

## Reviews

### ***Our Community* exhibition, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 30 June to 30 November 2005**

Walgett came to national attention rather inauspiciously during the 1965 Freedom Rides. Sydney University students stopped at Walgett, a town with a reputation for racial discrimination and a growing Aboriginal population, on their tour of north-western NSW, in order to draw to public attention the racism that was so deeply-ingrained throughout this part of Australia. They picketed the Walgett RSL Club, protesting the policy that disallowed Aboriginal ex-servicemen from becoming members. The students were warmly welcomed by local Aborigines, but received a hostile response from white residents, so hostile that they were effectively run out of town late at night, and in an apparent attempt to ensure they would not return, their bus was run off the road by a truck.

In the intervening 40 years, Walgett has retained something of a reputation as a place troubled by deep racial disharmony. It is a sticking point with residents that the only media focus Walgett receives is of sporadic events that reinforce this image. This representational history served as an unarticulated yet nevertheless very present backdrop to *Our Community*, an exhibition staged at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, between June and November 2005. In a photographic display, a film and oral history audio recording, *Our Community* revealed a very different Walgett to that encountered by the Freedom Riders. Presented here was the Walgett of the reconciliation era, an intimate portrait of Walgett as seen through the eyes of black and white residents of the town and its surrounding area.

The exhibition is primarily a celebration of Walgett's diversity, through the eyes of non-Indigenous photographers Ron Blake, Juno Gemes, and Sharon Aldrick. It was first conceived as part of a wider project launched by Aboriginal film-maker and academic Frances Peters-Little in 1998 during a research fellowship she held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. Peters-Little grew up in Walgett, which is her mother's customary country. She was interested to interrogate the complex and contradictory nature of community as it is experienced by residents of Walgett, and at one stage envisaged producing a CD-Rom exploring this theme. The photographic works which appeared in the exhibition were commissioned with this wider project in mind.

Peters-Little asked the photographers to 'explore the distinctive cultural and social diversities of those communities existing within the Walgett Shire'. Their different yet complementary perspectives work well together. All work with black and white film and a highly empathetic eye for the subject matter. Ron Blake was most affected by the relationships between people and country; his photographs capture the texture of

the natural environment and portray interactions between people and the land that lies beyond the town's perimeter. Sharon Aldrick spent several months living in Walgett, developing close relationships with the town's Aboriginal residents that enabled her to take a series of informal, compellingly intimate portraits. Juno Gemes accompanied Peters-Little on her 1998 journey through the region, recording photographically the social encounters through which Peters-Little traced her family history.

A 24-minute film, also titled *Our Community*, written and directed by Sean Kennedy and produced by Peters-Little, was commissioned for the exhibition. The film surveys residents of the three main residential areas of the Walgett Shire – Walgett, Lightning Ridge and Sheepyard – recording their thoughts on the nature of belonging. Among others, senior Aboriginal people, the local hairdresser, pool manager, General Practitioner, Court Youth Program Coordinator, publicans, business people, opal miners all speak of their relationship to these places. Across these short interviews striking commonalities and tensions emerge in the way residents convey their perspectives on the places in which they live. These representations can be explored as a series of layers in the discursive construction of belonging. The first layer articulated is similar in style and content to that which might be expected of residents of any rural town – people speak of the clear air, lack of traffic, skies full of stars, no hassles, reliability and generosity of neighbours, the simple joy of having 'absolutely nothing and everything'. A number of interviewees who speak about Walgett at this level give the impression that they are not sure of the purpose of the film. With assertions of this being 'the best place in Australia', and an appeal to 'come and check it out', they may have thought they were appearing in a tourism promotion.

Sitting below this description are a series of diverse perspectives, making it clear that within the Shire of Walgett there exist not one, but rather a number of relatively discrete communities with distinctive experiences and sensibilities. The residents of Sheepyard – a pub surrounded by a small number of miner's dwellings – appear to take comfort in the thoroughly marginalised nature of their existence. Here there is no talk of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interaction, but of individuals who have retreated to this 'last frontier' from all manner of backgrounds, and a series of reflections on the ways in which they pull together during tough times. At Lightning Ridge residents reflect on the multicultural nature of their community and observe it to be a place in which there is 'no judging people'.

Back in Walgett, others reveal, perhaps unwittingly, the complex tensions and contradictions that lie at the heart of the town: 'once you get over what's on the surface and get used to the bars on the windows and start meeting the people, then you'll find something special', observes local councillor Don Lillyman. 'I get emotional when people talk about Walgett, its not as bad as people say it is', says Court Youth Program Coordinator, Lesley Tighe, her voice cracking as she tries to maintain composure. The local hairdresser bemoans the segregation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents.

Through these simple vignettes we glimpse a town with a troubled history, ongoing tensions between elements of the black and white populations, high unemployment, young people who are migrating to the city, and other challenges faced by rural communities everywhere in contemporary Australia. Yet *Our Community* puts a positive face to these challenges, giving a sense that, in a place where life choices are

highly circumscribed, a core group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents are quietly going about the hard work of producing a viable way of living together. At a time when the reconciliation movement seems to have been emptied of all substance and potential by a lack of political will at a federal level, *Our Community* stands as a potent reminder that substantive work continues locally, and without fanfare, around the country. The film has already picked up an award for Best Documentary Short at the Dreamspeakers International Film Festival in Canada. It screens at SnowyFEST International Film Festival in Thredbo in 2006, and in Canberra during NAIDOC Week 2006 by the Department of Education, Science and Training. It has also been adopted for use in secondary school curricula.

This view of reconciliation in practice (as opposed to practical reconciliation) was reinforced in the presentation made by a delegation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of Walgett at the *History through a lens* forum held at the Museum to mark the exhibition's opening, on 1 July 2005. In a series of compelling, matter-of-fact accounts they shared with their audience some of the work they are engaged in. There was nothing triumphal in these accounts, although it was clear that the people of Walgett relished the opportunity to speak to a Canberra audience about some of the positive activity occurring in their town.

So, having encountered the Walgett of *Our Community*, what kind of impressions were audiences left with? Firstly, the various dimensions of the exhibition — the film, photographs and Frances Peters-Little's oral history worked together to present a complex human face to a town that has until now been known to outsiders only in superficial and stereotypical terms. The history of colonialism and various stages in governmental approach to Aboriginal people of the Walgett region were revealed. The resilience of Kamilaroi identity in the face of this history, the intercultural collaboration, and the joyous moments in everyday life reflected in the photographs serve as an important counterpoint to the negative mainstream media coverage Walgett's residents are all too familiar with. Yet, importantly, the film ensured that audiences would not leave with a romanticised view of life in Walgett. Bubbling beneath the surface of *Our Community* was a clear sense that while some basic perspectives may be shared, the experience of belonging is complex, contradictory and at times radically different for residents of this place, as it is in any place. The overall impression, however, was uplifting — audiences were left with the message that community is produced at the nexus of historical and contemporary processes, that people can intervene in this process in productive ways, enabling them not only to reinterpret their past constructively, but also to generate tangible hope for the future.

Melinda Hinkson  
Australian National University

**Along the 'pot-holed track': meditations on mixed inheritance in recent work by Ivan Sen and Dennis McDermott**

In Indigenous art and writing, stories of memory, family and tangled black/white identities become familiar; among them, Melissa Lucashenko's and Alexis Wright's uncompromising explorations in fiction, and Kim Scott's great novel *Benang*.<sup>1</sup> Novels are conspicuous, but the issues around black and white entanglement arise in other forms; looking at recent works by the film-maker Ivan Sen and the poet Dennis McDermott, there is a striking convergence. Both of these artists are of mixed Aboriginal and European descent; both avow white as well as black ancestry, and each places the implications of this at the centre of his work.

Ivan Sen's film, *Yellow Fella*,<sup>2</sup> is a documentary from the production-house CAAMA, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association. In June 2005 the Sydney Film Festival ran a special tribute to CAAMA, to mark its 25 years in active production. This began as a modest enterprise in Indigenous radio broadcasting for the widespread Aboriginal communities of central Australia. Now, with an impressive base in Alice Springs and established global reach, it has become an important centre of film and television work as well, producing short films in documentary and fictional genres.

Many of CAAMA's documentaries are information films for Indigenous communities; a few more are larger scale for wider circulation, and those are mainly circulated on SBS TV – the Special Broadcasting Service – Australia's multi-ethnic TV channel. Whether intentionally or not, they challenge general thinking on Aboriginal identity and race relations. In particular, they challenge common notions of Aboriginal victimhood. In the present-day liberal-conservative language of our political leaders and others, they might be seen as elements of 'the reconciliation process'.

Some would not agree that anything approaching 'reconciliation' between black and white Australia is actually under way; at least, not if we are thinking of the country's political leadership. In government-speak the term has become a cover for retrogressive policies; in policy terms, 'reconciliation' now seems not only glib but false. The word 'recognition' is more useful, and recognition is what *Yellow Fella* invites.

The film is a journey with Tom Lewis, opening with his memories of his role in the 1978 feature, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*,<sup>3</sup> a role he felt to be close to his own life – a young, restless man of mixed descent struggling to find a path between two clashing cultures. But his acting career has no explicit part in this story, which is about seeking out and affirming a difficult double inheritance. Tom is looking for the grave of his white father, the Welsh stockman Hurtle Lewis, with whom in adolescence he spent a few brief periods of time. Tom is filmed at the wheel, talking energetically as he drives across Arnhem Land.

At intervals along the way we get to know his Aboriginal mother, patient in the back seat, laconic, beautiful and dignified, in her sixties. On the property where she went to work as a domestic in her teens, the white man pursued her, with strong

1. Lucashenko 1998; Wright 1997; Scott 1999.

2. Sen 2005.

3. Schepsi 1978.

encouragement from her own relatives; she 'got used to it', she says, but when her child was born, she returned to home country at Roper River. Hurtle Lewis followed her to offer marriage, but she refused him, and kept to her own path. Tom was brought up by her and his Aboriginal stepfather, whom he remembers with love; but he also shows how much it has mattered to him that his natural father cared enough to make that journey. Now, with his mother, his young white wife and their child, he is driving 600 kilometres to the Tennant Creek cemetery, where he believes he may find Hurtle Lewis' grave.

From the passenger seat, the film keeps a close grip on Tom's changing emotions. The actor talks hard about what it means to be both black and white in present-day Australia. He says it's like being in a pinball machine, tossed violently to and fro. He remembers, vividly, the brief times with his natural father. He identifies a bush hill on the changing horizon as a sacred site, and attacks white society for its destructiveness on the land, for its acts of sacrilege. You could get embarrassed as he drives and is driven to make sense of his story — at close quarters, moving in and out of anger, sometimes weeping — we are compelled to sort out responses for which nothing in the standard versions has prepared us.

Later, as the film ends, and he has failed to find his father's grave, he keeps on arguing with fate: 'I'm not black, I'm not white, I'm yellow fella and I'm going to stay that way.' To his two fathers: 'I love them both. God bless them both.' He says he is finding an inner balance; but after the passages of agitation, anger and weeping, we wonder whether he is not working too hard on it, trying to talk his way into feeling what he thinks he ought to feel.

The radical element here may not be immediately apparent. Old stories hang around: memories of Albert Namatjira and Robert Tudawali, stories transmitted as tragedies of irreconcilable conflict when the Aboriginal figure, virtually doomed by his talent, is caught between two worlds. This is not to deny the truth in such stories — Tom Lewis himself, with the pinball machine metaphor, asserts their continuing painfulness. It is rather to suggest that such lives should not be reduced to their victimhood; these people did a lot more than struggle and die. For the purposes of romantic racism, versions of predestined doom are only too convenient; consider *Jedda*<sup>4</sup> and the questions the film-makers of the 1950s did not ask.

Now, when Indigenous speakers, writers and artists of mixed descent address the majority in Australia, their Aboriginal identification is usually paramount. Listeners and viewers know what political correctness requires; it is — understandably — Aboriginality which must be affirmed and applauded. So when it gets to question time, after a reading or conference paper, nobody asks: 'What are you doing with your white inheritance?' Sometimes the visiting artist is almost hostile in positioning the audience as Other, shackled in white privilege. But sometimes too, on a public platform, a writer or artist may find herself more definitively positioned as Indigenous than she may have wanted, when she has other concerns besides that of Aboriginal identity.

In a remarkable performance as himself in *Yellow Fella*, Tom Lewis makes a break in these disabling circuits. He is both same and other, unlike and like; he is asking for

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4. Chauvel 1955.

acknowledgment where both sameness and difference are taken into account. It is in this intimate sense, as well as in all the bigger histories of dispossession, accommodation, marginal reparation, that black and white have been sharing the country for centuries. As the anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw writes: 'The racial division could be drawn not only down the centre of many marital beds, but also within the bodies of more people than would like to admit it.'<sup>5</sup>

The young director Ivan Sen, like his subject, is of mixed descent. His short films and his feature, the poetic narrative *Beneath Clouds*,<sup>6</sup> have won many awards, locally and internationally. Some have been disappointed in *Yellow Fella* because, as they see it, the strong poetic element which marked *Beneath Clouds* is absent. It is a straightforward, linear documentary focused on one person; but what should not be missed is that Tom Lewis is living and speaking many more histories than his own.

From the beginning, from the first incursions and collisions, black and white began sharing the country. Indigenous possession, across vast and complex networks of trade, culture and travel, was as overwhelmingly real as it was uncomfortable to those who understood themselves as brave pioneers, whose role was endorsed by unquestioning faith in the invaders' imperial status. Some of the back country massacres were justified by the perpetrators in terms of the need to demonstrate white superiority. The kind of history to which that sort of story belongs is almost too well known, but it shouldn't fade into the wallpaper; the consequences have persisted until now.

The conservative view, perhaps assumed by a majority today, is that yes, some very unpleasant things did happen once, but all that is over; do not keep on plaguing us. For historical reparation, the Howard government's regime has efficiently and painstakingly effected a kind of erasure — we are not thinking of land rights any more, all that was fixed (was it not?), and the Aborigines were put back in their places when, most offensively, they had seemed likely to jump out of them. To make things worse, the Australian Labor Party has no conspicuous role in advancing race relations, which is to say our relations with history.

But elsewhere, in the unofficial politics of dissident public gatherings everywhere, Indigenous representation is beyond politically correct; it is mandatory. For the past decade, the government's politics of denial have worked as provocation. Every major educational institution now engages in Aboriginal studies; not only anthropologists and historians, but also economists, health workers, students of culture and literature and cinema find the boundary areas irresistible. It is only in very recent years that we begin to see the force of a call Umberto Eco made many years ago, for a 'reverse anthropology', for dialectic, for the necessity that observer and observed should change places, and that 'we' — the white majority — begin to understand ourselves as we are seen: the beneficiaries of an invasion.

From there, as the Indigenous poet Dennis McDermott has written, 'Australia is in recovery from a long habit of removing blackfellas from the scene. For the nation, as much as for those dispossessed, taken, sidelined, whitewashed or airbrushed out, recovery is difficult.'

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5. Cowlishaw 2004.

6. Sen 2001.

Tom Lewis' resounding announcement of mixed identity comes in that context. His declaration confounds the old stories; he is claiming his whiteness and blackness equally, and he will not put one above the other. The search for the grave is a playing out of a real history in which white and Aboriginal lives have always been intimately entangled. Intentionally or not, he and Sen undermine the romance of black identity, and perhaps risk heresy. But in affirming the closeness of black and white lives through time, they offer a harder challenge.

After the premiere screening of *Yellow Fella* at the film festival there was a friendly, low-key 'Question and Answer' session, with Tom Lewis on stage. Memorably, he moved away from discussion of this particular film to plead to the whole audience, probably a thousand or so at the time, to keep struggling for the life of Australian film-making. He confirmed the inclusiveness of the film when he said 'Please do not let the industry go'; 'This is our campfire,' he said.

It was a potent choice of words; around campfires, people are literally on a level. In his poetry, in academic papers and in essays, Dennis McDermott opens the imaginary circle further. There are links between his work, Ivan Sen's films and Tom Lewis' messages.

McDermott is concerned with what he calls the close 'imbrication' of black and white histories; *imbrication* is a word on which he dwells. He insists on Australia's fundamentally bicultural nature; he wants a history, in general acceptance, which charts the consequences both of dispossession and entanglement. He wants classroom-level histories to encompass the banal, everyday discriminations:

the rental property that vanished when they saw your face, the exclusion from school when a critical mass of parents objected, the forced removals of whole communities as late as the mining-mad sixties ... the plethora of pass-laws, dog-tags and permits to travel, to marry across colour-lines, to scratch yourself.

McDermott's own people were Gadigal, Gamilaroi and Irish; like Sally Morgan and other Indigenous writers, he came late to the knowledge of his Aboriginality. His poem 'Page Three Story' recalls an ironic tale from the mid-1950s. When his darker-skinned older sister won the City of Sydney Eisteddfod for her singing, the *Daily Mirror* headline ran 'First Aborigine wins Eisteddfod'. But then:

The only person apparently not pleased  
Was my mother. Didn't they know  
The Trinidad connection? Our honourable line  
Of West Indian descent? The life-line that  
Bound us mix-ups to our parents. My mother called it  
Slur, called for an apology, asked for  
And got a printed retraction. Page three.  
That put them in their place.

McDermott doesn't blame his mother, Dorothy, for thus energetically repudiating her real ethnicity; her extreme anxieties were part of the whole picture, and thus his book of poems is called *Dorothy's Skin*. There was a lot at stake: not just that Aboriginality was downgraded and disreputable, but the kids could have been taken away from her. The siblings were obliged to believe the Caribbean tale until their twenties, then

they worked things out for themselves and took their Aboriginality on board. McDermott now says:

As someone with both Irish grandparents and Aboriginal grandparents, in trying to write unselfconsciously, though not uncritically, about my Aboriginality, questions as to what constitutes *authenticity of voice* are more than academic to me — as is the whole question of personal identity. Defensive identities set hard, deny the reality of ongoing cultural evolution.

There he strikes at the essential centre of contemporary Hansonism.

The acute awareness of loss, the simmering anger and the sense of diminution ... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suffering may be of a different order: longer, harder, sharper ... but we *all* lose, under present arrangements.

Knowingly or not, McDermott is repeating Gough Whitlam's call in 1973, that without coming to terms with Aboriginality and the facts of dispossession, 'all Australians are diminished'. He writes:

Australia needs the Indigenous knowledge, and the frameworks for acquiring and living out that knowledge, that it has always pushed away. If the implied contention holds — that Australia's environmental and economic survival, and the persistence of our humanity, depend on some contemporary manifestation of traditional, respectful relations with 'land' in all its totality: of being 'owned by' the land, rather than owning it — then that becomes a major challenge for Australian writing generally.

And elsewhere, memorably:

This country has a long, pot-holed track, where a road should be, between where we are now and reconciliation with our own history, let alone any real Indigenous and gubba embrace.

In several essays he makes the difficult argument that for Aboriginal poetry to transmit, adequately, Aboriginal trauma, to work as a poetry of witness, it must work first as literature, such that 'one indicator of success may be the extent to which the work "bridges the gap" between a private and a publicly accessible experience'.

He wants Australian writing, from both black and white, to 'get to grips with this bloody barrier — that not only cuts us off from each other, but from the so-slowly won wisdom crucial to living here ... this unique *here*'. And he wants all of our writing 'to break through the denial of systematic separation'. Shifting metaphors, he finds that the denial and all its attendant misunderstandings are huge spaces, like the great areas of darkness in Rover Thomas' paintings. This is how McDermott writes of that artist's way of representing 'the killing times':

Rover paints in reverse:  
A massacre's just a skull up a tree.  
He makes the sky fall in  
on how things are held to be: ground takes shape,  
becomes visible; what we thought figure  
now looks ground.  
... Rover shows no blood, but when I stop  
driving, become a passenger, I see. Now, vision seeps  
through canvas. I see the earth turning, people



wound to the point of discharge, serpent winds  
that dance, like Kali, the desperate's renewal.

So the transformation of Australian self-understanding must not be only for the political and social domains; it is centrally, first and last, a matter of extending imaginations.

A segment of Rover Thomas' painting 'Ngarin Janu Country' appears on the cover of *Dorothy's Skin*. Invoking that great Kimberley painter is like calling up thunder. In 1994 Thomas' work was on large-scale display for the first time in the National Gallery; on a grey Canberra day, his larger works, with black mystery in vast ponds and channels moving through clay and sand, stopped us in our tracks. All you could do was stand and look; there was nothing to say. We had not been warned. There was simply too much there: chasms of complex, alien knowledge, areas of incomprehension; stillness; the great emotional distances between black and white; gaps and rough gullies in a history which still had to be taken as our own.

McDermott has a special freedom. He can call on Rover Thomas, and then range across European literature as well. For his readers in the dominant tribe, he knocks on the door of the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer. Thinking again of 'systematic separation', McDermott quotes from Tranströmer's poem 'Vermeer':

It hurts to go through walls; it makes you sick  
but it's necessary.  
The world is one. But walls ...  
And the wall is part of yourself.

At that rate, such walls must be demolished first from within. First, but not only. There is always a kind of comfort in affirming the psychic and personal domain; but unless the inward paths lead us back and out, through those classrooms into politics and history, they are sad dead-ends. Virtue is not enough.

Sylvia Lawson  
Sydney

## Acknowledgement

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## Films

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Sen, Ivan (Director) 2001, *Beneath Clouds*, 90 mins, Autumn Films.

— (co-written by Ivan Sen and Tom E Lewis) 2005, *Yellow Fella*, 25 mins, CAAMA Productions, Alice Springs.

Schepisi, Fred (Director) 1978, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, 122 mins, Australian Film Commission and the Victorian Film Corporation, Australia.

## A sour note on Peter Jackson's *King Kong*

***King Kong*, 2005, directed by Peter Jackson, screenplay by Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Peter Jackson, Universal Pictures**

In the sweltering conditions of summer, not long after one of Australia's worst 'race' riots, on Sunday 11 December 2005 (against anyone of 'middle eastern background') at beachside Cronulla in Sydney's south, with that special apocalyptic edge that bushfires etch into consciousness, Peter Jackson's *King Kong* arrived in Australia. Largely in order to escape Canberra's oppressive heat (38 degrees on 1 January 2006), I spent three hours in an air-conditioned cinema watching it. I found the film very disturbing and rather contemptible, particularly in terms of attitudes to 'race' and colonialism. When I got home, I searched the web to see if there was much discussion about the film in these terms, and quickly registered that it was proving quite controversial. In particular, I came across an essay on *Times Online* of 13 December 2005, by Dr Kwame McKenzie, a societal psychiatrist who specialises in causes of mental illness, racism, and social capital.

Dr McKenzie found particularly troubling the way Jackson's film 'feeds into all the colonial hysteria about black hyper-sexuality', an imagery, he points out, with a long history, going back at least to the representation of Othello. The story of the film also, McKenzie felt, 'touches the raw nerve of the Darwin-based association between black men and apes', an association that still has to be endured, he suggests, by 'black footballers when they travel to away games'. The 'same hackneyed stereotypes', he adds, are present in Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, where the 'most fearsome bad-dies were big black and just a bit too Maori looking, the good guys — well white'. He also observes that the film introduces the 'good and dutiful slave stereotype' in the character of the second officer to the ship's captain. McKenzie, seeing the film with his 'transfixed son', said he enjoyed the next two 'fabulous' hours, he liked the way that Jackson had removed the 'lust angle' in the relationship between Kong and Darrow (played by Naomi Watts), and he felt the cinematography was excellent. Nonetheless, he then had to have a complex discussion on negative racial stereotypes with his son. In subsequent email comments, McKenzie's reflections were met with some support but also much abuse and aggressive dismissal.<sup>1</sup>

I haven't seen the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. My response to *King Kong*, however, supports Kwame McKenzie's misgivings, though I came out of the cinema with a much lower opinion of the film overall. In aesthetic terms, it lacks visual wit, has long tiresome sequences of animated action where the results are always predictable, including a ridiculous running-with-the-dinosaurs scene. It is uninterested in character, and is saved only by the power of the myth itself, the pathos of impossible romance across species.

Yet, having lived in Washington DC for nine months in 2003/4, a still de facto segregated city, the 'race' implications to all Americans, white and black, are clear. When Kong is displayed in the early 1930s theatre in New York, in chains, listless with despair, the history of slavery, Deep South enjoyment of racial brutality, and Jim Crow laws sanctioned by the whole of white society, are evident now and certainly would have been evident then to the prosperous white audience.

What disturbed Kwame McKenzie and what disturbed me are the surprising scenes involving the 'natives' that the shipload of adventurers encounters on Skull Island. They are surprising because the clumsy references earlier in the film to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* seemed to promise ambiguity and complexity in relation to European colonising.

The movie attempts to lull its audience into thinking this film cannot be racist, after all it has a black officer on board the ship: a strategy endlessly adopted by American TV police shows — have black cop, then construct African-American criminals as bestial as you like. The black ship's officer, after explaining that Conrad's novel has nothing to do with any questioning of colonialism, but, he suggests, is mainly about wishing to find out what's round the next bend of the river, dies not long into the film. His function is over: putting a contemporary avuncular 'good' black man on board both justifies the text as politically beyond question, and shows the benefits when non-whites become 'white', that is, responsible and sensible.

At first one cannot believe the ugliness of the portrayal of the 'natives' on the island. But as soon as one of them refuses chocolate and they become hostile and threatening to the visitors, the usual colonising narrative reversal occurs; the invading explorers are now the victims of barbarism, and any force, especially an enormous array of gleaming guns, is acceptable. The hideous portrait of the islanders, primitive and savage amongst the ruins of a civilization they could neither sustain nor comprehend, offering a female sacrifice to a deity (Kong), ruled by a barbaric witch, owes almost everything, I thought, to the portrait of Gagool in Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, a novel so influential in Victorian and later popular fiction that the debt doesn't have to be direct. Gagool is the evil priestess who rules her realm by submissiveness, cruelty, fear, and treachery.<sup>2</sup>

1. To be precise: in the agitated *Times Online* discussion, which I accessed 1 January 2006, 11 were pro, 36 were contra. Some of those who supported McKenzie also approved of his critical comments on *Lord of the Rings*.

2. I discuss Haggard's novels *King Solomon's Mines* and *She* in section three, *Things Fall Apart of The Nervous Nineties* (Docker 1991).

What is most depressing is that, in an era when racism appears exponentially to be increasing around the world, the film can reproduce a late nineteenth century Victorian literary trope of this kind. It could be said that the film is attempting to reproduce without comment a pre-World War II set of portraits of 'race', but other strands in the film are contemporary in their perspective, particularly the constructing of Naomi Watts' character as feisty and independent. No, innocence is not possible. In reproducing such conventional racist images, the film knowingly promotes rather than questions racial stereotypes and racial hierarchy.

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John Docker  
Australian National University