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Screening in/out Indigenous sovereignties

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I acknowledge the Wiradjuri peoples of Australia who are the traditional owners and custodians of the lands where Charles Sturt University campuses and home are located. I also pay respect to Elders, past, present and emerging and extend that respect to other Indigenous readers.

Racism is an immovable wall. Racism flows like a capillary. In response to the editors' provocation to think and act anti-racist critique in ways that honour the work of critical race and whiteness studies scholars, I consider in this piece the social cartographies of racism as connected to the mobility of screens. In doing so, I hope to draw out the productive relationships Indigenous sovereignties can bring to the disciplinary field I work in, media studies. In working through the ways race moves us in different directions, the intersections between geography, racism, and racialisation are crucial. How are space and bodies constrained or enabled by racism and race privilege? These spatial mobilities and racial abilities are tied to specific geographical contexts, where the ongoing effects of settler colonisation and imperialism must be recognised in order to understand contemporary social realities and inequalities. As Moana Jackson has poignantly observed, "the racism of space is a prejudice pretending to be neutral" (2017, p. 10).

A dominant function of Western geographies is the production of barriers and walls as neutral infrastructure of everyday life. Richard Dyer refers to this spatial practice as the "white historical mastery of time and space" (1997, p. 36). We could also think critically about the social barriers, or social cartographies, that create inequalities here in Australia and around the world. Such barriers are productive of control in ways that stop mobility while also simultaneously coursing through the social body to make their effects felt. Walls then have a dual function: to exclude different people and groups by including others through motility. Walls aim to exclude but by their very conspicuousness draw attention and make visible their borders, which can then be targeted for resistance. The walls and barriers that remain invisible to some are particularly challenging.

I want to speak briefly about how to locate this analytic of the social cartographies of racism as walls in an Australian context, where I have settler ancestry. Walls can

operate as forms of mediation, as re-presentations of the world through dominant forms of law. Indigenous activism and thought has long pointed to the mediated creation of social reality in Western conceptions of truth. For instance, the Yolngu band Yothu Yindi recorded a famous pop song, “Treaty” (1991), about the failure of the Australian government to enter into treaty negotiations in the 1980s and begin a process of reconciliation. Australia was illegally settled under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, which presumed the land was not occupied or cared for. No Indigenous community in Australia has ever ceded their sovereignty. In the song the band say, “Well I heard it on the radio. And I saw it on the television.” This is also the title of a landmark essay by Marcia Langton (1993) on the political economy of Indigenous media representation in Australia. What the line poignantly discloses is the way words and law are bound up in processes of mediation – that reality is actively shaped by the power to enforce law and truth through discourse. It is instructive to note here that Indigenous peoples have been critiquing the “fake news” of settler colonialism for some time.

Settler law is given truth and power through technologies of media, which re-present settlement as legitimate or just simply common sense. In the recent film *Sweet Country* (2017), directed by Warwick Thornton, a small outback town in central Australia watch what is considered by film historians to be the first feature film, the Australian produced *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (1906). The scene overlays a series of screens, an audience is watching an Australian film watching an audience watch an Australian film, the “first” film. Given *Sweet Country*’s focus on the violent imposition of settler law on Indigenous peoples, I believe the scene is also offering a critique of how reality comes to be mediated by regimes of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980), particularly in terms of what or who is mediated as “first” and originary. Later, when the central character Sam Kelly, an Indigenous farm worker played by Hamilton Morris, is charged with a white man’s murder, the town must build a courthouse. Having never charged anyone with a serious crime before, despite the murder of Indigenous peoples by white settlers, the policemen find the only space large enough for the court is the outdoor cinema. The trial takes place with the defendant and witnesses sitting in cinema chairs. The characters therefore face the audience of the film, who stand in for the Kelly Gang film from earlier, as the focal viewpoint. I believe this staging powerfully evokes the mediated and theatrical display of settler law and the force to make it real. The audience, being substituted for the screen of a film within *Sweet Country*’s mise-en-scene, are then participants in the operation of the trial and settler law. This screening is illustrative of the way in which settler law – as a construction, or film, that plays out Truth – is emplaced.

Another example of screens as walls, and the mediated construction of settler law, is a recent controversy over an all white panel on the morning show *Sunrise*, discussing the removal of Indigenous children from their families (NITV News, 2018). The panel offensively misrepresented a policy guideline from child services which advises Indigenous children being evacuated from a harmful environment should be placed where possible with Indigenous relatives. I won’t detail some of the ignorant and insensitive comments made about Indigenous parents, Aboriginal fathers, and the so-called “beneficial” aspects of the policies that created the Stolen Generations, but want to note the protests that occurred outside of the Channel Seven television studio in Martin Place, Sydney, in Gadigal Country. The studio’s glass windows look out onto Martin Place and live footage typically shows commuters passing by or folks waving hello to viewers. On this occasion, activists observed that when the program aired live, the protesters outside were green screened away! (GreenLeftTV, 2018). In their

place, stock footage of the thoroughfare was played. I think this screening out of Indigenous bodies and activism is an apt illustration of the settler state's treatment of Indigenous peoples.

In thinking about screens as walls that function to include and exclude, screen in or screen out particular kinds of knowledge, I hope that we can consider who is displaced and moved about by the social cartographies of racism. Recalling *Sweet Country's* use of screens, how might media studies begin to account for the stolen land that provides the scaffolding and infrastructure for the creation of media worlds. In offering this critique of screens as tied to geographies of racialisation, I'm suggesting that a decolonising approach to the field of media studies as well as the consumption of media might begin by screening in Indigenous sovereignties.

Author Note

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