

Silver Screens, Red Earth: Aboriginal Identity, Digital Media Use, and Postcolonial Politics in Contemporary Australia

My research examines how Aboriginal Australians in northeast Arnhem Land use digital media technologies such as film and music to assert and construct their identity in light of the socio-cultural contexts of post colonialism. Venturing to a remote “homeland” community to help film a meeting between Yolngu Aboriginal elders and development officials with the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, I gained a unique insight regarding the purpose and politics of media use by indigenous people, as well as the tragic realities that Aboriginal people face with regards to the dominant Australian society. I worked with the Aboriginal Research and Development Services (ARDS,) a not-for-profit, post-missionary NGO that focuses on language and health issues, and with the Mulka Project, a digital media archive and production center operated out of the Buku Larrngay Mulka Arts Center, based in the Aboriginal community of Yirrkala, where I lived for three weeks. Both of these organizations work for and with indigenous Australians, attempting to “close the gap” between indigenous and non-indigenous people by utilizing the native languages, and by preserving and uplifting local indigenous culture. However, any attempt to look at the effects of these initiatives must take into account the many issues that Aboriginal Australians, and all indigenous populations face today such as drastically deficient health and education, as well as structural violence and deeply institutionalized racism from the dominant society. For two months I conducted ethnographic fieldwork all over the Australian continent, studying media use, racial politics in a post-colonial nation, and the conspicuous gap between “White” and “Black” Australia. While media use, production, and repatriation is alive and well in Aboriginal Australia, the pressing issues created by the realities of indigenous life in a post-colonial nation produce an environment which may hinder the intended effects of these well-meaning initiatives.