‘Digital Dreaming’:[1] Connecting to Country and Reclaiming Land through Digital Platforms

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Abstract:
The notions of ‘Country’ and ‘Land’ lie deep at the heart of Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and this is true for both Indigenous peoples who live in remote communities and those who reside in Australia’s urban centres. Country and Land are more than a geographical location; they are highly complex notions that shape understandings of identity and wellbeing for Australian First Nations. Yet, the age of the ‘Anthropos’ suddenly introduced into the continent by settler colonialism brought about drastic changes and new configurations within the relationship between ‘life’ and ‘nonlife’, ownership and stewardship. Such relations are constantly negotiated and debated as Indigenous communities strive to protect their homes, claim their land back and reconnect to Country using the means at their disposal. Digital technology, in particular, has become a very important tool in the hands of Indigenous communities over the past decade. Many are the projects that use digital technologies and platforms, from applications like #Thismymob (Digital Land Rights Project) to Kurdiji 1.0, the 3D animations of the Wunungu Awara project, and the work of the Karrabing Collective, just to mention a few. Looking at the narratives portrayed in the filmography of the Karrabing Collective from a multimodal perspective, and with a primary focus on the film *Wutharr*, this article explores approaches to Country and Land as mediated via the digital. Through these examples and case study, I thus argue that the digital provides a productive terrain to challenge current configurations of Land management, while proposing new forms of sovereignty, from the digital to the real. In order to better support these claims, I have embraced a theoretical framework that draws from Indigenous knowledges and methods, posthuman critical theory and geontologies.

Keywords: Indigenous digital practices; Country; Land; Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies; more-than-human connections; Karrabing

[1] The term ‘Dreaming’ has been used in a critical way. I am here referring to the genealogy of the term within the settlers’ vocabulary and, at the same time, the various uses of this term by Indigenous peoples. Terms such as ‘Dreaming’, ‘Law’, and ‘Lore’ are often used interchangeably and have come to constitute what Patrick Wolfe as called the “Dreaming complex” (198). English terms that, over time, have come to signify the highly complex ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies nested in the local knowledges of Indigenous peoples in Australia fail to capture the interconnectedness of *bio* and *geos*, reinforcing instead the dichotomy between the civilised and the uncivilised. For example, the history of the term Dreaming, with its semantic associations to beliefs and practices carried out on Country reflects this fracture. The phrase ‘Digital dreaming’ is taken from an expression used by Gumbaynggirr rapper Wire MC, in an attempt to define the complexities of his identity as an Aboriginal man living in the 21st century.

1. Introduction: Country and Land[2]

> If not for the strength we gain from the land, it would be difficult to continue the struggle to care for it, particularly when we mostly lose the battles. If not for the strength gained from the land as sovereign peoples, we might surrender and walk away. But country calls us to act and for the few Aboriginal warriors left standing, it is an imperative. (Watson, "De-colonising" 88)

I would like to start this paper by reflecting on and through the words of Indigenous (Tanganekald, Meintangk Boandik) scholar Irene Watson, whose appeal to fight for Land encapsulates the multifaceted nature of Indigenous connections to Land and Country. To talk about the meaning of these two concepts to First Nations is to enter an intricate terrain as their complexities are often connected to rich systems of knowledge. Indeed, Indigenous peoples[3] in Australia are bound to these domains of life in ways that challenge Western thinking at multiple levels. The notion of Country and its cognate (and yet different) concepts of Land, Place and Dreaming have been thoroughly explored by scholars working from within the most disparate fields, from psychology, where connections to Country are linked to psycho-physiological wellbeing (see for instance Atkinson and Bishop et al.), to anthropology,[4] music, media, and education (Bradley; Gurrumuruwuy, Deger, Gurunulmiwuy, Balpatji, Balanydjarrk, Ganambarr and Djingadjingawuy; Magowan and Wrazen; Dunbar-Hall and Gibson; McKnight, etc.), with Country as a key element to understanding Indigenous expressive cultures. These examples show the centrality of Country in and for Indigenous Life (after-life and extra-life). Country defines that which is visible and, simultaneously, the not-always visible. It entails a deep connection to the realms of life and the afterlife (see Collard), the human and more-than-human. It stands at the core of Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies (see Bradley; Cowan; Rose, *Reports*). Country is 'law' and 'lore' and it is a guiding principle for relationships/kinship and wellbeing (see Dudgeon; Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*, *Reports*). Indeed, Country is 'governed' by Indigenous Law in a way that reveals the multidimensional, multifaceted and localised relationships between humans, non-humans, the living and the *geos*, to use a system of binaries.

Looking at the complexities nested into the Aboriginal notions of Country, landscape and wilderness, Deborah Bird Rose states that "Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with" (7). For many Indigenous peoples, Country 'is' also identity (see Milroy and Revell). Bishop et al. have shed light on the psychological dimension of Country as identity by explaining that

> Land, or country, is central to the formation of identity in Aboriginal people, as it provides a guide for all human interaction. Within Aboriginal culture, country is not seen as something separate from the self. Rather, country forms one aspect of

[2] Country and Land have been capitalised as they refer to key concepts within Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. By capitalising these two terms, I also aim to highlight the ideological connotations they have acquired for Indigenous communities in Australia and around the world. When the two nouns are written in lower case, I refer to their concrete rather than symbolic dimension.

[3] The use of 'peoples' with final '-s' needs to be seen as a political stance, in recognition of the right of self-determination as acknowledged in international law.

[4] Considering the vast volume of academic literature on these aspects since Stanner's 1968 Boyer Lectures, I won't report any specific titles. Yet, it is important to remember anthropology's contribution to these themes (Dreaming, Land, Identity, etc.).

> the self and the identity of the individual and the group. Furthermore, subjectivity is attributed to all beings, including non-human. (31)

Country defines the boundaries of obligations towards the ancestors, fellow human beings, and the surrounding environment while providing guidance for one's place in the world. Land and Country are thus central to Indigenous belief systems, but they also represent significant sites of contestation in the relationship with settler understandings of nature, settler practices, and policies linked to resource management. Land, like Country, carries a strong affective dimension, but this is often overshadowed by the more political tones of its discursive contexts. The original assumption that Indigenous peoples had no material nor economic interest in the land (see Wolfe) facilitated and justified their removal from 'Country', further supporting the colonial framing of *Terra Nullius*. The idea that the land did not belong to anyone sustained the dispossession of First Nations from their territories, resulting in several Land Rights petitions[5] and culminating with the highly debated Native Title Act in 1993.[6] Today, mechanisms of land control continue to operate in less obvious but equally aggressive ways through an economy of extraction that sees mining companies as the main actors within the Australian landscape. Indeed, one of the ways in which settler late liberalism concretises is through neo-colonial policies.[7] Governmental measures have both a direct and indirect impact upon Indigenous communities and constantly undermine their individual and collective wellbeing. As Watson further argues: "[c]aring for country can evoke romantic images of Aboriginal people and the land, and it can be all of those images, but it can also be a lot of worry, sadness and hopelessness over our dealings with a dominant culture that doesn't care in the same way that many Aboriginal people care for the land" ("De-colonising" 85). Undoubtedly, the way Indigenous peoples relate to Country is complicated by the intricacies of the personal and the political, which often coalesce. When Indigenous communities are removed from Country or disregarded, meaning is lost and the land turns into a commodity.

It goes without saying that, within a late settler liberal framework, Country becomes devalued in its relationship to Indigenous knowledges as the gap between life (the living) and non-life (inanimate matter, *geos*) widens while marking difference. As a consequence, Country and Land often assume political connotations and contours that tend to obscure their more intimate and 'spiritual' significance. The relationship to the more-than-human is thus fundamental in conceptualising a worldview that sees assemblages of life and non-life as key parameters in advancing claims that aim to obtain the Land back, or to protect it from 'Western' extractive practices. Settler colonialism has been working through the logic of property, whereby the land becomes strictly regulated and relationships to it are normalised through a set of rules based on ownership (see Tuck and Yang 6). This predicament can be framed according to what Indigenous (see Goenpul) scholar Moreton-Robison calls the logic of the 'White possessive', which highlights the links between race, possession, and sovereignty through property. The beliefs of Indigenous groups are thus reduced to 'stories' with little to no relevance to the advancement of the nation.

2. Connecting the dots: Theories and Methods

Given such premises, in this article, I am interested in the ways in which connections to Country and Land across Indigenous communities in Australia are re-imagined and re-conceptualised

[5] See for instance Yirrkala, 1963, Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory), 1973, and Mabo vs Queensland, 1992.

[6] A process for Indigenous Treaties is currently being discussed in Australia, with the southern state of Victoria leading the way.

[7] An example of these neo-colonial practices is the 2007 Intervention into the Northern Territory.

through digital platforms. Digital technology, in particular, has become a very important tool in the hands of Indigenous communities over the past thirty years (see de Souza et al.; Ginsburg, "Rethinking"; Shiri, Howard and Farnel). Many are the projects that rely on the digital, from applications like #Thismymob, which is part of the Digital Land Rights Project, to Virtual Dreaming, the Kurdiji 1.0 application, Miyarrka Media, the Wunungu Awara digital archive, and the work of the Karrabing Collective, just to mention a few. In this article, I thus briefly introduce a selected sample of digital projects that engage with Land and Country through various perspectives that merge local concerns with global aspirations. These ventures provide a framework to think critically about the 'digital', its affordances and politics. Indigenous media and digital projects are in fact at the forefront of new ways of imagining Indigenous futures, and they are doing so by proposing a new vision of history and a strong political agenda. Therefore, the digital artefacts I am here considering, in particular the Karrabing case study, explore opportunities for regeneration (see Simpson) and 'survivance'[8] (see Vizenor) through 'radical hope' (see Lear), thus pointing to the decolonising possibilities of collaborative practices (where Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaborations occur) that disrupt dominant narratives as Indigenous communities try to exert more control over self-representations. Despite the specificities of each context, past and present cultural conditions, as well as the differing uses of digital technologies, these various examples demonstrate the growing desire for autonomy and an eagerness to be connected and heard.

A decolonising approach has also informed the ethical framework of this study in that I aim to be held accountable for the kind of research I have produced and the impact of my work.[9] The decolonial lens through which I have investigated the main case study is further sustained by the critical questions raised in Elizabeth Povinelli's examination of 'geontologies' and Rosi Braidotti's conceptualisation of the posthuman convergence. Inscribing my analysis into a decolonial and posthuman system of knowledge, while using selected methodological tools and categories borrowed from Multimodal Critical Discourse analysis (see Kress and van Leeuwen; see also Machin, "What is multimodal"), means to question the status quo by allowing alternative, marginalised, trans-species and trans-human alliances to form. Such arrangements hold the potential to shift the focus onto the liminal, the periphery, towards novel states of conscience. As Braidotti argues, these new scenarios can be seen as "multi-directional opening[s] that allow for multiple possibilities and calls for experimental forms of mobilisation, discussion and at times even resistance" (*Posthuman* 9). Thus, posthuman knowledge offers the philosophical grounding to question the place of the human, the *bios*, the *zoe* and the *geos* in current areas of intellectual inquiry. This development is reflected in the coming together of 'media', 'nature' and 'cultures'; what Braidotti has described as "medianaturecultures" ("The Critical" 383). Such a conjuncture provides the perfect space for critiques of the 'contemporary' to emerge. But, while Braidotti's linguistic and theoretical amalgam captures a new direction within academia and knowledge production, more broadly, Povinelli engages with the socio-cultural reality and the shortcomings of economic and political decisions that capitalise on maintaining the distinction between life and what's often considered to constitute 'non-life' (thus irrelevant).

The term 'Geontopower', coined by Povinelli, aptly captures the workings of late liberalism in governing markets and difference while grounding governance in an irreconcilable dichotomy between the living and the inorganic. This problematic is particularly evident in the work of the

[8] The term 'survivance' was used and popularised by Native American (Anishinaabe) scholar Gerard Vizenor in his book *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* to refer to the survival and resistance of Indigenous peoples, in the face of adversities.

[9] See Smith for a more nuanced understanding of decolonising methods within the Pacific region.

Karrabing Collective, a group of Aboriginal people—men, women and children—who reside in Belyuen Shire, on the Cox Peninsula, and who have been exploring these issues in their multimedia digital projects. Indeed, the Karrabing productions constitute a poignant and rich case study for the analysis of unique approaches to Land and Country through digital tools, as I will explain later in this article. 'Geontologies' and 'geontopower' are thus key points of entry to understanding the delimitations imposed by clear-cut demarcations between the 'existent' endowed with life, the living, and the *geos* or inanimate. 'Geontopower' provides the infrastructure of meanings against which we can read the Karrabing productions. In her role as anthropologist and member of the Karrabing collective, Povinelli, explains that 'geontopower' is simultaneously a concept and an application that reveals the workings of "late liberal governance" from the "cramped space" (6) from which many Indigenous communities in Australia are forced to exist.

And it is within such 'cramped spaces' that a new figure has been taking shape. In my previous work (see Minestrelli), I explored the metaphor of the 'Abo-digital', as a key actor within a landscape that, according to Povinelli (*Geontologies*), is currently defined by the "Desert,"the "Animist," the "Virus" (16). These are the figures of Geontopower which replace the ones identified by Foucault in his analysis of Biopower.[10] Povinelli asserts that the central imaginary for the 'Animist' is the 'Indigene', or those who acknowledge a vital force in all things. Disrupting 'Geontologies' in settler late capitalism, and yet meandering through its webs with agility, the 'Abo-digital' emerges as a new force. Indigenous (*Gumbaynggirr*) musician Wire MC, who coined the expression, explains its meaning in an interview with scholar Tony Mitchell and Nic Keyes by affirming: "I'm not Aboriginal. I'm *Abodigital*. At the beginning of time, our ancestors had a Dreaming, which all our people today are connected to. I'm connected too, but mine is a digital Dreaming" (qtd. in Minestrelli 57). The 'Abo-digital', half-human being and half-machine, resides metaphorically between life and non-life as it/she/he/them come(s) to terms with the logic of late liberalism. This figure may in fact represent a key disruptive agent within the national Australian project, one who uses information technologies to carve out new public spaces and regain forms of 'sovereignty' that extend beyond the digital. The 'Abo-digital' is outside categories as it/she/he/they represents the unpresentable, that which transcends binaries. 'Abo-digitals' could potentially stand for ideal subjects of the critical posthumanities as they embody the complexities of "human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given and manufactured" (see Braidotti, "The Critical" 383).

3. Digital approaches to the environment

In Australia, many Indigenous communities in remote areas started to embrace media technologies and platforms from the 1980s, when analogue tools became key assets for the configuration of personal and social relations. This transformation paved the way for what Melinda Hinkson (qtd. in Kral 174) has defined as the "telecommunication revolution" in Central Australia. By the mid-1980s most people within remote communities could access broadcast TV and Radio thanks to the AUSSAT satellite system (see Kral, "Plugged in"). Along with the advent of digital technologies, with their remediated (see Bolter and Grusin) and convergent forms (see Jenkins), new socio-cultural and linguistic practices started to form amongst many Indigenous communities. In some cases, as noted by Kral (see "Plugged in"; "Shifting"), this led to a significant widening of the transgenerational gap, especially in those areas where Indigenous Law and Lore are often challenged by the pressure of global flows of culture, information, and technologies.

[10] The figures of biopower are the masturbating child, the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, and the Malthusian couple.

The use of media platforms[11] and digital technologies[12] within Indigenous communities has been discussed by several scholars both in relation to their advantages (see Akama et al.; Carlson and Frazer; Rice et al.; Waller) and risks (see Carlson et al.; Kral, "Shifting"; Matamoros-Fernández; Rice et al.). Reflecting on this dichotomy, Faye Ginsburg ("Rethinking") notes that what has been defined as the 'digital divide', namely the inequalities in accessing technological resources, should be given more thought as the expression presupposes a constant state of deficit in which less privileged communities operate. The scholar challenges us to questions hegemonic powers and the norms that Indigenous communities often defy with their media and digital practices. This entanglement has been further discussed by Campbell-Meier et al. when they affirm that "[i]t is tempting for scholars to adopt a deficit position" (302), but in doing so "there is a risk of masking the social context where technology does not fix-that-which-is-broken, but instead, enables those who are doing their own thing with technology to do it on their own terms" (302). Therefore, questions of governance and ownership are pivotal as Indigenous media are establishing a stronger presence within the Australian public sphere. Independent Indigenous-owned media such as Indigenous X, First Nations Media, and the Koori Mail, along with the National Indigenous Television (NITV) are some of the most notable examples of a constellation of media businesses and projects[13] that have emerged since Indigenous peoples and their communities started to embrace media technologies.

Many are the possibilities that generate from the effective uses of multimodal and multimedia platforms, and yet the limitations and potential threats that come with them cannot be ignored. For example, digital and media platforms can be used as tools of surveillance if managed by the state. In addition, Indigenous digital creators and producers are often forced to operate within the same structures (late liberal economies and information capitalism) that restrain Aboriginal agency. To this day, one of the most relevant issues that many Indigenous people who live in remote communities have to face is that of access to resources and infrastructure (broadband, computers, software, etc.), low levels of digital literacy, and dependency on programmes. Digital intellectual property, copyright, and protocols are also key aspects to consider. As Indigenous communities are becoming more digitally literate and use these platforms to assert their voices, tell their stories and initiate strategic collaborations with national and international partners, there is a pressing need for more data protection and data sovereignty (see Walter and Suina). The former, I argue, goes hand in hand with Indigenous demands for Treaties and political Sovereignty over their Countries.

Taking into consideration these crucial aspects and without wanting to romanticise the affordances of digital technologies, in this article, I also contend that digital platforms, if used radically and with purpose, may provide powerful means to enhance democratic practices (see also Akama et al.). These tools could potentially advance the 'Indigenous political agenda' (with a focus on Land and Country) towards decolonisation and self-determination (see McMahon), from digital and "media sovereignty" (Ginsburg, "Indigenous Media" 583) to 'land sovereignty'. The projects I am here focusing on reinstate their own narratives on Country and circulate their own representations, in an effort to assert their own agenda. For this reason, I believe it is pivotal to focus on the positive aspects of these projects, not merely as a futile exercise that looks at a distant future, but with a vision that uses 'radical hope' (see Lear) as a way to move forward. Hope is here considered a political project—a precondition for a

[11] Media platforms include social networking sites, microblogging sites, etc.

[12] By digital technology I mean mobile phones, software, computer programmes, cameras, etc.

[13] See also Jennifer Deger's work with the Miyarrka Media arts collective (*Shimmering Screens* and *Yuta Anthropology*)

sustainable present with 'a' clear vision of the future. Yet, this vision needs to be coupled with real political change that can be realised both internally (nationally) and externally (through international demands). And, it is perhaps the latter, the transnational dimension (aims and objectives) of these endeavours, that helps foster and strengthen the same radical hope that has allowed First Nations to survive and thrive.

4. Digital Dreamings: some projects

'Digital Land Rights', also known as #thismymob is a smartphone application designed and built in collaboration with and for Indigenous communities. The project started in 2016 as a partnership between U.T.S. (University of Technology Sydney) and the University of Melbourne. The main aim of this venture is to utilise technologies that can improve the "wellbeing and connectedness of Indigenous peoples" (Thismymob) by connecting and re-connecting with the rich Indigenous Australian cultural heritage across the country. The project, created by Indigenous (Noongar) engineer and Professor Christopher Lawrence and his team, is the first of its kind and it is very ambitious as it sets to engage Indigenous peoples at a national level, seeking international partners and global support. Its international dimension is well represented and embodied by the scholars involved in the project who, in 2018-2019, travelled around the world to present the application to international audiences. A related project launched by the same team at the Centre for Indigenous Technology Research and Development at U.T.S. uses GIS systems, in connection with Google, Google Maps and Google Earth, to identify sites of Indigenous significance. This will also enable researchers and Indigenous communities alike to share stories in ethical ways, using local languages, and introducing visitors to Indigenous cultures through a more holistic approach (but it can also be potentially risky if we consider the extractive policies of Google). With the introduction of advanced and mobile technological tools, contextual and specific decolonising endeavours are constantly proposed and revised. Indeed, this new scenario has created the need for more ethical methodologies to emerge where knowledge is produced and reproduced through a collaborative effort that offers multiple compelling views towards decolonisation (see Smith). Being mindful of the possible perils nested in the infrastructure of such technologies and controlling the way in which the data is handled, #thismymob centres Indigenous voices and attempts to re-write history from an Indigenous standpoint (see Nakata).

Another example of the coming together of digital technologies and Indigenous knowledges is the Kurdiji 1.0 application. This platform was created by Australian Indigenous Elders, known as the Lajamanu Kurdiji Group, who partnered with a team of experts (photographers and IT professionals to psychologists) from The Black Dog Institute, with the aim to help Indigenous youth who struggle to find meaning in their life[14]. While this application is directly linked to the issue of suicide[15], connection to Country is a key component in re-establishing wellbeing. Considering the high levels of digital literacy that most Indigenous youth currently display (see Kral, "The Acquisition"), the creation of an application that incorporates stories, law, and ceremonies—online and on Country—can help strengthen the younger generation's sense of identity (see Kral, "Shifting"; see also Lumby), while healing the fracture that years of inappropriate governmental policies contributed to widening. *Kurdiji* is a Warlpiri word that means 'to shield or protect', therefore the application aims to use 3D visualisations of ceremonies, audio recordings, video, text, images, etc. to help heal the legacies of trauma. This tool is specifically conceived for those young people who are disconnected from Country (either

[14] Some of the people who have been working on the application are the Warlpiri Elder Steve Patrick, researcher and clinical psychologist Dr Fiona Shand, cultural historian, photographer and poet Dr Judith Crispin and Drew Baker, who specialises in 3D virtual worlds.

[15] Suicide is one of the main causes of death among Indigenous youth.

physically or spiritually) and uses its embedded tools to reconnect them to their cultural practices so as to increase resilience. The success of this project, namely a significant reduction in the number of suicides since the programme started, demonstrates that connections to Country and wellbeing may be mediated and reconstructed via the digital. As a consequence, Indigenous peoples feel more empowered as they are able to reacquire specific knowledge, practices, and beliefs through (digital) stories and texts.

With a similar intent to connect the youth to their traditional knowledge, culture, and language, the 3D animations used by Wunungu Awara, the former Monash Country Lines Archive, make great use of the latest advances in animation technologies to transpose narrative, Songlines, Dreamings and ancestral knowledges into visual form. The Monash Team[16] has been working with communities across Australia to preserve intangible heritage that might otherwise be endangered. This unique archive is a good example of how researchers and communities can come together in choosing the best technology to use in order to produce digital content. Each animation focuses on a story and each story represents an alternative way to make claims to Country through traditional languages and songs. Language preservation is indeed tightly connected to Country and gives communities the power to assert their intellectual property rights and ties to specific territories. This project constitutes an apt example of the alternative ways in which we can look at knowledge production from perspectives that transcend the human (see Braidotti, *Posthuman*). The stories told through the animations put an emphasis on how knowledge is embodied and embedded by showing 'transversal'[17] interconnections with the environment and "interactions of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo 2).

The propensity to learn, engage and interact with media and digital technologies that many Indigenous people, youth primarily, have shown (see Edmonds et al.; Kral, "Plugged in"; "Youth"; Rice et al.) can be read as a strategy of survival and resistance. Historically, and in many respects in the present, First Nations have been denied a 'liveable' future, especially if we consider the current climate emergency. 'Survivance' and 'radical hope' provide key metaphors and actual resources to continue the struggle for rights, self-determination, and sovereignty. For those who are forced to live at the margins of society, trust in the institutions is undermined by the legacies of colonialism and ongoing acts of neo-colonial power. For many Indigenous peoples, trusting institutions is no less risky than trusting the digital, which, at least, provides a middle ground where anything can happen. Therefore, multimedia technologies seem to be compatible with the life circumstances of most Indigenous peoples, who keep on living precariously (and not by choice).

The multimodal, transmedia and 'mixed-reality' approach to technology embraced by the Karrabing Collective with their many projects, from GIS technology to films and installations, reflects on these aspects in critical ways. In particular, Povinelli, one of the members of the collective, asks: "[g]iven the right software conditions, can new media allow Indigenous Australians to repurpose their ways of being in the land and becoming for the land according to their own desires, including their desire to become fluent in the new media and perhaps alter what in-place learning is?" (156-157). Indeed, as I pointed out earlier in the article, I believe digital platforms have the potential to provide a vehicle to enact sovereignty; a form of digital sovereignty whose impact often extends to real life. More and more Elders, not just younger

[16] The Monash Team is formed by staff from the Monash Indigenous Studies Centre, together with the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Information Technology's Sensi Lab.

[17] The notion of 'transversality' within posthuman theory points to the various ways in which different species, beyond the human, live and interact with their environments.

people, are welcoming the digital turn as a way forward, in the hope that this new era may provide opportunities to improve their conditions. As Indigenous (Gunai) Elder, Activist and Leader Robbie Thorpe has declared during an online conversation:

> The best is yet to come, the younger generation know how to use this media better than anyone, just hope they don't forget the knowledge of the Elders with them, who have been cut out of the communication game once again. One thing It's given our people's a rough voice that's quickly becoming refined, networking amongst old friends is a good thing for us, we have [been] isolated and deliberately divided for so long. (Thorpe)

This view is echoed in the work carried out by the Elders who are part of Miyarrka Media, an Indigenous arts collective based in Gapuwiyak, a Yolngu community in Northern Australia. The project is led by *Dhalwangu* Elder Paul Gurrumuruwuy and anthropologist Jennifer Deger and sees the participation of several members of the community. Through their prismatic and colourful art, the members of Miyarrka Media play with traditional and digital technologies to create highly interactive texts that invite audiences to learn about their ways, knowledges and everyday experiences.[18] The work of Miyarrka reflects on 'feelings', kin and Country through a vast array of audio-visual media artefacts created and circulated via smartphones. Miyarrka Media, like the other projects I have here mentioned, is an example of vitality and ingenuity in the face of hardship. All the projects come together in their quest to connect or reconnect to Country, as a site of identity, wellbeing, strength, but also as a symbolic space for contestation. Despite their local differences and specificities, there is a strong thread that unites all these creative outputs and which is visible both in the attention to international audiences[19] as well as in the strong collaborative component that has contributed to their success. Nevertheless, in this context, creativity often comes out of necessity, thus rendering the political a core aspect of these projects. First Nations have long experimented with the media and different mediums as a way to intervene in national political debates and have authority over representations of Indigeneity. Faye Ginsburg has defined this process as a form of "cultural activism" which combines "rights to self-representation, governance, and cultural autonomy after centuries of assimilationist policies" ("Indigenous media" 582). The same motives are the driving force behind Karrabing and their modi operandi.

5. The Karrabing Collective: against all odds

The Karrabing film collective was created in the early-to-mid-2000s. The collective is made of around thirty members including American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli. The lives of the people who form Karrabing are shaped by decades of government policies that have been seeking to control Indigenous communities, seizing 'their' lands[20] and regulating every aspect of their existence. The work of the collective is prismatic and rich in its telling of life conditions

[18] See in particular the publication *Yuta Anthropology*, as well as *Warwuyun (worry)*, a digital artwork composed of 50 individual altered photo-collages created on mobile phones in collaboration with a team of coders and designers.

[19] This global aspect is particularly clear in the words of the Miyarraka media creators who, referring to one of their exhibitions, state: "In this exhibition the *dhadhalal* calls to people and places far beyond Arnhem Land. No matter if you're European, Chinese, Tahitian, African, Indian, Aboriginal … this sound can connect us all together. Just like mobile phones!" (Miyarrka Media)

[20] See for example the complexities generated by the Land Rights Acts in 1976 and the outcome of the Intervention in 2007

around the tensions generated by forms of state interference and surveillance.[21] In response to this, Karrabing have been producing films as well as a transmedia project constituted by a digital archive that contains and geotags media items, thus allowing the Land[22] to "speak for it/herself" (Povinelli 147).

The use of digital technologies, namely smartphones, editing software, etc., has empowered the members of Karrabing to tell their stories from their own perspectives without having to give into dominant modalities, structures and narratives. Considering the highly mediated and mediatised quality of the societies in which we live, what Karrabing are doing through their transmedia projects may be seen as a reflection on the future direction(s) of Indigenous ways of interacting with the politics of Land in Australia.

In the work of Karrabing, Country and Land become central themes as they are constantly invoked, evoked, and problematised through a series of representational expedients, cinematic practices, and discursive strategies effected through mobile technologies and postproduction. It is important to note that, in this paper, I look at the Karrabing films as digital artefacts and not merely as films. The importance of the work produced by the collective lies in their ability to use the technology at their disposal[23] to reverse dominant narratives and talk about Land and Country from a 'digital' Indigenous perspective. Their films constitute intimate examples of Karrabing's 'analytics of existence' as they enact strategies of survivance—'staging' their lives, against the background of the Australian political and cultural project of territorial disconnection. Such a project turns Land into abstraction rather than embodiment, memories fade away, and new corporate interventions are made possible. While presenting different stories, in their films, Karrabing narrate Country through their ancestral obligations to Land, the politics of assimilation, and their relationship to fragile ecosystems. In fact, "[a]ncestors are the foundational source of power for Aboriginal people in many parts of Australia, and their renewing potency within the landscape and seascape continues today" (Magowan 64). Karrabing, which in the *Emiyengal* language refers to the tide reaching its lowest point, is invested in uncovering the possibilities that emerge from the low tide, both symbolically and physically. Embracing this particular ecological phenomenon, the members of the collective, who are originally connected to different Countries, subvert conventional notions of kin and clan/tribe establishing their own territorial and familial formations based on their living conditions and shared ecologies, i.e., saltwater.

It is the precarious nature of the circumstances in which Karrabing live and operate, the ingenuity of their methods of survivance, and their radical hope that are captured in the Karrabing productions, which Povinelli has defined as 'improvisational realism'. This genre speaks to the constant changes and adjustments that must be put in place to overcome the many adversities each member encounters in their daily activities. Improvisational realism is reflected in the aesthetic choices made by the collective, as well as in some of the ways the films are shot (e.g., the use of mobile devices and the juxtaposition of images, just to name a few). In their mixing of fiction and reality, performance and existence, these short films push the boundaries between art and life as they often intersect. Considering the complexities of the films, in terms of narrative and structure, a multimodal approach (see Kress; Kress and van Leeuwen; Machin and Mayr) to these texts allows viewers to better understand the complex cultural worlds represented on screen. The mediums used, the aesthetics and the cinematic devices (e.g.,

[21] Forms of self-determination sanctioned by the state can be seen as a form of surveillance, together with the many policies that keep Indigenous communities under strict regulations.
[22] This particular project is yet to be implemented.
[23] The Karrabing collective mainly rely on smartphones with cameras and editing software.

salience, visual modality, setting and 'point of view') (see Kress and van Leeuwen) adopted in each film give us a glimpse, if not of the intricate cultural layers that we witness, of how identity is lived and represented when all that exists lives and breathes life.
Considering the work of Karrabing and the fact that most of their production moves beyond Western epistemologies and ways of knowing and sensing, a multimodal approach, while limiting in capturing non-Western frameworks, holds the potential to highlight the impact of socio-cultural and historic contexts in shaping people's semiotic choices. This is particularly visible in the way Karrabing play with colour schemes, camera angles, and transitions, on the one hand, and sound and text, on the other. The semiotic arrangements of Karrabing and their 'meaning potential' (see Machin and Mayr) are extremely important to grasping elements of the complex world they inhabit. While the films and their plots have been widely discussed by Povinelli, here I would like to focus on the role of Land and Country as living and agentive characters, which are central to each story. I am also interested in how these elements are addressed through discursive, visual, and acoustic strategies. My analysis of Country is thus based on Bishop et al.'s argument that "Country is perceived as being alive, in a sense, and capable of thought and reflection" (31), which is why I see Country and Land as 'actors' and not 'attributes', from a social semiotic perspective.

In order to support my argument, I am here looking at one particular film/digital artefact that, I believe, provides relevant insights into the ways in which technology, and the digital in particular, can support the characters' Dreamings, offering new ways to be seen and recognised by the state. *Wutharr: Saltwater dreams* (2016) is the third film produced by Karrabing and it is often described as the most surreal of their whole filmography due to the quality of its visuals (dream-like scenes for instance), constant flashbacks, openings to different dimensions, various intersecting narratives, and converging sounds. This film uses the expedient of a community disagreement to challenge assumptions about what Indigenous communities are and how Indigenous peoples should be living. Like other Karrabing films, *Wutharr* offers a vantage point into Indigenous people's relationship to Land and Country, ranging from the onto-epistemological to the political dimension. This film addresses all these aspects through a series of visual semiotic resources that convey powerful meanings. Different layers of significance are explored through a narrative that examines all the complexities that derive from the encounter between Aboriginal Lore and Law, the settlers' law, and Christian values.

The story develops and takes shape around a discussion on a broken boat's motor and the possible causes of this incident. The dialogue presents viewers with three main perspectives, seemingly divergent and yet interconnected: a mechanical problem (an issue connected to faulty wiring), Christian faith (a heavenly intervention), and ancestral Law (the ancestor's way to punish the members of the collective for not visiting Country). And, it is around these three belief systems that the narrative unfolds in 'disruptive ways', as the Karrabing try to avoid another fine. This feeling of disruption, displacement, and disorientation has been described by Tess Lea and Elizabeth Povinelli who, referring to the Karrabing film, *When the Dogs Talked*, affirm:

> The film stages this disorientation as one of location and viewer. It suggests that the questions of what and where are indeed legitimate, but subverts the expected conventions of ready cross-cultural translation or ethnographic exegesis by insisting that non-Indigenous viewers also experience the disruptions of place and time that are usually thrust upon Indigenous subjects. (37)

And, I would argue, it is precisely this sense of disruption that accompanies all of the Karrabing's filmography. *Wutharr*, in particular, represents this state by asking viewers to forget what they know about 'Indigenous culture' (primarily in reference to life in the northern regions of the continent) and grasp the sophisticated and heterogeneous worlds of ancestral territorial arrangements tied to generational relations, obligations to kin, and responses to the pressures coming from the government.

The film directly addresses the problems inherent in the colonial project and its aftermath, grappling with questions around neo-colonial practices and their impact upon Indigenous communities in Australia. The question of Land is central here and it is the relationship to Land and Country that keeps on coming to the fore. This is conveyed visually, textually, and acoustically through a series of techniques. From a visual perspective that concerns salience, it is possible to affirm that colour, point of view, transitions, modality, and special effects are used to narrate all the complexities of a seemingly simple story. If we look at the visual resource of point of view, for instance, the camera is often placed at ground level. Filming from below creates meaning potential as this technique turns the ground/Land into the speaking subject, a living thing, or a sentient being, in line with posthuman thinking. In this and many other Karrabing films, the camera/phone is often placed at the level of the ground. From a multimodal angle, looking up at something means to be in a subordinate role as that 'something' that is looking down on the viewer stands in a position of power (see Kress and van Leeuwen). Yet, from a Karrabing perspective, and in the context of Indigenous knowledges, scenes from the ground can be interpreted assuming a different viewpoint. If we look at the earth as a living being, the soil is positioned at a horizontal angle with the viewer, suggesting a relation of involvement and equality (see Kress and van Leeuwen)—the Land is alive and has agency. There are also many instances where the earth stands in dialogue with some of the characters. In these cases, I would argue that the ground looks up at the Karrabing members not to symbolise subordination but subverting expectations and signalling power: the power to give and the power to take, which is further confirmed by the acting, the dialogue, and specific lexical choices and sounds (e.g., the ancestor's voices and the background music).

The Land observes people through the presence of the ancestors. This is not a static act, but a process of doing. In *Wutharr*, for example, the narrative structure of these scenes from the ground raises questions about who is acted upon or looked at. Here, the 'actor' (the doer or participant from which a symbolic line, or vector, originates) is the Land and the 'goal' (the participant that receives the action, at which the vector is directed) coincides with the Karrabing members as they walk on Country. This reading can be further confirmed by the role of the ancestors who repeat the order: "punish them, punish them!". Kress and van Leeuwen talk about narrative structures and representations when participants are connected through doing/action rather than in terms of possessive attributes that are part of the composition. So, while shots like those captured in figure 1 may be superficially labelled as 'conceptual patterns' that represent characters as attributes, the story tells us that we are witnessing an active process. Visibly, as the earth is the main 'actor' here, it is possible to draw a diagonal vector that connects participants and that makes the scene 'transactive' (the action is between two parties, the Land and a person; see Kress and van Leeuwen). Even though we do not see the 'Goal's gaze' in figure 1, we can imagine there is a bi-directional movement, an exchange between the two parties, but one where the earth holds more power. This is signalled through compositional choices such as the foregrounding of the natural elements, in this case the spinifex. The person is positioned in the background and there is a soft camera focus, while the grass takes centre stage through a horizontal angle that makes viewers closer to and in intimate relation with the image subject, which appears clear and foregrounded.

Figure 1. Screenshot from Wutharr

The ancestors are in the Land and are the Land as it is visually articulated through images where the multimodal category of salience is expressed through the use of bright colours, as well as colour contrast and tone, size, focus, and foregrounding (see Kress and van Leeuwen; see also Machin, *Introduction*). It is in the phase of post-production that the films are re-worked so as to convey specific meanings. In particular, colour is used here and in many other films to represent the atemporal dimension of the ancestors and their ubiquity. In figure 2, for instance, tone (i.e., the film looks overexposed when the ancestors appear) and modality—a low modality given by colour saturation and distortion (over exposition), are used to covey meaning. At the same time, deep perspective is employed to give prominence to the ancestors and communicate what lies beyond the world of the 'here' and 'now', offering viewers a glimpse of the *bios* and *zoe* possibilities of co-existence within the 'post-human convergence', as Braidotti (see *Posthuman*) would put it. From a posthuman theoretical perspective, it is precisely this coming together of media, natural, and cultural environments that we need to investigate as a precondition for challenging and better understanding the centrality and significance of the human in the age of the *Anthropos*. This question is even more pertinent if we consider that the "vital self-organizing powers that were once reserved for organic entities have now become an integral part of our technologically mediated universe" (Braidotti, "The Critical" 384). Karrabing embodies this interdependence between human, nature and non-human by pushing the boundaries of media production and embodying the many possibilities that emerge from this space.

Along with the relevance of visual aspects, the acoustic elements of the film are also key to understanding the many stories presented here. The soundscape alternates from the sounds of nature to non-diegetic sounds (Aboriginal songs accompanied by clapstick and didjeridoo, the voices of the ancestors, and the church bells). The constant oscillation between various sonic environments further contributes to the sense of displacement I mentioned above and which is meant to be induced in the viewer. Indeed, the context in which music sounds are played and where those sounds take their meaning from is paramount in establishing an affective connection with viewers (see Cook), who are invited to respond to the narrative in an active way. Filmic transitions from one scene to the other are accompanied by different sounds. The voices of the ancestors execute orders through the phrase "punish them there now," "punish

them." Their voices are whispers from the past as they locate themselves in the old internment camp known as Delissaville, the current Belyuen rural area. The sound of their ethereal voices overlaps with the sounds of nature and music. These sonic elements are represented as something distant and yet present through a voice quality and timber that range from loud to softer, from close to distant. The effect of voices from a distance, which are contrasted by the sounds of the clapsticks and the didgeridoo, indexes a remote temporal distance. Such distance is confirmed by the dialogue, "What year is this?" "1952" responds one of the ancestors. The merging of various sources of sound is accompanied by the juxtaposition of archival footage from Delissaville and current images of the Karrabing members. This 'back and forth' pattern repeats throughout the film when the ancestors and the Land communicate with the members of the Collective.

Figure 2. Screenshot from Wutharr (the Ancestors)

Given the rich semiotic language employed by the Karrabing, an in-depth analysis of their films would extend beyond the objectives of this paper. While brief, my analysis of *Wutharr* aims to highlight some of the ways in which Karrabing represent the relationship to the more-than-human, with a focus on Country and through the mediation of the ancestors. Their complex narratives and layered semiotic resources reflect a worldview that sees assemblages of life and non-life as key parameters in advancing claims to obtain the Land back and to protect it from extractive practices. By recentering Land and Country and giving them agency through a series of overt and less direct representational means, the Karrabing Collective are contributing to public discussions about resource management in Australia. Embracing the metaphor of the 'Abo-digital', the Karrabing's digital media practices have acquired global recognition, as their projects travel from country to country. Watching the films of the collective in various prestigious venues around London (The Tate Modern, Rich Mix, Goldsmith University), I often wondered what international audiences make of these stories as the protagonists move through a landscape that is "represented as a complex dynamic between locally contested cartographies and densely governed geontologies" (Povinelli 162).

6. Conclusion

The media, digital and technological practices of Indigenous peoples in Australia are now reaching maturity. With a focus on remote areas, in this article I have argued that despite some

structural and infrastructural constraints, many Indigenous peoples and their communities have managed to turn digital technologies into tools for the preservation of culture and language. Through these channels, they are proposing narratives of survivance and radical hope, thus asserting forms of digital Indigenous sovereignty that travel across borders and gather international consensus.

The examples mentioned in this article with their focus on Country and Land have highlighted the Indigenous peoples' continuous ability for renewal and a common, but distinct, need to assert different forms of sovereignty. Each project shows the potential of taking ownership of the digital, even in conditions of scarcity. The Karrabing Collective constitutes a prime example of this as they employ a highly sophisticated multimodal approach to engage viewers in their stories. The applications, the animations and the productions I have here examined can be seen as forms of digital storytelling that operate outside canonical narratives as they are often removed from the direct influence of mainstream media institutions. Yet, we should not neglect, their potential to participate in the national and international public spheres, especially when key stakeholders are involved (e.g., higher education and government representatives).

At the national level, the discourses generated through Indigenous digital projects can challenge prevailing stereotypes and flawed representations of Indigeneity, opening up new configurations of Indigenous agency. From a global perspective, the marketing and promotion of these projects to an international audience may help generate awareness (see for instance the way in which some of the projects I am here focusing on have been travelling around the world, initiating partnerships), thus gathering the support necessary to put pressure on local institutions. A question remains as to whether the Australian government will reconsider its approaches to Land and resource management in light of growing pressures from Indigenous activist groups whose cry for autonomy is growing stronger and stronger.

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