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## Filmmaking and Worldmaking: An Interview with the Karrabing Film Collective

FROM THE SERIES: [Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams](#)



Film still from *Wutharr, Saltwater Dreams*, directed by Karrabing Film Collective.

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In November 2020, we invited Elizabeth Povinelli and the Karrabing Film Collective to do an interview on their work for the Screening Room. Our invitation reached Povinelli in Belyuen, Australia, where the Karrabing members had recently reunited. We are pleased to present this interview with the collective, facilitated by Elizabeth Povinelli.

**Daniel Fisher:** The Karrabing has its immediate origins in the community tensions and violence that forced the Karrabing members out of Belyuen in 2007 (events that the Karrabing recount and reflect on in a short video *The Riot*, also featured in this series). How has the Karrabing's success impacted their everyday lives and relations in Darwin and in Belyuen? More broadly, how has the attention your films have received affected how and where members of the Karrabing live now?

**Karrabing Film Collective:** Yes, Karrabing began in the midst of two forms of settler governance, each of which created significant riffs and quakes within indigenous communities such as Belyuen. Belyuen was established as the Delissaville settlement in the late 1930s as part of the effort of the Northern Territory to remove Indigenous people from coastal regions on the Cox Peninsula (see our

*Night Time Go*, 2017). These beaches, situated right across from the city of Darwin, were considered strategic areas for military and economic expansion. The establishment of Delissaville was part of a longer, broader strategy of the annihilation and then forced assimilation of Indigenous people. Land rights protests throughout the 1950s and 60s led to the first significant piece of land rights legislation in Australia—the Aboriginal Land Right (Northern Territory) Act, 1976. For its supporters, the act provided a means by which Indigenous people could reclaim their traditional lands. But for critics, the act insinuated Western proprietary logics and geontological relations into the politics of recognition. Rex Edmunds and Linda Yarrowin are referring to these colonial histories and proprietary logics in *The Riot*. The short film tells the story of how these liberal divisions of recognition were amplified and accelerated by extractive capitalism and neoliberal governance in the wake of the Great Recession and how they led to the creation of Karrabing. In *The Riot*, Rex and Linda emphasize that while they have their “roan roan” (family-based) languages, lands, and totems, these are not kept in place by anything resembling a Western imaginary of the sovereign self and its property, but by the underlying ecological, historical, and totemic connections that created the differences between lands and languages and that keep these differences in place and in relation to each other. Karrabing was established to provide a framework for a counter-practice that is based neither on Western imaginaries of sovereignty nor Western imaginaries of the property free savage, but on Karrabing understandings of the connectivities that created and joins their differences.

We have been asked various versions of the question of how filmmaking has impacted people’s lives. Again, as *The Riot* notes, Karrabing began when the thirty-odd founding members—other than me—were made homeless after a violent clash caused by settler modes of recognition and dispossession. Thus to answer your question, the most immediate outcome is that no one is homeless anymore and most people have returned to Belyuen. More expansively, nearly all Karrabing refer to the impact that our filmmaking has made on the expansion and depth of knowledge and attachment to their lands and totemic truths. In a Q&A at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, Angelina Lewis described the tenuous condition of knowledge prior to *The Riot* and the creation of Karrabing, and of the powerful expansion of it afterward. Other members point to leadership roles senior Karrabing now take in the Belyuen community and in other Indigenous agencies. A more general if diffused sense of worth and agency is also an outcome. But everyone also reminds those who ask that they should not project some magical qualities onto Karrabing practices. The unrelenting nature of settler colonialism isn’t magically overcome even by the most successful of social projects such as Karrabing. What Karrabing does is keep in place an otherwise to the deadening dialect of the self and other—to enjoy moments and spaces of their expansive analytics of world and world-making even as they stubbornly refuse to give way to the narrative of inevitable cultural loss and decline.

**Daniel Fisher and Aidan Seale-Feldman:** Can you tell us about the collective’s process and approach to filmmaking? The Karrabing’s video work started with a short film, coproduced by Liza Johnson (*Low Tide Turning*, 2012). From then on, the Karrabing have worked independently, using mobile phones as cameras. What changed when you started working with mobile phones? Did working in this way allow or require a different approach?

**KFC:** The concept of Karrabing began on a beach at the edge of Anson Bay during the early period of homelessness I (Elizabeth Povinelli) mentioned above, sometime around 2009. On a particularly depressing day, Linda Yarrowin built on another member’s desire to be a movie star—Trevor Bianamu—and suggested we make a little movie about what their world was like, as neither living in the bush nor the city was possible. The question was immediately what kind of movie—should we just get a camcorder and start shooting? No one wanted this. They wanted to make a “proper film” and act out their story. I was charged with finding someone I knew to show us how. Liza Johnson and I had known each other for a few years by then. She had just completed a series of wonderful short films—*South of Ten* (2006), *In the Air* (2009)—so she generously agreed to come over and meet everyone, walk us through a craft workshop, and then codirect the short *Low Tide Turning* that was then repurposed as a part of *When the Dogs Talked* (2014). We also brought over the amazing filmmaker and editor David Barker (*Shirley*, 2020; *The Edge of Democracy*, 2019; *White Sun*, 2016) who led the edit of *When the Dogs Talked* and *Windjarrameru* as I learned editing from him. These first two films also had a non-Karrabing cinematographer and sound recordist. Johnson and Barker were invaluable to our understanding of film as craft, but also to our understanding of the disciplines that have grown into this craft, disciplines we very quickly realized we wanted no part of—production schedules, character psychology, Western narrative logics including assumptions about materiality and time. All this led to our shift from shooting with people outside the group and shooting with large cumbersome equipment to shooting from iPhones and hand-held sound recorders.

The changes were numerous. The schedule of films altered, sinking into the actual rhythms of people's lives. So, a film's core might be shot across a few days of consecutive shooting, the rest emerges whenever there is someone around and willing to do it. It also means that not only are the stories collective—someone comes up with a core idea that others add on to—but so is the cinematography and sound-recording. Because we are shooting with one to three iPhones, anyone there might be taking the shots. And anyone might be doing the sound recording. I remain the lead editor, showing drafts as the work goes along. But we don't shoot tons and tons and then "find the film." Indeed, we don't have a lot of clips lying unused. I think we are much looser acting in front of each other than in front of non-Karrabing. We've grown up together. We live together, raise kids together, hunt together, fight together, laugh, et cetera. So, acting together is just another thing we do together. As we say, how are we going to be ashamed of acting when we've seen each other in every sort of situation.

**ASF:** Elsewhere you have described Karrabing films as "improvisational realism." What is the role of staging and improvisation in this work?

**KFC:** Because we have grown up together, we are creating stories out of experiences that we have all shared. Sometimes literally—*Wutharr*, *Saltwater Dreams* (2016), is a story based on a boat trip that all of us were on. We've watched the cops stalk community members, miners destroy land, government agencies crush spirits, and Indigenous people refuse to abide the terms underlying these acts of aggression. Thus all the films are outcomes of real experiences, but we improvise a story around them. More specifically, someone will come up with a story—the broken boat, stolen alcohol, a jealous man, a young man wishing to learn about his country—and others then twist it this way or that either before we start or as we are shooting. There is no script. There isn't even some set meeting in which we agree about the plot. We just start and our shared experiences and improvised acting and dialogue take us to what becomes the end. We look back and say, that's so true.

**DF:** What has surprised you in the short history of making these films? Are there outcomes, entailments, or consequences of this collective project that stand out to you as exceptional, unanticipated, or surprising?

**KFC:** I think we are all surprised that, on the one hand, our films have been so well-received and on the other hand, that the real purpose of the filmmaking, a deepening of knowledge and attachment to ancestral lands, has worked.

**ASF:** In an essay on the work of the Karrabing Collective, Tess Lea and Elizabeth Povinelli (2018, 42) write that "film enables a way of being together that is otherwise strangled." Can you talk more about the forms of sociality and ways of being together that this collective project has actualized, and how that might be connected to the medium of film itself?

**KFC:** I often delink the film itself from the ends of filmmaking—not a film but a way of life, a way of deepening, thinking, and expanding memories and practices of relating Karrabing believe proper. But the medium of film, or maybe the film as a textual artifact of these interactional texts, is crucial to these same interactional practices. The way digital manipulation of the film allows us to montage past and present and future images into one frame and then manipulate their relation to each other is a crucial part of making and seeing Karrabing analytics of time and place. Likewise, edit programs not only provide a means of visually staging and then intervening in time, but also jump cuts, dramatically or subtly speeding up or slowing down a shot so we can probe the materiality being shown on the surface of the film. And, of course, the ease of copying and playing back films is crucial. We keep our films behind a firewall in large part because we derive significant enough income from them, in part because having had so much stolen from them it seems right not to chuck their films into the bonfire of dispossession. Among ourselves, however, the films pass around on thumb drives. Watching and rewatching the films provide a way of reinforcing memory—listening to what various people said; to how sounds are related to forms to provide keys to human and more than human meanings; and to the clues and passages and accumulations across the films as each adds and grows and diverges from the last.

**DF:** The Karrabing have recently travelled to the United States for screenings and exhibition at MoMA's PS1. En route you stopped at San Francisco's [Kadist gallery](#) for screenings and a very well-attended discussion. The films were well received and the audiences in attendance were open to learning from you what they might find in the films. What has this meant to the Karrabing? Do you

notice any significant differences in the kinds of audiences and questions you receive as the films travel outside of Australia?

**KFC:** Audiences have been remarkably generous and engaged inside and outside of Australia. We've received wonderful reviews of our films and gallery shows—and won a few nice awards. So, yes, everyone always loves an award!

We have also noticed the different kinds of questions that arise in different places. In southeast Asia and China, discussions of ancestral present are easier; we are able to discuss the differences between how their ancestors live with them in the present and the way they live with us. In Australia in general, the notion of the Dreaming (totemic landscape) is fairly ubiquitous, but it can also get in the way depending on the composition of the audience. Not surprisingly, more rural and northern Indigenous audiences have a more direct relationship to their more-than-human ancestral beings and lands and the constant governmental and capitalist interruptions, and maybe, we think, the Karrabing humor is more resonant and less anxiety producing than in the large cities. But the framework of settler colonialism is in the forefront throughout Australia. Europe is fascinating because of the different relations member states have to colonialism and racism. The history of African enslavement and settler colonialism provides an entirely different set of problematics. In Australia, settler colonial logics of race were inverted—one drop of white blood made an Indigenous person liable to forcible removal from their family so that the Aboriginality could be literally bred out of them—a policy begun by A. O. Neville, the so-called Protector of Aborigines for Western Australia in the 1930s. Whereas, where I was raised, Louisiana, one drop of Black blood made you Black. All these conversations are fascinating—lending different interpretative frames onto the films.

**DF:** At Kadist, several of your younger members were preparing for a visit to a music studio on their arrival in New York. This foregrounded for some of us in attendance the multiple media forms that the Karrabing engage in their collective work, from video and music to museum exhibition and your earlier interests in geolocation and digital archives. Can you talk about the different media and different arenas into which the Karrabing's work has moved?

**KFC:** Yes, we worked with our friend and collaborator, Thomas Bartlett, on the songs for *Day in the Life*, 2020. Karrabing member Kieran Sing led us in composing and recording, indeed was the inspiration for, *Day in the Life* even as he insists that each of its parts emerged—and they did—from the member it was based on. In any case, yes, we have slowly expanded from film to installation works and sound design for our gallery screenings, although this is nearly impossible during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

I should emphasize that Karrabing has always been oriented not to film and art per se but for the energy it lends to what I mentioned above, namely the underlying ecological, historical, and totemic connections that created the differences between lands and languages and that keep these differences in place and in relation to each other. Thus, Karrabing is a land-based project in film's clothing. We use the money we make to build and sustain relations to place. For instance, we are using the Australian Commonwealth Indigenous Language and Arts Program to complete a film and arts project for the ancestors on the south side of Anson Bay, the lands of many of the group. What does "film and art for ancestors" mean? We are not sure other than that we are building an outstation that will install films and artworks in the bush for the totemic beings and ancestors in the land to view. We think this will sustain them and thus Karrabing.

**DF:** What comes next for the Karrabing?

**KFC:** We are completing a zombie flick, commissioned among others by the Serpentine Gallery, London, the Australian Commonwealth Indigenous Language and Arts Program, and E-Werks, Luckenwalde.

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