

Samson & Delilah Revisited

Jacinta Bailey

Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009) is an unnerving and brutal portrayal of a rural Australian reality; one that we can no longer simply ignore.

Amidst the governments failing targets to 'close the gap' for Aboriginal Australians, Thornton's 2009 film has a newfangled relevance within public consciousness. *Samson and Delilah* is much more than an adolescent romance; it is a stark contrast of Australian pride and failures, a bleak and truthful demonstration of where systematic government failure has led, and, a simultaneous celebration of the survival and resilience of the Aboriginal peoples.

The 'unspoken emotion' that pulses through the film, speaks deeply of the complexities and structural disadvantages facing those in rural communities, where Aboriginal Australians are disproportionately affected (Shannon 2016). The absence of local opportunities, abusive or unstable home lives and a lack of support networks underpin adverse circumstances of homelessness, drug addiction and sexual and violent victimisation for the teens (Browne-Yung et al. 2016). Fortunately, amidst all of these harrowing circumstances Samson and Delilah emerge as survivors. And, in a shameful context that sees Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander youth as three times more likely than non-indigenous Australians to die between the ages of 15-25 years (ABS 2011), it is a true triumph.

This film resonates with so many of the 'cultural and non-cultural drivers', such as substance abuse, that the media and the public largely like to ignore, preferring to blame the Aboriginal community for their problematic situations (Browne-Yung et al. 2016 p.4). Yet in a context where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons account for 25% of homelessness in Australia (making up 42% of those under 18), while only constituting a mere 3% of the population (AIHW 2014; ABS 2012), Thornton's work illustrates something that many Australians are perhaps too afraid to admit. As Browne-yung et al. (2016) highlight, the implications of colonisation are still ever- present in our social issues today, as the long history of discriminatory government policies, both on state and federal level, have directly effected Aboriginal peoples and their communities (Goodall 1995;



Copyright 2018 by the author. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Browne-Yung et al. 2016). Samson and Delilah experience drug abuse, family and community related violence, sexual violence, exploitation, a lack of support networks, negative social stigma and homelessness, as a devastating product of the racist rhetoric that has negotiated Aboriginal identity since colonisation (Browne-yung et al. 2016; Shembri 2009; Goodall 1995). In many ways Thornton's work can be seen as a modern-day sequel of the critically acclaimed *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce 2002), a further exploration and commentary of where such racialised policies have led Aboriginal peoples and their communities (Goodall 1995).

Rabbit Proof Fence was striking in its horrifyingly truthful account of three girls whom experienced the harsh realities of the Stolen Generation (Noyce 2002), a shameful truth of Australian history that sought to desocialise and deny Aboriginal children from 'their rightful cultural inheritance' (Reed 2002 p.57). Both films share common themes of community and identity; the importance of engaging with and salvaging 'Aboriginality' (Attwood 2001 p.7), alongside the struggles of community breakdown (Mayer 2010). But rather than a historical account, *Samson and Delilah* is a product of now, a reality of our failures to eliminate the stigma towards, and disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. However, when Thornton created this film it was not targeted towards non-indigenous Australians, rather Thornton envisioned this film as an encouragement to Aboriginal peoples, 'to re-engage with traditions of collective responsibility' (Mayer, 2010), which is perhaps what makes it such a powerful masterpiece.

Further than just seeking to engage the Aboriginal community as active in change, *Samson and Delilah* also rejects the paradigm of passive, 'welfare dependent' Aborigines who don't want to 'help themselves' (Curchin 2016). Rather, these characters are fuelled by a desire to improve their situation, fleeing to the city in an attempt to escape the lack of opportunities within their home communities. Reaching the city, Thornton shows us the other side; changing our focus from their harsh reality to something as disheartening as it is shameful, the white Australians' reaction to these at-risk teens.

Australians disgraceful stigma towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has perhaps never been represented so beautifully as in Thornton's work. Arriving to the city, the teens become abject bodies in the eyes of the city dwellers, a mix of fear, disapproval or indifference registers in the faces Samson and Delilah pass, but not one of these strangers offers help. Instead, Thornton has chosen other members of the Aboriginal community, namely Samson's brother and Gonzo, a homeless man they meet along their journey, as the kids' helpers. However this decision raises a deeper question, was this merely a stylistic choice, in keeping with Thornton's vision of *Samson and Delilah* as a call towards the Aboriginal community to re-engage with 'collective responsibility' (Thornton in Mayer 2010), or rather, is this a harsh reality of the Australian mentality. Thornton's film is an important lesson for all Australians on many levels, not only does it humanise these people, their issues and their struggles in a social backdrop of blame and disapproval, but it also has shown us where we are falling short in combatting this inequality; the solution is in community involvement (Moran 2016; Robinson 2016; Mayer 2010).

While the targets of the long running 'Close the Gap' campaign are well intentioned, the large failure to focus on Indigenous participation and advise, particularly in developing community based approaches, seems somewhat reminiscent of the 'protection' discourses of the twentieth century (Goodall 1995).

Simply, if we are eleven years into this campaign and still not seeing results, then maybe it's time to accept that our model isn't working (Robinson 2016; Grattan 2015; Karvelas 2015; Moran 2016). Patrick Dodson echoes this sentiment, calling for politicians to put a new plan on the table that enables indigenous participation to take place, 'Without that, the ideas around improving the quality of life for Indigenous peoples are going to be fraught with difficulty' (Dodson in Robinson 2016).

We need a re-shift in how we think about policy towards indigenous issues (Robinson 2016; Mayer 2010). While Thornton's film started a real conversation surrounding indigenous struggles and solutions, it's time to see that reflected in political decision making. We must step away from an assumption that these peoples and communities need our intervention and instead must ask what resources we can give to help re-build community and support networks alongside indigenous peoples. If the government is truly serious about 'Closing the Gap' between indigenous and non-indigenous health and life expectancy then we need to listen to communities and Aboriginal voices about what the real issues are, only then can real solutions and progress be reached.

References

ABS 2011. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Wellbeing: A focus on children and Youth', *Australian Bureau of Statistics*.

ABS 2012 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population estimates, 2011 - preliminary', *Australian Bureau of Statistics*.

AIHW (Authoritative Information and Statistics to promote better health and wellbeing) 2014. 'Homelessness among Indigenous Australians: Summary', Cat. no. IHW 133. Canberra: AIHW. Viewed 21 April 2017 <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129548064>.

Attwood, B. 2001 'Learning about the truth'. The stolen generations narrative', in B. Attwood & F. Magowan (eds), *Telling Stories. Indigenous history and memory in Australia and New Zealand*, Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, pp.183-212.

Browne-Yung, K., Ziersch, A., Baum, F. & Gallaher, G. 2016 'When you sleep on a park bench, you sleep with your ears open and one eye open', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*. Vol 2

Curchin, K. 2016. 'From the moral limits of Markets to the Moral limits of Welfare', *Journal of Social Policy*. Vol 45, Issue 01, pp.101-118. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0047279415000501>

Mayer, S. 2010 'The Ties that Bind', *Sight and Sound*, Vol.20 Issue 4, p30

Goodall, H. 1995, 'New South Wales' in A.McGrath (ed) *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen &Unwin, pp55-120.

Grattan, M. 2015 'Australia falling down on progress to close the gap for Indigenous people', *The Conversation*, viewed 20th April 2017 <https://theconversation.com/australia-falling-down-on-progress-to-close-the-gap-for-indigenous-people-37466>

Karvelas, P. 2016 'Closing the Gap: how are we getting it so wrong?', *ABC News*, viewed 20th April 2017 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-11/karvelas-closing-the-gap-how-are-we-getting-it-so-wrong/6086018>

Moran, M. 2016 'How community-based innovation can help Australia close the Indigenous gap', *The Conversation*, viewed 21st April 2017 <https://theconversation.com/how-community-based-innovation-can-help-australia-close-the-indigenous-gap-54907>

Noyce, P., et al. 2002. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Australian Film Finance Corp, Sydney, Australia

Robinson, N. 2016 'Closing the Gap 'doomed to fail' without more Indigenous input, activist Patrick Dodson says', *ABC News*, viewed 21st April 2017 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-09/closing-the-gap-doomed-to-fail-without-more-indigenous-input/7149442>

Schembri, J. 2009 'Tough-love story pulls no punches', *The Age*. viewed 19th April 2017 <http://www.theage.com.au/news/entertainment/film/film-reviews/toughlove-story-pulls-no-punches/2009/05/06/1241289243663.html>

Shannon, G. 2016 'Refugees in their own land: how Indigenous people are still homeless in modern Australia', *The Conversation*, viewed 20th April 2017 <https://theconversation.com/refugees-in-their-own-land-how-indigenous-people-are-still-homeless-in-modern-australia-55183>

Thornton, W. 2009. *Samson and Delilah*, CAAMA Productions, Australia



© 2018 by the author. This article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).