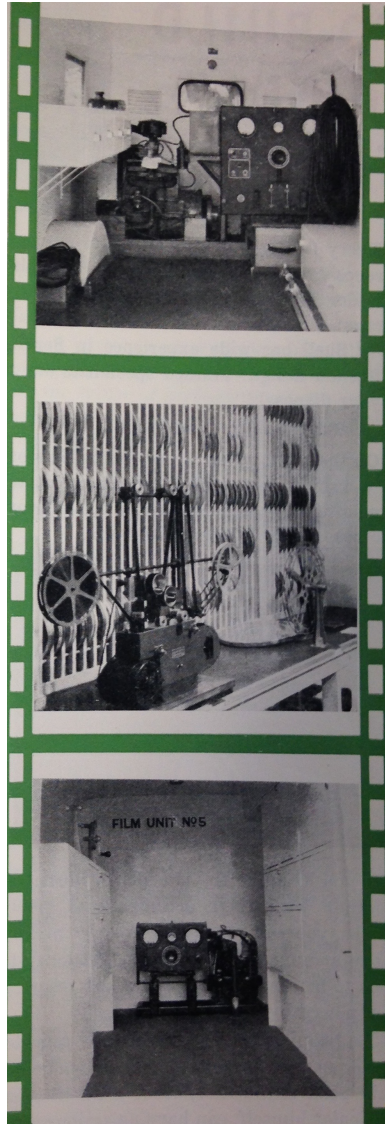


Mapping the Settler-Colonial Travelogue: The Shell Film Unit in Australia 1939 - 1954



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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Research

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Statement of Originality

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted previously, either in its entirety or substantially, for a higher degree or qualification at any other University or institute of higher learning. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis has been acknowledged.

Ruby Arrowsmith-Todd

10 October 2016

Abstract

In the late 1920s, the multinational petroleum company Shell began sponsoring filmmaking in Australia. This was the first attempt by a local industry to systematically engage the moving image in its corporate practice. The company instituted a national exhibition network which used mobile screening vans to canvas the far-reaches of rural Australia and screened films back to the Indigenous communities they depicted. From filming the desert landscape, to mapping its mileage and turning outback petrol station driveways into impromptu drive-ins; Shell's film operations represented space, sought opportunities to make it productive and fostered social spaces pitched to align the company's interests with those of the state. This thesis interrogates how Shell's ethnographic travelogues produced settler colonial space in mid-century Australia. The spatial regimes of settler colonialism are created through processes of (symbolic, practical and contested) dispossession. Structuring logics of erasure must be traced as contingent historical phenomena so as to eschew naturalizing and confirming them. The vertical integration of Shell's film practice - encompassing production, distribution and exhibition - bears witness to governing spatial ideas and practices as well as never entirely settled sites of local reception. By studying Shell's ethnographic travelogues across these three modes we glimpse how settler colonial space coheres and strains against its own productions.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Leigh Boucher for support and guidance throughout this project. The MRes program has provided a fantastic foundation for my first foray into historical research and I am very grateful to all staff in the Modern History department for their generosity. I thank Macquarie University for providing funding and institutional support for my research.

I have greatly benefited from lively conversations with Dr. Alec Morgan about our shared interest in early utilitarian cinema. Alec was incredibly generous with contributing archival materials in the early stages of this project. Associate Professor Deane Williams also very kindly donated his John Heyer archive and shared his extensive knowledge of documentary film history with me. For their generous reminiscences of industrial cinema's golden era, I thank Kev Franzi who was employed at Herschells film lab in the 1940s and Roland Beckett, a member of the Shell Film Unit in the 1950s.

I am further grateful to the patient and knowledgeable staff at the AFI Research Collection, National Film and Sound Archive, Noel Butlin Archive Centre and the University of Melbourne Archive.

Finally, I am profoundly indebted to Harriet Johnson. I am very lucky to have a partner who will read my work, discuss new ideas and broaden my critical horizons. Her intellectual curiosity sustains and inspires my own.

This thesis is dedicated to Queenie.

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Introduction

In the period 1939 - 1954, the Shell Company of Australia produced ethnographic travelogues and established distribution networks which screened these films back to the Indigenous communities they depicted. From filming the desert landscape, to mapping its mileage and turning outback petrol station driveways into impromptu drive-ins; Shell's film operations represented space, sought opportunities to make it productive and fostered social spaces pitched to align the company's interests with those of the settler colonial state. This thesis interrogates how Shell's ethnographic travelogues produced settler colonial space in mid-century Australia.

Producing Settler Colonial Space

To question how space is actively produced through ideas, institutional and social practices and how these spatial productions become an open field that is lived and contested by Indigenous peoples and settlers alike, is to ask how colonialism *settles* itself and is *unsettled* in turn. Settler colonies are premised on displacement and replacement.¹ In a settler colony, an exogenous people arrive in a territory and aim to forge a new society over the top of an existing one. The production of settler colonial space in Australia thus involves the dispossession of pre-existing (and enduring) Indigenous lives with their manifold material, social and spiritual connections to country. The legal fiction of *terra nullius* declares a land unoccupied, asserts sovereignty and attempts to remake this space anew. Unlike franchise colonies, settlers do not leave following the exploitation of resources: the (re-)production of space is an ongoing process.

¹ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), p. 1. See also Lorenzo Veracini, "Introducing: Settler colonial studies," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): pp. 1-12.

Given the centrality of claiming new lands and dismissing prior rights to country, historical analysis of the making and remaking of space is crucial to understanding the operations of settler colonialism. Yet characterising 'space' presents its own perplexities. Conventional analyses swing between the polarities of the narrowly concrete – zoning in on particular locales – and the diffusely abstract – space as a Euclidean backdrop to all range of historical phenomena. Space emerges, rather, from a dialectic of these universal and particular registers; it is not one or the other. The insights of Marxist geographer Henri Lefebvre into the production of space in the capitalist metropolis provide a critical framework that captures this dialectical movement. His account of space actively 'produced' across differentiated yet always synchronic registers - spatial ideas, practices and experiences - assists in throwing light on the settlement of the outback spaces of inland Australia.

In his landmark work *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre argues that space is not an inert, passive backdrop where nature 'lies' and history 'takes place.' It is itself actively produced and reproduced through the forces of capitalist modernity.² The production of social space – like the shape-shifting racial ideologies which justified settler expansion - is a *process* of unequal power relations which 'nurtures its own mythology,' masks its conditions of production and comes to appear natural.³ For Lefebvre, we can begin to demystify the illusion of naturalised, 'objective' space by looking backward to "reconstitute the process of its genesis and the development of its meaning."⁴ In aid of this process of demystification, Lefebvre offers a useful heuristic where three categories of space are distinguished but also studied in their unity.

The first register - *representations of space* - refers to the realm of concepts, ideas and abstract sign systems. Settler colonialism has certain ideological underpinnings – it not only

² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), pp. 17–18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

usurps land but also monopolises ideas about what makes that land meaningful. The importation of the British cadastral grid which blindly overwrote pre-existing Indigenous territorial boundaries with new allotments of private property began as ink markings on a manuscript. The second mode in Lefebvre's spatial triad highlights how this regime of spatial organisation physically rearranged the landscape through *spatial practices*. These are the material routes and networks (ranging from fences to gazetted reserves) which structured everyday interactions between settlers and Indigenous peoples and regulated their physical proximity. Finally, *representational spaces* encompass the practico-sensory realm of social space. Crucially, this experiential register recognises how Indigenous peoples have at times explicitly contested, co-produced and, by their ongoing survival, unsettled the remaking of settler colonial space.

At first glance, the study of cinema does not seem an obvious optic through which to chart the generative ideas, practices and embodied interactions involved in the production of Australian settler colonial space. Yet film, broadly conceived as a textually produced, culturally distributed and socially experienced phenomenon, has a remarkable synergy with Lefebvre's three modalities. Firstly, as a *representation of space*, a film text visualises certain ideas about space; it compresses and cuts up time such that space becomes newly surmountable. Secondly, the circulation of film is a *spatial practice* embedded in flows of power which determine who gets to see what film, when, and under which framing circumstances. Thirdly, the social space of cinema exhibition is a *representational space* where meaning is remade at the intimate intersection of cinemagoers amongst each other and before a moving image. Viewers clap, jeer, laugh at inappropriate points, walk out. The reception of film overshoots its conception.

Film studies has historically tended to focus on the first register of film as a textual production. A historiographical preoccupation with representations and 'meaning' narrowly construed has meant that cinema's expansive role in broader social, economic and political

undercurrents of twentieth-century modernity has been generally overlooked. This thesis proposes that an approach to Australian cinema history alert to film's wider social circulations is a necessary corrective to more constrained textual analysis.⁵ Moreover, when the outright depictions of space in film are connected to the spatial practices and policies of who gets to see what and when, as well as the dynamics of the audience, we glimpse how settler colonial space coheres and strains against its own images.

The Shell Company of Australia

In 1901, the year of settler nationhood, representatives from one of Britain's "mightiest industrial empires" sailed aboard the oil tanker s. s. *Turbo* into Hobson's Bay in Melbourne.⁶ The first cargo of bulk kerosene ever to reach Australian shores marked the arrival of the 'Shell' Transport and Trading Company in the Antipodes. The expansion of chairman Marcus Samuel's multinational energy organisation into Australia coincided with the birth of the motor era, an age of optimism for the infinite growth of fossil-fuelled capitalism. Today, we generally associate the Shell pecten with one primary site: the petrol station. Yet the oil company's presence once spilled into a surprising array of spaces. In the 1930s, the pioneering Shell Radio Show was broadcast into Australian living rooms on a Saturday night; in the 1940s, Shell was at the local town hall giving Australia's first demonstrations of live television which, in the 1960s, would be the medium of choice for airing the hour-long concert special 'The Beatles Sing for Shell.' The Company's most systematic cultural public relations activity, however, involved the production, distribution and exhibition of a medium which itself derived from petroleum byproducts: celluloid film.

⁵ My approach is influenced by the recent historiographical turn to 'new cinema history.' This burgeoning field of scholarship seeks to reorient historical film research from a prevailing focus on the production of film texts to consider cinema's wider socio-economic histories of distribution, exhibition and reception. For an overview of this field, see Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), pp. 3-40; Kate Bowles, "Lost Horizon: The Social History of the Cinema Audience," *History Compass* 9, no. 11 (2011): pp. 854-863.

⁶ Robert Murray, *Go Well: One Hundred Years of Shell in Australia* (Melbourne: Hargreen Publishing Company, 2001), p. 3.

In 1927, the year the British Oil Imperial Company (as it had been renamed in 1905) became the Shell Company of Australia, local executives marked this colonial independence by sponsoring an animated cartoon intended to 'indigenise' the settler-corporation. In *King Billy's First Car* (1927), a koala and 'King Billy', a simian figure wearing a breast plate, travel through the bush and knock up a makeshift vehicle using the tail of a snake as a tire, a duck as a horn and a bird's neck as a brake.⁷ In the next frame, a modern automobile cruises into a Shell petrol station and the voiceover tells us that 'time marches on, and with it comes Super Shell.' Undergirded by a crude primitive/civilised dichotomy, *King Billy's First Car* relies upon a barely disguised caricature of Indigeneity as a counterpoint to Shell and Australia's 'natural' petrol-powered progress. This cartoon – one of Shell's first sponsored films in Australia – is a prototype for the kind of popular ethnographic travelogue which would recur across its extensive film catalogue.

By the beginning of the 1930s, the Shell Company of Australia was regularly sponsoring the production of nonfiction films. These would come to include short educational documentaries promoting petroleum's role in agriculture and industry (*Modern Land Development*, 1939), wartime newsreels (*London Victory March*, 1946), internal staff training films and Australia's first internationally acclaimed art documentary, the 1954 Venice Grand-Prix winning *The Back of Beyond*. Significantly, this was the first attempt by a local industry to systematically engage the moving image in its corporate practice. Over the next decade, Shell established film distribution libraries and screening theatrettes in each capital city and deployed mobile screening vans to canvas the far-reaches of rural Australia. In 1948, the formation of an in-house Shell Film Unit drew local filmmaking activities into a transnational network of satellite production units which radiated out from the original Shell Film Unit in London across the globe from Venezuela to

⁷ *King Billy's First Car* (1927), prod. Herschells Films Pty. Ltd. for Shell Company of Australia, 1.5 min, Silent, BW, 35mm.

Egypt.⁸ The Shell Company of Australia's filmmaking infrastructure was now, like Hollywood's, fully vertically integrated: it controlled the means of production, distribution *and* exhibition. This vertical integration means that Shell's film practice dovetails – in a surprisingly apposite way - with Lefebvre's three registers of spatial production. The totalising ambit of the Shell Company's film practice offers itself up to a holistic account of the production of settler colonial space which recognizes ideas (film production), spatial practices (film distribution) and experiences (film exhibition) as at once disaggregated and interfolded across the corporate structure.

The '(Il)logics' of Settler Colonialism

This thesis asks the following question: how did Shell's ethnographic travelogues produce settler colonial space in Australia? I propose that charting the production, distribution and exhibition of a corpus of industrially-sponsored, ethnographic travelogues in the period 1939 – 1954 offers a valuable, oblique vantage point into the historical intersections of capitalist enterprise and the politics of spatial production in Australia. Despite well known theoretical divergences between Marxist and postcolonial regions of analysis, their objects of study - the interests of colonialisms of all stripes (settler, franchise and otherwise) and capital - are historically intertwined. Colonies provide both new markets and investments for surplus capital and new territories to deposit people made superfluous in the course of capital's periodic crises.⁹ The Shell Company of Australia and the settler state were both involved in making spaces productive for the capitalist mode of production. The mutually beneficial relationship of settler colonial governance and capital is often acknowledged but not closely studied. The fact that Shell's ethnographic travelogues were produced by a non-state actor with its own institutional prerogatives does not

⁸ For an overview of the global reach of Royal Dutch Shell's film operations see Rudmer Canjels, "Films from Beyond the Well: A Historical Overview of Shell Films," in *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), pp. 243-255.

⁹ See "Section II: Imperialism" in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), pp. 159-386.

minimise the insights they offer into the production of settler colonial space. In fact, Shell's very status as a corporation aligned to - yet distinct from - the state means that its film practice sheds light on tensions within settler colonialism in a particularly stark fashion. A spirit of capitalist opportunism meant the Company did not need to mask its ambivalences - as we will see, there were many markets to peddle divergent practices and conceptions of settler colonial space.

There seems to be a contradiction between my suggestion that Shell's vertical integration points to the totalising structures of settler colonialism and the idea that the Company provides peculiar access to tensions within the settler colonial project. To show that this contradiction is illusory will be the crux of my thesis. The apparent contradiction between an analysis of settler colonialism as a total structure and an internally fraught one corresponds to two dominant positions within recent settler colonial studies scholarship itself. Those who hold that settler colonialism is - following Patrick Wolfe - premised upon a singular logic of erasure have been recently accused of rendering an overly totalising portrait which gives practices of governance too much credit as a 'coherent' and unified movement of eradication while conceding Indigeneities too little agency.¹⁰ On the other hand, Tim Rowse proposes that settler governance is heterogeneous and imperfect so as to allow 'gaps' within the project such that expressions of plural Indigeneities are not interpreted as merely 'state conceded.'¹¹ Nonetheless, by shifting the language away from 'erasure', Rowse risks eliding hard won insights into the specificity of settler colonialism as a distinctive form of dispossession.

I propose a mediation between these two perspectives. By tracing the *(il)logics* of elimination, that is, constitutive tensions within settler colonialism's overall structuring logic, I offer a rapprochement of Wolfe's 'erasure' paradigm with Rowse's stress on the incoherencies of

¹⁰ See, for instance, Tim Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): pp. 297-301; Lisa Ford, "Locating Indigenous Self-determination in the Margins of Settler Sovereignty: An Introduction," in *Between Indigenous and Settler Governance*, ed. Lisa Ford and Tim Rowse (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 11.

¹¹ Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," p. 300.

settler governance. In studying the totalising agenda of the Shell company's film practice and yet emerging with insights into the tensions within the reigning ideas and processes of settlement, I also open up space within both Wolfe's and Rowse's structural analyses for what Lisa Ford describes as a more empirically sensitive approach. Ford challenges historians to 'deal more honestly' with the question of how governing structures are actually experienced.¹² If constitutive tensions beset even the most totalising social practices there simply cannot be a uniform transfer of settler colonial agendas and intentions onto colonised subjects. I propose that Shell's totalising yet internally fraught activities provide an insight into settler colonialism's *(il)logics* of erasure and that the empirical reception of the films open up the question of Indigenous contestation of space.

I examine a genre of film particularly germane to tracing the remaking of settler colonial space: the ethnographic travelogue. From *King Billy's First Car* onward, this was a mode of short documentary which recurred across Shell's film output in Australia. That a petrol company favoured a genre premised on travel and mobility is not surprising. I define travelogues as a form of nonfiction filmmaking which document movement through space. Before the advent of mass affordable tourism this was a wildly popular genre of early cinema – today, it lives on in lifestyle television programs.¹³ Shell's travelogues were also quasi-'ethnographic' as representing travel through exotic spaces often went hand in hand with documenting the supposedly 'exotic' Indigenous peoples who occupied them. My use of the term ethnographic is not deployed in the anthropological sense. After all, an ethnographic travelogue would seem a contradiction in terms: one mode is premised on an extended stay, the other on passing through. Rather, I use it to refer to a set of travelogues which include footage of Indigenous peoples for the purposes of popular, public consumption. Indeed, since anthropologist Walter Baldwin Spencer peddled his bioscopes

¹² Ford, "Locating Indigenous Self-determination in the Margins of Settler Sovereignty," p. 11.

¹³ See Jennifer Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 23-61.

of Arrernte ceremonies on the mass lecture circuit in 1901, the boundaries between anthropology, commerce and popular culture have long merged at the site of ethnographic filmmaking in Australia.¹⁴ These historical intersections have received scant scholarly attention.¹⁵ Likewise, the rich seams of early-mid-century nontheatrical cinema in Australia (encompassing ubiquitous, workaday genres including the industrial, ethnographic and travel film) have yet to be adequately mined.¹⁶ As the first study of the Shell Company of Australia's extensive local film operations, this thesis serves in part as a corrective to these oversights.

Shell's ethnographic travelogues may seem like a blip in Australian cinema history – after all, by the yardstick of theatrical feature film production, the mid-century decades are typically described as a barren stretch in the waiting game for the 1970s Australian film renaissance.¹⁷ Rather than dismissing these films as formulaic, archaic precursors on the road to artistic maturity, this thesis considers them in their mid-century historical moment – a period when the film medium's manifold institutional uses extended far beyond mere entertainment. The travelogues' present-day interest does not lie chiefly in their aesthetic or entertainment value. As opposed to Hollywood or indie films that now screen at the contemporary megaplex, these were

¹⁴ For an excellent account of Spencer's filmmaking activities in this period see "The Ethnographic Cinema of Alfred Cort Haddon and Walter Baldwin Spencer," in Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 127-170.

¹⁵ See, however, Martin Thomas, "A Short History of the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition," *Aboriginal History* 34 (2010): pp. 143-170; Geoffrey Gray, "Looking for Neanderthal Man, Finding a Captive White Woman: The Story of a Documentary Film," *Health and History* 8, no. 2 (2006): pp. 69-90.

¹⁶ Notable exceptions include Lisa Milner, *Fighting Films: A History of the Waterside Workers' Federation Film Unit* (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2003); on early ethnographic filmmaking see Ian Dunlop, "Ethnographic Filmmaking in Australia: The First Seventy Years (1898-1968)," *Aboriginal History* 3, no. 2 (1979): pp. 111-119. Though little scholarship exists on early, locally-produced non-fiction travelogues, there is a rich body of scholarship examining fictional representations of travel in Australian film and television. See, for instance, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, "Bitumen films in postcolonial Australia," *Journal of Australian Studies* 30, no. 88 (2006): pp. 97-109.

¹⁷ See Ken G. Hall, "Introduction," in *The New Australian Cinema*, ed. Scott Murray (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1980), p. 8; Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature-Film Production*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press in association with the Australian Film Institute, 1988), p. 201; Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, *Australian Cinema: The First 80 Years* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Publishers and Currency Press, 1984), p. 185.

‘utility films’: films that ‘worked.’¹⁸ A burgeoning field of research has begun to excavate the various uses to which institutions, governments, educators, civic groups and industry have historically employed cinema, as Haidee Wasson and Charles R. Acland argue in their field-defining collection *Useful Cinema*, as a “tool that makes, persuades, instructs, demonstrates, and *does something*.”¹⁹ My thesis will argue that despite serving multiple functions for the company, Shell’s ethnographic travelogues were ultimately enlisted to a common project – the production of settler colonial space. In doing so, I seek to bring this broadly functional approach to cinema history into dialogue with settler colonial studies’ recent spatial turn. Led by local historians including Tracey Banivanua Mar, Penelope Edmonds and Georgine Clarsen, this growing scholarship insists that spatially-oriented historical research must account for the structural specificities of settler colonialism as a distinctive colonial formation.²⁰ Shell’s ethnographic travelogues not only represented prevailing ideas about the spatialisation of race/ the racialisation of space in mid-century Australia, they were also circulated along routes which brought them into lived, social spaces where the effects of these ideas transformed – and were transformed by – the everyday interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In the chapters that follow, I use Lefebvre’s spatial triad as a guiding heuristic in which to map how Shell’s

¹⁸ For an overview of the emerging field of utility film scholarship see Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, “Introduction,” in *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), pp. 9-18. A major ARC Discovery project “Utilitarian Filmmaking in Australia 1945-1980” is also currently underway in Australia.

¹⁹ Haidee Wasson and Charles R. Acland, “Utility and Cinema,” in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 6. See also *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron and Dan Streible (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also special issues of *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37, no. 3 (2009); *Film History* 19 no. 4 (2007); and *Film History* 15, no. 2 (2003).

²⁰ Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds, “Introduction: Making Space in Settler Colonies,” in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 13. See also Georgine Clarsen, “Pedaling Power: Bicycles, Subjectivities and Landscapes in a Settler Colonial Society,” *Mobilities* 10, no. 5 (2015): pp. 706-725; Tracey Banivanua Mar, “Settler-Colonial Landscapes and Narratives of Possession,” *Arena Journal* 37/38 (2012): pp. 176-198; Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance and Reserve in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002).

ethnographic travelogues produced settler colonial space across the three stages of the Company's vertically integrated film practice.

Thesis Overview

In Chapter One I reconstruct the production history of the travelogue *Through the Centre* - a film produced on the 1939 Shell round-Australia mapmaking expedition. The geographical focus of this chapter, as in those that follow, is the spaces of 'the interior' broadly conceived as the 'Centre' and 'North' of Australia. This chapter asks how Shell's pre-war mapping and film-making practices ordered the spaces of the interior through two apparatuses of representation: cartography and the camera. I argue that the geographic imaginary which emerges is riven by a constitutive tension whereby settler colonial space of the 'never never' is represented *simultaneously* as devoid of Indigenous presence *and* as replete with differentiated, exploitable exotica. Drawing on internal correspondence from the Shell Company archive, contemporaneous newspaper articles and the expedition's published fieldwork notes, my analysis reveals a reliance upon prior Indigenous relations to land elided in the edited film.

Chapter Two shifts its focus from *representations of space* to explore Shell's distribution activities as a form of *spatial practice*. In switching register, I do not mean to suggest that spatial practices are separable from or derivative upon reigning ideas about a space – nor can they be disaggregated from lived experiences and the Indigenous co-constitution of space. Indeed, the triadic heuristic is intended only for clarity's sake. Thus Chapter Two isolates the practices that determine what films are shown when, to whom and in which spatial contexts. This chapter unfolds in two main moves. The first section examines the increasing alignment between Shell's corporate interests with those of the state. The second section examines how distribution circuits were designed - on a pastoral model of power - to mould Indigenous subjectivities on government settlements across the postwar, assimilation-era Northern Territory. The central

tension explored in Chapter One (space as both ‘empty’ and ‘exotic’) is here mirrored in the ‘(il)logical’ spatial practices of governance: at once segregated and intended to produce assimilated subjects.

The final chapter takes up Ford’s challenge to ‘deal more honestly’ with how governing structures are actually experienced. I examine mid-century film-viewing in its particularity as a break with the usual spatial regimes: ‘real’ geographies collide with the imaginative spaces flashing by on-screen. Firstly, I reconstruct the setting of a Shell film screening on Victoria River Downs pastoral station. The aim is to explore some of the experiential possibilities and limits of Indigenous agency for audience members at a particular historical juncture. This reconstruction does not seek to exhaustively capture ‘how it really was’ for Indigenous viewers to see themselves on screen. Rather, confronted by limited historical records at this site, the final chapter’s second section widens its scope to detail evidence of diverse Indigenous responses to cinema in Darwin during this period. I draw attention to how cinema’s multiple, overlapping spaces might have presented themselves to the viewers watching Shell’s travelogues.

Despite all pretensions to explore the unknown, the ideal-typical movement of a travelogue is circuitous. The camera ventures forth so as to return safely home: a confirmation that the alien and strange is in the secure possession of the known and familiar. By examining the production, distribution and exhibition history of Shell’s travelogues, I trace how their trajectory becomes waylaid. This thesis aims to contribute to the work of demystification: to show that settler colonialism’s own purportedly most secure possession - an internally coherent and exclusive claim to space - is far from settled.

Chapter One

Man's will is pitted against Nature's ageless strength, and with Science as his tool, Man, in the end, must link Nature to his chain, and put a girdle of civilisation around the Centre.¹

I begin with a claim that appears uncontroversial and axiomatic: settler colonial space is produced through processes of (symbolic, practical and contested) dispossession. Yet the question of which concepts of space are deployed to effect ongoing displacement and usurp Indigenous claims to sovereignty is less transparent. Far from abstract, the reigning concepts of space issue in powerful symbolic and practico-functional effects. Following Lefebvre, *representations of space* are the governing ideas which manifest in the developer's plans, the architect's models and, in the case of Shell, the oil company's maps and their cinematic corollary: the travelogue.² Shell's pre-WWII mapping and filmmaking practices ordered the terrain of 'the Centre' through two apparatuses of representing space: cartography and the camera. The central claim of this chapter is that constitutive tensions in the concept of settler colonial space are both textually represented in Shell's 1930s travelogues and attested to in their production history. Furthermore, according to the logic of my opening claim, by tracing antinomies in the predominant conception of the spaces of the Australian interior we glean *corresponding* insights into the contradictory logics of dispossession at work in 1930's Australian settler colonialism more broadly.

As discussed in the introduction, recent historiographical debate within settler colonial studies scholarship has pivoted on the question of whether settler colonialism is best understood as a singular, pervasive structure of dispossession which treats Indigenous

¹ Epilogue, *Through the Centre* (1939), prod. Herschells Films Pty. Ltd. for Shell Company of Australia, 29 min, Sound, BW, 16mm.

² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 33.

subjects as ineluctably doomed or by a multiplicity of contending structures which not only erase but also profit from and are challenged by Indigenous difference.³ Far from being simply theoretical options available to historians, this chapter proposes that the dichotomy of ‘erasure’ versus ‘heterogeneous Indigeneities’ is here itself constitutive of what I have called settler colonialism’s (il)logics. This chapter’s case-study is Shell’s 1939 travelogue *Through the Centre*. This was a film produced on a mapmaking expedition. There is no uniform logic of space represented in *Through the Centre* but a field of tensions – including the contestation by Indigenous peoples of Shell’s one-way trajectory. I begin by situating the distinctive spatial politics of the film in relation to two competing modes of cartography which Shell invested in across the 1930s. The first mode – aerial mapping for resources – conceptualises inland Australia as unoccupied, homogenous and exchangeable space. The second mode – road mapping for automobile tourism – assumes a more phenomenological cast, imbuing the interior with unique and exotic features. In dialogue with a critical reconstruction of *Through the Centre*’s production history, my analysis of these two cartographic practices seeks to illustrate an internal cleft within the late 1930’s project of conceiving and producing settler colonial space in Australia wherein Indigenous peoples are simultaneously vanished and ever-present.

Mapping for Resources

The first form of cartographic practice is exemplified in aerial mapping. In 1930, Shell supplied oil and fuel to the Mackay Aerial Survey of Central Australia, adventurer Donald George Mackay’s much-publicised attempt to put the “last remaining unknown sections of central Australia” on the government surveyor’s map (Figure 1).⁴ Shell’s sponsorship was rewarded with a public relations coup: the Mackay pilots conducted the survey in the shape of a great, imaginary wheel in the sky, radiating out from the base camp at Ilbpilla.⁵ Taking aerial photographs from a height of two miles, the expedition party’s evaluative lens did not

³ Tim Rowse, “Indigenous Heterogeneity,” p. 301.

⁴ “Aerial Survey: Mackay Expedition,” *The Brisbane Courier* (QLD), 26 June 1930, p. 17.

⁵ “In Central Australia: New Lakes and Mountains,” *The Argus* (Melbourne, VIC), 19 July 1930, p. 7.

see a country already richly embedded with pre-existing forms of life and meaning but a 67,000 square mile monotonous tract “of little use to anyone.”⁶ The Ehrenberg Range country was, of course, neither ‘unknown,’ ‘unmapped,’ nor an uncultivated wasteland. For members of the major Aboriginal groups in the area – the Pintupi and the Kukatja, whose territories overlapped – the landscape was brimming with *tjukurrpa* (Dreaming) narratives, sacred sites and places of sustenance (e.g. water holes and traditional food sources).⁷

The processes and practices by which early European explorers, surveyors and settlers discursively ‘emptied’ the Australian landscape and symbolically/instrumentally reinscribed it in their own image has been extensively explored. Though not explicitly under the mantle of settler colonial studies, landmark early works by scholars including Paul Carter, Ross Gibson and Simon Ryan continue to inform understandings of how the proprietary settler gaze, the process of naming and the act of mapping attempted (and attempts) to erase Indigenous presence and legitimise settler expansion.⁸ As Roslynn Haynes argues, the Australian desert interior has long represented a “particular and most exemplary case of *terra nullius*” within the settler geographic imagination.⁹ In the decades preceding the Mackay expedition, Shell provided free ‘motor spirit’ to countless similar transcontinental aviation time-trials over and automobile journeys through the ‘great empty Centre’, forging an early-twentieth-century corporate mythology steeped in the triumphalist rhetoric of nineteenth-century heroic exploration.

⁶ “Mackay Expedition Returns,” *Bowen Independent* (QLD), 15 July 1930, p. 3.

⁷ Lloyd D. Graham, “The Creation of Wilkinkarra (Lake Mackay) in Pintupi/Kukatja Dreamings,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (2003): p. 30.

⁸ See Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Sirius Books, 1984); Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁹ Roslynn D Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 31.

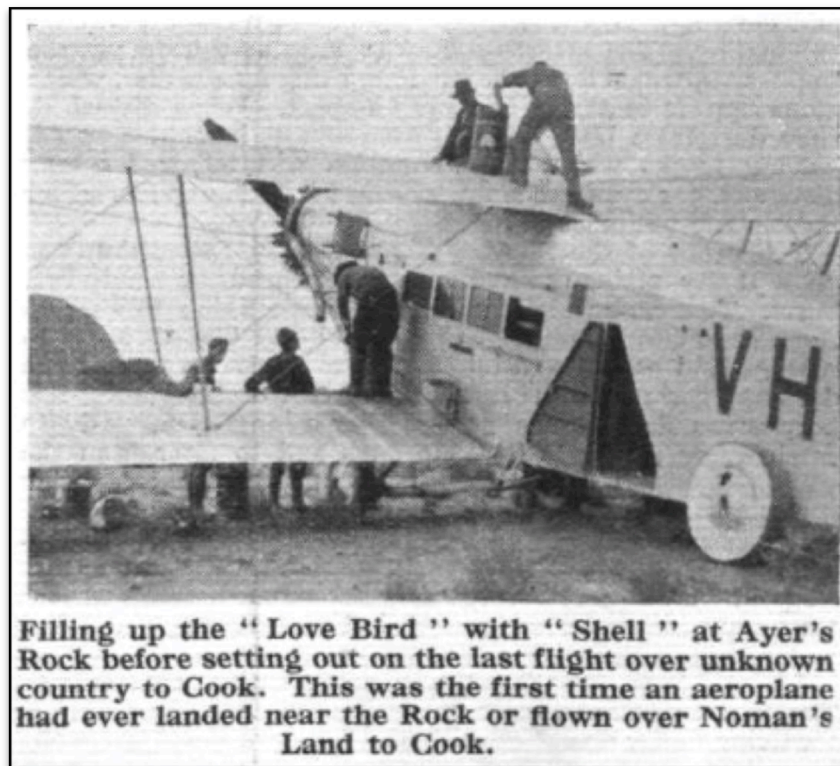


Figure 1 Mackay Expedition, Uluru, 1930. 'Aerial Survey of Central Australia,' *Flight*, 21 November 1930, p. 1257.

Extending this earlier scholarship, Lorenzo Veracini has recently proposed that a specifically *settler colonial* geographic imagination typically proceeds by 'vacating' the landscape (both discursively and physically) and re-presenting it as a *tabula rasa*: a void to be filled by productive settler endeavours.¹⁰ A few years after the Mackay expedition, Shell purchased its own fleet of airplanes and embarked upon an intensive program of aerial reconnaissance, crisscrossing the continent from the Nor' West to Brisbane with the aim of identifying potentially lucrative landforms. As Paul Virilio has shown, the convergence of aviation and aerial cinematography in the wake of the Great War brought about a new mode of perception premised upon depleting and reducing space to abstract systems and geometric patterns.¹¹ Shell's 1930s aerial maps appear devoid of human habitation and topographical variation: the unmarked spaces in between sparse, hand-drawn lines resemble blueprints for building or engineering. These maps are *featureless* apart from specifically instrumental

¹⁰ Lorenzo Veracini, "The Imagined Geographies of Settler Colonialism," in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 190.

¹¹ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), p. 17.

markers. Here, as Paul Carter writes, was a country “*waiting to be occupied.*”¹² Shell’s aerial maps offer striking evidence of the company’s attempts to re-inscribe the interior with its corporate agenda – plotting its network of inland petrol dumps, shading in regions of earlier mineral discovery and laying out the straight lines of roads being brought into existence by its own Mexphalte bitumen. By November 1939, Shell’s birds-eye prospecting appeared to have paid dividends. The company received its first Australian oil exploration concession and appropriated a 350,000 square mile area of southern Queensland’s Great Artesian Basin into its corporate coordinates. Following Veracini, then, Shell’s aerial representations of inland Australia as a blank – yet potentially profitable - space would therefore appear to be a smooth transposition of a company’s aims with the broader settler colonial project of erasure.

Mapping for Tourism

As the decade progressed, however, Shell was increasingly mapping not only for resources but for tourism. For many modern-day motorists, the sight of a red and yellow scallop through the windshield brings to mind a certain jingle – Go Well, Go Shell. In the 1930s, before the postwar explosion of car ownership, Shell’s corporate motto ran quite differently. The everyday consumption of petrol was less a matter-of-fact statement (Go Well) than a future proposition: ‘*Where to go – How to go – Ask Shell.*’ A new market of touring petrol guzzlers and with it, a new set of social desires – to explore the vast Australian interior - had to be first actively encouraged. While Shell’s inland aerial maps implicitly disavowed Indigenous presence, this second mode of mapping stressed Indigenous occupation as a profitable feature of the region. This double vision was not new: as Simon Ryan points out, representations of the Antipodes as both *tabula rasa* and “repository of perversity” have co-existed since the *mappae mundi* of the medieval era.¹³

The 1930s marked the beginning of a burgeoning leisure tourism industry into the

¹² Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 345.

¹³ Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 110.

‘exotic’ Far North and Centre of Australia.¹⁴ Catching glimpses of Indigenous lives and cultural practices was billed high on the itinerary.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, Shell credited the expansion of inland tourism to its own foresight in establishing remote refueling facilities throughout the preceding decades: “to organize a system of oil distribution over the whole country, conquering the tropical stretches of Northern Queensland and the vast deserts in Central and Western Australia, tremendous difficulties had to be surmounted.”¹⁶ The air of hardship writ large in this ode to corporate trailblazing reverberates with Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini’s recent account of the specific practices and subjectivities produced within settler colonial cultures of automobility.¹⁷ Where touring in the metropole was fuelled by fantasies of speed and sophistication, early settler colonial automobilities valorised “laborious travel through remote territories” as a process by which the bush-bashing settler-overlander became ‘indigenised.’¹⁸ Clarsen and Veracini argue that settler colonial automobilities have a recursive character at once retrospective and prospective. Early car journeys were represented as both nostalgic “mechanized re-enactments of earlier colonial explorations” and the key to “transforming ‘empty’ landscapes, bringing them into existence for the new polity.”¹⁹ In 1928, for instance, Shell engaged renowned adventure-cameraman Francis Birtles to chart an overland route to the site of the Burke and Wills camp at Cooper’s Creek.²⁰ Birtles, a prolific Kodaker whose popular “curio-pastiche”-travelogues fed the commercial cinema’s hunger for Australian exotica throughout the 1920s, returned from the Dig Tree with plans for a film and a map – both aimed at reclaiming this mythic site of

¹⁴ Peter Bishop, “Driving Around: The Unsettling of Australia,” *Studies in Travel Writing* 2, no. 1 (1998): pp. 146-147.

¹⁵ Baiba Berzins, “Before the Sharing: Aborigines and Tourism in the Northern Territory to the 1970s,” *Journal of Northern Territory History* 9 (1998): p. 71.

¹⁶ University of Melbourne Archives (hereafter, UMA), Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 15, Unit 292, *Shell: House Journal* 6 (1951), “A Jubilee of Progress: Shell’s 50 years in Australia,” n.p.

¹⁷ A subfield of mobilities research, automobilities scholarship seeks to understand the expansive cultural, social and political meanings with which cars have become invested beyond their ostensible utility as a mode of transport.

¹⁸ Georgine Clarsen and Lorenzo Veracini, “Settler Colonial Automobilities: A Distinct Constellation of Automobile Cultures?” *History Compass* 10, no. 12 (2012): p. 893.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 893-894.

²⁰ “Mr. Francis Birtles, Visiting the Outback Country,” *Border Watch* (Mount Gambier, SA), 13 December 1928, p. 6. For an insightful account of Birtles’ role as a celebrity ‘overlander’ in the development of the nineteenth-century settler overlanding phenomenon, see Georgine Clarsen, “Pedaling Power,” pp. 713-720.

exploratory failure for a new generation of pioneering motorists.²¹ Birtles' films seeded a popular ethnographic imaginary which, by the 1930s, saw widely-read travel magazines such as *Walkabout* commonly touting Indigenous Australians as “once noble, now vanishing” attractions en-route through the Outback.²²

Shell's attempts to capitalise on this growing tourist market manifest in road maps produced by the Company's Around Australia Mapping Unit (Figure 2). Here, the Northern Territory and Central Australia are marked out as exotic spaces of spectacle, denoted on the map alongside camp and water supply sites by metonymic, one-legged figures holding woomeras. In contrast to the representation of inland Australia as an empty expanse in Shell's mode of mapping for resources, here profit lay with foregrounding the marvels of difference on offer to the tourist whose own journey was to be remarkably standardised: following Shell's road maps, fuelling their vehicle with Shell's petrol and marking their border crossing courtesy of the Shell Touring Service (Figure 3). This second regime of cartographic representation resonates with Ernestine Hill's reassessment of a map from her childhood in *The Great Australian Loneliness* (1937). Where once “damnation was written in four words – ‘The Great Australian Desert’,” the ‘dead heart’ of Australia was, by the late 1930s, popularly reimagined as “vitaly alive.”²³

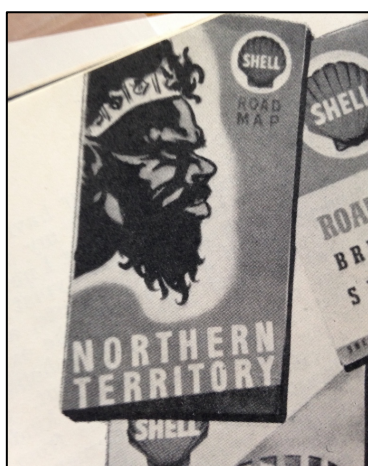


Figure 2 Northern Territory Road Map, 1930. UMA: Shell Historical Archive, Unit 255.

²¹ Michael Leigh, “Curiouser and Curiouser,” in *Back of Beyond: Discovering Australian Film and Television*, ed. Scott Murray (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1988), p. 83.

²² Lynette Russell, *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Australian Aboriginalities* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2001), p. 37.

²³ Ernestine Hill, *The Great Australian Loneliness* (Sydney: ETT Imprint, 1995), p. 247.



Figure 3 Shell Touring Service SA/NT border sign, 1928. UMA: Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045.00060.

Through the Centre

Both modes of mapping contribute to settler colonial representations of space that dispossess prior Indigenous claims to land, culture and socio-spiritual connection. Mapping for resources simply ‘vanishes’ inconvenient Indigenous presence, while maps intended for tourism actively exploit a caricatured, exotic Indigeneity. Shell’s 1930s ethnographic travelogues were coextensive with this second regime of mapping for tourism. In an internal memorandum from June 1939, Sales General Manager, Frank Cave proposed that while the Company’s Touring Department was fielding daily requests for maps from prospective tourists, “we should be doing much more than this; we should be selling the idea of touring to the motorist.”²⁴ In other words, Shell should actively aim to cultivate new markets and capitalise on the growing public interest in the red Centre as a tourist destination. A plan was hatched: a round-Australia mapping-cum-filmmaking expedition to update Shell’s touring

²⁴ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to Sales General Manager from Sales Development Department, 15 June 1939.

maps and secure footage “that will enable us to compile an outstanding talkie film on the Interior of Australia.”²⁵ The film would serve as a kind of ‘user guide’ to the touring maps – filling in its outlines and tempting the tourist spectator with brief, postcard-like glimpses of the sights on offer. As Martin Thomas has recently proposed, the rationale for interwar twentieth-century expeditions was no longer scientific or territorial discovery but the display of “showmanship and the generation of media product.”²⁶ Indeed, following a decade-long fever for round-Australia advertising stunts in the 1920s, Shell was not the only petroleum firm barnstorming around the country - the Vacuum Oil Company was also busily shooting its own quasi-ethnographic travelogue, the remarkably similar *Round Australia by Car* (1939).²⁷

On 29 July 1939, the Shell expedition - including in-house surveyor, Ray Murphy, cameraman Roy Driver of local production lab Herschells, and well-known overlander Mr. M. D. Cameron - set out from Melbourne’s Parliament House amidst a flurry of media attention. Travelling westward in a 1 ½ ton Chevrolet truck, their cargo included 4000 pounds worth of 35mm camera equipment and the publicised pledge to return with footage of “the kaleidoscope which makes up ‘Australia beyond the cities.’”²⁸ The film of the 9000-mile journey opens with a panning shot of bustling downtown Perth and a paean to this “rich and lovely city of the golden west,” voiced in the triumphalist tenor of a company confident that its near monopoly on the pre-war motor spirit market was in lockstep with the “culture and progress of the western capital.”²⁹

²⁵ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 83 2/10, Memorandum to Sales General Manager from Sales Development Department: ‘Shell Mapping Expedition,’ 27 July 1939. This was not the first time Shell had sponsored a publicity roadshow round Australia’s circumference - the Company also co-sponsored the 1928 MacRobertson Round Australia Expedition. See Georgine Clarsen, “The 1928 MacRobertson Round Australia Expedition: Colonial Advertising in the Twentieth Century,” in *Expedition into Empire: Exploratory Journeys and the Making of the Modern World*, ed. Martin Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 194-213.

²⁶ Martin Thomas, “What Is an Expedition? An Introduction,” in *Expedition into Empire: Exploratory Journeys and the Making of the Modern World*, ed. Martin Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 11.

²⁷ Georgine Clarsen, “Tracing the outline of nation: Circling Australia by car,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (1999): pp. 359-369.

²⁸ “Maps and Film of ‘Outback’: Expedition’s 8000-Mile Trip to Help Motorists,” *Moree Gwydir Examiner and General Advertiser* (Moree, NSW), 14 August 1939, p. 4.

²⁹ Murray, *Go Well*, p. 137.

This prologue cuts to an animated map which visualises the expedition's itinerary. Here it is clear that while we are venturing forth from Perth, this will not be a journey of linear progression – we have, already, stopped in at the stadial apex of civilisation. Nonetheless, the map – which intercuts the film's segments – is a reminder that in contrast to the disjunctive form of many early twentieth-century expedition films, here we have a clear point of departure, sequential route and a safe endpoint in sight.³⁰ This is important in the context of a film keen to rebrand the interior (its people and places) as at once a site of mystery begging for exploration and a safe space of demonstrable hospitality. Central Australia's Finke River is thus mysterious ("why it should run into a chain of mountains instead of away from it is beyond comprehension"), explorable ("no man has ever traced its full course") *and* a welcoming landscape, as if intended by nature for the motorist's convenience: "Finke River has cut great gaps so that one may go through the ranges not over them."

The Shell expedition set out seeking "interesting native life and customs."³¹ Thus, *Through the Centre* would seem to definitively leave behind the assumption of empty, unoccupied space underlying practices of resource mapping in favour of the touring map's penchant for exotic 'colour'. Yet to draw such a conclusion is overhasty. I propose that throughout the travelogue, three distinct modes of representing settler-Indigenous encounters come to the fore. The first two modes of encounter actually restage the tension between a spatial representation that profits from Indigenous presence and one that envisages Indigenous disappearance. The final mode, leaning on the buried production history of the film, gestures (necessarily incompletely) to Indigenous practices of contesting the settler colonial monopoly on recognised modes of spatial representation.

³⁰ Alison Griffiths, "The Untrammelled Camera: A Topos of the Expedition Film," *Film History* 25, no. 1-2 (2013): p. 104.

³¹ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 83 2/10, Memorandum to Sales General Manager from Mr. R. H. Murphy: 'Overland Motor Tour to Northern and Western Australia,' 26 July 1939.

1. Perth-Broome: Exoticising Encounters

An early intertitle frames the first, overtly exoticising approach: “The Great Red Heart of Australia! It is a land of mystery to the average Australian.” Departing Perth, the Western Australian leg of the journey is represented via a string of *Wunderkammer*-style curiosities, progressively more ‘mysterious’ as the expedition travels deeper North. Roy Driver’s camera lingers on the stunted natural oddities of Geraldton “where the trees grow horizontally instead of vertically,” the ‘blackboy’ trees (*Xanthorrhoea*) of Meekatharra and, inevitably, the living ‘specimens’ of tropical Broome. In a striking sequence epitomising the crude ‘civilized/primitive’ opposition underpinning much of *Through the Centre*’s narration, the film cuts between the “lovely homes of the white residents...sheltered by tall coconut flowers” and “the native quarter where the greatest interest lies.” Here, “we discovered living in the main street no less than seventeen different races of people.” As the expedition party is never featured before the camera, the ‘we’ of this voiceover clearly stands in for the prospective motorist-viewer, who is invited to participate in what Clarsen and Veracini call a “mass touristic re-enactment of the settler colonial relationship.”³² On this segregated streetscape, the camera hovers on a group of young Aboriginal boys and Japanese pearl-luggers, framing their facial features in close-ups reminiscent of anthropometric photography. The sight of inquisitive, southern filmmakers lingering on Broome’s multicultural diversity would no doubt have displeased the Western Australian Commissioner of Native Affairs, A. O. Neville, whose fears of ‘mixed-race’ populations sully the white body politic of the North had led to ongoing attempts throughout the 1930s to biologically breed out his state’s ‘colour.’³³ Shell’s interest lay instead with representing these non-white populations as ‘kaleidoscopic’ marvels of the overland tour – natural wonders akin to the swordfish and sharks which lurk in Geikie Gorge despite it being 400 miles from the sea.

³² Clarsen and Veracini, “Settler Colonial Automobilities,” p. 894.

³³ Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880 - 1939* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1997), p. 178.

2. *Broome-Darwin: Anachronistic Encounters*

Recalling my earlier discussion of Shell's aerial mapping practice, there would seem to be a fundamental tension between the Company's cartographic emptying of the landscape as *uninhabited* and touring maps and travelogues that sell Indigenous peoples as exotic attractions en route. Yet it is crucial to note that *Through the Centre* represents the Shell expedition as a journey through both space *and* time. According to Veracini, the settler colonial geographic imaginary is further distinguished by a particular temporal modality – an anticipatory character which relentlessly envisions future transformations of the land and its original occupants.³⁴ This is evident in *Through the Centre*'s second mode of representing cross-cultural encounter. Here, Shell seeks to promote tourism to sites of Indigenous confinement (missions, cattle stations and Aboriginal reserves) as opportunities for time-travel – a chance to visit pre-modern spaces and witness a 'colourful' humanity still popularly understood as doomed.³⁵ In other words – tourism to the interior promised a visit to the 'past' wherein the modern motorist could affirm their own relative contemporaneity.

This mode of encounter is exemplified in a before-and-after shot sequence which recurs across *Through the Centre*. At Fitzroy River Crossing, for instance, early footage of a car "bogged to its eyebrows" is contrasted with a travelling shot of the expedition truck traversing the now concreted overpass. As the expedition party crossed the WA/NT border into the cattle kingdoms of the Victoria River district, they staged a similar meeting of their own vehicle and an Indian hawker's donkey team – both, the narrator notes with false nostalgia, "not yet quite a thing of the past." Praising the motorcar, truck and airplane for "rapidly replacing other methods of transport in the north," the narrator conveniently omits that such progress in infrastructure was premised upon the ruthless exploitation of unremunerated Indigenous labour. The very Inverway-Wave Hill road that the expedition was traversing had, only a year earlier, been exposed in the media as a horror stretch where

³⁴ Veracini, "The Imagined Geographies of Settler Colonialism," p. 182.

³⁵ See, for instance, Daisy Bates, *The Passing of the Aborigines: A Lifetime Spent Among the Natives of Australia* (London: John Murray, 1938).

Indigenous road gangs toiled for rations in 'slavery-like' conditions.³⁶

While outright violence had ceased in the Victoria River district by the late 1930s, Deborah Bird Rose reminds us that the "threat and memory of terror" still bore heavily when Shell arrived to film the rations line at Victoria River Downs.³⁷ Awareness of the decades of settler brutality which preceded Shell's visit to the station makes this sequence one of the most harrowing of *Through the Centre*. As Driver's camera pans across the flour line, numerous women react to the presence of the interlopers by turning their backs and shielding their faces. These small acts of resistance are mocked by the film's narrator who jokes that "we had some difficulty in getting these ladies to face the camera...and, in a few instances, as it was the maid's day off they had to bring their babies with them." The punch line comes in the next shot where we see the same women doing the laundry – they are, of course, the maids: "the gins do all the work amongst the homestead – they're excellent at washing and even herd the goats!"

Further north, near Delamere Station, the sarcasm continues with a visual joke where the narrator's claim that "we paid a formal call at an Aboriginal camp" is juxtaposed with a pointed panning shot of ramshackle *mia mias*. Again, any sense that the surly demeanour of a group of strong, clearly angry Indigenous men may pose a threat to the tourist-viewer, is contained by a knowing wink: "although they didn't say so in just so many words, they seemed pleased to see us and cooperated fully with allowing us to obtain some interesting and intimate shots." Here, tourists could both enjoy the frisson of exotic danger and be assured that Indigeneity was ultimately hospitable (and so, as Chapter Two explores, assimilable). This jesting narration was precisely the kind of racist media commentary which Indigenous activists Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson had angrily railed against in their pamphlet published for the first 1938 Aboriginal Day of Mourning protest.³⁸ Shell could make these jokes because

³⁶ "Repair of Public Roads," *Northern Standard* (Darwin, NT), 22 February 1938, p. 3.

³⁷ Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), p. 24.

³⁸ Jack Patten and Bill Ferguson, "To all Aborigines!" *Australian Abo Call: The Voice of the Aborigines* 1 (1938), p. 1.

the Company did not envision Indigenous Australians as part of their future market – they were, like the camel team, anticipated as soon to be eclipsed by the settler and the diesel train.

3. Darwin – Melbourne: Contested Encounters

This chapter's analysis of Shell's two cartographic practices and a travelogue which served to animate the touring maps has thus far sought to highlight a constitutive tension within the late 1930s project of conceiving settler colonial space. Rather than drawn together in either an ineluctable telos or produced by multiple 'contending structures', the settler-colonial space of the 'never never' was represented *simultaneously* as a homogenous void *and* as replete with differentiated exotica. Yet I am aware that, as Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds have cautioned, in focusing on representations of "seemingly totalizing cartographic projects," there is a danger that spatial histories overlook the anxious, intimate and always more frayed contours of "everyday encounters between settlers and the Indigenous peoples that imperial maps sought to elide."³⁹ Indeed analysis at the conceptual register of 'representations of space' risks replicating the very processes (suppressing Indigenous subjectivities) that it describes. The final section of this chapter therefore shifts its focus from *Through the Centre* as a textual representation, to examine expedition member Ray Murphy's fieldwork diary as evidence of the off-screen encounters eviscerated in the edited film. While we should treat this source with caution – the serialized diary entries were posthumously published in a metropolitan newspaper several months after the expedition returned – they nonetheless open up the possibility of resistant readings of the travelogue's third, and final, mode of encounter.

Following a few days spent marveling at the "smoldering joss sticks and other odiferous perfumes" of Darwin ("such as to make one think one was in the Orient"), the Shell expedition trucked east into Arnhem Land.⁴⁰ Murphy's fieldwork diary reveals that here, like the many European explorers before them, the surveyors were deeply reliant on

³⁹ Banivanua Mar and Edmonds, "Introduction", p. 6.

⁴⁰ "Darwin, Northern Gateway to Australia," *Recorder* (Port Pirie, SA), 25 July 1940, p. 4.

local Indigenous guides for navigation. On a buffalo hunt near Marrakai Station, deep in swampy country where “tracks...to inexperienced eyes did not exist,” the Shell party lost its bearings.⁴¹ Here was a space constituted by coordinates which the expedition members could not read. They looked on in “awe” as “the native horsemen then set off into the timber and were lost to sight for some time until about an hour later we saw converge on the plains huge herds of buffalo followed by the horsemen.”⁴² In its epilogue (this chapter’s prologue), *Through the Centre* concludes with a sweeping tribute to petrol-powered modernity: “Man, in the end, must link Nature to his chain, and put a girdle of civilization around the Centre.” Yet Murphy’s admiring diary entries describing the skill of Arnhem Land buffalo hunters, and later, the prowess of Indigenous stockmen and ‘Afghan’ cameleers, suggests that this grand project of husbanding nature was, in fact, indebted to the local knowledge systems of the very people Shell sought to ‘civilise’. Interestingly, these encounters are not included in the film which cuts directly from Darwin to the narrator’s claim that heading south “we came across a camp of black gins who finally yielded to our persuasions to stage a corroboree.” Murphy’s diary entry reveals that far from ‘discovering’ this camp, the expedition was led there by Charlie, the station’s ‘half-caste’ driver. Far from ‘yielding’ to the Shell party’s persuasions, the female camp members in fact demanded “tobacco, together with tea, sugar and flour” in exchange for the performance.⁴³

Indeed, while the expedition expected to find in Arnhem Land a “comparatively wild type of aborigine”, they continually encountered subjects savvy to their own representation and familiar with Shell’s showpieces of Western modernity - the car and the camera.⁴⁴ Murphy’s diary entry for Marrakai is an object lesson in a settler’s own self-reflexive reckoning with preconceived prejudice: “you can imagine our amazement when we were greeted with ‘Good morning, sirs!’ by a native in a loin cloth, waistcoat, and bowler hat!”⁴⁵

⁴¹ “Thrilling Buffalo Shooting in Northern Australia,” *Recorder* (Port Pirie, SA), 30 July 1940, p. 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Expedition Entertained with Crocodile Hunting,” *Recorder* (Port Pirie, SA), 13 August 1940, p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Later he describes the Shell party's surprise upon being asked 'intelligent' and informed questions about their equipment by those before the camera:

It was a strange feeling, however, being asked by natives all marked and dressed for a corroboree, in a place in Arnhemland miles away from civilization, whether they would see their photographs on the screen at a theatre in Darwin.⁴⁶

By asserting their multiple subjectivities – as ceremonial participants *and* metropolitan cinemagoers – and by articulating their own autonomous, imaginative geographies, the buffalo hunters illuminate the fault lines undergirding *Through the Centre's* representations of space. The practical dependence of the Shell expedition party on Indigenous coordinates through country lends an ironic edge to the company's promise: 'Where to go – How to go – Ask Shell.'

Shell made ethnographic travelogues to sell petrol and en-route peddled a new lifestyle of modern car-borne exploration. There are, of course, more obvious sites to enquire into representations of settler colonial nation building: the Department of Information's films, for instance. Yet the fact that *Through the Centre* was produced by a non-state actor with its own prerogatives of marketing and fostering brand recognition does not minimise the insights it offers into reigning settler colonial ideas of space. *Through the Centre's* clashing images of space at once 'empty', exploitable and filled with exotic attractions bespeak precisely a spirit of capitalist opportunism. As already intimated in my introduction, Shell did not need to mask such tensions: there was a market for both selling petroleum-fuelled progress (and therefore anticipating future Indigenous erasure) *and* selling Indigeneity as a spectacle for tourism. From the outbreak of the Second World War, the Shell Company of Australia actively worked to extinguish the separation between its own interests as an enterprise and those of the state. It is to this merging that the following chapter now turns. The spatial practices of Shell and the state would come to closely align and produce social spaces of Indigenous cinema-going at once segregated from the body politic (i.e. sequestered to designated government

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

settlements) *and* aimed at socio-cultural assimilation through ‘visual education.’ The field of tensions we’ve encountered in Shell’s representations of settler colonial space (cartographically ‘empty’ but simultaneously ‘exotic’) are not overcome but ultimately absorbed into the practices of postwar assimilation in the Northern Territory.

Chapter Two

From reigning representations of Australian settler colonial space, I shift now to the spatial practices that materially produce and delimit it. Chapter One concluded in Arnhem Land in late 1939, with the image of Yolngu buffalo hunters confronting Shell's expedition party with the question of whether they would see themselves on screen in Darwin. Switching focus from the production history of Shell's travelogues to the circuits in which they were distributed, this chapter will explore how, by the late 1940s, the notion of the Shell Company actively screening their films to Indigenous audiences was no longer a cause for surprise. The buffalo hunters did not, in fact, have to visit a capital city theatre to see themselves on screen. In the postwar period, Shell films were brought back to the communities, cattle stations and missions that they, in part, depicted.

Following Lefebvre's spatial triad, I describe this system of nontheatrical film distribution as a *spatial practice*. These are the material routes and networks (roads, buildings, train tracks) which allow for the exchange of bodies, capital and cultural goods over space. As Lefebvre argues, spatial practices are not simply neutral conduits but undergirded by the agendas of hegemonic powers which shape the practical possibilities of a given social configuration.¹ Translated into film historical terms – the politics of distribution governs who gets to see which films, with whom and under which framing circumstances. This brings into sharper focus an implicit concern of the first chapter: the production of space necessarily involves the production of racialised subjectivities.² In Chapter One, Indigenous subjects were figured as 'doomed' in the model of mapping for resources or as 'exploitable' workers, 'hospitable' guides and 'exotic' attractions in the second mode of mapping for tourism. Dispossession is not just a negative power but also actively seeks to configure certain kinds of subjects. To understand how Shell's postwar spatial practices of distribution

¹ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 38.

² For an important account of the mutually constitutive production of race and settler colonial space, see Penelope Edmonds' analysis of the construction of Indigenous subjects as anomalous 'vagrants' on the nineteenth-century Melbourne streetscape; Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, pp. 135-138.

became explicitly entangled with the (always incomplete) racialising project of producing and governing Indigenous subjectivities, we must first see how Shell's corporate image became closely associated with state power.

This chapter unfolds in two sections. The first section 'Shell and the State' details the establishment of Shell's nontheatrical film distribution and exhibition infrastructure at the outbreak of World War Two. This was a period of crisis when the Company actively worked to identify its own interests with those of the Australian state. I demonstrate how Shell's production, distribution and exhibition operations were co-opted to the national effort. My discussion of the Shell Film Unit's travelogue *Alice Through the Centre* (1949) and its overt promotion of Australia's postwar assimilation policies suggests that this corporate-state alliance continued into the postwar period.³

Having established the wartime convergence of Shell and the state, the second section of this chapter 'Pastoral Practices,' turns to trace how Shell's film distribution and exhibition infrastructure became entwined with the postwar project of Indigenous assimilation. The Northern Territory's Native Affairs Branch explicitly regarded 16mm film screenings as one means of transforming Indigenous subjects into conforming, compliant 'citizens' on government-run settlements. These are spatial practices in the service of pastoral power: ministering to the 'souls' of subjects. Pastoral power, in Foucault's sense, refers to a form of institutionalised power that does not simply prohibit and discipline its subjects but actively produces subjectivities under the guise of 'taking care' of individuals.⁴ I argue that the field of tensions explored in Chapter One (either vanishing or exploiting Indigenous subjects in representations of settler colonial space) is not overcome but rather absorbed into the concept of assimilation. Assimilation policies endeavoured to produce subjectivities at once spatially segregated on government settlements *and* incorporated into the Australian body politic. By

³ *Alice Through the Centre* (1949), dir. Peter Whitchurch. Shell Film Unit Australia, 46 min, Sound, Colour/BW, 16mm.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984. Volume 3: Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 333-336.

reconstructing the spatial practices of Shell and the state's circuits of film distribution we glean further insights into the fraught (il)logics of settler colonialism. These insights testify against the settler state's avowed self-understanding as in command of the stadial march of reason and progress.

Section 1: Shell and the State

Shell and the State: WWII

In the pre-war travelogue *Through the Centre*, the Shell Company was more interested in selling a petrol-guzzling tourism lifestyle than explicitly promoting a version of Australian national identity. This chapter's case-study, the 1949 travelogue *Alice Through the Centre* registers a significant shift in agenda. As I will discuss, this film is an unabashed attempt by a multinational corporation to identify itself with the postwar projects of the Australian state. To understand the origins of this transition, we must first examine the importance of World War Two as a lull in consumer market demand for petroleum and a moment of crisis wherein Shell ceded its film infrastructure to the government for propaganda purposes.

While Shell's exploratory activities ground to a halt in southern Queensland at the outbreak of World War Two, other divisions of the Company kicked into overdrive. As Robert Murray describes, "the ordinary business of the oil industry ceased for the duration of the war. Shell and other oil companies harnessed themselves to the Allied defence machine."⁵ Shell was the biggest supplier of petroleum products to the Australian military, fuelling combat bombers, naval vessels and transport craft throughout the war effort. Tourist roadmaps became strategic blueprints, tanks were converted to aircraft carriers and petroleum derivatives were turned into TNT at Shell's newly-minted manufacturing plant at Salisbury, South Australia. The same nitrocellulose used in the production of explosives was the basis of the nitrate film stock which soon ran daily through Shell's in-house projectors.⁶ On 8

⁵ Murray, *Go Well*, p. 124.

⁶ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, p. 20.

September 1939 – a week after the declaration of war – Sales Development Department head Frank Cave sent a memorandum to General Manager, Vernon Smith, proposing that:

With an organisation such as ours, I believe there are many ways in which we could not only be of material assistance to the Commonwealth, in view of the present circumstances, but could also obtain goodwill and appreciation from the general public at whom our normal activities are aimed.⁷

By March 1940, amid growing rumours of the decade-long petrol rationing scheme which Menzies would soon introduce, Cave's modus operandi switched in tone from corporate patriotism to damage control. In a follow-up memorandum, he urged:

that there is at present (and will be for at least the duration of the War) a positive necessity for a marked increase in our public relations activities. The Oil industry does not appear at present in a very favourable light.⁸

Smith agreed, instructing Cave's department that "it is essential to keep our name before the public by all means possible."⁹ To do so, Shell turned to film – giving over its existing production and newly-formed distribution and exhibition infrastructure to the government. As it had in the prewar period, the Company engaged local film lab Herschells to produce a series of 16mm shorts intended to mobilise civilians on the home front. Films such as *They Serve* (1940) and *War in the Pacific* (1943) were distributed from Shell's Educational Film Library (Figure 4) which commenced operation in Melbourne in early 1940 as Australia's first public 16mm lending service. Shell films were also screened at the Company's own in-house theatrettes. Pre-war, these small cinemas (Figure 5) served as the site of nightly film screenings to motorists who received free tickets in exchange for purchases made at Shell resellers.¹⁰ In a further act of "material assistance to the Commonwealth," Shell theatrettes

⁷ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to Sales General Manager from Sales Development Department: 'Sales Development: General', 8 September 1939.

⁸ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to General Manager from Sales Development Department: 'Public Relations', 13 March 1940.

⁹ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to Sales Development Department from General Manager: 'Public Relations', 19 March 1940.

¹⁰ In September 1939, for instance, 10,385 motorists attended screenings across Shell's theatrettes. See: UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to Sales General Manager from Sales Development Department: 'Attendance figures for 1939,' 12 October 1939.

were now transformed into the site of twice-daily instructional film and lecture programmes given by government departments and Air Raid Precaution committees. Beyond the cities, Shell country district representatives further staged hundreds of free civic film fundraisers in rural picture halls from the Tivoli in Bowen¹¹ to the Regal in Dunedoo.¹²

For the purposes of this chapter, however, the most important lasting development in Shell's wartime use of film occurred outside the fixed space of the picture palace. I refer here to the Company's first forays into nontheatrical exhibition – a practice of bringing Shell into close contact with target markets through specifically curated film and lecture programmes held beyond the purpose-built cinema. In late 1939, Vernon Smith recognised the potential of portable 16mm projection equipment for screening films to audiences with limited spatial mobility. "It has occurred to me," he wrote to the Sales Development Department, "that when the Militia/ A.I.F. camps are in full operation and there are concentrations of 10,000 or 20,000 men at such centres as Seymour, etc., it might be possible to give the officers and N.C.O's from selected units a Shell Picture Night."¹³ By March 1940, the Sales Development Department could report that "tens of thousands of men" had enjoyed weekly Shell screenings under the stars in army camps across Australia (Figure 6).¹⁴

¹¹ "Shell Show: Excellent Film Programme," *Bowen Independent* (QLD), 2 Oct 1940, p. 2.

¹² "Shell Show at Dunedoo," *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative* (NSW), 29 March 1945, p. 10.

¹³ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to Sales Development Department from Assistant to General Manager: 'Picture Nights – Militia/A.I.F. Camps' 2 October 1939.

¹⁴ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 1/212, Memorandum to General Manager from Sales Development Department: 'Public Relations,' 13 March 1940.



Figure 4 Shell Educational Film Library, Melbourne, 1951.¹⁵



Figure 5 Shell Theatre, Melbourne, 1939.¹⁶



Figure 6 Shell militia camp screening, Brisbane, 1939.¹⁷

¹⁵ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 15, Unit 292, *Shell: House Journal* 6, no. 1 (1951), 'A View of the Shell Educational Film Library, Operated by Victorian Branch.'

¹⁶ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 15, Unit 292, *Shell: House Journal* 10, no. 6 (1939), 'New Shell Theatres.'

¹⁷ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 15, Unit 292, *Shell: House Journal* 10, no. 12 (1939), 'Shell Entertains Troops.'

Shell and the State: Post-WWII

Shell's close relationship with the state did not cease to be mediated through cinema at the end of the war. Rather, this corporate-state alliance continued into the postwar period in two main ways: 1) a shared vision of film's social utility and 2) direct collaborations between the company and state film units. Firstly, in 1948 an Australian Shell Film Unit and production facilities were established at Shell House in Sydney. The original, London-based Shell Film Unit was founded in 1934 on the recommendation of influential British film theorist John Grierson. Grierson viewed documentary cinema as a socially useful medium of public education invested with the power to produce an engaged citizenry.¹⁸ He predicted that the screening of films under the auspices of government or industry would soon 'creep' into everyday, nontheatrical settings:

As I see it, the future of the cinema may not be in the cinema at all. It may even come humbly in the guise of propaganda and shamelessly in the guise of uplift and education. It may creep in quietly by the way of the YMCAs, the church halls and other citadels of suburban improvement.¹⁹

In 1940, Grierson had visited Australia and recommended that the federal government establish documentary film production and nontheatrical distribution facilities.²⁰ This led to the formation of the Australian National Film Board in 1945 and later, a 16mm film lending service at the National Library.²¹ Through Grierson, the Shell Film Unit of Australia and the nation's main government filmmaking body thus shared a common origin and ethos. Secondly, this shared foundation was the basis of explicit collaboration. In 1949, the Shell Film Unit and the Australian National Film Board co-produced the instructional two-reeler

¹⁸ Colin Burgess, "Sixty Years of Shell Film Sponsorship, 1934-94," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 7, no. 2 (2010): p. 214. For a concise overview of Grierson's film philosophy and his leading role in the British documentary movement, see Forsyth Hardy, "Introduction," in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 13-40.

¹⁹ John Grierson, "Summary and Survey: 1935," in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 186.

²⁰ See, for instance, John Grierson, "Memorandum to the Right Honourable, the Prime Minister," in *An Australian Film Reader*, ed. Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), pp. 72-78.

²¹ See Albert Moran, *Projecting Australia: Government Film Since 1945* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991), pp. 1-30.

Farming for the Future. Shell's corporate motivation in sponsoring a documentary about soil erosion intended for screening to the important agricultural market is evident. The Company's immediate investment in two other mid-century social issues - postwar immigration and Indigenous assimilation - is less readily apparent. I turn now to this chapter's case-study to further illustrate Shell's newly explicit identification with state projects and, in particular, the Company's promotion of the government's assimilation policies.

Alice Through the Centre

The Shell Film Unit's third production, *Alice Through the Centre* (1949) is an overt advertisement for the Shell/State compact on two fronts. Firstly, it is a clarion call for Menzies' postwar immigration program: "we want people, people with guts, especially women to help us to open up some of that outback country that's waiting." Lewis Carroll's story of topsy-turvy displacement is reworked into Shell travelogue format. Down the rabbit hole goes Alice, a young, naïve Briton, led on a nationwide tour showcasing the growth of Australia's primary industries, manufacturing plants and inland settlements. Secondly, the film optimistically advocates for the government's postwar Indigenous assimilation policy: "we're just beginning to understand [Indigenous people], just beginning to help them fit into our sort of life."

One year earlier, the first postwar Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Welfare Authorities took place in Canberra. For some historians, this meeting marks a turning point in government assimilation policy from a model of biological absorption in the pre-war period toward a new model of socio-cultural assimilation on the basis of shared beliefs not blood ties. Russell McGregor identifies the postwar logic of assimilation as a shift from an ethos of exclusionary ethnic nationalism enshrined since Federation (where unity stemmed from common descent) toward a more inclusive, civically-oriented conception of nationhood.²² As Anna Haebich argues, this new approach promised

²² Russell McGregor, "One People: Aboriginal Assimilation and the White Australia Ideal," *History Australia* 6, no. 1 (2009): pp. 03.1-03.17.

Aboriginal peoples equal citizenship and constitutional rights in exchange for renouncing their Indigeneity and conforming to a vaguely-defined, normative Australian 'way of life.'²³ While I will shortly address concerns about this periodisation of postwar assimilation as a 'turning point' in settler colonial governance, *Alice Through the Centre* certainly proclaimed a new inclusive horizon. Alice's guide is an Akubra-wearing 'dinkum Aussie' settler on horseback (Figure 7) who explains Australia's 'progress' on race relations in the Northern Territory: "on the whole they've had a bad trot from the white man, not getting away from that. The kids'll have a better spin than their parents!"



Figure 7 Shell Film Unit shooting *Alice Through the Centre*, Alice Springs, 1949. NFSA: 445845.

As Jane Lydon has shown, the postwar decades witnessed a significant shift in ways of seeing and thinking about Aboriginal people.²⁴ In the wake of global revolt against Jewish persecution, civil rights protests and decolonisation movements abroad, local Indigenous and

²³ Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970* (Perth: Fremantle Press, 2008), p. 12.

²⁴ Jane Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition: Photography and the Emergence of Indigenous Rights* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2012), p. 29.

non-Indigenous activists increasingly deployed photography and film to advocate for Indigenous rights and document human rights infringements.²⁵ In 1949, for instance, photographs of Western Australian Indigenous prisoners in neck-chains circulated internationally through the communist press.²⁶ The Australian government became “almost obsessively aware” of how its Indigenous policies appeared abroad.²⁷ The Indigenous subjects filmed by Shell in 1949 were framed as wholesome cowboys and beaming children frolicking in station dams across the Territory.

Yet to rectify the appearance of an extended ‘bad trot from the white man,’ it did not simply suffice to make Aboriginal people camera-ready. Targeted film screenings at government settlements themselves were to play a larger role in the implementation of postwar assimilation policy. Previous scholarship has framed the relationship between Indigenous assimilation and cinema chiefly in terms of production and representation.²⁸ Government films such as Jaques Villemainot’s *Areyonga* (1958) and E. O. Stocker’s *The End of the Walkabout* (1958) depicted assimilation ‘success stories’ through uplifting, before-and-after narratives. Yet almost a decade before these well-analysed films were produced, the Native Affairs Branch had begun planning to use 16mm screenings as a spatial practice intended to sedentarise and train Indigenous peoples at “schools of citizenship” across the Territory.²⁹ The remainder of this chapter turns now to ask how such films came to be *distributed* to Indigenous audiences on Areyonga. Described by producer Geoffrey Bell as a travelogue intended to “weld into one the people of a great continent,” it is highly likely that

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁸ See Haebich, *Spinning the Dream*, pp. 138-1950; Catriona Moore and Stephen Muecke, "Racism and the Representation of Aborigines in Film," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (1984): pp. 36-53. On the representation of mid-century Indigenous assimilation in novels, see Catriona Elder, *Dreams and Nightmares of a White Australia: Representing Aboriginal Assimilation in the Mid-twentieth Century* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2009).

²⁹ Tim Rowse, *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 103.

Alice formed part of the specially-vetted pool of films circulated between government settlements for the purposes of ‘native education.’³⁰

Section 2: Pastoral Practices

Pastoral Power and Nontheatrical Cinema

This section examines the apparatus of racialised subjectification involved in Shell and the Native Affairs Branch’s shared vision of film screenings for (native) ‘education.’ As we have seen, WWII played a pivotal role in Shell’s outright identification with state assimilation policies. According to anthropologist A. P. Elkin, the war also proved Indigenous peoples’ so-called ‘capacity’ to appreciate “civilized services and amenities (hospitals, hygiene, canteens, films, huts and schools)” while stationed on army settlements across the Northern Territory.³¹ The purported surprise at Indigenous audiences’ cognitive abilities is manifestly racist and patronizing. While there may well have been an ‘unforeseen’ new capacity discovered in the military setting, this did not reside with the unanticipated aptitudes of Aboriginal soldiers but rather in the newly discovered power effects of 16mm film’s specific spatial practices. WWII proved the efficacy of film as a mass propaganda medium and small-gauge film technologies as the most versatile means of directly distributing these messages to audiences.³² Unbounded from the four walls of the picture palace, the ‘promise of 16mm’ lay in its supposed potential to “produce subjects in the service of public and private aims.”³³ The postwar decades represent the “golden age” of utilitarian film production in Australia and, arguably, the golden age of a distinctive mode of institutionalised, pastoral film exhibition.³⁴

³⁰ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 15, Unit 292, *Shell: House Journal* 8 (1949), ‘How Gum Trees Sell Gallons as explained by Geoffrey Bell, English Film Producer,’ pp. 3-5.

³¹ A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines*, 5th ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974), p. 369.

³² Haidee. Wasson, “Protocols of Portability,” *Film History: An International Journal* 25, no. 1 (2013): pp. 236-247.

³³ Wasson and Acland, “Utility and Cinema,” p. 2. I take this phrase from Gregory A. Waller, “Projecting the Promise of 16mm, 1935-1945,” in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 125-148.

³⁴ Rick Prelinger, “Introduction,” in *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*, ed. Rick Prelinger (San Francisco: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2006), p. vii. The history of sponsored cinema has received scant attention within Australian film historiography despite a burgeoning field of international research on the wide gamut of these ephemeral genres. Notable exceptions include, “A

Originally an ecclesiastical term describing the shepherding of the flock, Foucault explains how pastoral power shifts in modern times. State and non-state actors aim to ensure salvation in this world (not the next) by looking after “not just the whole community but each individual in particular, during his entire life.”³⁵ Tending directly to the health of the soul, pastoral power is a force that actively ‘individualizes’ rather than simply constraining individuals.

A mode of film exhibition cultivated by Shell during the war years helps to illuminate the operations of pastoral power. Rural Shell Shows were typically framed by the presence of a district representative who gave updates about the Company’s war contribution.³⁶ The attendance of a live lecturer is a defining feature of what Ronald Walter Greene, in his work on the YMCA’s Motion Picture Bureau, has described as a ‘pastoral’ mode of film exhibition: “the teacher/preacher, through the act of application, demonstrates and models the proper relationship the audience should have toward the film.”³⁷ In Greene’s model, the content of a given screening is less important than cinema’s capacity to assemble a receptive audience in a shared social space. Unlike a commercial film screening, this experience of cinema-going was framed by the presence of a mediating cultural authority - typically a company representative - who educated the audience about how their civic, educational, industrial or governmental organisation was both providing care for individual well-being and “harnessing the practice of movie watching to alleviate social, political, and moral problems of a population.”³⁸

Realist Film Unit and Association in Australia,” in Deane Williams, *Australian Post-War Documentary Film: An Arc of Mirrors* (Bristol: Intellect, 2008), pp. 21-50; Martha Ansara and Lisa Milner, “The Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit: the Forgotten Frontier of the Fifties,” *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine* 119 (1999): pp. 28-39.

³⁵ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” p. 333.

³⁶ For a contemporaneous review of a Shell film lecture, see ‘Batlow: ‘Shell Show’, *The Tumut and Adelong Times* (NSW) 17 December 1940, p. 3.

³⁷ Ronald Walter Greene, “Pastoral Exhibition: The YMCA Motion Picture Bureau and the Transition to 16mm, 1928-39,” in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 212.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

Civilising Circuits: 16mm Distribution and Assimilation

From 1948 onwards, Shell deployed a fleet of mobile cinemas (Figure 8) to screen films directly to audiences on remote timber camps, missions, mines and cattle stations across the Territory.³⁹ Unfortunately, evidence of the internal mechanisms of Shell's distribution practices such as the mobile film units' audience reaction reports are lost to the archive. However, given the preceding discussion of Shell and the state's interlinked film infrastructure, it is possible to garner the logics of the Company's postwar spatial practices through another source. In the late 1940s, the Native Affairs Branch established a circuit which distributed educational films – including Shell's travelogues – to Indigenous audiences on select government settlements across the Territory. By turning now to examine a series of memoranda organising the establishment of this distribution circuit, the following section seeks to reconstruct the explicitly pastoral aims of these film screenings.

The power-effects of nontheatrical film exhibition was not lost on the Northern Territory's Administrator, Arthur Robert Driver. On 5 July 1949, Driver sent a memorandum to the Director of Native Affairs, Frank Moy, encouraging his Branch to foray into 'visual education' on its 'native settlements.'⁴⁰ Beginning with the establishment of Jay Creek in 1937, the Administration set up a network of ration depots-cum-government reserves intended to curb Indigenous peoples' mobility until they were fully socio-culturally assimilated in 'respectable' settler behaviours: "fit to enter and use the town."⁴¹ A few months later, the Branch's plans to establish similar trading posts in Arnhem Land were publicized across national newspapers.⁴² These trading posts were intended to stem the 'drift' of Yolngu into Darwin and would likely have directly impacted upon the film-going freedom of the buffalo hunters we encountered in Chapter One. Upon publication of these plans, Moy was

³⁹ I thank Shell Film Unit member Roland Beckett for his generous insights into the establishment of the mobile film units.

⁴⁰ National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): Native Affairs Branch; F315, 1949/451, Films – Recordings – General Correspondence Papers – Re-production of film by C Chauvel – Native Cast; Circular Memorandum: 'Departmental Films,' to the Director of Native Affairs from NT Administrator, 5 July 1949.

⁴¹ Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*, p. 6.

⁴² See for instance "Wealth May Come to Black Men of Arnhem Land," *The Newcastle Sun* (NSW), 3 Nov 1949, p. 18.

bombarded with offers of encouragement from the commercial motion picture industry. Alongside a very similar proposal received from Hollywood studio M-G-M, one Sydney-based projection firm suggested that “16mm projectors be installed for the purposes of screening suitable films to the Aborigines by way of an amenity or otherwise to induce them to stay close to trading posts.”⁴³ As this section will detail, Moy took on board the logic of this proposal. In the postwar Northern Territory, Indigenous peoples were not to travel to the cinema in Darwin to see the latest feature films; instead, a specific kind of educational film would travel to them.



Figure 8 Shell Mobile Film Van, Farmhouse, Mount Gambier, S.A, 1953. State Library of South Australia: BRG 347/1043.

One overlooked - yet central - pillar in the state’s training program to erase Indigeneity on government settlements (alongside guidance in hygiene, domesticity and cash use) was the use of 16mm film screenings. In the context of the prevailing assimilation policy, ‘visual education’ meant learning assimilatory lessons not only from the content of a

⁴³ NAA: Native Affairs Branch; F315, 1949/451; Letter: ‘Trading Posts,’ to the Director Dept. of Native Affairs from M. S. Elliott, Sales Manager, Precision Engineering Co. Pty. Ltd., 15 Nov 1949.

film but in the very process of conforming one's body to the condoned manner of Western cinema-going. Northern Territory Administrators including Deputy Chief Protector, Dr. Reilly, had long complained that Indigenous cinemagoers both "employed and idle, dirty and almost clean, healthy and diseased", perpetrated 'insanitary nuisances' at interval" at the town cinema in Alice Springs.⁴⁴ The government settlement screenings were intended as a means of 'rehabilitating' Indigenous audience members at sequestered, educational screenings until they were 'ready' to reenter the realm of commercial cinema-going as citizen-consumers. Attending a 16mm film screening at an outdoor theatre on the settlement grounds was conceived as an act of acculturation akin to developing 'skills' in sanitation, communal eating and settling down in a prefabricated house. In other words, 16mm film was explicitly deployed by the Branch as a tool to discipline and transform individuated Indigenous subjects.

In Moy's film distribution master plan, the Territory would be divided into two halves. In the North, regular weekly programmes would circulate between Bagot, Delissaville, Snake Bay, Beswick and Catfish settlements; in the Centre, the Native Affairs office in Alice Springs would send prints between Areyonga, Haasts Bluff, the Bungalow and Yuendumu (see Figure 9).⁴⁵ Two newly procured Native Affairs Branch mobile film units would screen at the spaces between and, in time, all Territory missions "should be brought into an organised circuit if they have facilities for projecting."⁴⁶ Other sites with considerable Indigenous populations such as pastoral stations were not included in the Branch's circuit - after all, as Chapter Three explores, Shell was already staging screenings at places such as Victoria River Downs. Given the kind of films Moy sought to borrow from the National Library, however, it seems likely that Shell films - such as *Alice Through the Centre* - did, in fact, travel along the Branch's distribution pathways. The following were deemed 'suitable' by Moy for screening to settlement audiences: short films about animals, films illustrating

⁴⁴ Cited in Rowse, *White Flour, White Power*, p. 76.

⁴⁵ NAA: Native Affairs Branch; F315, 1949/451; Memorandum: 'Use of Films for Native Education in the N.T.', to Mr. H. L. White from L. S. Lake, 11 June 1951.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

sport, films about industry, travelogues (i.e. *Through the Centre*), animated cartoons of all kinds and, above all, documentaries “showing native contact with European civilization, and the blending of native and European cultures.”⁴⁷

There is a rich body of scholarship examining the British Empire’s extensive use of mobile cinema across the Caribbean, Africa and Asia during and after WWII.⁴⁸ As Tom Rice argues, film screenings served “as political events, as a means of monitoring, addressing and homogenizing disparate groups of colonial subjects.”⁴⁹ Yet the deployment of mobile cinema as a means of governance from Trinidad to Malaya was “informed by the administrative principle of Indirect Rule, which held that colonial policies should reinforce indigenous cultures and traditions.”⁵⁰ This was certainly not the case in the settler colony. The Native Affairs Branch firmly intended their settlement film evenings to efface and replace Indigenous cultural practices and identities. In an appreciative letter written to the National Library in late 1949, Superintendent F. W. Albrecht of Hermannsburg Mission reported that a screening of the government-sponsored documentary ode to Canberra, *National Capital* (1945) had the intended effect on his Arrernte audience: “I think that many of our Natives will, in future, feel much more like real Australians after seeing that Film.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ See Charles Ambler, “Projecting the Modern Colonial State: The Mobile Cinema in Kenya,” in *Film and the End of Empire*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 199-224; Zoe Druick, “At the Margins of Cinema History: Mobile Cinema in the British Empire,” *Public* 40, no. 1 (2009): pp. 118-125; “*Majigi*, Colonial Film, State Publicity, and the Political Form of Cinema,” in Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 73-122.

⁴⁹ Tom Rice, ““Are You Proud to Be British?”: Mobile Film Shows, Local Voices and the Demise of the British Empire in Africa,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36, no. 3 (2015): p. 332.

⁵⁰ James Burns, *Cinema and Society in the British Empire, 1895-1940* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 95.

⁵¹ NAA: Department of the Interior; A431, 1949/2256, Cinematograph Films unsuitable & suitable for exhibition to Native Races; Letter to Mr. H. K. White, Librarian, Australian National Film Board from F. W. Albrecht, Superintendent, 10 December 1949.



Figure 9 Teachers and students with a 16mm film projector, Yuendumu School, date unknown.
Northern Territory Library: PH0703/0124.

Having now established how settlement screenings were broadly intended as a mode of settler colonial subjectification, we can begin to interrogate the logic of assimilation that undergirded these spatial practices. There is an apparent contradiction in attempts to integrate Indigenous peoples into the Australian body politic by sequestering them on out-of-sight settlements. As Jeremy Beckett argues, assimilation “used the goal of eventual entry into the community as a justification for segregating Aborigines on settlements, and the goal of eventual citizenship as a justification for curtailing their civil rights.”⁵² To Beckett’s inventory of the self-refuting practices of assimilation, we might add the irony of using newly mobile screening technologies to fix Indigenous peoples in one place. The ‘(il)logics’ of instituting a differential screening practice on segregated government settlements in the assimilation era was not lost even on staff within the Native Affairs Branch itself. In response to a 1952 proposal by a ‘well-known Territorian’ that an Indigenous-only cinema be erected beyond Alice Springs’ town boundaries, Branch spokesperson McCoy “pointed out that the Government policy on the treatment of our aborigines is one of assimilation and that the suggestion may clash with this policy.”⁵³

⁵² Jeremy Beckett, “Aboriginality, citizenship and nation state,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 24 (1988): p. 10.

⁵³ “Separate Theatre for Aborigines’: Territory Man’s Proposal,” *Centralian Advocate* (Alice Springs, NT), 30 May 1952, p. 1.

Underlying McCoy's concern about a clash between his Branch's assimilation policy and the mooted segregatory practice is the assumption that assimilation itself was not an internally riven project. This is a mistaken premise. My discussion of assimilation has so far followed the periodisation established by scholars who identify a decisive postwar policy shift toward a socio-cultural model of civic inclusion. Patrick Wolfe has influentially challenged the notion that assimilation was a definitive break with earlier manifestations of settler colonial governance. According to Wolfe, assimilation discourses were in fundamental historical continuity with earlier manifestations of the logic of elimination, namely the "confrontation" era of outright frontier warfare and later, the "carceration" phase which vacated Aboriginal territory by removing its owners to missions, reserves and settlements.⁵⁴ Rather than a caesura that disrupts previous models of governance, assimilation may further be traced in its continuities with what I have earlier termed the (il)logics of settler colonial spatial productions. In the late 1930s, Shell's representations of space corresponded to efforts to simultaneously 'vanish' Indigenous peoples from the landscape and construct certain palatable and exploitable versions of Indigenous alterity. By shifting focus to late 1940s circuits of film distribution, this chapter has sought to trace how this constitutive tension transmuted into the '(il)logical' spatial practices of a postwar assimilation policy that segregated. In screening select Shell films at settlements and trading posts, the Native Affairs Branch sought to 'tend to the souls' of Indigenous subjects qua citizens and so make them disappear in their difference. Yet settlement screenings were also a strategy of banishment, of confining Indigenous peoples to life conditions premised upon an exceptional relation to the law (i.e. excluded from voting rights, wages and the material benefits of social inclusion).

By examining the contradictory logics underlying the Native Affairs Branch's distribution practices we have witnessed the impossible, divided demands of settler colonial processes of Indigenous subjectification. The production of subjects is not a clean imposition of governing agendas onto docile bodies. Rather, as we have seen, Indigenous peoples were to become both included *and* excluded Australian subjects in the same gesture. Moreover, as

⁵⁴ Patrick Wolfe, "Nation and Miscegenation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 36 (1994): pp. 99-102.

Foucault himself underlines, efforts of governance cannot be dissociated from the “art of not being governed like that and at that cost.”⁵⁵ For all the careful plans of the Native Affairs Branch to minister to the souls of Indigenous subjects, the presence of a projector and a didactic documentary was no guarantee that Indigenous audience members on Bagot or Snake Bay settlements necessarily engaged with film screenings in the intended manner. At the site of reception, cinema’s meanings are socially mediated and reconstituted within the experiences of unpredictable collectivities. The following chapter turns now to reconstruct a mid-century moment of reception when diverse Indigenous subjects encountered Shell’s ethnographic travelogues on screen.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, “What is Critique?” trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 45.

Chapter Three

The experience of watching a film opens up a possible break in the usual, mid-century spatial routines. Splicing and dicing segments of spatialized time, the montage technique of the editing suite enables film to vividly construct otherwise impossible intersections on screen; travelogues, in particular, offer themselves up for ‘virtual voyaging.’¹ At the same time, these on-screen images unspool alongside the off-screen experience of being corralled in a cinema seat. In an intimate, darkened environment amongst fellow cinemagoers one both exists within and imaginatively ‘exits’ one’s physical surrounds. The theatre is a space of unwieldy reception where audience members laugh, jeer and critically respond to film offerings in ways both predictable and unexpected.

My analysis thus far has focused on governing representations of space and spatial practices imposed ‘from above’ on Indigenous subjects as strategies of settler colonial erasure. I have drawn out tensions - (il)logics - within these strategies. Yet further tensions emerge as we examine the experience of cinema-going as a uniquely disruptive spatial experience. Hegemonic spatial productions are complicated within a site of embodied, social interaction where ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ spaces overlap and meet a not-entirely-governable response. In Lefebvre’s spatial triad, *representational spaces* (such as the cinema) are lived, social spaces which cannot be fully subsumed by either (on-screen) *representations of space* or (off-screen) governing *spatial practices*.² This does not necessarily mean that these are sites of explicit resistance. Rather, a representational space is a multilayered space of “all inclusive simultaneities, perils as well as possibilities: the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle.”³ I have so far described the cinema as a locale where imagined and real geographical possibilities collide. To more closely understand the particularity of this spatial experience, it is necessary to briefly introduce Foucault’s notion of heterotopia.

¹ Jeffrey Ruoff, “Introduction: The Filmic Fourth Dimension: Cinema as Audiovisual Vehicle,” in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 1-24.

² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 33.

³ Edward W. Soja, *Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), p. 68.

A heterotopia is a space of exception which breaks with or disrupts pre-existing socio-spatial arrangements. These ‘other spaces’ - including ships, cemeteries and the cinema - “constitute a kind of counter arrangement” which simultaneously represent, contest and invert other real sites.⁴ The cinema is a heterotopia because it a single space where real, divergent spatial orderings and imagined, incompatible spatial possibilities overlap: “on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of three-dimensional space.”⁵ Like the mirror, the cinema screen is utopic - an “unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface.”⁶ But also like the mirror, it does exist in reality - “it exerts a sort of counteraction to the position that I occupy.”⁷ The experience of watching films - especially films which depict known faces and communities - offer a rupture with the usual possibilities of spatial arrangements. For the purposes of this chapter, Foucault’s account of heterotopia is useful for understanding the specific kinds of experiences engendered by cinema as a representational space. Cinema exhibition necessarily opens up an encounter with other, imagined spatial possibilities beyond the physical limitations of the theatre or, in the case of this chapter, the nontheatrical setting.

In sympathy with this analysis of cinema as a uniquely multilayered space, I aim to open up a history of (overlapping) experiential possibilities rather than ventriloquising a singular account of ‘how it really was’. This chapter does not claim to provide insight into how individual Indigenous audience members may or may not have experienced or responded to the screening of a Shell travelogue. That would be an impossible task archivally, given available records but also methodologically, as a non-Indigenous historian. In the first section of this chapter, I hone in on a particular Shell screening, on a certain evening, at a precise location: Victoria River Downs (VRD) cattle station. VRD has often been described by historians as heterotopic itself: a remote pastoral expanse where Indigenous labourers were

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” trans. Jay Miskowiec in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 333.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁷ *Ibid.*

incarcerated largely away from the purview of the law.⁸ I consider what it means that a cinema existed within this space. This micro-study is a modest, necessarily partial attempt to reconstruct the experiential possibilities of a moment when Shell screened its travelogues back to those who featured within them.

In examining the experiential realm of cinema-going, this chapter is the most methodologically fraught and speculative. Firstly, VRD was primarily a cattle station not a cinema - there are no detailed box office reports, printed schedules or audience surveys in the archive. Given the paucity of records and in order to sidestep the danger of speaking for Indigenous subjects, the second part of this chapter therefore shifts from VRD to consider other exhibition spaces in the Northern Territory in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This section details evidence of a range of Indigenous responses to the encounter between cinema's real and imagined spatial possibilities – from pleasure at seeing oneself on the big screen to staging a walkout in protest of breaches to Aboriginal customary law.

Section 1: A Shell Screening at Victoria River Downs

In 1879, 41,000 square kilometers of land owned by the Bilinara, Karangpurru, Mudbura, Ngarinman, Malngin, Wardaman and Ngaliwurru was excised from the Indigenous estate and transferred via lease to a few wealthy pastoralists.⁹ Situated in the Victoria River district of the Northern Territory, Victoria River Downs became the world's largest pastoral property – a cattle empire invested with the promise of bringing wealth and development to Australia's Top End. As has been well documented via oral histories with Yarralin and Lingara historians, the expectation of vast proceeds was premised on decades of ruthless frontier violence and later, the incorporation of unremunerated, expendable Aboriginal labour. As elder Jack Jangari of VRD outstation Pigeon Hole told Deborah Bird Rose, Indigenous pastoral workers “made every station, whatever station there in the Territory now, we made

⁸ See, for instance, Deirdre Howard-Wagner and Ben Kelly, “Containing Aboriginal Mobility in the Northern Territory: from Protectionism to Interventionism,” *Law Text Culture* 15 (2011): p. 111; Thalia Anthony, “Postcolonial Feudal Hauntings of Northern Australian Cattle Stations,” *Law Text Culture* 7 (2003): pp. 277-307.

⁹ Rose, *Hidden Histories*, p. 20.

all them places rich. And [they] keep us fellows poor.”¹⁰ Described in 1909 as a “plague-spot on the map of this fair land,” VRD continues to be categorised by historians as a heterotopia of ‘deviance’ – a remote fiefdom which operated outside of mainstream labour regulations and ‘incarcerated’ its Indigenous workforce.¹¹

Shell and Victoria River Downs

In 1909, VRD was sold to Bovril Australian Estates, an absentee landlord which ran the station until 1955. As we saw in Chapter One, another London-based multinational – the Shell Company – had established close ties with VRD by the mid-twentieth century. In *Through the Centre*, the Shell expedition visited VRD because it was an important overland petrol depot and a station “using 70% Shell products.”¹² Large pastoral stations were important clients for Shell – neighbouring Inverway and Wave Hill were both ‘100% Shell.’ The Company’s desire to monopolise pastoral stations’ petrol accounts explains why these remote locales often featured on the Shell mobile film units’ itineraries. In 1958, for instance, Shell provided free picture show evenings to stations on the nearby Barkly Tableland, at the McArthur River Mine, in Borrooloola, Pine Creek and at the Northern Hercules Mines. At Brunette Downs (100% Shell), the film officer reported that “we showed films in their outside theatre to an audience of 20 whites and 50 aborigines.”¹³ This image of European and Indigenous pastoral workers sitting side by side enjoying modern entertainment in the bush proffers itself as a vision of postwar assimilation success.

As Chapter Two explored, the Northern Territory’s Native Affairs Branch viewed cinema as one means of transforming Indigenous settlement residents into conforming citizens. It is therefore no surprise that VRD’s “excellent open-air theatre” where “whites and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹¹ Cited in Rose, *Hidden Histories*, p. 20; See Deirdre Howard-Wagner and Ben Kelly, “Containing Aboriginal Mobility in the Northern Territory: from protectionism to interventionism,” *Law Text Culture* 15 (2011): p. 111. For an important, alternative account which stresses some positive aspects of Indigenous pastoral workers’ experiences on stations west of VRD see Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin Australia, 1987).

¹² UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 1, Unit 84 2/212, Memorandum to Sales General Manager from Tours Dept.: ‘Fuel and Oil Supplies for Overlanders,’ 14 November 1939.

¹³ UMA, Shell Historical Archive, 2008.0045, Series 15, Unit 292, *Shell: House Journal* 9, no. 7 (1958), ‘Ray Murphy’s Log Book,’ p. 13.

blacks alike” watched films was praised by Administrator, Arthur Robert Driver, as a model site of assimilation at work.¹⁴ Indeed, while management may well have organized film screenings for their own recreation, there is evidence to suggest that cinema on VRD was conceived in terms familiar from our examination of the exercise of pastoral power. The cattle station was a space where Indigenous populations were subject to powers that attempted to discipline and remodel them as productive yet exceptionally exploited subjects.

Saturday 31st July, 1948: A Shell Picture Show

The VRD station ledger is revealing. On the morning of Saturday 31st July 1948, European employee Morton spent his day building a meat safe in the newly-erected ‘native kitchen’ on VRD’s head station.¹⁵ As we have seen, the N.T. Administration’s policy failings were increasingly in the postwar public spotlight. Northern cattle stations were singled out as spaces which seemed to act beyond the law – allegations of slavery were frequently made.¹⁶ The building of the ‘native kitchen’ was by all accounts a (begrudging) attempt by management to implement the findings of Acting Director of Native Affairs, V. G. Carrington’s 1945 report into the pastoral industry. Carrington found a widespread flouting of the requirements of the *Aboriginals Ordinance 1918-1953* and recommended that if Indigenous workers were to be “uplifted,” they first required pastoral guidance in settler habits: “eating at tables, using plates, cutlery, etcetera. It has been shown in Army settlements that natives will do this.”¹⁷

We must understand the events of that Saturday evening in the context of the assimilatory projects pursued during the day. On the evening of Saturday 31st July 1948, a

¹⁴ “Films for Outback Stations,” *Centralian Advocate* (Alice Springs, NT), 2 December 1949, p. 1.

¹⁵ Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University: Victoria River Downs records, Z354 Deposit 2, AU NBAC 87 6/9, Diary, July 1948.

¹⁶ See “Conference On Slave Charges,” *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill, NSW), 3 December 1946, p. 7.

¹⁷ Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University: Victoria River Downs records, Z354 Deposit 3, AU NBAC 119-6, Correspondence. Report into the pastoral industry in the NT to the Northern Territory Administration by SGD. V. G. Carrington, Acting Director of Native Affairs to His Honour, The Administrator, Darwin, NT 1945, p. 1.

Shell Picture Show lit up the night sky at VRD's outdoor theatre.¹⁸ It was early in the mustering season, which meant that the head station's population would have been at full capacity and we can hazard a guess at who might have been in the audience that evening. Station records tell us that up to forty, mostly male European employees were on site that day – amongst them, Bowrey was saddling, bookkeeper Gurr was in the office, Ryan Crystal had spent the day on paddock duties and station manager Hartley Magnussen and his wife were both present.¹⁹ Amongst the non-European audience members possibly in attendance were a handful of southeast Asian and Pacific Islander workers employed as station cooks, mechanics and stockmen. The majority of audience members, however, would have been working Indigenous men, women and their families. In early 1948, 49 male and 21 female Ngaliwurru, Mudbura, Heinman and Bilinara employees were listed as present at head station while 68 non-working dependents (including children and the elderly) were noted as residing at the 'native' camp.²⁰

Among the Indigenous residents were Mudbura stockman Bungaree, his wife Rosie who was employed to tend the station garden and their eight year-old male son.²¹ By 7pm that Saturday evening, they were likely physically and perhaps mentally exhausted after a long day of working under European overseers – maybe the last thing on their minds was a cinema show in the presence of their often patronising, sometimes “tyrannical” co-workers.²² Perhaps instead of attending Shell's show, they retreated to the privacy of their own camp and partook in the card games which, according to anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt, thrived amongst Indigenous station workers on neighbouring stations.²³ Assuming, however, that Bungaree and Rosie did make their way to the outdoor theatre that night, what factors other than the film title may have shaped their cinema-going experience? To begin to reconstruct

¹⁸ Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University: Victoria River Downs records, Z354 Deposit 2, AU NBAC 87 6/9, Diary, May 1948.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University: Victoria River Downs records, Z354 Deposit 1, AU NBAC 42 16/4, Station Journals, Journal for month ended February 1948.

²¹ Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University: Victoria River Downs records, Z354 Deposit 1, AU NBAC 42 14, Papers relating to Aborigines and their employment, Employment of Aborigines – Return for Six Months Ended – 31st December, 1948.

²² Rose, *Hidden Histories*, p. 173.

²³ Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, *End of an Era: Aboriginal Labour in the Northern Territory* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987), p. 207.

the experiential possibilities of this screening space, we need to first situate the outdoor theatre within VRD's deeply segregated station topography.

The physical location of film exhibition on VRD was not permanent but seasonal. In the wet season (December – March), where station numbers dwindled, screenings took place at a large indoor hall next to the male European employees' living quarters.²⁴ In the dry, when the arrival of films was more frequent, screenings shifted outdoors and the space before a large sheet of white canvas became the station's cinema. This open-air theatre was a long way from the sights, smells and sounds of the metropolitan or suburban picture palace. Although no photographic evidence exists, VRD's dry season theatre would likely have resembled one of the many outdoor cinemas constructed at settlements across the Territory during WWII (see Figure 10). This makeshift screen was erected outside the station's main front entry – nearby the overseers' quarters and in sight of the white picket fencing and rows of Poinciana trees which bordered VRD's centerpiece: the station manager's residence, or 'Big House.'



Figure 10 Outdoor picture theatre, Adelaide River army settlement, 1942. Northern Territory Library: PH0035/0059.

²⁴ Darrell Lewis and Lexie Simmons, *Kajirri: The Bush Missus* (Brisbane: Boolarong Press, 2012), p. 5.

The spatial layout of the VRD head station was undergirded by many such enclosures. Although they spent long days working together, Indigenous and non-Indigenous employees did not sleep, bathe or relax around the same campfires by night. Racial hierarchies were physically inscribed in the station landscape – palings marked off European employees’ accommodation, kitchen and mess-hall from the station commons – while half a mile’s distance separated the main homestead from the ‘native camp’ where Indigenous employees and their families lived. Station management was determined to maintain this segregation. As manager Scott McColl (1950-1955) plainly stated: “the school has always been restricted to white children....educating the Aboriginal children is against our policy.”²⁵ By the 1940s these hierarchies were not only carved into the built environment but deeply etched in the minds of the station’s Indigenous population. After decades of experiencing, witnessing and passing along stories about the violent whims of settler pastoralists, Rose tells us that “death still bore heavily on VRD Aborigines” – it was the “shape and substance of their experience.”²⁶ Evidence of the deeply riven socio-spatial divisions on VRD suggests that the site of cinema-going would have been an especially “nervous” space within the pastoral station for Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents alike.²⁷ Going to the movies involves the coming together of bodies in the dark for an extended period of time – in other words, the collapse of boundaries which uphold distinctions during the day.²⁸ It also involves the collision of multiple on-screen spatial possibilities with real, physical infrastructure.

We know that if Bungaree and Rosie attended this Shell Show at the nearest commercial cinema in Katherine, Broome or Darwin, their choice of seating would have been limited to the roped-off front rows.²⁹ Although there is still very little research on the

²⁵ As cited in Rose, *Hidden Histories*, p. 151.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35; 211.

²⁷ Denis R Byrne, “Nervous landscapes: Race and Space in Australia,” *Journal of Social Archaeology* 3, no. 2 (2003): pp. 169-193.

²⁸ Although as McGrath points out, male European station employees were often content for such distinctions to collapse by evening for the purposes of sexual liaisons with Indigenous women. See “Black Velvet,” in McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country*, pp. 68-94.

²⁹ Evidence of segregated seating arrangements for cinemas in each city are detailed in the following: in Katherine, Francesca Merlan, *Caging the Rainbow: Places, Politics, and Aborigines in a North Australian Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), p. 39; in Broome, “A Night in Broome: Aborigines and the Pictures,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 14 May 1927, p. 9; in Darwin, “Cinema’s Color Problem: Showing The Movies in North Australia,” *Advertiser* (Adelaide, SA), 30

interlocked social histories of Indigenous cinema-going and practices of segregation in Australia, a growing body of scholarship has begun to demonstrate how racial stratification was choreographed across metropolitan and country town cinemas.³⁰ This is a difficult task. As Denis Byrne argues, practices of *de facto* cinema segregation left little material trace: “racism was and is a spatial order governed primarily by behavioural convention and coercion, rather than by a specific physical infrastructure.”³¹ A nontheatrical exhibition site such as VRD’s outdoor theatre presents a particular historiographical challenge – here, the only architecture was rows of backless rough hewn benches. While the N.T. Administrator claimed that films were screened to “whites and blacks alike,” without oral history research it is impossible to know how exactly segregation may have settled in the outdoor theatre’s seating arrangements. Based on accounts of the mutual discontent, resentment and avoidance between Indigenous and *kartiya* (Europeans) on mid-century northern cattle stations, however, we can speculate that for Bungaree and Rosie, watching films was, in fact, deeply influenced by segregatory practices.³²

Whatever practices of discrimination might have policed where Bungaree and Rosie could sit that night are not recorded in the VRD archive - they reside instead in the “memory traces” of Aboriginal and white station workers.³³ This point is also made by Maria Nugent in her examination of how experiences of racial segregation in “sites of segregation/sites of memory” such as the cinema feature prominently in Indigenous peoples’ autobiographical reminiscences. Nugent identifies two recurring tropes of remembrance. The first evokes the spatial dimensions of segregated cinema-going and the shame and anger of taking one’s place in the worst seats of the house. The second involves memories of resisting and defying these exclusionary practices. In her coauthored autobiography, for instance, Isabel Flick recalls demanding that management at Collarenebri’s Liberty Theatre “Take these ropes off! What

July 1936, p. 20.

³⁰ See Maria Nugent, “Sites of segregation/sites of memory: Remembrance and ‘race’ in Australia,” *Memory Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013): pp. 299-309; Maria Nugent, “‘Every Right to be There’: Cinema Spaces and Racial Politics in Baz Luhrmann’s Australia,” *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 51 (2011): pp. 5-23.

³¹ Byrne, “Nervous landscapes: Race and Space in Australia,” p. 170.

³² Berndt and Berndt, *End of an Era*, pp. 82-83.

³³ Byrne, “Nervous landscapes: Race and Space in Australia,” p. 186.

do you think we are? Our money is as good as anyone else's and we want to sit where we want to sit.”³⁴ Might similar challenges to repressive spatial practices have taken place under the stars at VRD’s outdoor theatre?

Within Lefebvre’s triad, lived representational spaces open up the potential of embodied resistance to hegemonic spatial ideas and practices. Yet just because this register recognizes the presence of “actual” bodies, does not mean that we will necessary find contestation, agency or disruption in the archive. Indeed, the VRD records do not reveal any such instances. The paucity of written evidence for explicit contestation is not surprising – the Berndts found that resistance on nearby pastoral stations often manifested “through in-group dramatic performances and songs about Europeans and about local conditions.”³⁵ In seeking to consider the experiential possibilities of a VRD film screening, it is important to contend with the limits to expressions of Indigenous agency in this space. Unlike Isabel Flick in rural NSW, Bungaree and Rosie’s potential to subvert existing spatial regimes at their cinema was severely circumscribed by what Rose describes as the pervasive “structures of power which so distorted their lives” on VRD.³⁶ While their ancestors had fiercely protected their country from the pastoralist invasion, the weight of oppression for mid-century station workers could be overwhelming: “for the most part, terror seems to have produced a sense of powerlessness (as it was intended to do) among Aboriginal people, frequently expressed in the phrase ‘we couldn’t do anything.’”³⁷ In the decades before they walked off VRD in protest in 1972, Indigenous employees were struggling to survive let alone contest or reconstitute the station’s shared representational spaces.³⁸ The Yarralin mob’s recent land rights victory suggests that the ongoing fact of survival and persistence in place was itself a significant act of resistance in a space designed by turns to assimilate, segregate and suppress them.

³⁴ Isabel Flick and Heather Goodall, *Isabel Flick: The Many Lives of an Extraordinary Aboriginal Woman* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 90.

³⁵ Berndt and Berndt, *End of an Era*, p. 276.

³⁶ Rose, *Hidden Histories*, p. 73.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Section 2: Mid-century screenings at the Star

In detailing some experiential possibilities of a Shell Show screening on VRD, Section One has brought us to the brink of reception – to the moment when Indigenous station residents might have seen Shell’s depiction of themselves and members of their communities onscreen. Here, however, the VRD archive runs dry. There is no evidence of cinematic reception to be gleaned from the station’s day books and ledgers. We do not know which Shell films may have screened that evening and so cannot tell if *Through the Centre* projected known faces in close up under the night sky. The preceding discussion has been, in part, an exercise in imaginative reconstruction in the face of archival absence. Yet it would be remiss for a chapter investigating lived, representational spaces not to examine episodes on the mid-century historical record when Indigenous reception disrupted Shell’s one-way imposition of settler spatial regimes. Cinema is a live social experience which is limited by - yet not reducible to - the ideas it represents and the spatial practices in which it is framed. To this end, it is necessary to widen our focus from VRD and consider evidence of Indigenous reception at the nearest metropolitan cinema – the Star Theatre in Darwin. In doing so, I am not equating the experience of cinema-going at this metropolitan space of reception with the necessarily more vulnerable, intimate site of screenings on VRD. Nor am I suggesting a universally applicable set of Indigenous responses to cinema. I work within the limits of the settler archive to reconstruct modes in which Indigenous audience members may have negotiated the mid-century cinema-going experience.

This section takes its cues from Denis Byrne’s question: “How, in a practical-spatial sense, do you live in a landscape that no longer belongs to you? On what basis do you continue to exist inside the grid of your own dispossession?”³⁹ Influenced by Byrne’s conclusion that Aboriginal people in Manning Valley, NSW historically resisted the cadastral spread by subverting its boundaries (fence-jumping or raiding orchards) and tactically appropriating tracts of Crown reserve land, a growing number of historians have identified

³⁹ Byrne, “Nervous landscapes: Race and Space in Australia,” p. 177.

similar practices of Indigenous counter-mapping in ‘nervous landscapes’ across Australia.⁴⁰ Yet somewhat surprisingly, little scholarly attention has been paid to how Indigenous peoples’ ongoing presence at the cinema worked to unsettle a space often at the heart of a town’s ‘nervous system.’⁴¹ The following section therefore turns to reconstruct – in a necessarily partial, potted manner – a range of ways that Indigenous audience-members at the Star Theater responded to cinema’s heterotopic spatial “openings” in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Moreover, while records are more forthcoming for this permanent theatre, newspaper reports of Indigenous reception must be treated with caution. The anecdotes under examination are not first-hand sources but reflect the pervasive biases of the settler archive. Yet even read skeptically as prevalent stereotypes, these reports provide insight into the fact that far from being simply ‘assimilated’ into a preordained model, Indigenous modes of cinema-going were perceived by white settlers as being diverse and often recalcitrant.

‘Counter-Censoring’

While Shell films travelled to remote VRD, Indigenous peoples continued to travel to Darwin’s Star Theatre to watch them throughout the 1940s. Across the decade a stock narrative detailing Indigenous cinemagoers’ epic journeying to the metropolitan theatre recurs with such frequency in newspaper reportage that it cannot be overlooked. “Above all civilization advantages, the Australian aborigine loves the movies,” declared one columnist.⁴² “These nomads of the bush frequently walk hundreds of miles through the Northern Territory, jealously guarding in their pockets the fare into the Darwin movie. They walk for two or three days, perilously fighting their way through swamps and jungles, blithely enduring the ravages of painful thirst.”⁴³ The hyperbole of this report quite obviously bespeaks prevailing settler caricatures of Indigenous rootless nomadism. Yet read in the context of other similar articles,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178. See, for instance, Tracey Banivanua Mar, “Belonging to Country: Racialising Space and Resistance on Queensland’s Transnational Margins, 1880–1900,” *Australian Historical Studies* 43, no. 2 (2012): pp. 174–190; Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*, pp. 131–152; Jane Lydon, “Imagining the Moravian Mission: Space and Surveillance at the Former Ebenezer Mission, Victoria, Southeastern Australia,” *Historical Archaeology* 43, no. 3 (2009): pp. 15–17.

⁴¹ A notable recent exception is Catherine Kevin, “History and Memory in Ngannawal Country, and the Making of Jedda,” *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 7, no. 2–3 (2013): pp. 165–178.

⁴² “So they Say: Filming a Corroboree,” *Queenslander* (Brisbane, QLD), 7 December 1938, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

it reveals a dawning realisation by settler commentators that Indigenous peoples were both strongly invested in the cinema and a growing presence in the Darwin theatre. In 1941, for instance, *Time* magazine reported that an Arnhem Land man named Jacala and “twenty fellow tribesmen” had trekked across the Top End to reach the Star’s neon lights. According to the brief article, upon entering the theatre and witnessing a scene where “a white man was hugging and kissing a white woman,” Jacala and friends were “disgusted, stalked out, walked 40 days home again.”⁴⁴

This is a potentially apocryphal report of Indigenous men rejecting sentimental Hollywood schmaltz. Yet the anecdote becomes more illuminating as a stereotype when contextualised alongside the growing number of (often surprised) settler accounts of Indigenous cinemagoers asserting themselves as discerning critics. Articles with titles such as ‘The Australian Aborigine As a Film Critic’ detail evidence of Darwin cinemagoers’ strong genre preference for westerns and action films.⁴⁵ Indeed, according to one report, the Star’s programming was dictated by the section of the audience relegated to the theatre’s front rows (Figure 11). When a European audience member requested “more English drama and less hoof-dust and gunfire on the tri-weekly bills,” they were told by proprietor, Tom Harris, that “I’d like to oblige, but I’m afraid the boongs would not stand for it!”⁴⁶



Figure 11 Star Theatre, Darwin, 1933. Northern Territory Library: PH0200/0167.

⁴⁴ “Theater Party,” *Time* 38, no. 25 (1941): p. 30.

⁴⁵ “A Night in Broome: Aborigines and the Pictures,” *Sydney Morning Herald* (NSW), 14 May 1927, p. 9; “The Australian Aborigine As A Film Critic,” *The Argus*, 4 April 1942, p. 6.

⁴⁶ “Primitive Blacks At The Pictures,” *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane, QLD), 26 September 1937, p. 36.

Indigenous audience members' purported power to decide the Star's programming abutted real spatial practices of segregation which dictated which nights they could attend, where they could sit and what films they were allowed to see. Since the 1927 Royal Commission into the Moving Picture Industry, Commonwealth censorship legislation (specific to the N.T. and PNG) had regulated which commercial feature films were "suitable and unsuitable for Native Races."⁴⁷ In 1950, for instance, the Director of Native Affairs advised Tom Harris that the colonial melodramas *Sanders of the River* (1935), *The Drum* (1938) and *East of Java* (1935) were all banned for viewing by his Indigenous patrons.⁴⁸ In the face of this top-down censorship, there is evidence that the Star Theatre's Indigenous cinemagoers developed their own creative practices of 'counter-censoring', for example, by "flashing electric torches at the screen" to blot out kissing scenes between Europeans.⁴⁹

Another way Indigenous cinemagoers explicitly resisted on-screen representations was by asserting the primacy of traditional social practices. In 1949, for instance, Superintendent F. W. Albrecht reported that a screening of the government-sponsored documentary *Namatjira the Painter* (1947) had triggered an unexpected reaction amongst the Arrernte audience at Hermannsburg: "'Namatjira' caused a tremendous stir. The Corroborree scene in the Film is more than women and children, and all uninitiated men, are allowed to see; any men who break this rule, are liable to be put to death."⁵⁰ Described by Anna Haebich as an "assimilation success story" intended to mollify overseas critics of Australia's Indigenous policies, the film charts Albert Namatjira's transformation from a young man raised at Hermannsburg to an internationally acclaimed artist.⁵¹ This time, however, far from being pleased at seeing a fellow Mission resident on screen, the reported Arrernte response

⁴⁷ *Report of the Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia* (Canberra: Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1928), p. 18. See also Marion Benjamin, "Dangerous Visions: 'Films Suitable and unsuitable for native races,'" in *Screening the Past: Aspects of Early Australian Films – Selected Papers from the Sixth Australian History and Film Conference and Other Sources* (Canberra: National Film and Sound Archive, 1995), pp. 141-150.

⁴⁸ NAA: Native Affairs Branch; F315, 1949/451; Memorandum: "'Cinematograph Films: Unsuitable for Native Races. NAB 49/451,' to The Director of Native Affairs from T. D. Harris, 24 Jan 1950.

⁴⁹ "Theater Party," *Time*, p. 30.

⁵⁰ NAA: Department of the Interior; A431, 1949/2256, Cinematograph Films unsuitable & suitable for exhibition to Native Races; Letter to Mr. H. K. White, Librarian, Australian National Film Board from F. W. Albrecht, Superintendent, 10 December 1949.

⁵¹ Haebich, *Spinning the Dream*, p. 149.

gives insight into how Indigenous audience members negotiated cinema-going with customary law: “So when (the Corroborree scene) came on, there was first of all dead silence, then interjections and in the end, the men clear the hall, within less than 2 minutes only a few old men remaining, and the white audience. Then, after the show we were accused of endangering their lives and we should have known better.”⁵² By walking out, the Arrernte cinemagoers were expressing themselves as heterogeneous subjects whose cultural worlds could neither be entirely effaced nor assimilated by hegemonic on-screen ideas and off-screen spatial practices.

Despite government attempts at censorship, physical segregation and differentiated distribution circuits, Indigenous audience members continued to find ways to strategically circumvent regulatory attempts to control their ‘free-time’ at the movies. From the outdoor theatre on VRD to the Star Theatre in Darwin, this chapter has considered various cinemas across the Territory as heterotopic spaces of exception. By first detailing the experiential possibilities and limits to Indigenous cinema-going on VRD, I then considered a range of ways in which Indigenous acts of metropolitan reception – from obliterating the Star Theatre’s screen to walking out of a government ‘assimilation’ documentary – disrupted pre-existing spatial arrangements. In 1928, the Royal Commission introduced film censorship for Indigenous audiences on the grounds that “vivid and lasting impressions are retained by the natives, and frequently their imagination is riotously aroused.”⁵³ These words were more prophetic than the Commission could have anticipated. Over two decades later, Indigenous workers staged the largest ever strike on the streets of Darwin. Between late 1950 and early 1951, hundreds of men and women including those stationed on nearby government settlements collectively protested for the rights of equal citizenship, the rights of equal wages, and the right to “come into town and go to the pictures when they like.”⁵⁴ The Royal Commission’s fears had been realised. At the turn of the mid-century, however, the strikers

⁵² NAA: Department of the Interior; A431, 1949/2256, Cinematograph Films unsuitable & suitable for exhibition to Native Races; Letter to Mr. H. K. White, Librarian, Australian National Film Board from F. W. Albrecht, Superintendent, 10 December 1949.

⁵³ *Report of the Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia*, p. 18.

⁵⁴ “National Support for Natives’ Fight: Police Charge Dismissed,” *Northern Standard* (Darwin, NT), 19 Jan 1951, p. 1.

were far from naïve recipients of on-screen action but seasoned audience members whose responses to cinema's multiple imagined and real spatial possibilities sought not be "governed like that and at that cost."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Foucault, "What is Critique?" p. 45.

Conclusion

The sediments of past processes of Indigenous dispossession underlie Australia's present-day topographies. The fact of territorial expropriation endures – as we know, the settlers have not gone home. The production of settler colonial space - imposing new settler spatial orders atop prior and existing Indigenous relations to land - is ongoing. A structuring logic of erasure subtends diverse processes of settlement. Yet it is crucial to resist the conclusion that this logic is itself seamless, rational, coherent. Such a conclusion risks conceding to Western exceptionalism its own unwarranted claim to 'know the lines of march' across the movement of history. The task of demystifying the 'naturalised' appearance of settler spatial arrangements and demonstrating constitutive tensions manifest in the historical processes which produced them is of vital importance. The fact that settler colonial space is produced does not mean it is finally settled.

I conclude my study where existing accounts of Shell's local film operations typically begin and end: *The Back of Beyond*.¹ This 1954 travelogue follows Royal Mail postman Tom Kruse and his Indigenous assistant, Henry, as they deliver supplies along the Birdsville Track from Marree, in central South Australia to Birdsville, in far west Queensland.² The documentary's lyricism has been rightly praised – it won Shell the Venice Grand Prix Assoluto upon its release and continues to be regarded as an aesthetic landmark in histories of Australian cinema. As we have seen, *The Back of Beyond* belongs to – yet breaks with – a two-decade long tradition of travelogue filmmaking by the Shell Company of Australia. In contrast to the set trajectories of the earlier travelogues we have encountered, Shell's artistic apogee is a film about losing track; going in circles; failed enterprise.³

¹ See, for example, Sylvia Lawson, *The Back of Beyond* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2013).

² *The Back of Beyond* (1954), dir. John Heyer, Shell Film Unit Australia, 52 min, Sound, BW, 16mm.

³ Tom O'Regan, Brian Shoemith, and Albert Moran, "On 'The Back of Beyond'"; Interview with Ross Gibson," 1, no. 1 (1988): p. 90.

Where *Through the Centre* (1940) championed the coordinates of the Shell touring map, *The Back of Beyond* concedes that the Birdsville Track was mapped for millennia as an Indigenous trading route. Where *Alice Through the Centre* (1949) depicted inland Australia in bloom with postwar reconstruction projects, *The Back of Beyond* journeys through a landscape of entropy where progress has gone to seed. In 1953 – mere months after Shell reluctantly relinquished its exploration license in Queensland – WAPET struck commercial quantities of black gold at Rough Range. *The Back of Beyond* represents the collapse of this postwar corporate optimism both on-and off-screen. Recently declassified ASIO documents reveal that director John Heyer’s ‘well-known communist tendencies’ had attracted the suspicion of the state. Where Chapter Two detailed the emergence of the Shell/State compact, *The Back of Beyond*’s production history details its disintegration. The state now closely monitored the Shell Film Unit’s activities – intelligence officers infiltrated Shell’s theatrettes and questioned why the Company “should pay Heyer to produce a film so far removed from their own particular industry. If Heyer has produced the film with the express purpose of discrediting Australia, then he has achieved his purpose.”⁴ This represents a remarkable full-circle breakdown of a relationship which Shell had long sought to foster through the cinema.

This is not to suggest that Shell’s film practice post-1954 radically broke with its earlier trajectory. In the years following *The Back of Beyond*, the Shell Film Unit continued to produce, distribute and exhibit films ‘in the steps of the explorers’ as the title of one late-1950s travelogue series put it. Rather than focusing on the exceptionality of Shell’s aesthetic masterpiece, my thesis has interrogated whether the Company’s more workaday ethnographic travelogues could themselves be brought to reflect upon the internally fraught production of settler colonial space. Genres of ‘useful’ cinema such as an industrially-sponsored ethnographic travelogue are easily dismissed as ‘bad objects’ within film history. One reason for the general lack of scholarly interest is that the utility of such films may seem

⁴ NAA: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Central Office; A6126, 487, HEYER, John Whiteford; Assessment: ‘Heyer, John Whiteford,’ 19 September 1955, p. 3. NAA: Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, Central Office; A6126, 487, HEYER, John Whiteford; Memorandum: ‘John Heyer (H/1/11)’ from Principal Section Officer, B.1, 14 September 1954, p. 1.

overdetermined. Useful films appear narrowly constrained to realise a particular telos which explicitly tells us how interpret them: this travelogue sold a certain vision of inland Australia to create a tourist market; that travelogue was Shell's attempt to align itself with state policies. Across all their particular agendas, Shell's ethnographic travelogues were instruments of a settler colonial logic of erasure. Yet erasure is never totally attained nor does it entirely enjoy the logical coherence to which it professes. I have aimed to show that even the supposedly unidirectional telos of utilitarian cinema can reveal breakdowns and fissures within its avowed uses.

This thesis has sought to mediate Patrick Wolfe's influential 'logic of elimination' paradigm with Tim Rowse's recent concern that historians remain attentive to the multifaceted modes of settler colonial governance. Rowse has cautioned that discussions of settler colonialism's "inexorable logic" of erasure run the risk of conflating and reifying historically contingent phenomena under a singular, coherent teleology. Wolfe's paradigm may concede too much to the self-depiction of settler colonialism as a linear trajectory of displacement and replacement. Rowse instead advocates for the heterogeneity of settler colonial formations, practices and Indigenous subjects, past and present.⁵ Yet this account itself risks overlooking the specificity of settler colonialism as a distinctive form of colonial rule with its own endemic imperatives. By bringing Rowse's stress on internal fractures to bear on Wolfe's account of settler colonialism's distinct organizing principles, my aim has been to trace what I have termed the *(il)logics* of elimination. While each chapter has focused on a particular register of spatial production at a specific historical juncture, I have not sought to replace a structural analysis of settler colonialism for a piecemeal account of moments that refute or complicate these structures. The field of tensions brought forth in each chapter are not simply idiosyncratic gaps or lapses in the otherwise smooth edifice of settler colonialism. Rather, they inhere within a structuring logic that is itself internally riven and, at times, self-refuting.

⁵ Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," p. 300.

Across the three modes of Lefebvre's spatial triad, the tension between exclusion and inclusion, erasing Indigenous presence and exploiting Indigenous subjectivities for certain settler purposes, has recurred in different guises. By tracing how settler colonialism's *(il)logics* shape-shifted in the period 1939 - 1954, I have sought to show how the production of space is not determined in advance by an "inexorable" march toward Indigenous elimination but actively made and remade in the crucible of settler colonialism's constitutive tensions. With the formation of an in-house Film Unit in 1948, Shell became Australia's first corporation with ownership of the means of film production, distribution and exhibition. When cinema is broadly conceived as a textually produced, culturally distributed and socially contingent phenomenon, it offers a particularly holistic insight into the generation of spatial ideas, practices and experiences. By examining Shell's ethnographic travelogues in the context of the company's vertically integrated film practice, this thesis has itself followed three, crisscrossed routes of enquiry.

I began by tracing the outline of Shell's 1939 round-Australia mapping-cum-filmmaking expedition. By contrasting Shell's mode of aerial mapping for resources – which vanished Indigenous presence from the landscape – with the Company's concomitant attempts to rebrand the interior as a space of mystery ripe for car-borne exploration, I sought to illuminate a constitutive tension in late 1930s representations of space whereby Indigenous peoples were both absent and ever-present. Whether cartographically 'emptying' inland Australia or exploiting its occupants as profitable features of the region, both conceptions of space dispossessed prior Indigenous claims to land, culture and socio-spiritual connection. As a textual source to be 'read' and interpreted, film gives important expression to reigning conceptions of settler colonial space.

Yet cinema is not only a medium of representation but a material practice: an apparatus for structuring the spaces of recreational, free-time. World War Two provided the context for a new convergence of Shell's film operations with the assimilatory projects of the settler colonial state. By studying a series of Native Affairs Branch memoranda organising a

film distribution circuit on segregated government settlements, Chapter Two argued that the rationale for these postwar film networks was in fundamental continuity with the inclusive/exclusive (il)logics of settler colonial spatial productions. Settlement film screenings were intended to acculturate Indigenous subjects into the Australian body politic by spatially sequestering them on remote outposts and instituting a regime of targeted, racially-specific ‘visual education.’

Across its representations of inland space and through its new mobile spatial practices, Shell promoted film as an instrument of settler colonial agendas. Yet in a darkened venue before a screen efforts to make cinema work for particular purposes are open to be remade. The site of cinema exhibition is volatile. The audience may respond with unpredictable boos, ‘censoring’ flashlights and/or flurries of applause. This is a lived, social space which cannot be comprehensively contained by either reigning representations nor by governing spatial practices. It was the task of Chapter Three not to determine how Shell’s travelogues were experienced by Indigenous cinema-goers but to gesture toward the very dynamism of cinematic spatial encounters. The volatility of the cinematic encounter is foregrounded when the site of reception doubles as the site of film production as in Victoria River Downs. Seeing oneself or one’s community on screen opens up prospects of vivid self-recognition. For instance, during the production of *The Back of Beyond*, John Heyer sent photographic stills featuring the film’s Indigenous participants back to Birdsville. Sergeant Barlow of the local Police Station gave word of the response:

I passed the photographs on to the parties concerned and needless to say it was a time of great joy for each of them...Tommy had me mount some on the door inside of his hut where it is promptly shown to any visiting aborigines.⁶

Yet, as I traced in the latter half of the final chapter, the history of mid-century metropolitan indigenous responses to film, suggests equal potentials for subjects to react against settler film producers’ grievous misrecognitions.

⁶ Letter in possession of the author.

Records of any one such an encounter, where the settler gaze is directly returned in Indigenous experiences of watching, criticizing and reappropriating the significance of Shell films, has proven elusive. However, the reclamation of the cultural meanings of ethnographic travelogues is not confined to the moment of first viewing. It may be recalled that Shell's first production was the animated cartoon *King Billy's First Car* (1927). A caricatured Indigenous man is shown to knock up a makeshift vehicle from bush flora and fauna only to be inevitably surpassed by more advanced machines in need of Shell's products. The film's sponsors could not have anticipated that these madcap mechanics would be memorably "re-indigenized" at the turn of the next millennium in the Warlpiri Media Association's television series *Bush Mechanics* (2001). This cult show was circulated locally in nontheatrical distribution networks established at Yuendumu, a former government settlement. We must take a leaf from the Warlpiri bush mechanics: rather than naturalising settler colonialism spatial logics, it remains to historicise them.

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