clearly, resources on Aboriginal or television making in the southern and eastern states are limited, even though the number of films and film-makers in urban centres in constant production is to some extent higher than the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people making films in the remote areas. So one wonders what scholars are writing about and more precisely what they are not writing about and why this should be the case.

53. I refer to works by Eric Michaels, Tony Dowmunt, Mary Venner, Christina Spurgeon, Phillip Batty, Tom O'Regan and Helen Molnar. Those who do not specifically write about remote television usually write about individual Aboriginal film-makers, who are usually the same people such as Tracy Moffatt, Michael Riley, Ivan Sen or Rachel Perkins, and to a lesser degree Darlene Johnson, Ann Pratten, Marcia Langton, Karen Jennings, Albert Moran, Catherine Summerhayes and Anne Kaplan. Those who specifically write about urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander television are Faye Ginsburg, Alan McKee, John Hartley, Rachel Perkins, Jackie Urla, Megan McCullough and Lester Bostock, most of whom are Aboriginal film-makers or North American academics.

54. http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/oztv/bibtv.htm

Conclusion

When I began this research, I set out to review some of the most popular misconceptions and preconceptions of Aboriginal film and television making. I was concerned about the *noble* focus on the 'real' Aborigines in northern and central Australia. I was concerned that there were too many *noble* expectations on Aboriginal film and television makers to prove that they could make different or better films about Aborigines than white film-makers. Unrealistic expectations were being placed on them to prove that Aboriginal people supposedly possess 'natural' ability to not only make films, but that they could communicate to white audiences a more accurate, political and unbiased, homogeneous view of Aborigines. I was concerned about the demands for Aborigines to prove these 'natural' abilities to audiences, broadcasters, political commentators, academics, social and cultural theorists and art critics in their 'natural' propensity to be able to represent their entire culture, community, history and culture in any given film or program. There seemed to be an unstated expectation that the moment Aborigines take control of their image they will be doing *nobler* things with it. However, I am yet to be convinced.

I am also concerned about the opinion that television today is better than television in the past, or that it is going to get better. One only needs to look back at the politically motivated magazine programs in the 1960s and 1970s that covered issues from land rights to anti-uranium mining to Aboriginal citizenship and compare them to the weekly magazine television programs about Aborigines on television today. Programs such as the ABC's *Countrywide, Monday Conference, This Day Tonight, A Big Country, Weekend Magazine, Four Corners* and *Chequerboard* tried to prick the comfortable Australian consciousness at the time. Journalism at that time did not sustain the view of Australia as the lucky country, but found poverty, loneliness, neurosis, corruption, mental and physical suffering and other social problems just below the surface of everyday life,[55] and subsequently covered many pro-Aboriginal programs, focusing on Aboriginal land rights, protest movements and Aboriginal civil liberties. To say that television is getting better and that the political messages from the Aboriginal community are more frequent is somewhat erroneous. There are far less collaborative works, which were relatively fashionable in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Perhaps a honeymoon period for independent Aboriginal documentary filmmaking emerged from the Sydney Film-makers Co-op, whereby many celebrated documentary film-makers entered into successful and memorable collaborations with Aboriginal people, producing perhaps the most outstanding films in Aboriginal film-making history: films like *My Survival as an Aborigine, Lousy Little Sixpence, Munda Nyuringu, Couldn't Be Fairer, Ningla A Na, Wrong Side of the Road, On Sacred Ground, State of Shock* and *Dirt Cheap*. These are films that are perhaps more politically confronting than say David Batty's *Bush Mechanics* series (2001) or Imparja Television's *Nganampa Anwernekenhe* series (2000).

Whether one makes an Aboriginal story, person or issue *noble* or *savage* in its representation, it is in one way or another a pendulum swing from one opposite pole to another, neglecting all shades and perspectives in the course of Aboriginal self-representation. It denies opportunity for further honest and rigorous debate between others

55. A Moran 1989.

and us, and new ways of imagining and exploring ourselves. But instead of new ways of seeing ourselves and debating new issues, what has emerged after 45 years of television and three decades of self-determination has been an increasing interest in formalising and legalising the way film and television makers ought to make films about Aborigines. The recent surge of legal protocols and guidelines that require film-makers to demonstrate their 'cultural respect' or to learn how to sufficiently read 'Aboriginal body language' will,[56] I suspect, invite further restrictions not only for white film-makers, but Aboriginal film-makers themselves in the future.[57]

I am mostly concerned that the outcome of too many rigorous ethical protocols and cultural guidelines which are meant to protect Aboriginal 'moral fitness and standards' run the risk of manipulating film-makers to produce sanitised versions of Aboriginal culture, thus distorting the very culture they purport to protect.[58] We have swapped the *savage* for the *noble* in a way that is neither true nor useful. What we are perhaps witnessing is a *savage* backlash to years of *noblising* Aborigines as untouchable subjects, undeserving of justice or open debate. I am most worried about what the future may bring in Aboriginal film and television making, and all its possibilities. This includes the prospect that film-makers may have less room to create and say new things, and they may become discouraged from asking the hard questions that need answering simply because we still want Aborigines to be *noble savages*, and we lack the courage to challenge each other and ourselves.

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56. Bostock 1997.
57. Peters-Little 2002: 2.
58. For example, in Bostock's 1997 guidelines it states that Aborigines from New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania are Kooris, and Aborigines from Queensland are Murris. These are white boundaries, and there are Aboriginal tribes in NSW who are also traditionally Murris.

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