

Ancestral Spirits Calling

By Maria Walsh

Writers in the Cinema. Projections, Newcastle Upon Tyne: 2020

The opening shots of *Lunch Run* plunge its viewers into the middle of a conversation. Two young men and one young woman, all members of the Karrabing Film Collective,¹ sit around a wooden outdoor table checking their iPhone signals and voicing frustration at not having a reception.

The film's credits refer to the group as cellphone addicts.

The camera hones in on black-skinned hands busily tapping phone screens, a proximity that is counteracted by lines of white code that scroll down the frame, a surface writing that somewhat bars the viewer's inclusion in the scene. A haptic flatness and an equally haptic depth coalesce on the same plane, creating a weird continuum between different perceptual modalities that pervade the tale that follows in which an older man suggests going fishing, but the young people refuse as there is no phone reception there. As if in answer to how this narrative is ever going to get moving, another young man pulls up in a Land Cruiser asking them to join him in looking for Quinton, a friend who has gone missing in Milik. As the young people pile into the jeep, the older man warns them to watch out for the 'walakantha', referred to in the film's subtitles by three asterisks, as if to say their name might invoke the spirit of these 'short people' who can take on any appearance and lure one into the bush

for good. The young people are nonplussed, more concerned with finding a good mobile reception than anything else.

From the outset, this short, approximately six minute film - Karrabing films usually being 30 to 40 minutes - hints at the coalescence of disjunction in Belyuen life worlds: on the one hand, the young people's attraction to cellphones and hip-hop; on the other, the question of how to transmit Dreaming stories and ancestral ways of living under the regulatory conditions of late liberal governance in Australia.

Dreaming has to do with the stories derived from the animal totems that structure kinship relations and also unite human and nonhuman relations. Part of the impetus for the Collective's filmmaking is to keep these stories 'strong' in the minds of their young people. In their indigenous language, Emiyengal, Karrabing means 'low tide turning', a nature-culture phenomenon in which tidal movement creates formations of land and their watery surrounds in constantly revolving cycles. Dreaming maps indigenous peoples' relations with the land as a virtual network of topological vectors and actual sacred places that run counter to the Australian government's injunction that families identify with a fixed totem so that they can be ascribed specific patches of land under the land reclamation Rights Act of 1976, which entails that Aboriginal persons can make a claim on confiscated settler land as long as they adhere to fixed cartographic parameters. Eschewing such rigid classifications, Dreaming is neither good nor bad, but nonetheless Lunch Run can be seen as a miniature morality tale, albeit a ludic and highly sonic one.

Various animal sounds invoking Dreaming are layered over the electronic soundtrack that accompanies the searchers on their mini-road trip. Dogs bark, birds – parakeets perhaps – squawk, though none appear in the image. Ceremonial chanting and the sound of traditional percussion sticks being beaten add to the mix. Their sharp clinking resonates in my mind with metal being hammered, an association linked in my mind to the earlier shots that hovered on the wire fence surrounding the family property. It is as if its carceral boundary sonically haunts any wandering outside its cartographic range.

This stricture to their semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle is one of the 'problems' the Karrabing Film Collective address in their filmmaking, not in any didactic or commonsensically activist way – this indigenous filmmaking project is not about making demands or claiming rights but about the community representing themselves to themselves in a bid to take care of their stories for their young people. One of the answers to the question of ancestral transmission has been the Collective's shift from engaging a camera person to filming with their iphones. While these tools epitomise the extractive capitalism that damages indigenous relations to the land, they nonetheless also enable collective participation in the filmmaking process on terms that fit with the partly displaced,² partly nomadic lifestyles that resist the imposition of deadlines or upskilling that might satisfy governmental demands to become productive citizens. As opposed to Audre Lorde's infamous statement that the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house, Karrabing use such tools to make their own meanings. The fluidity of film, its techniques of superimposition and sound/image disjunction, as well as documentary recording, allow them to represent the many obstacles to their flourishing as well as the

mutability of Dreaming in which humans and nonhumans, animals, rivers and sand, are entangled in conjunctive relations.

A close-up of 'Quinton' fills the screen, his body lit with a reddish filter against an overexposed white background, as if the image itself is emitting radiation. His voiceover is squeaky and fast like a helium-induced chord, as 'he' cajoles the group to follow him. Funny and eerie at the same time, I think of subliminal horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), whose performative cinematography and hand-held camera work, although different in genre, has sensory affinity with that in *Lunch Run*. Unaware that 'Quinton' is watching them, the group finally catch sight of him crossing the track, the speeded up footage of his movement adding an element of slapstick and complementing the tenor and pace of his helium-like voice. Seduced by the promise of an iPhone 10 and a better reception, 'Snake', one of the group, follows 'Quinton' into the bush, mimicking his zombie-like swaying like an aeroplane landing in the wind. The others call out to 'Snake' to come back: 'It's not worth it', they shout, their rejoinder referring to a mobile upgrade and a better signal, but also perhaps to the promise of the good life if one accepts the laws of late liberal governance.

Neither good indigenous subjects performing an authenticity that colonialism attempted to eradicate, yet which is nonetheless still expected of them, nor good indigenous activist filmmakers expected to use their filmmaking for militant advocacy, the Karrabing's film work is more about existence-making for themselves. This involves a performativity often denied by the mainstream to indigenous or

marginalized peoples, who are habitually cast as native others reduced to a predetermined authenticity. While performativity, from a western point-of-view, has a lineage both in theatre and in linguistics, it is also integral to Karrabing cultural heritage, for example, in the legacy of indigenous music ceremonies such as 'wangga' in which singers compose from their daily lives or while Dreaming. This non-contradiction between the taking on of a fictional character and being oneself is capitalised on in the Collective's filmmaking method which they refer to as 'improvisational realism'. The latter has affinities with Augusto Baol's Theatre of the Oppressed,³ whereby participants enact scenes from their own lives to get a purchase on them. Becoming the creative protagonists of their own stories does not mean that their problems are solved, but re-imagining them through improvisational dramaturgy provides energy for making change.⁴

We do not know what happened to the 'real' Quinton or if the friends ever returned, *Lunch Run* being more akin to a teaser or a music video than longer Karrabing films assembling Christian morality, ancestral value systems and technical knowledge, for example the 29-minute *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams* (2016) which interweaved all three perspectives to explore the reasons for a broken boat motor. Bringing hip-hop and iphones together with ancestral Dreaming, *Lunch Run* creates a film world that nourishes continuity with ancestors as well as desires for globalised forms of youth culture. Nonetheless, as a miniature morality tale, it cautions that, when wishes for capitalist commodities override respect for ancestral knowledge, things can run amok.

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¹ Karrabing Film Collective is an indigenous media group based in Australia's Northern Territories that uses filmmaking to interrogate the conditions of inequality under later liberal governance and to retain connections to land and their ancestors. The group includes more than thirty members predominantly living in Belyuen, as well as anthropologist, activist and gender studies professor, Elizabeth Povinelli, who has worked with the community since 1984.

² Issues such as homelessness and overcrowding resulted from the interventionist governmental techniques of 2007 which involved the resettlement of indigenous communities to Belyuen, a remote indigenous township west of Darwin, 300km away from Karrabing sites of ancestral dreaming.

³ When the community first decided to make films, Povinelli enlisted documentary filmmaker Liza Johnson, who had previously made issue based documentaries with non-professional actors, to work with the group. Initial workshopping for the project used techniques from Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Johnson codirected their first film, *Karrabing: Low Tide Turning* (2012).

⁴ The Collective initially assembled as a grassroots organisation to produce a GPS media archival project that would be an educative and business tool for the community.