CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Openings and Retrospectives

GENERATIVE HOPE IN THE POSTAPOCALYPTIC PRESENT

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> The Native Apocalypse, if contemplated seriously, has already taken place.
>
> —Grace Dillon

> I grew up hard, me. I've been through hell. I've faced the worst, tough people in my time, but I stood my ground.
>
> —Dunba Nunju (Walmajarri)

We live in an era increasingly defined by apocalyptic rhetoric, from the seeming inevitability of climate change to conflict in the Middle East, from the specter of deregulation-induced global financial collapse to populism fueled by unprecedented First World income inequality and political distrust. Despite its Christian connotations, the concept of apocalypse serves a critical role in theorizing Indigenous futurity, uniquely capturing the world-altering histories of colonial brutality. Indigenous futures are not only vital for Aboriginal people; they also provide valuable insight into global challenges. In light of the widespread

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"apocalyptic turn" (Lynch 2012), it is essential that we pay thoughtful attention to those who have already lived through an apocalypse and are articulating generative hope in its aftermath. Indeed, with her formulation of explicitly plural "Indigenous futurisms," Grace Dillon (2012, 3) argues that the zenith of colonial damage lies in the past for many Indigenous peoples, even as it continues to manifest itself in the present. This analytic takes seriously that Indigenous people have long been positioned as the anachronistic foil to Western civilization, and too often remain temporally entrapped within mythic pasts and troubled presents. Building on Indigenous futurisms scholarship on Native science-fiction films (Lempert 2014; Medak-Saltzman 2017), I engage recent Indigenous Australian video projects that draw more subtly on futures to illustrate how and why they articulate generative hope in the postapocalyptic present.

Dystopia, a common sci-fi trope, represents an irredeemable end stage beyond all reasonable hope for justice. While dystopias serve as instructive morality plays and cautionary tales for sci-fi audiences, dystopian ethnographic depictions may unintentionally serve to reinforce the dispossession of Indigenous futures. We should therefore remain particularly mindful of the deeper implications of "dark" anthropological representations that imply inevitable cultural demise (see Ortner 2016). In contrast to dystopia, the postapocalyptic present proceeds from a place of beginnings, in which the apocalyptic informs the past and present yet does not foreclose future possibilities.

Ahistorical idealism, an inversion of dystopianism, is also deeply fraught. For example, many fly-in, fly-out visitors with whom I interacted in Aboriginal communities explicitly sought to "help" Aboriginal people, which locals often interpreted as implying an inherent superiority. While they certainly had good intentions, some professionals who might be described as "well-meaning, White, left-wing, [and] middle-class" (Kowal 2015, 35) exacerbated matters, wavering between conflicting desires for Aboriginal equality and difference without a serious consideration of settler-colonial history. Like dystopianism, this idealistic approach often abets assimilation by reifying "suffering slots," thus dispossessing Indigenous futures and fostering imaginaries of a degenerative sociality for doomed and defeated victims. Such subtle yet crucial distinctions inform the nature of hope. In the face of inevitable cultural destruction, the best that can be achieved is something akin to Jonathan Lear's (2006) "radical hope." Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism" pushes this cautionary sensibility further, noting instances in which attachments to impossible goals for a good life become coun-

terproductive. However, this was not what I generally encountered during my years of ethnographic research.

In Aboriginal communities, people alternately expressed what I describe as *generative hope*. This is hope with grit, hope that neither avoids the history of colonial dispossession nor has been rendered misanthropic by it. By furthering the specificity of hope, this analytic aims to help address hope's relative underdevelopment in social science research due to its perceived ambiguity, despite hope's central role in how desire becomes projected into the future and "always invokes an ever further horizon" (Crapanzano 2003, 10). Following Eve Tuck's (2009, 417) call for research that decenters damage in favor of desire, generative hope is "involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore . . . about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future." This hopeful sensibility becomes particularly apparent during the imaginative process of filmmaking, and the diversity of its expressions reflects the multiplicity of Aboriginal Australian experiences. These include whether or not an individual lived through contact, was abducted from their family to attend boarding school, worked at Christian missions or cattle stations, or came of age in urban areas. Echoing Hirokazu Miyazaki's (2004) "method of hope," Melinda Hinkson (2010, 321) describes the ascent of Aboriginal film production itself as a "politics of hope," which transcends vacillation between positive and negative media caricatures, both of which "position Aboriginal culture as an object that functions or fails according to its own logic," while concealing the entangled complexities of enduring settler-colonial structural violence.

It is in their interrelationship that generative hope and the postapocalyptic present become greater than the sum of their parts, a dialectic that defies synthesis due to its pairing of theses that make up two opposing sides of the same existential coin. This intertwining is the site of a key temporal configuration, in which mediations of optimistic futures are rooted in a present that foregrounds past yet enduring legacies of colonial brutality. For anthropologists, this grounding reaffirms the need for vigilance against seductive desires for resolution and the undoing of damage that cannot be undone; it encourages both cautious optimism and the amplification of local visions for the future that seek to expand Indigenous possibility. Coupled, generative hope and the postapocalyptic present evoke a perpetually unsettled tension that aptly aligns with the paradoxical and erratic settler-colonial realities within which Aboriginal people live their lives.

Since hope is a sensibility that tends to come into existence through action, collaborative media production provides a powerful process through which an-

thropologists can engage Indigenous futurity both theoretically and methodologically. While analyzing completed projects provides insight into the meaning and impact of films, it is in the daily practices of media production that the political and representational stakes of Indigeneity are actively negotiated and imagined. Indeed, these films are not simply *communicating* visions of the future; they are also collectively *producing* them.

DUNBA

I first met Dunba Nunju during a 2015 film project through Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media (PAKAM), which was funded by and screened on National Indigenous Television. Collaborating with Henry Augustine (2015), a PAKAM media worker, I traveled with Dunba along the Indian Ocean coast near his community of Beagle Bay in North West Australia, delving into his life story as we visited sites from the iconic pearl-shell church that he helped construct to his favorite fishing spots along the beach. Over several days, Dunba's quiet and humble personality gave way to intimate and expansive stories that expressed an enduring optimism despite unimaginable heartbreak and hardship, which began when he was removed from his mother, who had contracted leprosy, and was placed in the Beagle Bay Mission far from his Walmajarri Country, family, and language.

Video 1. Excerpt from *Dunba* (2015).
Video courtesy of Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media.

Dunba begins the film by asserting: "I grew up hard, me. I've been through hell. I've faced the worst, tough people in my time, *but I stood my ground*." Dunba emphasizes these last five words, which inform his hopeful outlook in spite of the hell that he describes having endured. He shares many of the experiences of his generation and embodies the future-oriented hope following tragedy that this essay aims to elucidate.

Video 2. Excerpt from *Dunba* (2015).
Video courtesy of Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media.

In the conclusion of our film, Dunba calls for youth to spend more time on Country to avoid substance abuse, speaks to the power of forgiveness (which does not imply forgetting) in moving forward unburdened by anger, and reflects on the voices of family members that continue to guide him, as well as on how his own voice will endure within his children.

THE STAKES OF MEDIATION

It is not surprising that for Dunba, the future is synonymous with younger generations. This theme emerged as prominent in many of our projects, including *For Young Futures* (Young and Lempert 2015), a short PAKAM production shot outside the Aboriginal community of Balgo in the Great Sandy Desert. I collaborated on this film with two community members, David "Shorty" Young and Allison Gill, who, like Dunba and Henry, had a clear vision and passion for the film years before shooting began. Shorty and Allison were also similarly focused on the importance of extended family in supporting new generations (personified

in their young son Eli, who is featured throughout the film), guiding youth to avoid drugs and, as Shorty narrates in the film, "to look at the good future in the front" so that "moms and dads, aunties, uncles, grandmas, and grandpas might be a proud family."

Video 3. Excerpt from *For Young Futures* (2015).
Video courtesy of Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media.

While both *Dunba* and *For Young Futures* address concerns about substance abuse, they are far from antidrug public service announcements; they frame the use of alcohol and drugs as an effect rather than a cause, as self-medication for coping with the disconnection from family and Country wrought by enduring settler-colonial legacies. Accordingly, their messages regarding addiction focus on strengthening these bonds, rather than on rehab or on the substances themselves. They remain optimistically oriented toward a generative hope for kinship futures on Country, emphasizing connection to family and place as the proper path for living a good life.

Such representations of generative hope contrast starkly with dominant depictions of Aboriginal people. One evening after a day of filming, Shorty and I turned on a much-anticipated episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's flagship documentary TV series *Four Corners*, which featured remote communities in the region. As we watched the episode, entitled "Remote Hope" (Everett 2015)—a title that was quickly revealed to imply that hope itself is remote—our feelings turned from excitement to frustration as an opening line of voiceover narration declared that "these dysfunctional communities have the

most depressing living conditions imaginable. They are a disgrace to Australia and all those who have a prosperous way of life." While the episode presented itself as a balanced debate on the future of Australia's remote Indigenous communities, the narrator described these communities as "blighted by grinding poverty, with few job opportunities, chronic alcohol and drug abuse and, in some cases, endemic sexual and physical violence, including against children." Accompanied by ominous soundscapes, these morose narratives continued throughout the episode's forty-four minutes, and although film crews had spent mere hours in the communities, the joyless program was framed through distorted and often disproven accusations made by governmental representatives. While fault was disputed, the overall message was unambiguous: remote Aboriginal communities are miserable and futureless.

Such dystopian representations carry high real-world stakes for Aboriginal people. In the wake of the (euphemistically named) Indigenous Advancement Strategy—which, in 2014, cut about 40 percent of total funding for Aboriginal organizations—this broadcast aired at the height of a nationally polarizing debate around Western Australia's plans to defund more than half of the state's 274 Aboriginal communities, which is in practice tantamount to closing them. So far, wide-scale protests of these plans have proven instrumental in forestalling their implementation.

Although there certainly are instances of despair in Aboriginal communities, dominant deficit-discourse representations and corresponding policy rhetoric are

Video 4. *Luurnpa Cliff Side* (2014). Video courtesy of Indigenous Hip Hop Projects.

not representative of the sanguine register that tends to characterize everyday community life and engagements with the future. The dystopian vision of Aboriginal communities that "Remote Hope" expressed seemed to bear little resemblance to reality, and the program stood in stark contrast to a collaborative, youth-focused hip-hop music video titled *Luurnpa Cliff Side* (Balgo Community 2014), which the community members whom I spoke with agreed captured the affect of Balgo and the challenges it faces. In the video, a young man declares: "We are the present, we are the future."

The seeming paradox of joy amid hardship in Aboriginal communities remains difficult for most Australians to imagine, let alone see. Yet it is essential that they do; as the only major settler-colonial state lacking Indigenous treaties and sovereign nationhood, Australia is a country in which the public imagination has a significant influence on Aboriginal policy decisions. This vulnerable, yet highly visible, political reality positions Australia as a key site for mediating generative hope *in* the postapocalyptic present and *for* Indigenous futures. More broadly, this dialectic informs a fundamental dynamic in the self-representation of Indigenous people across the globe who share histories of settler-colonial dispossession and erasure.

ANTHROPOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE AND THE FUTURE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

> What kind of duty does the anthropologist have to engage [the] future as a social phenomenon of the present but also as a potential key for the future that opens up possibilities we may not yet have thought of?
>
> —David Valentine

While anthropologists are increasingly engaging with the future (Collins 2008; Valentine 2012; Appadurai 2013; Salazar et al. 2017), the relative lack of work on *Indigenous* futurity suggests the continued temporal slotting of Aboriginal people into savage pasts and suffering presents (see Ginsburg and Myers 2006; Bessire 2011). Indigenous media production helps to establish not only visual (see Raheja 2011) but also temporal sovereignty from the colonial imposition of "settler time" (Rifkin 2017). Such projects provide immersive platforms for addressing the structural silencing of Aboriginal futures through critical mediations on *how* and, just as importantly, *when* Indigenous people are imagined. They also resist overemphasizing radical ontological/temporal difference, which can serve to de-

politicize a key intervention: disrupting the colonial logics of futurity by which dispossession becomes enacted.

Film provides an ideal form for mediating Indigenous futurisms because of its ability to transcend the temporal and ideological limits of written language through accessible, imaginative, and corporeal world-making (MacDougall 2006). As Jean Rouch (2003, 185) proclaimed, the ciné-ethnographic "art of the double, is already the transition from the real world to the imaginary world, and ethnography, the science of the thought systems of others, is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another; acrobatic gymnastics, where losing one's footing is the least of the risks." I would add that Rouch's analysis proves even more relevant for future-oriented Indigenous films, which provide crossing points between immemorial and apocalyptic pasts, hopeful and somber presents, and ambiguous and sovereign futures, in which *imagining* too expansively is the least of risks.

Furthermore, taking futurity seriously can provoke fundamental interventions within anthropology itself. It affords opportunities not only to reimagine ethnographic projects via futures but also to reflect such critical inquiries back onto the discipline. When considering the cycles of anthropological trends and turns, we might ask: What are we turning *away* from, why, and from a broader temporal perspective, to what ends? While we often frame arguments in opposition to past disciplinary missteps, it would be productive to also ask: What do we want anthropology to be and do decades and centuries from now, and what are our own roles in materializing such disciplinary futures? Furthermore, how might those living in these distant futures look back on the current anthropological era and our own projects? Standing at the dawn of the apocalyptic Anthropocene, what types of new insights and perspectives might we gain if we sought not only to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange but also the present future and the future present?

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