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An Ethics of Following and the No Road Film: Trackers, Followers and Fanatics

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Aboriginal Trackers come to the fore in moments of settler crisis, often articulating a limit to settler occupation and settler understanding of the land: "they can't know what I see", as a song from *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer 2002) tells us. This limitation has been explained largely as a challenge to white claims to sovereign possession of the land. Wilson has pointed out that the Tracker (in *The Tracker*) highlights the white men's "failure to grasp the reality of the country they purport to rule" (2002). Similarly, Simpson and I argue in relation to *One Night the Moon*'s (Perkins: 2001) depiction of Tracker Albert Riley that his "knowledge of the land casts doubt over the settler's rightful ownership of it" (Probyn and Simpson 2002). Collins and Davis open their book *Australian Cinema After Mabo* by reading the return of the Tracker in *The Tracker* (2002), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce: 2002) and *One Night the Moon* (2001) as a sign of a crisis in Australian national identity after Mabo where "the landscape is no longer the template of an untroubled national identity grounded in European modernity" (2004: 92). Here I look for evidence of giving ground cinematically to this challenge, primarily by reading de Heer's film *The Tracker*¹.

The Tracker is a fascinating figure in Australian cultural history. His (more often than her) capacity to read the country can demonstrate an "ontological relationship to land" that Aileen Moreton-Robinson has recently argued is exclusive to Aboriginal people (2003:31). But his presence also highlights the usefulness of that knowledge (and relationship to land), to the process of colonisation. Not surprisingly then, for some the Tracker is a 'race traitor' (Olive Pink qtd in McGregor 1994, Matt Savage qtd in Wiley 1971), part of an unwitting collusion in colonial expansion (Carter, 1987: 340-341), while for

others, he is a triumphant figure of culturally specific knowledge (Baulme and Toussaint 1999). He might also be an exemplar of a "caught between two worlds" thesis (Rosser 1996), or a strategic operative (Fels 1988). Critics use words like "enigmatic" (McFarlane 2003), "mysterious" (Wilson 2003) and "fascinating" (see above) to describe him. Peter Pierce argues that the Tracker is a "most potent image of reconciliation between black and white Australia" (1999: xii-xiii). Collins and Davis open their book on Australian cinema with a discussion of the return of the Tracker: he is quite literally their guide to post-Mabo Australian cinema. Taken together, all these readings suggest that the Tracker is a Dream for filmmakers, explorers, myth makers, writers, politicians, academics alike. He can represent Aboriginal privilege, Aboriginal complicity, oppression, containment. He can represent settler powerlessness, powerfulness, arrogance, ignorance and illegitimacy. It seems that he will take us where we want to go, allow us all sorts of possible readings of Australian culture that are contradictory, eclectic and paradoxical. But there is a problem with this, or to put it more accurately, a *limit*. Given that the Tracker represents a kind of epistemological limit to settler perceptions, it seems strange that we critics try to articulate what the Tracker represents without questioning how this contradicts the function of a 'limit': how can I *know* what he represents if his knowledge signals something that I *cannot know*? How is this gap, this aporia to be *represented*? How might it be represented cinematically?

To think this through I mobilise Rolf de Heer's comment that his film *The Tracker* is a "road movie without roads" (de Heer's Diary ²). De Heer's description evokes a film lacking the usual signposts and clues (road signs) to its reading, though containing "plenty signs like this" (The Tracker to the Follower) that white viewers may not be able to 'see'. Other Tracker films like Ivan Sen's short film *Wind* (1999) have no roads, while Rachel Perkins' *One Night the Moon* (2000) is also largely off-road. *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce 2002), was described by the cinematographer Chris Doyle as a "road movie on foot". Each of these films features a Tracker, an Aboriginal 'guide' to a country replete with tracks and other signs (Carter: 1988) that might not be seen by most viewers. We have to imagine what we cannot see for ourselves: this is what cultural difference means, it is also the paradoxical status of the limit in a space/time of liminality.

Stephen Muecke's *No Road: Bitumen all the way* (1997) can also be mobilised to think about the relationship between track, road and settler perceptions. On one level Muecke's book is about the limits of settler perception. Utilising his text, I argue here that *The Tracker* is a 'No Road film' which articulates the limits of settler perception. White settlers will never know what/who the Tracker *really is*³ and what he represents. Instead we *follow*, relying on his knowledge while not having it ourselves. This has a number of broad implications that I wish to unpack in this essay.

Rolf de Heer out there: making *The Tracker*

The Tracker was filmed in Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary, northern Flinders Ranges, South Australia. Armed with 27 military maps, Rolf de Heer located the area for filming after a day and a half of vehicle trouble on dirt roads, noting in his diary that "at times like this you realise just what a big country this is". De Heer describes the film as a "road movie without roads" and yet, significantly, his adventure 'out there' in the Flinders Ranges and eventually to Arkaroola to find the location for *The Tracker* is narrated much like a road movie. He is on the road to 'nowhere' to establish a location / a 'somewhere':

I had no fewer than 27 military maps with me, covering the entire Flinders Ranges. After the first fruitless day and half, I studied these very carefully, in the Caravan park at Hawker (we'd camped that night). On the 26 th map I struck paydirt... Forget all this Chris, we're going to Arkaroola!

But half way to Arkaroola, the tyre deflates and 52 kms later, the spare tyre also gives up leaving de Heer and Corin "stuck, on a dirt backroad" to wait for a passing vehicle. Four hours later de Heer makes it to the next town to get the tyre fixed, commenting: "There were no taxis, no cars to hire, no cars to buy even". The journey continues as does the drama of his self-location: "Got to Arkaroola well after dark, pitched the tents, disposed of a snake under one of them, cooked, ate, fought the flies and mosquitoes, tried to sleep. The tents almost blew away." Arkaroola, a space without roads, poses an epistemological problem for film making: "this is a road movie without roads...how do we co-ordinate this in such an isolated place? How do I keep track of the many places that are possibles, and then choose the best for each particular scene? How do I keep them in the right order for the film, how do we find them again?" Off the bitumen de Heer experiences the horror and pleasure of the non-place of space as did the first settlers, the explorers, the original 'trail blazing' 'road warriors', whose freedom 'out there' came from a reliance on a western science of mapping (bitumen's primer) and also, most importantly, a reliance on the other science of Aboriginal Trackers and guides. For the settler whose relationship to land is contingent on the permanent marking of land through roads, being without them is a disorienting experience: *via nullius*, the no road upsets the bitumenising logic of location and possession.

The Tracker depicts a journey taken in 1922 'somewhere in Australia' by four men to capture an Aboriginal man (The Fugitive played by Noel Wilton) accused of murdering a white woman. The other characters include (and are named as) The Fanatic (Gary Sweet), The Tracker (David Gulpilil), the Follower (Damon Gameau) and The Veteran (Grant Page). The Fanatic is

quickly revealed as a psychopathic colonialist who believes the 'blacks' to be untrustworthy and in need of strict and brutal supervision, a conviction which he also demonstrates in his treatment of the Tracker and in the massacre scene. Along the way he orders the arrest of a small party of 'bush blacks', who are then tortured at gun point until being massacred by him, the Follower and the Veteran. This massacre scene is depicted in one of Peter Coad's 14 paintings (interspersed throughout the film) with a soundtrack of shouting and screaming and guns firing. The Fanatic's power is slowly unravelled as the Follower starts to show contrition about his involvement in the massacre. When the Fanatic demonstrates his cruelty again, the Follower places the Fanatic under arrest. The Tracker and the Follower then join up in an uneasy, strategic alliance based on a common condemnation of the Fanatic. While the Follower sleeps (drugged by the Tracker), the Tracker executes the Fanatic by hanging from a tree, finding him guilty of murder (he has murdered a party of Aborigines and the Veteran). The execution of the Fanatic leaves only the Tracker and Follower. The Tracker then leads the Follower into and out of captivity amongst the 'bush blacks' who have captured the Aboriginal man accused now of assaulting an Aboriginal woman. For this crime he is punished according to tribal law, but the Tracker explains to the Follower that as for the other crime of murder of the white woman, he would not get a fair trial for a crime that was probably committed by a white man. The Follower seems to accept this, or at least, he follows what The Tracker suggests: "If you wanna stay alive, you better be quiet and follow me."

'Sorry', says the Follower to the Tracker

Early on in the *The Tracker*, the Follower disputes the Tracker's ability to read the country: "anyone can see he's not really tracking, just following his nose and hoping for the best" he says to the Fanatic. The Fanatic, a brutal white supremacist, is pleased to demonstrate *his* knowledge of the Tracker's knowledge and orders the Tracker to show the Follower how he reads the land. The Tracker's explanation: "That stone belong there, been kicked away about 2 hours ago" elicits an apology "Sorry", from the Follower. This "Sorry" brings a lingering smile of satisfaction on the Tracker's face. The Follower's 'contrition' (called for elsewhere in song) affords both men grounds for their strategic collaboration later in the film.

Australian audiences will recognise the powerful resonance of this word 'sorry' in reconciliation debates. Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations after the publication of *Bringing them Home* (1997) was commemorated shamefully in the skies during the Reconciliation Walk over the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000, when SORRY was written many times in the sky above the harbour by a skywriter. The "Sorry" that the Follower delivers in this film comes directly after and through his recognition of the Tracker's knowledge, his ability to read the landscape. This "Sorry" and

the recognition of the Tracker's knowledge are bound up with reconciliation itself ⁴ and recent calls for the recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty.

The relationship between knowledge of the land and 'ownership' of it has been noted by the authors of *Reading the Country* (Benterrak, Roe and Muecke: 147). While Trackers were often trespassers, their epistemological relationship to land still suggests a sovereign priority in relation to the country at large. Aileen Moreton-Robinson has reaffirmed the significance of land to Aboriginality, arguing that Aboriginality is ontologically linked to the land:

Our ontological relationship to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous. This ontological relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share, and which cannot be shared, with the postcolonial subject whose sense of belonging in this place is tied to migrancy (2003:31).

What Moreton-Robinson seems to be suggesting (in my interpretation) is that we settlers (or migrants) can have, indeed, *should* have the knowledge of Aboriginal connectedness to land, but that we cannot have the connectedness itself. Moreton-Robinson warns off potential appropriations of Aboriginal belonging (as in Peter Read, see Probyn 2002a), which indicates a level of envy surrounding that connectedness to land. Moreton-Robinson suggests that the positions of settler migrant and Aborigine are not commensurable because of this essential, ontological difference. She explicitly states that the Aboriginal connection to and knowledge of the land cannot be shared: "we do not share" and "cannot be shared". To 'share' this would be to give up the difference that marks her account of Aboriginal power/knowledge. So, there is in Moreton-Robinson's work a desire to close off this aspect of land connectedness to settlers at a metaphysical level and on ontological grounds.

Moreton-Robinson's argument above offers a useful approach to *The Tracker* and the centrality of the Tracker's knowledge in that film. In the scene that I recounted previously, the Tracker shows the Follower how he has read the country, which elicits a resounding 'sorry' from the Follower, which is in turn met by the Tracker's smile. This scene seems to confirm Moreton-Robinson's statement that an Aboriginal ontological relationship to land cannot be shared but that knowledge of that relationship must be recognised by the settler. Interestingly however, the recognition of Aboriginal epistemological priority does not necessarily lead to a positive or respectful relationship between settler and Aboriginal. After all, the Fanatic also appreciates the Tracker's knowledge but holds him in contempt as a 'black'. This recognition of the

knowledge of the tracker (or recognition of the Aboriginal relationship to land) thus presents two options within the film. On the one hand, the Follower's recognition of Aboriginal knowledge of the land seems to throw him off course in terms of his colonialist assumptions and onto more respectful grounds. On the other hand, the Fanatic's knowledge of the Tracker's knowledge situates the Tracker as merely a cog in the colonial machinery. The Fanatic's execution suggests that this view of Aboriginal knowledge (as valuable only when it is functionally complicit with colonialism) is not viable, not reconcilable.

In a different reading of this scene, Collins and Davis have suggested that the Tracker demonstrates "a willingness to share cultural knowledge, opening the eyes of The Follower and the spectator to his cultural understanding of the land" (16). Here, contrary to Moreton-Robinson's thesis, Collins and Davis suggest that the Tracker's knowledge is "shared" with the Follower. But I would argue that de Heer's film is in agreement with Moreton-Robinson's thesis that there is an incommensurable, ontological land connectedness for Aboriginal Australians that cannot be shared by whites. Again, the film suggests that the *knowledge* of Aboriginal ontological connectedness can be 'shared', but not the connectedness itself. That is why the Tracker reappears now, at a time when Sovereignty and Native title is most pressing; as a reminder of a connectedness to land that is metaphysically closed off to settlers. However, as Collins and Davis' reading suggests, the desire for that same connection to land is still prevalent within Australian settler culture. Thwarted, it is often expressed as a desire for a connection to Aboriginal knowledge of the land.

So how is this figured in *The Tracker*? A close reading of the scene shows that the Tracker and the Follower do not 'share' the Tracker's knowledge. Rather, the Follower recognises that he does not have the knowledge to pass judgement on the Tracker's epistemology. During this scene the camera focuses on the ground (a dry river bed) and in particular on the 'mass' of the stones in front of us. The Tracker shows the Follower and the viewer which stone was turned and when; the evidence and the deduction. We are at ground level, having the signs read to us by the Tracker. This moment of 'reading the signs' is close to the ground, but we quickly return to a wide landscape shot. But something is different. The Tracker leads us through the landscape which we now know to be *not* only a landscaped 'object' but a land 'replete with signs' (Carter) that we cannot read. We have not 'shared' the Tracker's cultural knowledge here: he has shown us what we cannot see for ourselves. This is an important moment: we are presented with the contradiction of a landscape rendered passive by the camera and Peter Coad's landscape portraits, but also with a land that can be read very differently. Seeing the film, reading the land in it, we are seeing what we cannot read: we cannot read the landscape like the Tracker, we are *following*. We do not share in the knowledge of the Tracker, as

Collins and Davis suggest in their reading of the film, rather we are placed in the position of Follower who has to trust that he doesn't know and that his not-knowing is not the same as Aboriginal lies: "anyone can see he's not really tracking." In saying these words the Follower had assumed that *he knew* that *anyone knows* what 'real' tracking looks like: it is an assumption of god like perspective into the shared knowledge of *all Others*. Such a presumption has been described by Fiona Nicoll in the following way: " *unspeakability for white people* " is not the same as " *unknowability for indigenous people* " (3-4). The Follower's 'Sorry' indicates that he begins to see the limitations of his own perspective on the matter. But it also ends his conversation with the Tracker, as if he now finds the Tracker's ability 'unspeakable'.

The Tracker does not leave us in any easy, reconciled, political space at its conclusion. It is not romantic in that sense. At the end, the Tracker rides off into the sunset to go home "which is far away, boss, but always I can find it". He asks the Follower if he will be able to find his way home "You know how to get back?" and the Follower says, "Think so" followed by "You?". The Follower *still* questions the Tracker's ability to find his way home. The Follower thinks that he will be able to "get back". How do we read this affirmation? Do we imagine the Follower nervously retracing his steps, following whatever mark of himself that he can see in the land, or 'following his nose and hoping for the best'? Or do we imagine that the Follower has learnt enough from the Tracker to find his own way, *like he belongs*, and if so, how might this unguided return trip compromise the Tracker's epistemological priority insisted on elsewhere in the film? The Follower is left with no one to *follow* : has his contrition and his friendship with the Tracker left him with the knowledge to survive? Is he "backtracking over familiar ground" (Collins and Davis:172) or is he able to read the country for the first time? It is difficult to read with any certainty and I think this is partly the point of leaving the Follower where he is; stopped, slowed right down so that we don't know where he'll go from there. The film ends with us looking out over the Follower's shoulders as the Tracker gallops away on a horse into the distance. One is going home, the other watches but stays still. We remain attached to the Tracker's tracks in the distance, as if the way home for the Follower is still linked to the Tracker. This seems to indicate cinematically, that if, as Moreton-Robinson suggests, Aboriginal people have an ontological connection to land, then settlers have an ontological connection to Aboriginal ontological connection to land. Which is to say that settlers are ontologically connected to the land, but not necessarily through their knowledge of the land, but rather through their *lack* of knowledge and consequently their / our capacity to and desire to accumulate the knowledge of Others. This is one way in which Moreton-Robinson's ontological view of Aboriginal connection to land might be linked with the white critics (Collins and Davis, Muecke, Read) and their desire (explicit or not) to 'share' in that Aboriginal knowledge. An

Aboriginal ontological connection to land becomes the very thing that the settler wants to share (whether realisable or not) but cannot have - so instead, we have a *lack* of knowledge to cling to, and also the promise of someone who does know. Moreton-Robinson's thesis might be seen in this context as confirming a relationship that has been there from the outset, when the first settlers looked to Aboriginal epistemologies to help navigate the country. At that point they probably did not worry too much about a 'connectedness' to it. Now it seems that the settler desire for connectedness has led to a different kind of following; a following that seeks a proximity to Aboriginal epistemology just at the time when incommensurability comes into play.

A settler imperative to follow Aboriginal epistemologies can be thought of as a *good* thing, as a transformative thing, because it can also de-centre a settler imaginary, producing uncertainty about the direction ahead, with no guarantee of 'progress', and with the threat of becoming lost at any moment. Think back to Rolf de Heer, to many other settler texts which articulate this fear of becoming lost 'out there' in the 'badlands' as Ross Gibson (2002) has recently fantasised. To rethink this 'lostness' as a positive manoeuvre involves accepting the prioritising of Aboriginal knowledge before our own (called for by Moreton-Robinson: 2002:xxv). As Stephen Muecke observes, seeing the country differently with respect to Aboriginal sovereignty might require him/whites to "leave the bitumen, to leave the roads and finally to get lost and maybe to find a way again" (133). This getting lost, reaching the limits, can be rethought as a 'poetics of failure' that imagines the limits of settler perception in order to attempt to think otherwise, but not always or necessarily free of colonial paradigms (see Probyn 2002b). It might also be rethought as an 'ethics of following' as elucidated in the relationship between the Tracker and the Follower in the film. Such an ethics insists on prioritising Aboriginal knowledge (Moreton-Robinson, 2002: xxv) while not fully knowing what this actually looks like, nor what it might mean. Nor does it come with any clear political trajectory. As Paul Carter reminds us, European colonisers were often initially followers: "More often than not the European explorer did not lead, but was lead" (340). Carter points out that one of the implications of this Following was that the "guide enables him [the explorer] to pretend the horizon is not there, the landscape already possessed" (341). So, following an Aboriginal lead, prioritising Aboriginal knowledge, has also been a feature of colonial power itself. For instance, in his account of an expedition to the Hawkesbury in 1789, Watkin Tench describes following Colbee and Boladaree in order to *know what his guides know* about the country, to 'share' in their knowledge:

We expected to have derived from them [Colbee and Boladaree] much information relating to the country, as no one doubted that they were acquainted with every part of it between the sea coast and the river

Hawkesbury. We hoped also to have witnessed their manner of living in the woods, and the resources they rely upon in their journeys. Nothing, however, of this sort had yet occurred (Tench, 187).

Instead of learning about the land or "their manner of living in the woods" (both of pressing concern to a colony which was suffering the combined depredations of very low rations and no bush skills), the main discovery was not theirs to make. Colbee and Boladaree's discovery of white incompetence in the bush appears most significant, Tench recording that: "Our perplexities afforded them an inexhaustible fund of merriment and derision" (190). This is the first written (published) record of what was and still is an issue of great importance in postcolonial Australia: the foreignness and incompetence of settlers in the bush relative to the at-home-ness of the Aborigine (see also Mulligan and Hill 1999). Colbee and Boladaree had what Carter has described as a 'spatial command of the country'⁵ (Carter: 335) which "presented the greatest threat to white interests" (336) if it worked outside of those interests. Perhaps Tench and his followers were happy to follow Colbee and Boladaree, happy to appreciate their connectedness to country, as long as it didn't work against their material interest in the land. Perhaps today we are happy to follow the Tracker, happy to appreciate his connectedness to country, as long as it provides us with another way to be at home *with him*, and if with him, then with the land also?

The Tracker draws our attention to this settler reliance on an Aboriginal connectedness to land. It is this relationship to land that Moreton-Robinson argues we are excluded from that then constructs settlers as ontologically linked to a *lack* of knowledge about the land (and thereby dependent on Aboriginal connectedness to land). Thus the settler, the Follower, is ontologically linked to the Aboriginal ontological relationship to country. Into the space of this difference, this incommensurability, between Aboriginal and white settler, often comes romanticism. This was particularly evident in the critical and popular reception that followed the film, and in particular, David Gulpilil. Rather than thinking through the implications of cultural difference that the film gestures at, critics rushed to fill the gaps with romantic figures of resistant, 'authentic natives', suspended in a pre-colonial time. This reading of the film and David Gulpilil relates, I would argue, to its challenge to genre and so in order to end with a discussion of the film's No Road film status, I take a detour here and discuss the ways in which *The Tracker* and Gulpilil were 'bitumenised' in the film's critical reception.

Bitumenising the Tracker

The 'bitumenising' of the Tracker, by which I mean the mobilising of colonial myths to 'explain' him *finally*, followed the reception of David Gulpilil as the

Tracker in *The Tracker*, as well as in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. David Gulpilil's reported reply to Rolf de Heer ('Rolf, matey. I'm *really* a Tracker'⁶) provided the opportunity for the Tracker to be tracked down to Gulpilil's particular 'authentic' self. The man who played the Tracker saying that he really was a Tracker made for an interesting loop of representations and counter-representations which is reflected in the suggestion made by some of the film's reviewers that David Gulpilil's performance as The Tracker was, in fact, not a performance at all, but an example of being 'natural'⁷. Needless to say, the same reviewers did not argue that Gary Sweet was a 'natural' psychotic Fanatic of outback Australia. (But this does open up the possibility for a reading of the 'authentic white' as psychopathic rather than a 'follower'). The romanticised description of Gulpilil as 'natural' suggests that he is not granted mimetic privilege like his fellow cast members (he is being 'real') because of the significance attached to his Aboriginality (manifest as tracking skills), which in turn confines his contribution to the film to his mere presence in it. There is something telling in this desire to make the Tracker 'real' or David Gulpilil accessible *through* the screen, and it relates to the contemporary fascination for what the figure of the Tracker (with his use of 'traditional' skills) tells us about Australian settler history and what we might desire to be 'real' in it. It is as if in the absence of roads we are back in 'nature', rather than in the "cultivated space" (Carter: 337) of Aboriginal sovereign possession.

David Gulpilil as The Tracker seemed to serve as partial consolation for the violence of settler history depicted in the film largely through Peter Coad's paintings, as demonstrated by the following reviewer's comments: "Along the way are confronting scenes of violence. *But* at the heart of every scene is the Tracker"⁸ (my emphasis). The "but" here seems to suggest a form of consolation for having to bear witness to these scenes of colonial violence, the 'but' suggesting that we cannot have been that bad if the Tracker is, after all, victorious, heroic and subversive. His success palliates the brutality of what we imagine. This seems to correlate with the desire to position David Gulpilil as a non-Actor despite his work over the past 30 years. Gulpilil's 'authenticity' is what the critics desire, to make him the "Face of the Nation" (*Inside Film*) because in the image of this 'traditional Yolgnu man' settler culture is reassured that its history cannot have been entirely destructive, as Elizabeth Povinelli suggests: "Shimmering off this traditional mirage, they [settlers] would catch a glimpse of their own best selves" (27). Povinelli suggests that in fact it is the *settler* who desires this 'authentic native' because his/her presence effaces "bad settlement history" (35) which led to the loss of those pre-colonial 'Aboriginal traditions' in the first place.

This emphasis on Gulpilil's actual skills as a Tracker and the assertion that he is not actually acting is connected, I think, to the use of Peter Coad's paintings within the film - it is these paintings which depict the violence that the Fanatic

orders on the bodies of Aboriginal people captured, chained and shot along the way. There is the potential that such a use of the paintings in place of the camera's depiction of violence might palliate the brutalities of the colonial encounter (as Edward Said sees 'culture' in relation to imperialism in *Culture and Imperialism*, xiii). Karen Jennings has noted in her reading of John Honey's *Manganinnie* (1980) that the use of long shots and off screen gun shots to depict violence can be read as an attempt to "make a shameful period of Aboriginal-European relations somehow more palatable" (1993: 29). But in relation to Coad's paintings in the film, critics have responded to the technique with the suggestion that the paintings make the violence more 'real'⁹. This insistence that the paintings make the violence more real (more violent than the violence) does in fact invoke its artifice even more strongly because of the reference to the 'real' outside of the film itself. Rolf de Heer's diary reveals that most of the actors found the massacre scene particularly difficult to deal with while David Gulpilil found it exciting because events like these (according to de Heer) were within his community's recent memory:

David was the only one among us who was actually excited by the scene, by the nature of the depiction. In his home country in Arnhem Land there are still people alive who were present at the massacres that took place there in the first half of the twentieth century, and for him to be seeing how some of it might have been was for him being in touch with his history. But it is our history too (de Heer's diary: Friday 9/3/2001)

However, this begs a question: *who* is reassured by the representation of violence in the art works? Who is it who needs the reassurance: " *But* it is our history too" (emphasis added).

The romanticised readings of the Tracker (as David Gulpilil) are not supported by the film in which he appears. Homi Bhabha's work on colonial mimicry, ambivalence and hybridity is helpful here. Bhabha's oeuvre draws attention to the strategies that the colonised use in resisting colonial domination. Those co-opted to assist the process of colonisation (like Trackers) remain liminal figures who cannot be positioned neatly as 'the colonised' or 'the coloniser's accomplice' but who are both and more. This is demonstrated in *The Tracker* where the Tracker's mimicry of the words of the white bosses underlines the point that he both *resembles and menaces* them (Bhabha, 1984: 127). For instance, the Tracker tells the Fanatic: "no such thing as an innocent black. The only innocent black is a dead black" and to the Follower he reports "you know, we all cannibals". Here the Tracker strategically repeats racist remarks and yet his repetition radically alters (makes ironic) their meaning. Moreover, his comment "blackfellas...they're slippery" paradoxically demonstrates the truth

of the whitefella's words in the sense that he *is* indeed strategically slippery, and whites *are* "paranoid" (Bhabha, 1985:78). The undecidability of his mimicry is echoed in critical responses to *The Tracker*, which situate the Tracker as "invisible to white conversations," (McFarlane: 62), "knowable only in part" (Wilson, 2) and "familiar yet estranged" (Collins and Davis, 3). These descriptions *do not* capture the truth of the Tracker. Rather, they are spoken by the settler at the limit of what they /I can perceive because: "to tell the history of the Other is to be pushed against the limits of one's own" (2) as Sara Suleri has written.

So, how might these limitations in settler knowledge be presented in film? Here I return to what I suggested in the opening of this essay - that in taking seriously de Heer's description of *The Tracker* as a "road movie without roads" we might begin to see how these limitations have been transferred onto the screen as a challenge to genre. In this final section, I posit *The Tracker* as a No Road film: a film that *resembles but menaces* (Bhabha, 1984: 127) the generic Road film and which gestures towards incommensurable differences between settler and Aboriginal views of country. This is not to say that it 'captures' Aboriginal differences. Rather it exposes the fact that such a thing is impossible: "they can't know what I see" as the Tracker says. *The Tracker* poses this as an epistemological challenge to the viewer, and this is where the No Road idea comes into play. As I will detail below, the No Road film allows the de-centring of certain cultural assumptions about land as a cinematic 'object' under our sovereign gaze.

The No Road Film: 'A Road Movie without roads'

The Tracker has been described as a "Western" and "not a Western" (62) by Brian McFarlane (which is perhaps why he also brings up the theme of 'backtracking' 2003), while Wilson also suggests that it is a "stripped down Western". But I prefer to follow de Heer's lead where he describes his film as a 'road movie without roads', which means it could be a No Road film. This has two meanings: firstly, such films are without bitumen roads and secondly, such films include different epistemological traces to the usual road film that we might not be able to know from the inside but are still there anyway (much like Aboriginal Sovereignty in relation to the State).

The concept of *No Road* comes from Stephen Muecke's ficto-critical work *No Road: Bitumen all the way*. Muecke borrowed the title from his friend Gloria. She told him the story of a local man from a community outside Darwin in the Northern Territory. She asked him whether there was a road out to his community and the man replied: " Road? No road...NO ROAD. Bitumen all the way. Bitumen aaall the way ". (18) In this story the bitumen is not a road: the road is a track. What is a road to some is not a road to others; where I see a track, others might see a road. These are quite different perceptions of place

but articulated with the same word 'road'. This indicates that though we might 'share' the same physical space (road, country) the meanings attached to it can be radically different. The relationship between road and track is not a neat opposition, not always surface and depth (not the track *beneath* the road) but intertextual: one is built out of and into the body of the other, like a 'fold' where cultures meet, violently at times. The presence of the road does not negate the track, it is indebted to it, it invokes it, brings it into presence in an uncanny sense. As Paul Carter notes, the first road to Botany Bay was an Aboriginal track. There is no 'authentic' way of occupying roads or tracks, no easy historic continuity, but a complex genealogical folding of road with track, tracking with driving, cars with feet, No Road films with Road films. Bill Bennett's film *Kiss or Kill* illustrates this point by showing a Tracker, Possum Harry, tracking a 'pommy' car along a dirt road from the bonnet of a police vehicle. Trackers are not nostalgic dreams of Aboriginality in the land and country but nor are they Nietzschean "supermen...beyond good and evil" or "singular modernists" as Gibson paints troopers of the frontier (58-59).

No Road: Bitumen all the way lends itself well to a reading of *The Tracker*. Its focus is on the epistemological importance of the road and it exploits the association between the road and knowledge, epistemology, journeys, narratives and nations. The book is ostensibly the account of an "accidental intellectual" (31) on a road trip to do cultural studies work for an Aboriginal community at Purnululu. It ties together the symbolic nature of the car and mobility into the landscape of postcolonial Australia. As in road films, the narrative/journey is realised as epistemological as well as spatial. The narrator leaves home to start "touring again" to make *things* /language/ideas/theory move. So the road is not simply a metaphor in this book; it is also, crucially, a way of seeing and being in land, culture and place. The road in *No Road* has material semiotic form; it is always equally about knowledge and materiality simultaneously. The road is both an object and a meaning-making machine (trope), which could be placed alongside literature, the museum and map for its capacity to reflect and participate in histories of Empire.

The No Road's departure from the orthodox Road film is related to its postcolonial trajectory. Like the Tracker who works for and with the colonial powers, the No Road film is also a kind of captive of the Road film genre, its intimate and complicit critic. To make a No Road film one needs roads - but to make a Road film one also needs No Roads. Far from representing "freedom on the road to nowhere" as Timothy Corrigan (1991) has described the Road Movie genre in the US context, the *No Road* film in postcolonial Australia demonstrates that what is 'freedom' to one is a colonial imposition to an Other and that the road does not lead to 'nowhere' with its connotations of *terra nullius*, but leads into, onto and through, someone else's already culturally inscribed land. While road movies in the US are posited as going "back to the nation's frontier ethos" (Cohan and Hark, 1997: 1) where the road signifies "an

empty expanse, a tabula rasa, the last true frontier" (Dargis qtd in Cohan and Hark, 1), such a *terra nullius* image rings hollow in postcolonial Australian cinema and culture. No Road films illustrate above all the 'somewhere-ness' of place in contrast to the Nowhere-ness of unbounded, unmapped 'space'.

There are a number of things that occur once the road is taken out of the road film. There is still a journey, a quest, or an escape motif, but there are significant departures from the road film related to the absence of the road and its epistemological, cultural and historical implications. Firstly, in all of these films, the white male who traditionally dominates the road movie is no longer dominant. In *The Tracker*, the Fanatic becomes increasingly psychotic as his dependence on the Tracker grows. The Follower, who forms a friendship with the Tracker, is left at the end of the film to find his own way home (an ambivalent gesture from the 'guide'), while The Veteran is speared and then killed off by his boss. In *One Night the Moon*, the white settler male shoots himself. A O Neville (played by Kenneth Branagh) in *Rabbit Proof Fence* loses control of his charges, despite his maps, cars and police. In *Sen's Wind*, the white Sergeant is also killed.

Secondly, if the road is taken out of the film we are *in* the country, the land, the bush rather than hurtling through it. And as I argued in a previous section where I looked at the scene in which the Tracker shows the Follower that he is reading the country, in that scene the settler viewer is confronted with an image of landscape that is *country*, or, land that can be read and is being read in multiple ways, with signs that we cannot read: "they can't know what I see". The implications of this become more stark if we think of the No Road film's privileging of this inability to read the signs that we might understand to be there (without being able to read them ourselves). What this signals is Aboriginal cultural difference that is, according to Moreton-Robinson, closed off to a settler sensibility. These No Road films, 'road movie[s] without roads', or films in which the road is decentred, need to be read differently from the traditional road movie, with a different kind of logic which has everything to do with reading / treading the country differently.

The third implication of taking the bitumen out of the Road film is that western markers of time and space lose epistemological priority. A land without permanent *roads* marking a progression through space has to be read differently and not according to teleology of historical progress. Without the road, the 'pastness' of the historical location of these narratives is difficult to place. For instance, the Tracker opens "In 1922, somewhere in Australia", and it is the absence of roads that produces this 'somewhere-ness', the indefinite place off the side of the road, outside of mapped history with its emphasis on progress, movement. To marginalise the perspective of the road of History is to then emphasise the play of time, where past and present become entangled, inseparable, ghosts of each other.

Judith Wright uses the term 'haunting' (Wright qtd in Griffiths 1998) to describe the white settler's relationships to a violent past. The term is apt because, as Derrida has observed in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), ghosts, spectres, indeed *hauntology*, indicate that the division between the dead and the living is never settled and the relationship between past and present is not a clear issue of historical progress and teleology that leaves the past *behind*. So 'backtracking' to the 1920s, 1930s in these films (and 1867 in Sen's *Wind*) is not only symptomatic of melancholia (an inability to get over it, move on, make progress) as Collins and Davis argue, it might also indicate the need for a new approach to history that has given up on the myth of progress itself (Brown: 2001): and what more perfect place to situate this account of history than a place without roads? Taking the road out of the road film is like taking out the myth of progress, the illusion that we can 'move on' through a clearly defined path through linear time and space, with 'tides of history' that wash away the past (Justice Toohey's pronouncement in the Yorta Yorta Land claim). These films return us to the past but only in the sense that there is no clear road to determine what constitutes the pastness of the past and what then constitutes 'progress'.

The epistemological challenge posed by taking the bitumen road out of the road film thus manifests itself not in the guarantee of political *progress*, away from a violent past and into a glorious future (*sic transit Gloria mundi*, so passes the glorious world, spoken by both Fanatic and Tracker) but into a sense of historical unpredictability that the No Road film articulates. From the ambivalence of the Tracker who takes centre stage in the No Road film, we can also see that the No Road film is likewise an ambivalent collection of moving images, the politics of which cannot be settled.

Conclusion

Clearly, the political trajectory of the No Road film is not set in stone but in *motion* and motion pictures at that: objects that are *made* and *read* and *circulate* in ways that cannot be predetermined. Without a clear historical trajectory ahead, with the 'road to reconciliation' contested, the No Road film offers itself as an ambiguous guide. Congruent with reconciliation, the recognition of the Tracker's knowledge in these films bears an enormous cultural significance, as the Tracker says to the Follower: "you listen to me carefully, you do as I tell you to do, you don't do anything that I don't tell you to do. That way you'll survive". This could stand as reminder of the Settler/Follower's relationship of debt to Aboriginal sovereignty. But as I hope to have shown, it is not so simple. The call to prioritise Aboriginal knowledge can turn the Aboriginal "owner" into the "guide" - the former lending itself to suggestions of sovereignty, the latter suggesting the passing on and sharing of that knowledge to respectful and grateful whites. When Moreton-Robinson insists on an incommensurable Aboriginal ontological connection to land, she also

invokes the kinds of parasitism and dependency that colonisation creates in settlers (becoming ontologically dependent on Aboriginal ontological connection to land). Films like *The Tracker* highlight this; thereby also highlighting the appropriation that is colonialism's other name. *The Tracker* reminds us that the 'road to reconciliation' is paved with tracks that whites cannot see and cannot presume to know in advance. No Road films indicate that whites cannot necessarily see a limit to their understanding, but need to have it continually pointed out to us, somewhere, over there, *look, here, there*. The No Road film follows this predicament of contemporary settler postcoloniality: seeing and not seeing limits in a space / time of liminality.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Trackers have appeared throughout Australian films including the following: *Moora Neya or The Message of the Spear* (1911), *Robbery Under Arms* (1907) with new versions 1957, 1985, *Peter Vernon's Silence* (1926), *The Kangaroo Kid* (1950) *The Phantom Stockman* (1953) *The Back of Beyond* (1954) *Journey out of Darkness* (1967) *Lost in the Bush* (1973) *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir, 1975) *Journey Among Women* (1977) *Little Boy Lost* (1978) *Manganinnie* (1980) *We of the Never Never* (1982) *Bush Christmas* (1983) *Backlash* (1986). Thanks to Meg Probyn for compiling this list.

2. De Heer's diary covering the making of *The Tracker* can be viewed at Vertigo Productions http://www.vertigoproductions.com.au/information.php?film_id=8&display=diaries

3. Jake Wilson (2003) also observes that his "thoughts and motivations are knowable only in part".

4. Interestingly, the settler in *One Night the Moon* (Paul Kelly) also recognises the Tracker's skills (Kelton Pell) but it is too late. His suicide may signal contrition but not reconciliation, which demands the presence of both men.

5. The Tracker's spatial command of the country is supported in anthropological work. Balme and Toussaint, anthropologists researching plans to preserve a Tracker's hut at Fitzroy Crossing, found an overwhelming sense of the need to preserve the hut given that it "represented Aboriginal tracking skills which were found wanting in Europeans" (1999:32). Balme and Toussaint were surprised by this response by the locals, given the "mediating role of Aboriginal Trackers in European occupation of the Kimberley" (Balme and Toussaint, 31). They had been expecting (and this seems to be a common settler perception,

Baker 1988, Carter 1988, Matt Savage qtd in Wiley 1971, Olive Pink qtd in McGregor 1994), that the Trackers would be seen as race traitors. But what seems to have mattered to the community were the fact of those skills and not the uses to which they were put. This emphasis on the significance of those skills seems also to describe recent representations of the Tracker in film: issues surrounding Tracker complicity are sidelined in readings that highlight the significance of Aboriginal epistemological privilege over the land and the sovereignty that this suggests.

6. David Gulpilil to Rolf de Heer, qtd in "Tracking David" in *Inside Film*, 46, August 2002, p.34

7. "Gulpilil, in particular, is so completely in sync with his character, it is almost an insult to call it a "performance" Leigh Paatsch, "Rolf's on the right track" *Herald Sun* August 15, 2002.

8. Margaret Pomeranz, <http://www20.sbs.com.au/movieshow/index.php?action=review&id=936>

9. "Rolf de Heer has an unusual way of dealing with the violence that is at the heart of his latest film, *The Tracker* - he opts not to show it directly. The story encompasses massacre, murder and retribution; the violence is portrayed obliquely using songs and paintings. But it is no less harrowing for the restraint de Heer shows. Philippa Hawker "Haunted By History" *The Age* July 22, 2002. Pomeranz - "De Heer's use of Coad's paintings adds an uncanny power to the film, strangely making the violence more meaningful, more tragic, taking away any notion that's it's only a movie."

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