

'Keeping story alive': screening Indigenous resistance in Mitch Torres' *Jandamarra's War* (2011) and *Keepers of the Story: Jandamarra* (2010)

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ABSTRACT

Stories of Indigenous resistance to colonisation were central to the Australian History wars and remain an area of contestation in Australian History. In recent years, documentaries by Indigenous directors have played a significant role in challenging orthodox histories of colonial conflict and Indigenous resistance. This paper reflects on this work by considering the production, form and style of *Jandamarra's War* (2011) and *Keepers of the Story: Jandamarra* (2010), two historical documentaries by Indigenous director Mitch Torres that retell the story of the Bunuba freedom fighter Jandamarra from what she describes as a 'Bunuba perspective'. It argues that by combining Indigenous storytelling practices with a process of textual hybridisation, Torres enacts a set of new historical practices that allows Bunuba people to reclaim Jandamarra's story as their own, indeed as a story that comes from and belongs to their country. I therefore propose to consider Torres' work not only as a new manifestation of the Jandamarra legend but as an historically significant strategic act of keeping the story of Jandamarra 'alive' by renegotiating the terms of its telling and reasserting its place in country.

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'This is the story I carry. This is the story that was told to me by my old people'.
(George Brooking – Bunuba elder and senior custodian of the Jandamarra story)

In the first shot of Mitch (Michelle) Torres' Australian documentary *Jandamarra's War* (Torres 2011), the camera flies over a dry riverbed and heads towards the imposing Napier Ranges, located in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.¹ Massive walls of limestone are interrupted only by a small canyon leading to Windjana Gorge, where the story is enshrined and where Torres is taking us. As the narrator, Indigenous actor Ernie Dingo explains, for the Bunuba people, the traditional owners of this land, these ancient ranges are a place of sacred significance; they are the embodiment of the living law that has been passed down across generations from the creation time. For the white settlers, who arrived here following Alexander Forrest's expedition in 1879, this part of

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the Kimberley would instead become an impenetrable fortress looming over their stations, and Windjana Gorge would soon come to be known as the Devil's Pass. The dual nature of the so-called last frontier in Australia's exploration and colonisation is mirrored in the life and legend of one of the most famous Indigenous resistance leaders: Jandamarra.

Born in 1873, Jandamarra spent most of his life moving between his Bunuba world and the settler's world before becoming the leader of a three-year-long guerrilla campaign against the European colonists.² Raised in the bush with his mother Jenny, he moved with her at age 11 to live and work on Lennard River Station, one of the first pastoral stations in the Kimberley region. Here, he was given the name Pigeon, and he quickly became an expert rider and marksman. When Jandamarra abandoned this station life to return to his country and begin processes of cultural initiation, he was captured, along with his uncle Ellemarra, during a police raid and imprisoned in the Derby jail for sheep-stealing. Upon release, he returned to Bunuba country, but became alienated from traditional life and was eventually outlawed, banished by his elders for breaking kinship law. With nowhere else to go, Jandamarra associated himself with a white settler called Bill Richardson and worked as a tracker, helping police to capture many of his own people. He finally had to choose which side of the Napier Ranges he would stand on when in late 1894 he and Richardson captured Ellemarra together with a group of other senior Bunuba leaders and elders. During the night of 31 October 1894, he shot Richardson, armed his people and began a guerrilla campaign against the settlers. Armed with a profound knowledge of both Bunuba country and police tactics, Jandamarra successfully halted pastoralist expansion in the Kimberley for over three years and gained an almost superhuman fame amongst settlers for his ability to continuously evade police raids. He was finally tracked and killed in Tunnel Creek in 1897, and his head was severed from his body and sent to England – as with the heads of Indigenous resistance leaders Pemulwuy and Yagan before him.

Stories of Indigenous resistance to colonisation are one of the main areas of contestation in Australian History. Until recently, Indigenous history has often been interpreted as a form of myth and/or marginalised as oral history and incorporated into Western accounts that neutralise it through the adoption of methodologies that pursue objectivity and truth and do not pay attention to embedded cultural values and to the impact that these stories have in the present (Beckett 1994; Peters-Little, Curthoys, and Docker 2010). As a result of this, Indigenous people in Australia are routinely portrayed as 'without history' (from another time) and stories of Indigenous resistance to colonisation are relegated to the past as a distant chapter in Australian national history. As Felicity Collins and Therese Davis have argued, film, theatre and television productions by Indigenous artists have all played a fundamental role in mediating Indigenous perspectives on these histories; yet, these media incarnations are often not regarded as forms of proper history (Collins and Davis 2006). As Michelle Arrow points out (Arrow 2011), the devaluation of film and TV as history can be partially ascribed to the way in which these two different storytelling modalities operate, with academic accounts being written for a restricted audience and with values such as historical accuracy and evidence-based research in mind and multimedia retellings visualising historical events in ways that try to emotionally involve a larger audience in the narrative and establish a connection between past and present. Indigenous histories combat this prejudice and others. Ann Curthoys has further pointed out how Indigenous history in Australia was not simply

erased from the colonial record, but rather assimilated as part of a nation-building effort in what she defines as: ‘narratives of reversal, placing indigenous people as the invaders and seeing the settlers as the defenders of their land’ (Curthoys 2006, 7). The reasons for disregarding Indigenous multimedia history-making practices as a proper form of historiography are therefore not only structural, but also, and most importantly, political and thus bind any discussion about Australia’s past to our present.

But how do Aboriginal historiographies challenge conventional histories of conflict and resistance? In this essay, I explore how in *Jandamarra’s War* (2011) and *Keepers of the Story: Jandamarra* (2010) Indigenous director Mitch Torres attempts to move beyond the relegation of Indigenous history to the role of ‘minor history’ (Birch 2006) by retelling a colonial story of conflict and resistance from a new Indigenous perspective. I argue that by melding Western and Bunuba history-telling practices, documentary techniques and dramatic re-enactment, she pursues a process of hybridisation and creation of new historical practices able to maintain the cultural specificity of Indigenous history, while at the same time challenging our understanding of the role that ‘place’ plays in documentary practices by showing how Jandamarra’s story belongs to Bunuba country and focusing on the role that country has played in keeping his story alive. I therefore propose to read *Jandamarra’s War* not only as a new manifestation of the Jandamarra legend, but rather as an attempt to renegotiate the terms on which Bunuba history itself is told, where and in what tense.

Over the years following Jandamarra’s death, the Bunuba people fought not only to preserve the memory of their resistance leader, but also to regain control of a story that, not unlike Jandamarra’s head, was taken away from the Kimberley and assimilated into colonial history by authors such as Ion Idriess in his novel *Outlaws of the Leopold* (1952). In 1984, Banjo Woorunmurra, Johnny Marr and other Bunuba elders established Bunuba Productions Aboriginal Corporation (BPAC) with the express intent of producing a feature film that would, in their words, show the world the story of Jandamarra ‘through Bunuba eyes’ (Bunuba Cultural Enterprises 2015). The first step towards bringing the story to a wider audience was the collaboration between Woorunmurra and historian Howard Pedersen on *Jandamarra and the Bunuba Resistance* (1995). The book provides an historical account that for the first time read and interrogated Western sources in light of Bunuba history and is considered by Bunuba people to be the most accurate written version of the story currently available. As Bunuba leader June Oscar recalls in the preface to the second edition:

The Bunuba community commissioned the writing of the book and many of us participated in its production as guides on country, storytellers and editors. As a community we retraced our people’s history and, by combining our oral tradition with information from the written records, we have been able to piece together the story that we, the Bunuba people, own. (Pedersen and Woorunmurra 2011)

This collaborative work set the model for future productions. In the mid-1990s, BPAC was restructured as Bunuba Films, then in 2013 as Bunuba Cultural Enterprises (BCE), when the responsibility of passing the story on was handed down to a younger generation. While BCE continues to pursue their aim of producing a feature film of the story of their leader, Jandamarra’s story has been adapted into a play by Steve Hawke and Bunuba Cultural Enterprise (*Jandamarra*, 2008–2011) and it was featured in episode five of Rachel

Perkins' historical documentary series *First Australians* (2008). Other iterations of the story are found in a children book by Mark Greenwood (*Jandamarra*, 2013), a young-adult's short-novel by John Nicholson (*Kimberley Warrior: The Story of Jandamarra*, 1997), a song by Paul Kelly (*Jandamarra/Pigeon*, 1989) and most recently a cantata by Paul Stanhope, Steve Hawke and Bunuba Cultural Enterprise (*Jandamarra: Sing for the Country*, 2014).

Of course, throughout this period of time, the story has continued to be passed down to Bunuba people from across the Kimberley region through traditional storytelling, dance and song. And this is how the story eventually reached film director Mitch Torres. In a recent interview, Torres recalls how she first heard about Jandamarra from her Walmajarri Nyikina grandfather, whose stepfather was a Bunuba man, when she was six years old, and how the story has travelled with her until 'its persistent murmuring moved me to begin writing the treatment for *Jandamarra's War* in 2008' (ABC 2011b). Produced by Wawili Pitjas, the Broome-based independent production company owned by Mitch and her sister Eileen Torres, in collaboration with Andrew Ogilvie and Andrea Quesnelle from Electric Pictures, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Screen Australia, *Jandamarra's War* is the result of a four-year-long project that saw Bunuba elders like George Brooking, Dillon Andrews, June Oscar, Joe Ross, Selena Middleton and Danny Marr working closely with Torres, historian Howard Pedersen and the Fitzroy Crossing community to retell the history of Jandamarra from a Bunuba perspective. As Torres herself explains, building on previous Bunuba iterations, her work is the result of a process of collaboration and hybridisation that sought nonetheless to preserve the specificity of each voice involved:

I consciously went in knowing I was going to tell the Bunuba side of the story. People may call that bias but for me it's the way the Bunuba wanted to tell it. Then I merged it with the historical facts using the police files, which gives it balance. (Harvey 2011)

Producer Eileen Torres further elaborates how *Jandamarra's War* relies on a variety of sources and plays with the previous incarnations of the story in order to retell the story through a documentary that has its roots in drama and might therefore be viewed as closest version of the feature film that Banjo Woorunmurra and Johnny Marr once dreamed of.

There are many versions and interpretations of the Jandamarra story; books that vary wildly in their accounts, numerous oral histories and stories, songs and dances. The documentary script draws on many of these sources. It contains elements and incidents that are taken directly from historical records, and the odd line from official accounts such as police reports and parliamentary debates. But it also plays with the known history – the Aboriginal and the white versions – selecting, melding and blending characters and incidents. It is a work of drama with its roots in history, but tries to tell the story from a strongly Bunuba perspective. Above all, it seeks to be true to the spirit of Jandamarra and his story as it is remembered by the Bunuba people. (ABC 2011c)

The process is documented in *Keepers of the Story: Jandamarra* (Torres 2010), a twenty-minute documentary produced by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA), in association with Imparja Television and Wawili Pitjas. Here, Torres follows the traditional custodians as they tell the story of Jandamarra from a perspective closer to that of traditional oral storytelling and reflects on the processes that lead to the