



You dead people must have broken the boat motor.

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Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams

Karrabing Film Collective

2016, single-channel video installation, color, 29 min., English. **Production company** Karrabing Indigneous Corporation (Nightcliff, Australia). **Director** Elizabeth A. Povinelli **Screenplay** Karrabing Film Collective. **Director of photography** Natasha Lewis. **Production design** Sandra Yarrowin. **Sound** Leandros Ntounis. **Sound design** Leandros Ntounis. **Editor** Elizabeth A. Povinelli. **Production manager** Cecilia Lewis. **With** Trevor Bianamu (Trevor), Rex Edmunds (Over), Linda Yarrowin (Jojo), Rex Sing (Rex), Patsy-Ann Jorroek (Ancestral Spirit #1), Lorraine Lane (Ancestral Spirit #2), Robyn Lane (Ancestral Spirit #3), Sandra Yarrowin (Ancestral Spirit #4), Sharon Lane (Welfare Worker #1), Daphne Yarrowin (Contemporary and 1952 Pastor).

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Across a series of flashbacks, an extended Indigenous family argues about what caused their boat's motor to break down and leave them stranded out in the bush. As they consider the roles played in the incident by the ancestral presence, the regulatory state and the Christian faith, *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams* explores the multiple demands and inescapable vortexes of contemporary Indigenous life.

The film is the most surreal and near-psychedelic of the Karrabing Film Collective's productions to date. It explores how the collective's Indigenous filmmakers experience the containments of missionary-Christian moral codes as well as settler-colonial rule-of-law, and how these layer, displace, but ultimately are absorbed into ancestral territorial arrangements secured in sweat and through generational obligation.

An interview with the Karrabing Film Collective

In October 2016 the Karrabing Film Collective obtained passports for the first time, and traveled to take part in Jerusalem Show VIII *Before and After Origins* at Al Ma'mal Foundation. The presentation formed part of the 3rd Qalandiya International – a contemporary art event that takes place every two years across Palestinian cities and villages and in 2016 included sites of the Palestinian diaspora in Amman, Beirut, and London. The exhibition featured among other things *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams* by Karrabing Film Collective. A discussion with the Subversive Film collective from Ramallah was also announced.¹

Vivian Zihelr, curator of the Jerusalem Show and founder of Frontier Imaginaries, met the collective's members Gavin Bianamu, Sheree Bianamu, Natasha Lewis, and Elizabeth A. Povinelli for an interview.

Vivian Zihelr: *Jerusalem Show VIII Before and After Origins proposes an "arts of connection" – learning from the Palestinian experience in which a chief technology of dispossession has been the long-term division and estrangement of populations. How is Karrabing filmmaking an art of connection, and how did that come about?*

Karrabing Film Collective: Karrabing filmmaking began in the wake of a vicious state intervention in Indigenous governance – the governance of Indigenous people in the North. In the 1970s the Australian state "recognized" the rights of Indigenous people to their lands but operationalized this right by dividing people based on reductive anthropological theories of "clan" and "totem." In practice, state-based land recognition pitted Indigenous groups against each other, and set up the settler courts as purportedly neutral arbiters. But by the 2000s a longstanding conservative federal government backed by large mining interests slowly tried to overturn land-rights legislation by "starving" people off their land – denying financial and social support for rural and remote Indigenous communities, forcing them into low wage jobs or more typically not caring about what happens to them after they leave their lands. This tactic assumes that, once removed from country, "land" increasingly becomes an abstraction rather than an embodied relation. And the need for a means of life increases. As an abstraction the seductions of capital and capitalization of land become more seductive.

Karrabing filmmaking refuses both forms of state disconnection – the disconnection of families and the disconnection of families and generations from their memories and lands. Karrabing does not refer to a single family's land or totem but to a condition of the saltwater tides. Karrabing is the saltwater that connects across family lands and is the condition of their existence. And Karrabing filmmaking provides the practices of memory that continually re-embody people and place.

Today Karrabing crossed from Jerusalem to Ramallah to spend time with the collective Subversive Film because they could not join the public event with Al Ma'mal Foundation. What did you learn meeting with Subversive Film, looking at their research into Palestinian Militant Film, and from the border-crossings that had to happen for this to take place?

The footage was stunning – both the surrealist Palestine Liberation Organization propagandist stuff and the documentary footage of people's arrival in Jordanian camps in 1967. We remembered stories of grandparents and great-grandparents being interned in the 1930s and removed again during World War II, and some sneaking out and walking hundred of kilometers across the bush to get back to their homelands. Some of us were really interested to see that women and young kids were training to fight with guns. And that people imagined they could – and partially did – get their lands back by arms. There were acts of violent resistance in early settler colonialism but the demographics were different, and Indigenous people were largely massacred.

In terms of crossing the checkpoints, some of us thought about the differences and similarities in the way that rural and remote Indigenous communities are locked up. Part of the lock-up and removal has to do with where Indigenous people in the north were interned in the 1930s – away from white cities – and how poverty keeps them locked there (cars, petrol, registration all cost money). Part of this is the way the state currently polices Aboriginal communities as well. Police have the right to enter communities and houses at will under the flimsiest of pretexts. They can set up check-points to search for alcohol, and under this excuse arrest people for quality of life infractions, outstanding warrants, unregistered cars, etc. As fines pile up and income drops, these slow quasi-violent acts account for the vastly unequal number of Indigenous men and women in Australian prisons. We saw the walled enclosure, the constant harassment of Palestinians, the blockage of movement as similar in form if not content.

The 1970s style militant image/cause was about being prepared to die in order to continue existing, but militancy for you guys, and increasingly Palestinians, is about being prepared to live... in order to continue existing?

Yes, but we must reimagine what it is to be militant outside of one of the dominant images and causes of 1970s style militancy, namely armed insurrection; a being prepared to die for the cause. In the condition of the state debilitation of Indigenous existence militancy is the refusal to cease to exist.

*Our colleague and co-conspirator Rachel O'Reilly once pointed out that in some ways Karrabing's filmmaking is about the effort of getting better scripts for its protagonists. What part of the Australian settler-colonial script does *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams* work on in particular, and how do images do the job?*

Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams is our favorite film so far even if it is probably the most challenging for non-Indigenous people. It begins and insists throughout that Indigenous families are not homogeneous cultural machines but are composed of complex points of view. The film begins with a simple question – what caused a boat motor to break down on a trip to Karrabing's remote country. Was it faulty wiring? Jealous ancestors? Or a test of Christian faith?

In a series of flashbacks each of these points of view is recounted. But in the end we see that, in fact, all three points of view exist in the same frame – that all three are now facts on

the ground, that they coexist in the same place and time, and that they find if not a unity then an ongoing interconnected relationship.

Crucial scenes – the scenes we think hinge the argument without explicating it – are one at the beginning of the film where three people argue about whether the ancestors (Trevor), Jesus (Linda), or wiring (Rex) caused the motor to break down and a long scene near the end when Linda confronts the ancestors seeking help with the boat.

But throughout the film the images of entryways are crucial as characters go into one entryway and come out in another place and time. And as in all Karrabing films, the everyday nature of Indigenous struggles to maintain a contemporary relation to each other and their land is constantly punctuated by the state. Throughout *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams*, the argument about what broke the motor is driven by the fact that the police are looking to enforce an enormous fine on the owners of the boat for setting off an emergency flare without having expensive safety equipment or permits.

¹ Subversive Film is made up of Reem Shilleh and Mohanad Yaqubi, who will take part in *Think Film No. 5 „Archival Constellations“*. Yaqubi's film *Off Frame aka Revolution until Victory* is also part of *Forum Expanded 2017*.

Vivian Zihel: "Karrabing Film Collective, *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams*," on [vdrome.org](http://www.vdrome.org/karrabing-film-collective-wutharr-saltwater-dreams/), 2016, URL: <http://www.vdrome.org/karrabing-film-collective-wutharr-saltwater-dreams/>

The Karrabing Film Collective began in 2008, in the shadow of the Australian state's assault on Indigenous social worlds and lands. The collective is a grassroots arts and film group who use their aesthetic practices as a means of self-organization and social analysis. Most Karrabing are Indigenous and live in a rural community in the Northern Territory with low or no income. Their films and art works represent their lives, create bonds with their land, and intervene in global images of indigeneity. They develop local artistic languages and forms, while allowing audiences to understand new forms of collective Indigenous agency. Their medium is a form of survivance – a refusal to relinquish their country and a means of investigating contemporary social conditions of inequality.

Karrabing Film Collective members: Trevor Bianamu, Gavin Bianamu, Sheree Bianamu, Ricky Bianamu, Taleesh Bianamu, Danielle Bigfoot, Kelvin Bigfoot, Rex Edmunds, Chloe Gordon, Claudette Gordon, Ryan Gordon, Claude Holtze, Ethan Jorroch, Marcus Jorroch, Reggie Jorroch, Patsy-Anne Jorroch, Daryl Lane, Lorraine Lane, Robyn Lane, Sharon Lane, Tess Lea, Cecilia Lewis, Angelina Lewis, Marcia Bigfoot Lewis, Natasha Lewis, Serina Lippo, Joslyn McDonald, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Rex Sing, Kerin Sing, Shannon Sing, Claude Yarrowin, Daphne Yarrowin, Linda Yarrowin, Roger Yarrowin, Sandra Yarrowin, Quentin Shields

Films

2012: *Karrabing, Low Tide Turning* (14 min.). 2014: *When the Dogs Talked* (34 min.). 2015: *Windjarrameru, The Stealing C*nt\$* (35 min.). 2016: *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams*.