Figure 1. Darlene Johnson, writer and director, *Crocodile Dreaming* (Australia, 2006)

Between Worlds: Indigenous Identity and Difference in the Films of Darlene Johnson

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Australian Indigenous writer and director Darlene Johnson's biographical documentary *River of No Return* (Australia, 2008) tells the story of Frances Djulibing Daingangan, a Yolngu woman from a small and extremely remote Indigenous community in Arnhem Land in Northern Australia.[1] At age forty-five, Daingangan was selected by Rolf de Heer to play the lead female role of Nowalingu in his arthouse hit *Ten Canoes* (Australia, 2006), codirected by Peter Djigirr and made in collaboration with the Indigenous community in Ramingining. Johnson's film documents Daingangan's life as she attempts to continue to pursue an acting career. It opens with a dreamlike image of the swirling motion of a spinning dancer: a young Yolngu girl in a pink party dress scored by the distinctive sound of Marilyn Monroe's singing "I Wanna Be Loved by You" from Billy Wilder's classic Hollywood farce *Some Like It Hot* (US, 1959). As the dance

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slows and the girl's features become clearer, Daingangan begins her voice-over narration: "As a child I always wanted to become an actress, just like Marilyn Monroe. But I was told it was ridiculous for a Yolngu girl to have such dreams, such fantasies." A close-up of the girl looking bewildered dissolves to a medium shot of Daingangan as she appeared in her role as Nowalingu in *Ten Canoes*, with her naked breasts decorated with the distinctive white clay markings of traditional Yolngu ceremonies. Here, however, Daingangan is not playing the role of an ancient Yolngu ancestor as she did in *Ten Canoes*. Rather, by affectionately emulating her movie idol in a soft, unaccompanied delivery of Monroe's signature song, she proves that far from being "ridiculous," her childhood dream of being an actress who can play any role she chooses has indeed come true.

This opening sequence from *River of No Return* cleverly dramatizes a long history of female film spectatorship through its figuration of Daingangan as a child caught in the reveries of wish fulfillment. As the story unfolds, the film becomes a testament to the ways in which the cinema can change the course of people's lives. It is also a vivid example of how Indigenous filmmakers are using film in highly inventive ways to expose the enormous social gap between Aboriginal communities—especially those located in rural and remote areas—and the wider Australian community. By bringing contemporary Indigenous culture and Hollywood cinema together in this intimate scene of mimetic performance, Johnson's film opens the way for a woman-centered perspective on the complexity of Australian Indigenous film as it emerges from the intersecting histories of colonialism and the cinema and the interplay of local and global cultures.

As Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin have observed, studies of Indigenous media have been " 'haunted' by the question of whether minority or dominated subjects can assimilate media to their own cultural and political concerns or are inevitably compromised by its presence."[2] As Australia's most prominent Indigenous documentary maker, Johnson is part of a group that Ginsburg describes as "a young Aboriginal cultural elite engaged in constituting a vital Aboriginal modernity through a

variety of media, including music, visual arts, film, and drama."[3] Most recently, this work has included a wave of feature films that present a new set of questions about the status of Indigenous media in the Australian imagination.

The films in this new "Blak Wave" have been widely celebrated and critically lauded: *Samson and Delilah* (dir. Warwick Thornton, Australia, 2009) received the Caméra d'Or at Cannes, *Bran Nue Dae* (dir. Rachel Perkins, Australia, 2009) won the People's Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival, *Toomelah* (dir. Ivan Sen, Australia, 2011) was honored with the UNESCO Award at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards, and *The Sapphires* (dir. Wayne Blair, Australia, 2012) swept the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Awards.[4] *The Sapphires*, a feel-good musical about an Aboriginal girl group from the 1960s, took in AU$2.3 million in its opening weekend and went on to become only the fifth Australian film in the past five years to gross more than AU$10 million at the local box office.[5] The Weinstein Company rolled it out globally, and it spent several weekends among the top twenty films in the US.[6] The commercial success of this and several other recent Indigenous features overturns the local industry myth that "stories with indigenous themes were box-office poison."[7] It is also transforming the status of Indigenous filmmaking in the industry. As Sandra Levy, chief executive of the Australian Film, Television, and Radio School, recently claimed, "Indigenous screen practitioners have become a force to be reckoned with. . . . [They] are now firmly at the heart of contemporary screen practice."[8]

Yet while there is much to celebrate about this new wave of Indigenous features, there are some concerns about the marketing and popular discussion that surrounds it, namely the claim that Indigenous film is novel. The dominant national funding body, Screen Australia (formally the Australian Film Commission), continuously searches for new ways to make Australian cinema distinctive and competitive in the international market. This approach has played and continues to play a major role in the formation of this cinema's recognizable cycles: the quirky comedies of the 1990s, the reconciliation cycle of the 2000s, and the post–*Wolf Creek* (dir. Greg McLean, Australia, 2005) horror