

# Colonial Nation:

## History and Identity in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*

By Carolyn Lake

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ABOVE Rosalie Kunoth as Jecda in *Jeddah*

AS BENEDICT ANDERSON and many others have since shown, the media is a powerful discursive site that constructs nations, histories and identities, or in Anderson's words, "imagined communities" (6–7; Carter 6–9, 182–209). *Australia* (Luhrmann, 2008) reflects this paradigm more explicitly than any other Australian film before. It makes claim to the Australian nation most obviously through its title but also through its promotion, both as a film and together with tourism campaigns, through its mythologizing of Australian history and through its allusions to Australian literature, film, geography and people – whether accurate or not.

*Australia* received mixed reviews, both in Australia and abroad, with many Australian critics taking issue with its historical inaccuracies (with no credited historical advisers on the film, this is a salient objection) and its narrow representation of the Stolen Generations. Many critics simply claimed it was a bad film, "a fraudulent and misleading fantasy," while others applauded it, saying it gave "Australians a new past" (Greer; Langton, "Faraway"). The incongruence between history, as an academic discipline, and historical representation in film has been argued elsewhere, without much consensus (McGrath), and although the role of history will be discussed here, it is not within the scope of this article to debate the feasibility or merit of historical "truthfulness" in popular culture. Rather, this article is concerned with the use of national mythologizing in film, its functions and its consequences.

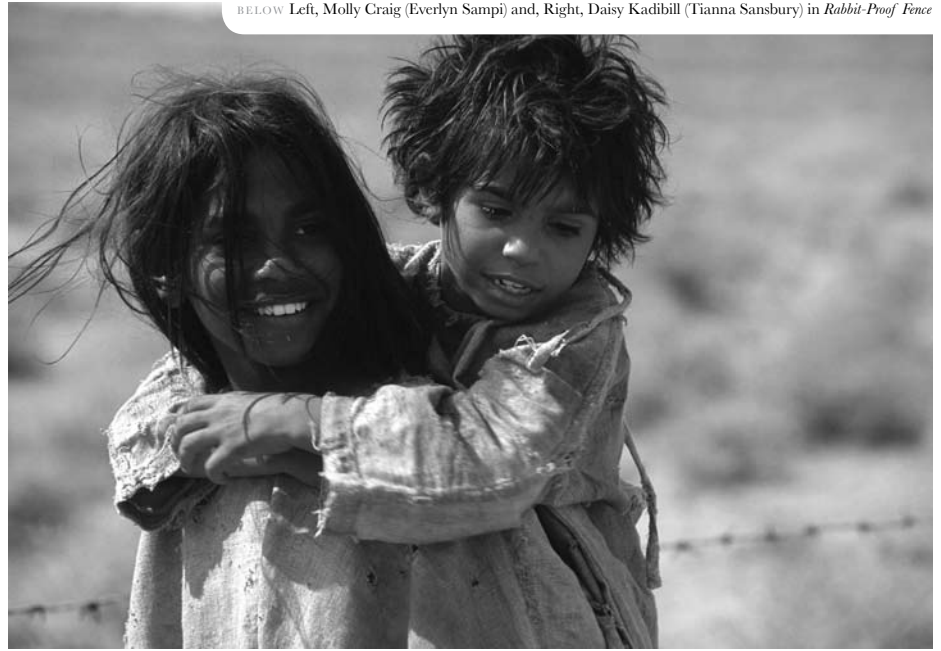
As Luhrmann so often stated, *Australia* is an epic, an ambiguous term that, apart from signalling its intended scope and projected box office sales, offers little indication of what the film is about. It could be described as a romance, a western, or an adventure film, and it is in fact a messy pastiche of all these genres. Set in the Northern Territory of Australia during the late 1930s and early 1940s, the film depicts a clichéd meeting of two people. In the male lead, there is the very Australian Drover (Hugh Jackman), known mythically by no other name, who is the infallible Australian stereotype: male, egalitarian, resilient, independent and rough, yet can wear a tuxedo if the occasion calls for it. Alongside him is Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman), a "genuine aristocrat" who sails from England, intending to sell her husband's property, Faraway Downs, believing him to be having intimate relationships with "the native women." Upon arrival at Faraway Downs, Sarah discovers that her husband has died, her accountant is a drunk and her station manager, Neil Fletcher,

is likely stealing her cattle for the villainous King Carnie, the largest cattle exporter in the region. With 1,500 cattle left wandering, Sarah employs the help of Drover to transport them to Darwin in time for an army contract. On the way a romance develops between them, and despite having to cross the disastrous Kuramen Desert (which does not actually exist), Sarah and Drover make the deadline, beat King Carnie and, as a number of reviewers commented, this is exactly where the movie should end, instead of going on for more than another hour.

This mammoth-length feature, however, contains more than a romance-adventure quest. Luhrmann also jammed in the bombing of Darwin and set the film against one of the most shameful elements of Australian history, the Stolen Generations. When Sarah arrives at Faraway Downs, there are Aboriginal people working and residing on the property: a “housemaid,” Bandy Legs; a child born of European and Aboriginal parentage, Nullah; and Nullah’s mother, Daisy. The inclusion of a Stolen Generations story in *Australia* cannot be understood without first grasping why this part of Australian history is so pertinent to ITS.

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) presented the Australian government with its report of the “laws, practices and policies which resulted in the separation of Indigenous children from their families by compulsion, duress or undue influence” entitled *Bringing Them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia). The report found that the main objective of removing children was to assimilate them into the non-Indigenous community; that the forced removal breached fundamental human rights; and that from the 1940s onward, the removals were a gross violation of international prohibitions on genocide and racial discrimination (Dodson 128). The *Bringing Them Home* report is, to this date, the highest-selling government-commissioned publication produced in Australia (Whitlock 198). For many Australians, their history suddenly changed in 1997. As Drusilla Modjeska wrote of that year, “I am sure I am not the only one to have had the sensation of waking up to find myself in an Australia I barely recognise. Or, rather, more to the point, in an Australia I would rather not recognise” (Modjeska 159).

In light of *Bringing Them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia), Australia’s very conception of nation – to the extent that it was built on community and related to land – suddenly became morally illegitimate. This national identity crisis is one way of explaining the resurgence of historically



BELOW Left, Molly Craig (Everlyn Sampi) and, Right, Daisy Kadibill (Tianna Sansbury) in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*

*This national identity crisis is one way of explaining the resurgence of historically based Australian films during the late 1990s and 2000s, as an attempt to create new collective memories for a new collective past.*

based Australian films during the late 1990s and 2000s, as an attempt to create new collective memories for a new collective past. The *Bringing Them Home* report, along with the landmark *Mabo* and *Wik* High Court Native Title judgments, popular history books, such as Henry Reynolds’s publications, and television projects, such as the Special Broadcasting Service Corporation (SBS) miniseries *The First Australians* (Perkins, 2009), generated a new public discourse of history, nation and identity. “Aboriginal history” was beginning to move into the public spheres of television, literature and mainstream politics. It is in this context that films such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (de Heer, 2002) and *The Proposition* (Hillcoat, 2005) emerged. All of these films, in differing ways, “attempted to displace the nation’s myth of origin from the sacred trenches of Gallipoli to the immense, historical crime scene of the colonial frontier” (Collins 281). Three years and many Australian films later, Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia* premiered.

Because of the way national identity is inherently tied with national history, this backtracking over Australia’s history through film is an integral process for reconciling Australia’s current identity crisis. As Felicity Collins writes of post-*Mabo* cinema in Australia, “this unrooted memory of a traumatic colonial past has decisively

displaced cultural nationalism’s bush legend and its ethos of mateship as a sign of an egalitarian nationhood” (Collins and Davis 281). And this is exactly why Luhrmann’s *Australia* had so much riding on it. Despite what Luhrmann’s intentions may have been, the title said it all. In light of recent historical and political developments, Australia was searching not only for an identifiable past but a promising future. But, rather than *Australia* “backtracking” (Collins and Davis 7) or interrogating Australian history, a more inclusive and accountable history, it held true to most of the national myths that have been ignorantly espoused since the nineteenth century.

Broadly speaking, the most enduring national myth for Australia has been the “bush” (Turner 34–36). From the day the first fleet arrived in 1788 and found unpleasant weather (they had not anticipated the reversal of seasons from England) to the release of Luhrmann’s *Australia*, the bush has been a dominant national marker. Australian landscape, as represented in film, is “typically vast, even ‘epic’ . . . [t]he land is challenging, as it must be for heroes, but it can be tamed” (Carter 197). *Australia* strongly upholds this narrative tradition, despite being produced in the twenty-first century. The media coverage of *Australia*’s production and postproduction invokes this idea of a mythic

and dangerous Australian land. As one reporter wrote, "This [Australia] is the real McCoy, big and parched. Bloody beautiful. The idea of shooting a movie in such hostile terrain, one that would suck the last drop of gumption out of Ray Mears, is not to be entertained lightly" (Dawson 2008). It is true that a proportionally large part of Australia is virtually uninhabitable. Look at a rainfall map of the country and you will notice the massive empty space in the middle. However, this element of the Australian environment is not one that many Australian people can directly relate to, either now or in the early twentieth century.

Colonies, and later cities, have almost exclusively been on the coastal regions of the continent. Most Australians are more familiar with beaches than they are "untamed wilderness." Yet, historically, Australia has mythologized itself within a bush paradigm: "unarguably harsh in its extremes, bizarre in its affection of beauty, it is just these most harsh and bizarre aspects of the land which we perversely enshrine in our national character" (Turner 36). This personification of land is evoked again in *Australia* through the character Drover. Drover has a rough demeanor, preferring to sleep under stars rather than under a roof. He insists on droving during the dry season despite financial security. Indeed, just as the land needs to be tamed and civilized by the settlers, Drover needs to be tamed by Sarah. Like the binarism of Sarah and Drover, the bush legend is not Australian so much as it is *not* British, a sturdy man of antiauthoritarian, egalitarian principles fighting the land in the vastness of nowhere.

Although Drover is at home on the land, Sarah is not. The character of Neil Fletcher reminds us of this when he remarks on Sarah's arrival in Darwin: "She won't last, a delicate English rose withers in the outback." But Sarah does last, and this can be attributed to her partnership with Drover. It is Drover who literally comes to the rescue to transport Sarah's cattle to Darwin after she fires Fletcher. It is Drover who gets her served a drink in the front bar, and it is Drover who manages to save the children from Mission Island. Although Sarah does try to recapture Nullah, her passive approach does not compare with Drover's action-packed search-and-rescue escapade. Drover and Sarah's relationship ties back again to the land. When the two characters kiss, rain falls on the drought-stricken Darwin. When they consummate their relationship, monsoonal storms appear, the land becomes rejuvenated, birds fly and rivers flow. When Britain is soon to leave Australia defenseless



BELOW Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) and Nullah (Brandon Walters)

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against Japanese attack, it is the very British Sarah, together with the very Australian Drover, who save the land.

This relationship between myth and land has deeper consequences, creating a settler discourse around land that displaces any notion of dispossession from Indigenous peoples. Early in *Australia*, Nullah tells Sarah that she is like the Rainbow Serpent, that she will heal the land. But Sarah will do more than heal the land; she will own it. Do Sarah's healing powers justify her ownership? Sarah's mythic propensity to cultivate the land is curiously similar to the settler's ability to develop agriculture. The broad meaning of *Terra Nullius* is land belonging to no one, land over which no one has sovereignty. This includes but is not limited to an expression of sovereignty through the development of agriculture. Sarah's adoption of the title of Rainbow Serpent, the title that seems to distance her from the status of colonizer, invader or dispossessor, comes eerily close to the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*, the doctrine that "justified" European colonization of Australia. Rather than attempting to circumvent Indigeneity, by naming Sarah the Rainbow Serpent, Indigenous discourses are appropriated by European ones, constructing these alternative meanings and histories.

Throughout *Australia*, there is a tension amongst Neil Fletcher, the former manager of

Faraway Downs; King Carnie, the infamous cattle baron; and Sarah. Both men want to purchase Sarah's property, and both offer her various propositions throughout the film. In one particular discussion of the property between Fletcher and Sarah, Fletcher argues that his family has lived at Faraway Downs for three generations and that his father had died working the land on which they stand. Fletcher's response invokes a Lockean conception of ownership, that the labor he and his family have spent on the land constitutes ownership, also invoking the philosophical position of "squatters" in colonial Australia. Sarah insists she rightfully owns the property because her deceased husband had purchased it. Unless Sarah's husband had purchased the property by way of treaty with the Indigenous peoples living there, her ownership rights are as illegitimate as any other colonial's. At no time during the nearly three-hour film does any character, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, suggest that neither Sarah nor Fletcher is morally positioned to be on the land in the first place – a stark omission considering *Australia* was heralded as giving "Australians a new past" (Langton, "Faraway").

A recurrent theme throughout *Australia* is "story." The film opens with Nullah narrating; he recounts that the most important lesson he has learned is "tellum story." One of Drover's

most famous lines in the film reiterates a similar message: “Most people like to own things, you know, land, luggage, other people, makes them feel secure. But all that can be taken away, and in the end, all you really own is your story.” Drover tells this to Sarah on their first encounter, as he is driving her from Darwin to Faraway Downs. This is another area where the film unfortunately falls short of its intention, wandering vaguely among its subplots and returning most frequently to its central romance. But what of the 1942 Darwin bombing? Moreover, what of the other framing story, that of the Stolen Generations?

Luhrmann engages with the Stolen Generations history primarily through the character of Nullah. Early in the film, Nullah’s mother, Daisy, dies and with his father suspected to be the morally corrupt former manager, Neil Fletcher, Nullah is effectively orphaned. Like other scenes in *Australia*, this narrative element is powerfully reminiscent of the Australian film *Jedda* (Chauvel, 1955). *Jedda* was a first for Australian film in three ways: it was the first Australian feature film to be shot in color, the first to include credited Aboriginal actors in lead roles and the first to cinematically represent the Stolen Generations. Although *Jedda* is today seen as “sickening and, at the same time, laughable in its racism,” it has become an iconic Australian film (Langton, “Well” 47).

Like *Jedda*, *Australia*’s Aboriginal child is not taken in the literal sense but orphaned. And as in *Jedda*, Nullah is taken in by a non-Indigenous woman, Sarah. Sarah is medically unable to have children; the comparative character in *Jedda*, who interestingly has the same first name, Sarah McMann, has recently lost a child. So, in both films, the orphaned Aboriginal child is taken in by a well-intentioned non-Indigenous woman, and both women have at least symbolically lost the opportunity of motherhood. Whereas *Jedda* was made during the height of the Indigenous child removal policies, *Australia* was made with the benefit of hindsight and with the indisputable historical awareness that *Bringing Them Home* (Commonwealth of Australia) has afforded Australians. Yet Luhrmann makes the same narrative choices as *Jedda*, representing the Aboriginal child as in need of a family and a home, with a benevolent non-Indigenous woman willing to do just that. The five decades that have lapsed between these two films have not, unlike other Australian films,<sup>1</sup> given *Australia* any greater insight.

The conventional narrative structure of cinematic representations of history is to



BELOW Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) and Drover (Hugh Jackman) in Baz Luhrmann’s *Australia*

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explore the past through the experiences of individuals. This is the way story and myth have functioned for centuries. This convention is not limited to film: museums also increasingly use stories for representing the past. As Bain Attwood writes, “it [an exhibition] tells a story in which it treats an event as symbolic of a general phenomenon that really happened, which is how myth commonly relates the past” (Attwood 107). No reasonable person expects absolute historical accuracy in film, but they would expect that a film’s narrative be at least thematically true to the events it represents. Yet, it is difficult to reconcile Luhrmann’s Stolen Generations story with the themes that emerged from the *Bringing Them Home* report a decade earlier. With film acting as a powerful arbiter of social memory, this incongruence is an issue worthy of critical consideration (Collins 277). Australians might be shy about their own history, even ignorant, but we should know enough to know that *Australia*’s depiction of the Stolen Generations does not generally reflect the past and that it is not the story we should be sending to our national cinemas or cinemas abroad.

Although Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was a “profoundly unsettling film” (Potter and Schaffer), *Australia* is merely cute. Nullah speaks in a cutesy version of Pidgin, a simplified version of English formed for

easy communication between colonizers and Indigenous peoples (Greer). He is innocent and naïve, liking Sarah’s shaky rendition of “Over the Rainbow” – after all, he did dub Sarah the Rainbow Serpent. Nullah is not afraid of Sarah or Drover, nor should he be, despite Sarah’s early mistakes with respectful language; both characters are good-natured, well-intentioned colonials, neither racist nor sexist; Drover must have been the most liberal man that side of the equator. Not only does he ride with women and find them “easy to get along with,” but his conveniently deceased wife was Aboriginal. This fact exonerates him from any historical accountability one might want to impose upon him. And although Sarah did not marry an Aboriginal man, for she was fresh off the boat from England, she symbolically and literally saves Nullah numerous times throughout the film. As one reviewer so aptly put it, “it’s a perfect film to see if you want to feel great about being white” (Zachariah).

Luhrmann deals with the tragedy of the Stolen Generations, not by Nullah being taken from his family and community and then institutionalized (though he is taken from Sarah and sent to “Mission Island” for a period), nor by being made to work in inhumane conditions for no pay, but by being unable to go “walkabout” with his grandfather, King George. The walkabout problem is

representative of assimilation. To say, as some reviewers did, that *Australia* does not attempt a discussion of mid-twentieth-century discourses on race is to judge the film too harshly. *Australia* does, at least subtly, attempt to discuss the complexities of assimilationist policy. The following dialogue is the key scene in which this takes place:

SARAH. What's wrong?

DROVER. I'm not used to people making decisions about me, that's all.

SARAH. I was just expressing an opinion. Captain Dutton was telling me about this wonderful school of the air. It's conducted all over the country.

DROVER. He wants to go walkabout with King George.

SARAH. That's ridiculous. He's a little boy. It's not safe.

DROVER. He would be safer in Arnhem Land [Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory] than he would be hanging around here. You can't change him Sarah.

SARAH. I thought you said it has nothing to do with you.

DROVER. It doesn't. It's just sooner or later you're going to have to let that boy go.

SARAH. I don't know what you're talking about.

DROVER. If he doesn't go through ceremony, he'll have no country, no story, no dreaming. He'll be all alone.

This key dialogue, and Luhrmann's "walkabout" ending, is how the film deals with and reconciles past Australian practices of segregation, assimilation and child removal. In fitting with mainstream cinema's problem-resolution formula, Nullah's eventual walkabout is presented as the literal (in

the capacity of this individual story) and symbolic (defying the assimilation ideologies) solution to Australia's history. This formulaic approach is strengthened by the film being bookended with reference to factual policy and governmental acknowledgement of past injustices. Together, with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations and Nullah being allowed to go walkabout, the problems of the past appear resolved.

Nowhere in Sarah and Drover's discussion is an interrogation of the racialized inferior/superior assumption that "justified" the segregation and assimilation in Australia. Sarah shows a lack of understanding toward Aboriginal culture, but this is narratively accredited to her being a recent arrival in Australia; after all, Drover knows what he is talking about. Sarah's benevolence combined with Nullah being an orphan excuses Sarah from any well-intentioned mistakes. Drover, equally, did marry an Aboriginal woman, so he is no racist. Considering all the narrative ties between *Australia* and *Jedda* (even Drover's dog is named Jedda), it is a pity that Luhrmann did not further explore what *Jedda* briefly suggested:<sup>2</sup> that civilization, which is just a Western conception of society, is only normative when seen from the perspective of that "civilized" society. In much the same way that notions of the primitive are dichotomized as inferior to it, civilization is no more than a discursive system used to justify racialized ideology, exploitation and land theft.

In 1993, Australian scholar Marcia Langton published an essay she had written to the Australian Film Commission. Her essay, "Well, I Heard It on the Radio and Saw It on the Television," was "an attempt to develop an anti-colonial cultural critique" about "the

politics of representation" (Langton, "Well" 7).

Textual analysis of the racist stereotypes and mythologies which inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal is revealing. The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists. Film, video and television are powerful media: it is from these that most Australians "know" about Aboriginal people. The Aborigines that Australians "know" are Bennelong, Jedda and Marbuk in Chauvel's *Jedda*... They are safe, distant distortions of an actual world of people who will not bring down the neighbourhood real estate values (Langton, "Well" 33.)

What Langton discussed here is just as important and relevant now as it was in 1993. Film allows for a vicarious experience and it encourages identification. For Australian audiences, this identification was amplified. The title of *Australia* tells us this is "our" film, the film that will show our identities and our histories. As Langton recognized, film has a powerful capacity for constructing subjectivities. So, although an audience might not expect historical accuracy on-screen, films such as Luhrmann's do discursively create and perpetuate social and historical memories, and this is how many Australians relate to their country and its peoples.

So, what subjectivities does *Australia* construct? There is Drover, the quintessential Australian, who works hard and rough, enjoys a drink and is always up for a fight. There is Lady Sarah Ashley, the British aristocrat, who comes to tame the wild Drover, raise the country's orphaned children and after a scene wearing a tie during the drive to Darwin, resorts back to a dress and scarf to live happily ever after. There is Nullah, the boy who likes *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), who prophesizes Sarah's healing capacity and whose story is essentially bringing together two non-Indigenous people on the land stolen from his ancestors. There is Bandy Legs, Sarah's housemaid, who, although allowed to ride for the drive, is back to serving tea and biscuits silently once all the adventuring is done. There is Drover's sidekick Magarri, who is, like Bandy, allowed no agency and runs when Drover calls. At the end, Magarri dies, Bandy has disappeared, Nullah gets to go walkabout, and Drover drives off into the sunset with Sarah at his side. All is well for Australia, but is it really? /END/



ABOVE Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman)

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In particular relation to *Jedda*, see *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (Moffatt, 1989).

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<sup>2</sup> In a commonly cited scene between the characters Sarah and Doug McMahon, Doug asks Sarah to consider the validity of her assumptions on "civilization."



### Author Biography

Carolyn Lake is a bachelor of arts student at Flinders University, South Australia. She is majoring in History and English and hopes to combine these two interests into an interdisciplinary honors project. Carolyn is interested in Australian literature and film, specifically issues of ethical engagement, representation and the politics of identity.



### Mentor Biography

Catherine Kevin lectures in Australian history, body politics and memory at Flinders University. She has previously held positions at King's College London and SBS Television. Catherine has recently edited *Feminism and the Body: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2009) and is currently working on a monograph entitled *Great Expectations: A Political History of Pregnancy in Australia since 1945*.

### Department Overview

The Department of History was opened with Flinders University itself in 1966. Over the last four decades, the department has established an impressive reputation in teaching and research, with specializations in Australian, European and international history. The department encourages an interdisciplinary approach to history, with innovative opportunities for learning and research.