

Island Home Country

‘Subversive Mourning’

Working with Aboriginal protocols in a documentary film
about colonisation and growing up white in Tasmania

A cine-essay and exegesis



Doctorate of Creative Arts (DCA)

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge and pay respects to the ancestors and elders, the traditional owners: palawa, cadigal, garigal, wurrunjerrri, boonawrung, yorta yorta, pitjantjatjara whose countries I have lived in and filmed in – and whose community members and ancestors appear, or are spoken of, in this film and exegesis.

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Abstract

In this doctorate, *Island Home Country*, a documentary film and exegesis, I reflect on growing up in a white settler-invader family in Tasmania in the late 1940s-1950s oblivious to any Tasmanian Aboriginal culture or history on the island.

The working method of the film was initially based on Freud's notion of 'the work of mourning' as a way of working through repressed history. However the project's engagement in a six-year protocols process with Tasmanian Aboriginal community members influenced this research paradigm. It triggered a 'meditation on discomfort', involving a turn towards critical race and whiteness studies, decolonising methodologies and a consideration of white privilege and ways to challenge it.

This exegesis seeks to articulate the film's textual strategies alongside theoretical and political issues that surfaced while making the film, in particular the impact of protocols, the ethics and responsibilities they entail and their repercussions into the text of the film and the project's research paradigm. The film is in the documentary essay mode. My aim has been to work in an affective and performative register with image, poetry, sound and music to try and penetrate amnesia and to think and see 'beyond the colonial construct'.

The process of making a film in consultation with Tasmanian Aboriginal community members, as well as my own family is examined, particularly the subject position of being a white person producing a work amidst the complex borderlines of 21st century colonial-post-colonising Tasmania. The six chapters of the exegesis – *Amnesia*, *Possession*, *Memory*, *Mourning*, *Encounter* and *Reckoning* follow the chapters of the film, opening out the ebb and flow of protocols process for discussion.

This exegesis analyses the film's attempt to 'work through' the historical trauma of colonisation at both an individual and community level, examining the film's intention to reckon with the ghosts of history and how they may live on. I conclude that the film's intention to 'make a reckoning' may be flawed. The film's practice-led process and the ethics and politics involved in working with protocols both challenged the project's 'work of mourning' thesis and facilitated the project's shift from the layer of 'text' only, to become a work grounded in responsible relationships with community. In this context I consider the potential of creative and collaborative works to become sites of

negotiation and dialogue around cultural differences, rights and responsibilities. Both the exegesis and the film suggest that this negotiated process may contribute towards a decolonising process as ‘newcomer’ Australians, such as myself, become ‘unsettled’ and learn to *come into country* in recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty.

On Language and Speaking Positions

The First Australians: Aboriginal people in Tasmania refer to themselves as Tasmanian Aboriginal, not Aboriginal Tasmanians or Indigenous Tasmanians (Everett 2007: pers.comm.). I follow this usage for Tasmania. I use Aboriginal, Indigenous and First Australians in other contexts in Australia. Some Tasmanian Aboriginal people also refer to themselves, in Palawa kani language, as ‘Palawa’.¹

The Strangers: How to name those who arrived-invaded in 1788 and all who have arrived since? The naming is charged and politicised. Current usage includes Europeans, Anglo-Celts, Anglo-Irish, invaders, settlers, settler-colonials, colonisers, non-Aboriginal people or whites. This exegesis uses newcomers, strangers, invaders, settler-colonials and non-Aboriginals. On occasions I refer to myself as a ghost. In some instances the terms white and black are used.

Indigenous Protocols: This exegesis principally uses the term ‘Aboriginal protocols’ in reference to Tasmania. ‘Indigenous protocols’, protocols and cultural protocols are used in other instances.²

country: ‘country’ has different meanings for Aboriginal people in contrast with the ‘newcomers’ notion of ‘the country’. Colonisers have tended to use the word ‘my country’ or ‘the country’ to signify both ownership of land and to refer to the ‘nation’. Aboriginal people speak of ‘country’ and their connection to ‘country’ in a profound ontological and spiritual sense; ‘country’ includes earth, water, sky and all living beings and their mutual responsibilities.

Speaking Position: I am speaking as a white middle class woman born into an Irish Celtic family of convict stock, transported for theft and dumped by the British into Gadigal country (Sydney) in 1788. At times I also speak from a place influenced by the extended Jewish family I married into. In both the film and exegesis I speak as an essayist and documentary film-maker, not as an historian or ethnographer.

¹ ‘Palawa kani’ is an ongoing reconstruction of a composite Tasmanian Aboriginal language.

² See Appendix 1.