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Shades of Indigenous Belonging in *Samson & Delilah*

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INTRODUCTION

Warwick Thornton's 2009 film *Samson & Delilah* was surprisingly untimely on a number of levels. In terms of its cinematic approach, it is a film that provokes a sense of untimeliness, as it seems *out of step* with other contemporary Australian films. This applies firstly in terms of the way in which the film consciously uses time in its structure—for example in the way it uses a cyclical motif to reinforce the specific way in which time impacts on the main characters' everyday lives, while at the same time using this cyclical motif to provide humour and light relief. Secondly, the film can be seen as

untimely in the sense that it is firmly grounded in the *present*, which is unusual for a film set in outback Australia and one that focuses on an Indigenous story. *Samson & Delilah* is a contemporary story that does not displace its Indigenous characters by assigning them, and their connection to country, to history. Rather, the film situates its characters (and their struggles) very firmly in the context of country and of contemporary struggles, thereby ironically creating a sense of untimeliness. At the same time however, this means that in subtle ways, the film creates a sense of place, and by extension a sense of belonging (for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences) that works on two different levels: inside the film for its characters, and outside the film for its audience. None of this means that the film is out of step with history, but rather that it is out of step with Australian film history, in which there has been a tendency to position Indigenous Australians in one of two main paradigms: either as 'noble savages' living in harmony with and on the land, or as lost and hopeless city dwellers, divorced from their culture. Neither of these paradigms allows for the many different experiences of belonging which Indigenous Australian peoples inhabit.

For the purposes of this paper, we wish to consider the notion of belonging as being more than feeling at home in a place. Rather, our use of the term includes subverting conventional belonging narratives about the national imaginary—which are built on repressing colonial violence—so that Indigenous experiences of belonging are not assimilated or appropriated by Western frameworks and expectations, but are represented *on their own terms*. Although there have been notable exceptions within these paradigms—for example, films such as *Beneath Clouds* (Sen) or *The Tracker* (De Heer), both of which resist assimilation and appropriation to some extent—the commercial reception of such films has never been as successful as films that stay more firmly within the conventional paradigm, such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce) or

Australia (Luhrman). Thus, for a film that can be seen as untimely in these various ways, *Samson & Delilah*'s reception has been interesting. Pre-release buzz and very favourable reviews (Pomeranz) ensured that it had a strong opening week, and it ultimately grossed AU\$3.17 million in its 20-week Australian run (Swift). The reviews were partly based on the film winning the *Camera d'Or* at Cannes, and the film went on to win the awards for Best New Director and Best Film at the Australian Film Institute Awards (Price).

This paper will explore the sense of belonging that *Samson & Delilah* creates, both for its characters and its audience. We will argue that its critical and commercial success can largely be attributed to precisely that sense of belonging, and potential non-Indigenous re-reading of belonging, which not only ensures the film's sense of realness, (despite its being very carefully crafted and structured), but also creates a contemporary sense of Indigenous belonging, that is grounded and falls outside of the usual cinematic paradigms.

TIME AND SPACE IN SAMSON & DELILAH

Time is one of the central organising principles in *Samson & Delilah*, and it works on different levels and serves different functions, some of which relate to the film's pace and the way it builds up the drama at its centre, while others are more related to external factors and how the film situates *itself* in time. The latter has more to do with the film's position in Australian cinema history and contemporary context, and the intervention it creates in that respect. For now however, we will concentrate on the use of time in the film itself. As Therese Davis notes:

Thornton experiments with different forms of cyclical time to create episodic structures for exploring various ways in which Aboriginal people negotiate the reality of having to live between two worlds, two sets of law and cultural knowledge...time isn't something that simply passes passively or chronologically. His films make qualities of time palpable, allowing

us to feel how time behaves in active ways and experience its complex patterns.

There are a number of examples of this 'active' and 'complex' time throughout the film, right from the opening scenes where Samson wakes up three times in a row, with variations that are ever so slight. Similarly, the public phone rings again, and again, and again, and Delilah retreats into the community's shared four-wheel drive every night. In combination with the film's use of long takes and its overall slow pace, it would be easy to conclude that it is a typical art house film on a superficial level. For example, Felicity Collins states that 'Thornton adopted the measured realism of art house drama to reframe media images of "bare life" and "lateral violence" in Central Australia' (73). The issue here is not so much the label 'art house drama' itself, but rather its connotations and how that label positions the film, for it diminishes what the film is trying to achieve to some extent, by forcing it into an externally imposed framework. It is true that 'in contrast to films where drama and meaning are constructed through chains of cause-and-effect relations, *Samson & Delilah* builds its tensions through the small changes that occur in the film's repetitions of the teenagers' daily actions' (Davis 10). However, it does this not to use an 'interesting' time structure for the sake of impressing an art house cinema audience, but rather it uses what Davis calls a 'quiet approach' to achieve a 'powerful sense of truthfulness.' In Thornton's words, 'I wanted to show two incredibly beautiful children who have fought all their lives just to breathe...I wanted to show that to Central Australia, and if the rest of Australia or the world get involved that's fantastic' (qtd. in Collins 73). Thus, in combination with a sense of quiet communication (in the form of visual and gestural, rather than oral communication), time is used very carefully to achieve a sense of honesty and 'authenticity' about contemporary life and struggles in Central Australia—which is characterised by a slow, repetitive pace, by random violence, and by a sense of hopelessness but at the same time is presented as a place of

profound humanity, haunting beauty, humour, love and thus potential hope.

It is the latter set of characteristics that we do not see on the evening news about Indigenous communities (Hartley and McKee), but it is that potential that *Samson & Delilah* draws attention to, and which can be seen as a key part of a post-apology reconciliation process,ⁱ and central to a contemporary sense of Indigenous belonging. In other words, it is a film that constructs its story unapologetically from an Indigenous point of view. According to Ellie Rennie, 'one of the film's great achievements is that it shows Australia through the eyes of remote people. And with not one useless or insincere word,' again drawing attention to a sense of honesty, sincerity and realness that in turn creates a strong sense of belonging. Similarly, Davis argues that 'Thornton's distinctive community-based realism conveys a deep sense of truthfulness based on the art of bringing people close to the real.' Together, time and place are central to the highly structured way in which the film achieves this.

The realness, sincerity, and 'authenticity' are not simply there to entertain, however. There is a rather more ambitious agenda behind this, which relates to personalisation, audience identification, and most of all emotional investment. In Thornton's words, *Samson & Delilah* 'was designed for Central Australia because we do write these kids off there...Elders in Aboriginal communities...are writing these kids off as well' (qtd. in Collins 73). The film's unwritten agenda can thus be seen as attempting to make people care, by creating and then drawing on an emotional investment in a place and the people who occupy that place, which simultaneously creates a sense of belonging. To care about someone or something requires emotional involvement, which in turn is more likely to lead to a change in behaviour or attitude. In short, engaging in the reconciliation process requires one to *care* and to empathise, which is very different from 'black armband'ⁱⁱ-type denial or self-blaming

victimhood in an abstract sense. In addition, it requires a sense of familiarity, and by extension, belonging. With Collins then, we argue that cinema may be able to 'reframe a certain field of perceptible reality already established by archival, publicity and news images' (66), by inviting an emotional response to something hitherto characterised by detachment. In other words, the news footage and stories about violence and abuse (of all varieties) in remote Indigenous communities form the only entry point or glimpse into life in those communities for many Australians, and as Collins argues:

The flow of media images of "bare life" in remote Aboriginal communities evokes regular pinpricks of shock, shame and moral outrage; but at the same time media temporality exhausts the initial shock of these images, normalizing the very violence and suffering that activist-intellectuals and policy makers seek to ameliorate. Cinema, under these circumstances, has the capacity to narrativize and reframe media images, and to draw a broader constituency into an anti-colonial response. (66)

Samson and Delilah not only show, but make us *feel* that 'bare life' in their community is not quite as bare as first imagined, and that even if it is bare in some respects, there is a palpable sense of admirable resilience at the same time. Moreover, the film invokes a richness and beauty that makes the accompanying violence and deprivation all the more difficult to swallow. In short, the film makes the audience *care* on an emotional level, and therefore experience a sense of belonging to a previously alien place. The audience encounters alternative dialogues about place and feeling at home. It is difficult to pinpoint specific examples of this, as it applies to the overall way the film frames its characters in country. In the act of watching the film, the viewer participates in remaking their own understanding of country and nationhood, thereby potentially re-shaping their own sense of belonging. As Collins argues, 'by reframing "bare lives" as vulnerable and grievable lives, the

film provokes an ethical response that has been numbed by the hyperbolic flow of media images, government reports and expert debate' (74). She goes on to suggest that this explains the film's success as a media and cinematic event. The ethical response she refers to can only be provoked by an emotional response, for as Luhmann notes, 'emotions are our most basic moral reactions. We feel disgust; we feel rage; we feel joy; we feel these responses to the way others behave and events unfold. That insight makes our politics physical and fundamental' (355). By evoking emotions, albeit in a highly structured way (indeed, perhaps because of this structuring), *Samson & Delilah* makes a big contribution to what Collins-Gearing identifies as 'non-Indigenous Australia's emerging awareness of what has previously been wasted, discarded and positioned as valueless.' The emotion comes from the invitation to the audience to identify with the characters' struggles including elements of those struggles (such as 'living rough' and substance abuse) that are familiar from the mainstream media but who report on this in highly detached ways. Collins-Gearing argues that the film invites (or perhaps forces) involvement from both white and Indigenous communities in the struggles of Samson and Delilah. In her words, '*Samson & Delilah* is a dialogical cultural representation: it forces a space where the mainstream doesn't just critique the Aborigine, but their own identity and involvement in the construction of that critique.' Again, it requires some degree of emotional investment to critique, or even simply to reflect on, one's own identity, and one's reasons for critiquing others. The reward for this type of emotional investment is a sense of belonging, not in the conventional understanding of the term but as a redefined, at times uneasy, experience.

It is this process of reflection that *Samson & Delilah* allows for, or perhaps aims for, by initially delivering an emotional blow. The fact that this is done in a highly structured and aestheticised way (as opposed to a raw reality TV type of aesthetic, for example) must

be weighed up against the potential benefits of provoking such emotional investment. Thus, Susan Sontag's warning about 'aestheticised suffering for the purposes of satisfying a consumer demand' (qtd. in Collins 68) does not apply to *Samson & Delilah* in our opinion, because it is not the suffering that is aestheticised, but rather the beauty amongst the struggle, exemplified by Samson's dance under the street light, watched by a mesmerised Delilah. By the time Delilah gets hit by a car, the love between them, established through the cycles of temporal repetition, has ensured that we are not only emotionally involved, but indeed emotionally drained. The conclusion ultimately delivers hope and thus provides a 'pay-off' for the audience; a reward for emotion invested. This may in turn invoke a political response, even if it is merely an attitudinal shift. This response can be seen as resulting from the difference between an ephemeral tourist version of empathy, and the empathy that evolves from feeling a deeper sense of belonging, and therefore provoking a more profound ethical response.

Through its use of cyclical time, the temporality in the film thus ensures a sense of realness, because it represents not only the slow movement of time, and its repetitiveness in remote Indigenous communities, but it is also used as a form of silent communication that feels 'authentic' on an emotional level. Temporality is even used as an instrument to invoke humour that feels culturally grounded in a place, and thus honest. Where colonial representations of Indigenous characters have often been characterised by infantilised images (Hogan) and especially sounds, *Samson & Delilah* uses time and silence to communicate on a deeply emotional level. Both time (as in 'time is money') and sound (as in the 'civilised' spoken word) have long occupied privileged positions in colonial cultural frameworks. However, emotions, and the way they are expressed, are not universal but rather culturally grounded (Musharbash). *Samson & Delilah* invokes an emotional response by

building an emotional arc between its main characters through slow cycles of time and non-verbal communication. In this way, the film can be seen as untimely in its unapologetic and uncompromising embracement of *contemporary* Indigenous cultural values and practices, and can thus be seen as a profoundly postcolonial text. It is interesting, and decidedly untimely, for an Australian film to adopt such a decolonised position, and it is even more interesting that it is precisely this untimeliness that has provoked such an emotional response and such popularity from an audience well beyond the Indigenous one it primarily addresses (Khorana). In this way, it can also be seen as a very generous film in that it invites audiences (beyond Indigenous audiences) to develop a sense of belonging.

BEYOND BINARY FRAMEWORKS OF INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION

As noted above, *Samson & Delilah* can be seen as a postcolonial text, in the sense that it does not use colonial frameworks of representation, and thus as an untimely film in the context of Australian cinema. This is especially so if we compare it to its contemporary blockbuster *Australia*, which, for all its postmodern pastiche, is ultimately firmly grounded in colonial representations of Indigeneity. *Australia* thus appeals to a tourist identification with Australia, rather than a sense of belonging. As Hogan notes, 'the film reiterates certain longstanding discourses of Australian national identity... [and] enacts the reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and offers symbolic absolution for the violence of colonialism...*Australia* is an exercise in national wish fulfillment' (63). However, we could even question whether such wish fulfillment has any traction, resonance or even interest anywhere beyond the commodified context for which it is produced and in which it is received. In other words, *Australia* provokes a sense of complacency and

ensures non-engagement beyond the time in the cinema, as it relieves the audience of the need for an ethical response. As Collins rightly argues, 'Luhmann's hyperbolic pastiche of film genres and styles commodifies the history of the Stolen Generations. In this view, the sensory immersion of the spectator in computer-generated storybook images aesthet-icises frontier violence, evoking pathos rather than sustained ethical response' (71). As discussed, *Samson & Delilah* is far more ambitious than that, which makes it untimely in its departure from colonial binary frameworks of representation (to which *Australia* stays very much faithful). This is partly due to the intended audience; in the commercial context of contemporary cinema, there is a big difference between addressing the largest possible audience (as *Australia* does) and primarily addressing the Indigenous community in Central Australia (as *Samson & Delilah* does). However, the tourist gaze invoked by films like *Australia* is firmly grounded in a long history of representations of Indigenous characters, which ultimately have profound consequences for those being represented, and their sense of belonging in the wider Australian context. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll note, 'the construction of authentic Aboriginality as a remnant to be "experienced" as part of cultural tourism in remote Australia [in the form of cinema in this case] has worked for decades to efface many battles over ownership and the terms of invasion, occupation and settlement in this place that historically took place' (157). The very different 'authenticity' that *Samson & Delilah* creates is therefore untimely and has the capacity to jolt the audience out of complacency; to provoke the ethical response required for honest reconciliation. It is precisely this untimeliness, and the sense of belonging it provokes, that makes it a postcolonial film with a strong emphasis on 'post.'

Representation is central to postcolonial theory and Ashcroft clearly outlines what has

become a dominant way of thinking about representation in postcolonial studies:

Cultural identity does not exist outside representation. But the transformative nature of cultural identity leads directly to the transformation of those strategies by which it is represented. These strategies have invariably been the very ones used by the coloniser to position the colonised as marginal and inferior, but their appropriation has been ubiquitous in the struggle by colonised peoples to empower themselves. This suggests that “resistance” can be truly effective, that is, that it can avoid simply replacing one tyranny with another, only when it creates rather than simply defends. Post-colonial writing hinges on the act of engagement which takes the dominant language and uses it to express the most deeply felt issues of post-colonial social experience. (5)

The concept underlying this process of identification is that of agency. Within this line of thinking, agency is recognised in the colonised, which allows for a recovery of history from the perspective of the colonised, which is then seen as liberating and indeed empowering. Furthermore, there is an implication that the coloniser’s tools are subverted and come back to haunt them (as discussed in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back*), which is exemplified in *Samson & Delilah* by the untimely use of cinematic tools, and also by the exposure of non-Indigenous misuse and misappropriation of Indigenous artwork. Samson’s desire to play the electric guitar to express himself, or Delilah’s act of hanging up the Christian cross when she goes home to her mother’s country also exemplify Ashcroft’s postcolonial ‘engagement.’ Porsanger argues that ‘the quest for Indigenous methodologies has often been interpreted by the academic world as a political gesture on the part of Indigenous peoples in their struggle for self-determination.’ The appropriation of cinematic tools to tell an Indigenous story in *Samson & Delilah*, and thereby claim or declare a sense of

belonging, can be seen as an important moment in that struggle.

According to Iseke-Barnes, ‘telling and retelling stories, reclaiming the past, and providing testimony to the past are all ways that Indigenous peoples are engaging the process of recovering from a colonial past’ (213). Thus, some of these stories and other forms of representation do specifically address the coloniser, and some of them are even resistant. However, those that do not explicitly address the coloniser (either in terms of language or content) are often simply marginalised as not conforming to the coloniser’s expectation of what constitutes Indigenous knowledge worth engaging with. In Bhabra’s words, ‘at present, the only way into debates around belonging and identity for those “others” who are not acknowledged as “universal” is by standing on “their” traditions or in the new differences they can make from their locations—their voice is all about adding content, or colour, to what is already known, not about *refiguring the parameters of what is known*’ (38). We would argue that what defines *Samson & Delilah* is that it does precisely that: it reconfigures the parameters of what is known, and therefore potentially jolts its audiences (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) into action. However, it can only achieve this *because* it speaks from an honest and ‘authentic’ Indigenous position, from a position that belongs. This is much more ambitious and powerful than simply ‘reclaiming Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom that have been devalued or suppressed’ (Thaman 2). *Samson & Delilah* is not about reclaiming, but rather about drawing attention to *what is*, which in turn does not deny colonial dispossession and appropriation. In short, it can be seen as a postcolonial film, grounded in an Indigenous sense of belonging, but inclusive at the same time.

In recognition of the problematic implications of the term ‘postcolonial,’ and in an attempt to ‘name what is so invisible to contemporary “white” majority societies: the racialised nature of power and privilege’ (Haggis

50), Aileen Moreton-Robinson has usefully coined the term ‘postcolonising,’ rather than the more final ‘postcolonial nation,’ ‘to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions us as belonging but not belonging’ (38). This is attractive because ‘postcoloniality’ is seen here as a continuing process, in which different subjects occupy very different positions, particularly in Indigenous/white settler societies such as Australia. The term ‘postcolonising,’ then, allows for the important recognition that ‘Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are situated in relation to (post)colonisation in radically different ways—ways that cannot be made into sameness’ (Moreton-Robinson 30). Nor should they be, for resisting the impulse to create sameness (as opposed to equity) can help illuminate the powerful forces that try to create sameness, as part of a restricting but politically dominant form of nation building. If used in Moreton-Robinson’s conceptualisation, the term ‘postcolonising’ inherently resists unifying discourses that sometimes underlie the term postcolonial. Moreover, it actually allows us to see difference as part of an ongoing, dynamic, and potentially productive field of power relations, rather than something that signifies a lack and therefore needs to be erased. Furthermore, the implied equity allows us to demand attention for different subject positions and thus demand engagement with those subject positions. Seen in this way, *Samson & Delilah* is a profoundly ‘postcolonising’ film.

Collins and Davis have identified what they call an Australian ‘post-national’ cinema, which they perceive as being defined by ‘modernity’s anchorless mode of belonging’ and characterised by ‘a montage of places’ as a ‘bastard of a national history’ (129). This, they argue, is the cinematic response to post-Mabo Australia.ⁱⁱⁱ However, this implies a white acceptance of Indigenous ownership of and belonging in country, and a white feeling of being at ease and present ‘in country’ while never being able to achieve being ‘in country’ in Moreton-Robinson’s sense. Such an acceptance

on white Australia’s part is questionable and a little premature for now, even if this is indeed one of the outcomes and ethical stances that *Samson & Delilah* demands, or at least aims for, in a post-apology national context. In contrast, Catriona Elder argues that ‘more commonly Indigenous peoples are desired [in films] because of the legitimacy they can bring to non-Indigenous peoples’ occupancy of this land,’ which she calls an attempt to ‘indigenise [sic] oneself’ (147) by association. Similarly, Gillian Cowlishaw talks about ‘a hunger for accounts of Indigenous experience’ (70). However, this hunger or desire is often highly selective and frequently results in Indigenous cultures being ‘appropriated or used by non-Indigenous peoples to help create a feeling of belonging’ (Elder 148). As discussed above, *Australia* is perhaps the most recent and clear example of that. As Fiona McAllan warns, ‘the maintenance of white domination can become further obfuscated through notions of “tolerance” and “inclusiveness”’ (1). However, it is important to keep in mind that it is only when belonging is seen as necessitating a fixed link (for example to land ownership or to a fixed notion of identity) that anxiety about such belonging becomes a factor. Alternatively, belonging can be seen as ‘an act and a process’ (Feldman 110), which is potentially far more productive, for it removes the anxious and obsessive search for a fixed end point (and indeed a fixed starting point), while allowing for a recognition of incommensurable difference and *respect* (as opposed to *tolerance*) for such difference. *Samson & Delilah* is untimely in that the film does not specifically address a white audience. Rather, it invites that audience to take part in the ‘act and process’ of belonging, albeit firmly on Indigenous terms. Collins-Gearing notes that ‘the dialogue opened up by the success of Thornton’s beautiful film is one that also explores non-Aboriginality,’ but she warns against wasting the opportunities for dialogue that the film opens up, which relate to the film’s untimeliness. In other words, *Samson & Delilah* should not be drawn into becoming a ‘marker against which all new (and old)

Indigenous cinema is measured' (Collins-Gearing), because that would mean that it would be reclaimed (and potentially marginalised once more) under the category of Indigenous cinema—even if this time from a considerable position of power. The untimeliness of the film, and its potential power to provoke dialogue and force an ethical stance, only lasts as long it takes to become the new benchmark, and therefore to be timely again.

LISTENING TO AND SEEING THE 'KNOWERS' IN SAMSON AND DELILAH: A SENSE OF BELONGING WITHIN.

The experience of watching *Samson & Delilah* provides a space for any audience to see, and listen to, the language and experience of the 'knower' and the 'known.' Both the film as a cultural and national representation and the narrative perspectives of the two main characters present youth, community, isolation and hope from an Indigenous standpoint so that a 'cultural interface' (Nakata 199) emerges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures that is presented with a subtle, quiet strength. The viewer's inter-subjective experience creates a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, which evolves from and revolves around listening and seeing, rather than telling and showing. By communicating via Aboriginal lingo, or slang (with subtitles), as well as moments of English, and by using music, humour, silence, cyclical time, body gestures and language, the film offers the opportunity for viewers to observe, as well as participate in, a dialogical exchange between different knowledge systems. Martin Nakata defines the 'cultural interface' as being more than a nexus between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing; it also forges a space that dynamically mingles ancestral and Indigenous realities with Western realities, constructing a subjective but reflexive narrative of possibilities as well as constraints (199). The 'cultural interface' is the merging of distinct and

shifting intersections between different peoples, histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses and is abundant with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation. This interface informs, constrains and enables what can be seen or not seen, heard or not heard for individuals and collectives.

Thornton's film—the characters, the setting, the forms of communication, the silence, the devastation and the hope—reveals a cultural space that is dynamic and lived, a location that is individual as well as collective. It becomes a lens through which relationships (between male and female, black and white, young and old, marginal and mainstream) are presented, understood, resisted and renewed in a framework that Australian audiences, perhaps any audience, had not previously experienced. Nevertheless, this framework feels potentially 'familiar' in its 'realness.' The 'cultural interface' created by the film—the space where it constructs a lived location for the audience and the film's creators to intersect—reveals the frameworks through which the characters and those watching understand, explain and regulate their thinking, knowledge, identity, history, and sense of belonging. As Nakata observes, '[m]ost importantly, [cultural interfaces] shape how we can speak of ourselves and of each other, how we understand one another and the ongoing relations between us, and how we describe and represent our lived realities' (199).

Samson & Delilah dismantles (op)positions between black and white, us and them, traditional and Western, marginal and mainstream. Instead, it presents an alternative narrative vision, at times full of conflict and contestation, at other times seeking strength, faith and hope that are inextricably interrelated for the characters of Samson and Delilah themselves, as well as for the audience—whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, marginal or mainstream. This relates closely to Nakata's assertion that 'in all these different intersections [...] there are spaces where people operate on a daily basis making choices

according to the particular constraints and possibilities of the moment' (201). While the narrative offers a way of seeing in which choices and opportunities may be limited or defined by 'particular constraints and possibilities of the moment,' the film itself contributes to the viewer's possibility of understanding previously invisible or marginalised ways of understanding and communicating.

For such a long time, the dominant culture in Australia has held the power to describe, define, position, label, classify, romanticise and/or denigrate Indigenous Australian peoples and knowledges. Mainstream reactions to film narratives that try to create a space for Indigenous voices to speak and be heard have relied on and have been influenced by the desire and ability of the dominant culture to want to watch (Langton). The power to see or render invisible Indigenous peoples and their experiences, and whether such experiences were perceived as subjectively universal (a mother's love for her stolen child) or objectively 'othered' (the noble savage, the black tracker, the 'detrivalised' uptown black) resulted from what we might call an unknowingness (a lack of knowledge) of Indigenous, historical, social and economic contexts. As Larissa Behrendt argues, many Australians decontextualise the issues faced by Indigenous Australians:

they perceive Indigenous people as being from a traditional, "primitive" culture, or only see their contemporary impoverished situation. Without the awareness of how genocide, dispossession, cultural genocide, and discrimination have created a legacy of cyclical poverty (and a lack of secure rights in relation to property interests), some Australians view the position of Indigenous people at the lowest level of Australian society as being solely their own fault. They erroneously assume that Indigenous people are on a level playing field with all other Australians. (63)

The film offers a space to gain a glimpse of a lived reality that many Australians would not

otherwise converse with or listen to. By considering Nakata's Indigenous Standpoint theory, individual and collective lived experiences, at the 'cultural interface,' are the point of entry into the film and therefore potentially steer the audience towards a redefined sense of belonging that is not dependent on or pre-determined by concepts and categories for explaining experiences of belonging.

Thornton achieves exactly this with *Samson & Delilah*. He brings 'the situation of ourselves [Indigenous Australians] as "knowers" into the frame [and] does not make ourselves the focus of study but [...] investigates the social relations within which we as "knowers know"' (214). Our point is that the film is not an attempt at educating the audience (though we believe it does this subtly) or at explaining Aboriginality. Rather, it presents a beautiful love story, set in the desert, about two young people who are Indigenous, and offers a narrative from the subject position of the 'knowers.' What this effectively does is give a voice to Indigenous stories that audiences see and listen to, which in turn forces a questioning or reconsideration of perspectives and knowing. Moreover, *Samson & Delilah* not only starts from a place of belonging, but also potentially expands the audience's sense of belonging. In her effort to offer 'an objective account of the subjective conditions of whiteness in Australia [...] to examine the role of the trope of perspective, itself, in making Indigenous sovereignty invisible and unknowable to white Australians,' (17) Nicoll argues that

epistemologies do exist outside the scopic regimes of Western modernity. [...] Unfortunately, white people are often too blinded by the light and heat of our own racialised knowledge production to engage with Indigenous knowledges of us. (21)

In short, *Samson & Delilah* makes visible the perspective of those who know for those who may have previously not known, thereby widening the potential sense of belonging. Referring to the act of making invisible as the

‘performative assumption of perspective,’ Nicoll quotes Moreton-Robinson, who refers to ‘occupying the subject position of the “white know-all”’ (19). Nicoll goes on to state that ‘there is an important distinction between white people knowing what *Indigenous sovereignty* is, on the one hand, and knowing what *white sovereignty* does to Indigenous rights, on the other’ (19). Nicoll’s argument is that we have a responsibility to focus more on the ways white perspectives make invisible Indigenous ones rather than analysing and evaluating Indigenous perspectives. She succinctly asks how white people can unlearn what they think they know:

In my experience, white people are as unlikely to voluntarily “fall” from perspective as we are to “give” space to others or to “unlearn” our privileges [...] In other words, I unlearn what I think I know when I am knocked off my perch (the performative assumption of perspective) and hit the ground with a thud. This is not an experience that my white race privilege encourages me to seek out but it does help me to understand Australian race relations *within my skin*, rather than presuming to know them from some point outside it. (29-30)

We consider Thornton’s film to be both an act of Indigenous ‘performative assumption of perspective,’ while at the same time, knocking those that aren’t the ‘knowers’ off their seats with a thud—not permanently, but setting them on a course towards a hopeful, generous, and inclusive ‘unlearning.’

UNLEARNING THE ABILITY TO LISTEN

We are hesitant here to fall into the trap of presenting *Samson & Delilah* as a moment where the subaltern speaks; where privilege as a ‘natural’ position occupied by the viewer is instantly ‘unlearned’ and where sanctioned ignorance becomes visible and confronted. Rather, while advocating Spivak’s ‘learning to learn from below’, our fascination with the film stems more from its strength in making the viewer listen. Expanding on Spivakian notions

of hegemonic literary representations obliterating the presence and agency of subaltern voices, we argue that Thornton’s film is not concerned with opening a space for an Indigenous voice to emerge. Rather, its unconcernedness with white audiences listening is one of its greatest strengths—because, ultimately, they have listened, which is precisely the surprising moment emanating from the film that appears untimely. By not relying on dominant modes of communication, such as standard Australian English, but rather utilising a series of modes of communication in unique and non-dominant ways, such as music, humour, silence, relationship with country and Christianity, body gestures and language, and traditional lingo with subtitles, the film removes the problematic connotations of language. For us, the film offers an example of the power of silence: not just the choice to avoid speaking and being misheard and translated, but also the confidence to ‘know’ and remain silent. In doing so, the film does not seek to ‘produce the “truth” of the Indigenous position but to better reveal the workings of knowledge and how understanding of Indigenous people is caught up and implicated’ by ‘the corpus of objectified knowledge about us’ (Nakata 215).

Building on Nakata’s notion of the ‘cultural interface,’ the strength of being the ‘knower’ means that ‘I am not out singularly to overturn the so-called dominant position through simplistic arguments of omission, exclusion or misrepresentation but rather out there to make better arguments in relation to my position within knowledge, and in relation to other communities of “knowers”’ (216). This strength of the film—that is, the film’s confidence in ‘knowing’ and its firm grounding in a sense of Indigenous belonging—is subtly and elegantly reinforced throughout the narrative via the use of humour and irony. While heartbreaking, bittersweet, and powerful, the film is also sweetly and sincerely funny. In the scene where Delilah and her nan are painting while Samson sits, watching, in the background, Nanna takes great delight in

teasing Delilah about running off with him because he is the right skin^{iv} for her: ‘Good one over there’ she says chuckling at Delilah’s embarrassment ‘your eyes are making me laugh.’ The character of Gonzo provides many profound yet humorous insights into the tragedies befalling the young teens, often singing snatches of songs to them such as ‘We have survived the white man’s ways and you know, you can’t change that.’ At one point when Samson is sniffing petrol at their campsite under the town bridge, Gonzo tells him ‘Don’t get too close to the flames or you’ll go WHOOSH!’ Seeing Samson and Delilah together he continues ‘you know, I was in love once too, was bloody lovely [...] [sings] I know I know you love me too, won’t you come over darlin’ cause I’m feelin’ blue...and horny too.’ Nakata argues that Indigenous humour emerges from this locale where we form a community around some shared intersubjective understanding of our experience, where we can understand the jokes (216).

Humour and irony also contribute to forging an intersubjective dialogue between the film and the audience: a dialogue where the film speaks, predominantly with silence, and the audience sees and listens. Throughout the film, moments of humour are underscored by bittersweet ironies, which contribute to the strength of this dialogue. For example, the scenes between Samson and his brother’s band are very funny due to interplay of repetition and silence, but at the same time also tragic in the violence that inevitably occurs. Similarly, Nanna’s quiet mocking of Delilah’s interaction with (and apparent rejection of) Samson is funny, but is at the same time somewhat undercut by the relationship of Delilah with her Nanna, which requires her to take responsibility at her age for her Nanna’s care. The film is littered with examples of these subtle contradictions, accentuated by humour. While the power of dominant society is easily visible—for example the tragedy of Delilah’s artwork being overlooked by buyers who are spending thousands of dollars on Nanna’s art of which

she only sees a couple of hundred dollars—the strength in Indigenous ‘knowing’ is simply reinforced by such instances. In Beck Cole’s *Making Samson & Delilah*, when Thornton is asked to describe the movie he ends his description with the comment that the story is ‘true love, but true love that probably no audience has ever seen before.’ Kath Shelper, the producer, who is sitting next to Thornton, and Cole, behind the camera, both let out a big laugh and Kath, leaning back in her chair cries ‘wharrrrr’ at this impressive statement. You can hear Cole’s voice saying ‘ok, we’ll have to do a take two of that’ to which Thornton throws up his hands and says ‘Aww why! What the fuck’s wrong with that?’ and they all laugh. But you can’t help but think that Thornton was in the ‘know’ because what *is* wrong with that statement if, until *Samson & Delilah*, nobody had seen a story like this before?

One way in which *Samson and Delilah* pulls the viewer to the ground with a thud is through its ability to dismantle notions of strength and weakness associated with representations of Indigeneity that have been entrenched in colonial discourses—for example, the ‘knowing’ that an Indigenous youth petrol sniffer is a representation that the audience may be familiar with, but the lack of understanding of the hunger, boredom, isolation and a myriad of other experiences that are interconnected with it. The film frees such representations, and in turn the unknowing viewer, from the subtly coercive ability of dominant language and perspectives. For Gemmar Fiumara, notions of power too often absorb notions of strength, and it is this distinction that catches our attention when we consider the untimeliness of Thornton’s film. Fiumara puts forward a powerful argument for the replacement of the ‘silent’ silences of Western thought with the rich openness of an ‘authentic listening,’ and she considers how some perspectives and approaches are positioned as ‘weak’ in opposition with those that are understood as ‘strong,’ for instance, the distinction made in Western thought between ‘literate’ cultures and

'oral' ones. 'A culture, for example, can show little interest in distinguishing between the power (or faculty) to annihilate and the strength (or capacity) to restore, reintegrate and let live' (Fiumara 68). The power of *Samson & Delilah* comes from its quiet strength: the sense of confidence that the film communicates about who it speaks to, how it speaks, and the importance of its message. As a performative act that quietly dismantles dominant assumptions of perspective, the film subverts the constraints of a language which knows how to speak but not how to listen (for us, this is similar to Langton's category of intersubjectivity where the non-Indigenous speak to the non-Indigenous about and for the Indigenous). The practice of listening in fact does not in any sense imply assent; on the other hand, when dissent is raised to a philosophical level, by the inherent mechanics of a logocentric system, it tends to endanger the quality of listening, and to confine itself in an epistemic fortress in which freedom of thought proves to be illusory. If, however, we continue to explore the possibility of a more germinal and profound freedom, we can aspire not only to the faculty of justifiable dissent but also to 'the strength (and virtue) of listening' (Fiumara 63). Fiumara proposes a differentiation between the concepts of power and strength, which offers an important contribution in our efforts to understand the sense of belonging that *Samson & Delilah* creates.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we set out to explore the shades of Indigenous belonging in *Samson and Delilah*. The strength of this 'quietly powerful' film comes from a variety of untimely characteristics, primarily its confidence in addressing an authentic audience in an authentic way, with an authentic story. 'Authentic' here means 'keepin' it real,' rather than the variant of the word that is constrained by narrowly defined colonial frameworks. As a

result, *Samson & Delilah* basks in untimely postcoloniality, and is triumphant in raising the 'knowers' off their seats, whilst bringing 'the others' down to earth with an equally powerful 'thud.' It is thus a post-apology film which is dialogical and demands engagement, emotional investment and respect, rather than mere curiosity. In that sense, it is also very generous in that it opens the door for a wider and more complex sense of belonging in Australia that cuts through narrow colonial settler versions of belonging. It is our responsibility to ensure that its untimely power is not co-opted into older, colonial frameworks—and thereby marginalised—but rather that those elements that give the film its power are used as a starting point for timely and meaningful reconciliatory engagement. Now wouldn't that offer a sense of belonging worth pursuing?

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NOTES

ⁱ The post-apology reconciliation process refers to the ongoing reconciliation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians since then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's official apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples in February 2008.

ⁱⁱ The term 'black armband history' is part of Australia's 'culture wars' and was popularised by then Prime Minister John Howard to indicate a version of history that is supposedly 'too negative' and is not considered to 'celebrate' colonial achievements enough.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mabo versus Queensland was a landmark High Court of Australia decision in 1992 that recognised native title in Australia for the first time. The High Court rejected the doctrine of *terra nullius* in favour of the common law doctrine of Aboriginal title. The action which brought about the decision had been led by Eddie Mabo, David Passi and James Rice, all from the Meriam people (from the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait).

^{iv} 'Skin' is a vernacular Aboriginal English term for 'subsection,' which in turn is an anthropological term for social structure in Australian Aboriginal societies, particularly those in the Centre and Western parts of Australia.

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