



- [Current Issue](#)
- [Back Issues](#)
- [Occasional Papers](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Webteque](#)
- [Events](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [Archives](#)

Current Issue

## ***The Farm* (2009) and Indigenous Remembrance**

[Romaine Moreton](#)



Crossing the river, *The Farm*

*The Farm* is a story about a place that my family simply calls “the farm”, but is specifically Tally Ho farm, near Bodalla in NSW. I recently “Googled” Bodalla and found a sparse, almost blank map, which I thought was rather appropriate: a lack of detail, a lack of representation of Indigenous peoples, and a lack of filmic representation. To give you a bit of backstory to the town: Bodalla was once a huge dairy estate, historically relevant because in 1892 the first mechanical milking machines in Australia were installed there. It is the home of the “Big Cheese” attraction; when I was growing up we would go to the cheese factory every year as a school excursion. We would also go to a large church that was built by and dedicated to Thomas Sutcliffe Mort, the colonialist who started up the dairy industry in the Bodalla area. The church remains as an

indication of the kind of wealth colonialists were extracting from Indigenous lands and peoples, specifically from the Yuin people. It was a huge church for such a little town – at that time, a population of about 500.

My family is not originally from this area. We are from south-eastern Queensland, but we followed the bean-picking route all the way down to Bodalla. From the 1930s, Indigenous itinerant bean-pickers travelled back and forth from the south coast of New South Wales, near the Victorian border, to South Australia. They were travelling in the back of cattle trucks, because this was some of the only work that Indigenous people could find. The huts featured in my film were built in the 1930s. They were intended for transient accommodation only but, by the 1970s, families like mine lived there all year round. I lived there until 1981. In the film I specifically wanted to show how the space of the farm is broken up into sections: the worker's huts; the stockyard behind the huts; and, beyond the stockyard, the farm owner's "big house" as we called it (and I know that term is used a lot in this kind of rural setting). There was also the area in front of the huts known as the "black" area, and that's where we lived. There were about six huts, so showing this shared space was really important, too. If we wanted to talk to each other, we went and sat on the grass in front of one of the huts, and everyone would come together and have a yarn. The reason I wanted to show this idea of divided space is because I think it is important to tell this history about how, every day, my community was incredibly racialised; told that we were born black. We couldn't escape that contextualisation because it was built into the structure of the farm itself: we were the black labour and the landowners were using our labour to sustain their properties.

But there is another side to this story, which I also wanted to tell. In the many years of storytelling within my family, moments of recollection that we relive through our shared yarns, the farm took on a certain mythology. For me this mythology has a melancholy, because it recalls a time when I lived both physically and figuratively on the fringes of society. But it was also a period of my life that was yet to be dominated by materialism and technology. I was living in a physical environment that held great delight for me, as well as being formidable. The countryside has that kind of power. So I felt that these moments of freedom (from materialism and technology) and humility (before the power of the land), which I remembered from my childhood and which I hold within me, were a strong premise for a story.

*The Farm* was also an opportunity for my community to remember who we are and how we once lived. It was an opportunity for us to self-create a film memory of that time, a shared story. Bean-picking is rarely documented in historical texts. So those of us who have this experience, who hold personal memories of the bean picking days, are integral to the telling of such a story. As a first time film director, I chose this subject because I knew it would be important for my own personal process, – a subject that I knew well and had experienced first hand. I knew I also had to fully immerse myself in an understanding of the machinations of filmmaking, the technical craft of writing and directing. This was important because I knew that I, and *The Farm*'s producer, John Harvey, would have to communicate this process to the community, breaking down the technical terms of filmmaking for them in a way that made it transparent. So making a film *in* the community quickly shifted to making a film *with* the community. The collaboration was about us experiencing remembrance as a verb: a doing, an action. From the very start, everyone began to tell each other stories, and this act of remembering became a unifying force. Although, as the director of the film, I knew I was personally responsible for how this experience was unfolding and how it would eventually be transposed through language and story in the film. I knew it would be me who would have to deal with any consequences of this experience. And I knew that the story of the experience would stay in the community, as shared knowledge to be drawn upon in any future productions.

My community showed incredible trust in me as a storyteller and person – they agreed to participate in the project without having read the script. This is because we had already filmed *A Walk with Words* about ten years prior, so there was a basis for this film. We shot the earlier documentary with a small team: Erica Glynn (director), Charlotte Seymour (producer), Warwick Thornton (cinematographer), David Tranter (sound), and me as the co-writer and subject. The community still asks about all the members of that film crew to this day (as they do about John Harvey, from *The Farm*). To me, this shows that, when things are done in the correct way, an ongoing connection between a community and filmmakers is formed. It also shows how those connections become a form of Indigenous resilience for everyone involved. Colonialism has ruptured Indigenous peoples' lives. I see films such as *The Farm* as an opportunity for Indigenous people to reconnect: to emphasise connections between ourselves, and our shared connection with the land. This idea of reconnecting with each other and with our land informs everything about *The Farm*.

A lot of the discussion at the *U-matic to YouTube* symposium was about non-Indigenous filmmakers working with Indigenous communities, and how that works in terms of cultural differences. For me as an Indigenous person working with my extended family and community, it is a matter of us all being well aware of our differences *and* our similarities, at personal, familial and cultural levels. I am a child of bean-pickers who originate from Stradbroke Island, but I grew up in Yuin country. That country and that community claims me, as it should because that place and the people raised me for a good portion of my childhood. So there was no community resistance to me making this film. But for me as a filmmaker it was important to think about how to involve people in the film, and how to do this correctly. I went into the making of *The Farm* with some idealism around these issues, such as thinking that only Yuin people should play Yuin characters on screen. This was impractical: aside from the lead roles, it really came down to who was available and who was willing to perform a role. On the day we were set to shoot the scene where the family travel down the road alongside of the spirit ancestors, a Yuin extra, who was scheduled to play a character who is referred to only as "40s man", didn't show up. The council had blocked off the road for us, and it turned out that one of the Lolly Poppers, i.e., one of the council workers redirecting the traffic, was Koorie – a guy called Floyd Carberry. So we spoke to the boss and asked if Floyd could jump into the part we needed for the film. And that's how Floyd made his screen debut!

The making of *The Farm* showed me that all the relationships in my life, past and present, are of importance and have consequence. The owners of the farm where we shot the bean-picking scenes are white, and they are people I knew throughout my childhood, whose children are around the same age as me. The Tally Ho farm, where we shot the hut scenes, is still owned by the same family, and they have been supportive both times that we've asked to shoot a film on their property. Then there are the relationships formed in the community coming together to make the film. Our film drew on all my relationships, black and white, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. For me, this is what is captured in the shots – they are a visualisation of my relationships. John and I were very aware that we were bringing the movie-making machine and its sensibility (and sometimes lack thereof) into a community who were, I consider, very brave, because none of us fully knew what to expect in this process. We were all vulnerable, and we relied on experienced people like Warwick and Erica Glynn (who was also on set). They, and the experienced crew we were blessed with, were teaching and communicating with us in ways that meant that film, as a form of storytelling, could be introduced to my community in a healthy way.

My relationship with my mentor Merata Mita was also very important in the making of this film. [1] She was instrumental in how the women's story evolved. Merata worked with me during the script development and visual workshops run by Screen Australia's Indigenous Department. She spoke to me as a mother about motherhood, and about the poignancy that the mother/daughter relationship could possibly communicate on screen – I say “could” because part of Merata's teaching was to encourage me to explore possibilities beyond my limited experience. We discussed every aspect of the script: the position of the bodies in the river, the shot list ... Basically Merata taught me about how to find the integrity of my voice both within the frame and as a woman in film collaborating largely with men. Or another way of saying this is that the ways in which I locate and honour the female relationships on screen is due very much to Merata teaching me about how to be strong in my role as an Indigenous woman directing a film, how to be strong for the people with whom I'm working, and the characters for whom I am responsible. So *The Farm* is not a drama based on a Western logic of conflict. It is the drama of Indigenous spirituality and spiritualism. By this I mean that I explored the drama of the piece differently: I had to locate and understand its points of conflict as an Indigenous woman/director from an Indigenous perspective.

I took this same approach to the film's location and settings. I wanted the country to have agency, and I knew that Warwick Thornton, as a gifted cinematographer, could help me to do this. I had written the script from my memories of the country at a time of great abundance, a time when it was very green and lush. But when we did our location scouting, the reality was that the land was in the throes of drought. For me, location scouting is the point in the process where we, as filmmakers, are directly in conversation with the country on which we want to shoot, and in this case we had to consider the production schedule from a point of view of lack. All the shots I had decided on in conversation with Warwick were about capturing the country from my memory as a child in the landscape. The locations such as the bridge and the river were and still are very important to these memories. And later I discovered that the river is very important to Yuin people. But I had to work *with* the country as it was because, once we were on location, we were immersed in a relationship with country and also, at the same time, with the Yuin – the traditional owners. All of this work had to be done carefully and respectfully. And we were incredibly lucky that rain came just before the shoot, so the river looked more reminiscent of how it used to flow. But I had to work with the fact that a lot of the landscape had changed: trees had been taken down, there are no longer any bean paddocks on this particular farm, and the plants and gardens around the huts had disappeared. We had to recreate the plants, as much as the budget would allow. The art director said, “Look, you can have another hut or you can have the plants”. It was very important to me that the film showed how our community created a home on the farm, so I said, “Look, we've got to go with the plants”. In terms of establishing the shot list, that's what we did. The vegetable garden and other plants around the huts made a happy reappearance!

And the beans? There was a lot of talk at the symposium about Indigenous culture disappearing. But if we hadn't made this film at this time, we may not have been able to do so, because the thing that is disappearing from this part of the country is the bean industry. The farmers can't afford to grow beans anymore. Fuel costs, issues about organic/inorganic produce ... All these things are affecting the producers down there, as well as the members of my family who still work as bean-pickers. So I think it is interesting that, while beans are disappearing from that part of the country, at the same time the Yuin culture and language is making a resurgence. My film pays homage to that resurgence, to the Yuin people's living culture. It's about bringing the past into the present. Our research involved looking at the historical, visual records of the Yuin and other groups from this area. You can see a few key figures from these records in the film. We closely drew on photographs of King Merriman, with a King plate (a brass plate worn around the neck that colonialists used in the 1900s as a form of identifying our leaders). He is an important Ancestor in this area. Our Queen character in a mission dress was also drawn from historical photographs. We really wanted to do our best to bring these old characters, these ancestors, back into the story, and to do it with integrity.

Someone at the symposium asked me if my filmmaking is connected to my poetry. Poetry is a great skill to have, and I am increasingly grateful for how it informs my exploration of different media and storytelling platforms. Poetry, like screen language, is about economy of language, about being succinct and clear in one's vision. I apply this kind of discipline to my filmmaking. But I must admit: like, I think, many poets, I struggle with drama based on a binary logic that you find in a lot of Western filmmaking: good versus bad, white versus black, poor versus privileged. My early poetry drew on these binaries and it was, quite frankly, easy to be invested in this logic. I could easily express anger about black and white issues: racism, poverty, and so on. But I came to realise that, by buying into the idea that there are only two positions available within a predetermined dramatic framework, I was, as a poet and a storyteller, consistently being reactive about my environment and my life rather than actively shaping it. So, a subsequent shift in my storytelling voice and increased understanding of drama was founded on my need to belong to the world, rather than simply existing as a marginalised being separate and alienated from it. And I found that the world came to me: in the form of the wind, bird songs; in what the West calls nature, but what I

culturally understand as kin. This new, intense connection with life occurred through a sensorial awakening and, from this time onwards, I have found myself wanting to participate in global conversations. It was liberating. And in my quest to join the world, it became clear that I would first have to know myself and my story better: who I am, where I come from, the people I come from, as well as a deepening appreciation of the people in my life. For these reasons, I do not want to create film dramas that perpetuate the dominance of Western thought over my Indigenous storytelling voice. Instead, I want to make films that help to liberate indigenous audiences (and I intentionally use the lower case i here to indicate indigenous peoples within an international context) from having to think of ourselves within the constraints of the English language, from having to always question the way history and reality are presented to us through media. What I really wanted to say through *The Farm* is: “We are beautiful”.

One of the most poignant moments that contributed to my desire for this expanded field of experience and alternative (indigenous) frame of reference occurred in the Northern Territory; a part of the country that, upon reflection, I realise has given me so much increased self, cultural and creative awareness, through both its people and the undeniable presence of the land itself. Early in my career, when my poetry was still all about social injustice, I had been invited to Alice Springs to give a poetry reading. At that event, an Indigenous woman asked me if I wrote any poems about the land. At that point, I had to say no. This was an incredibly profound moment for me; I can still recall the face of the woman who asked me this question, so gently and without imposition. It was a very real request by her to hear something about country and land, rather than hardship and pain. Her question interrupted my thinking about life as well as my storytelling style. I immediately reviewed everything about myself, and those with whom I was engaging as an artist. For the first time I saw an audience beyond the one I had been talking to – an audience that wanted to have country talked about in a way that was not about conflict but rather about beauty and spirituality.

And from there we can cut to a scene in *The Farm*, like the one where the bodies of the old people are floating in the currents of the river. Do you know how much conversation was had about those two characters? They took on a life all of their own, even though we see them for all of about thirty seconds. The colonial conflict is there, but it is expressed in a way that honours the beauty of that landscape and the relationship that we can assume these two water spirit characters had with that land.

Water is very important to me and in my films. *The Farm* has led to a new project called *Sacred Water*. It is about the fishing rights of the Yuin people. I am working with a family that I have known since I was young, and it was the elder of the clan who approached me and asked me to make this film for them. It is about the sovereign rights of the family to be self-sustainable on their ancient lands, how these rights are prevented by colonial jurisdiction, and how members of the family and community are having to endure criminalisation as a consequence of the denial of those rights. This film project has been a long time in development, especially when you consider the relationship between the family and myself (which is something that, as I have explained, has to be in place in order to do a project like this). But I also think that having a pre-existing relationship with the community, as is the case with *Sacred Water*, means that I have to be even more careful as a filmmaker. I have to listen to the tellers of the story as though I am meeting them for the very first time. In this instance I am merely the story facilitator, and for me the act of facilitation is about honouring the listening, and in honouring the listening I honour the person telling the story. As a maker of Indigenous films, I believe that story facilitation is about allowing the storyteller’s relationship with place to have both primacy and visibility.

I am not Yuin, but Yuin country raised me. The making of *Sacred Water* is an expression of this relationship. And like in all my film work so far as well as the films I plan to make, I see this fundamentally as a conversation with the country in which the film is made, and with the original peoples of those areas. My films have been and will continue to be an articulation of a shared, ancient worldview that is in every way still relevant, and increasingly so. In this way, I see community collaboration in film as a part of the way in which we search for and validate our cultural and personal relevance as Indigenous peoples; a process of demystifying and decolonising the filmmaking process so that it can become a viable and sustainable storytelling option for the community and individuals involved.

[1] See *New Zealand OnScreen*: “Merata Mita (Director, Writer, Producer [Ngāti Pikiao, Ngāi Te Rangi]). 1942-2010. A passionate advocate for Māori creative control, late director Merata Mita documented some of the most controversial events of Aotearoa [New Zealand’s] last fifty years. Mita’s work includes *Patu!*, a documentary on the 1981 Springbok tour. Her 1988 drama *Mauri* remains only the second fiction feature directed by a Māori woman”. <http://www.nzonscreen.com/person/merata-mita> (accessed 22 May, 2011).

## About the Author

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Dr Romaine Moreton specialises in Indigenous philosophy and knowledge with a focus on media technology and communication, informed by her experience as a filmmaker and performance artist. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Umuilikko Higher Education Research Centre, The University of Newcastle. She has published on Australian Indigenous film in "Artlink Magazine" and "Interventions: International Journal of Post-Colonial Studies". Her most recent short film "The Farm" was screened on ABC TV in 2009 in their "New Blak" series. [View all posts by Romaine Moreton →](#)

