Screening anthropology and theology in Ten Canoes

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this article contains the names and images of people who have died.

Introduction

This edition of St Mark’s Review explores intersections between the disciplines of theology and anthropology. In this article I am proposing that the award-winning Australian film Ten Canoes (Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, 2006) provides a space where a rich interaction between theology and anthropology can take place. Part one provides an overview of Ten Canoes. Part two examines the dynamic use of Donald Thomson’s anthropological record in Ten Canoes along with perceptions of “Thomson time” off-screen and on-screen. Part three explores resonances between Ten Canoes and Willie James Jennings’ theology of creation. I conclude by arguing in part four that anthropology and theology have separate contributions to make in terms of the production history and interpretation of Ten Canoes; however, the film also provides a shared space of interaction for the two disciplines.

I am writing this article as a non-Indigenous theologian working within the Christian tradition. This means that I approach the theological discussion as an “insider” who is familiar with the language and frameworks used within theology. Conversely, I am an “outsider” when it comes to anthropological discourse. I am also an “outsider” in relation to the Yolngu knowledge, spirituality, and culture that are represented in Ten Canoes.
The theologian whom I have chosen as the conversation partner for this article, Willie James Jennings, describes the space where an outsider comes close to the language, traditions, and culture of another as “overhearing.” This posture involves approaching others with both respectful distance and an openness to joining when the invitation is given. Jennings contends that this posture is an inherent feature within the Christian tradition. He draws upon the precedent within Christianity where Gentile Christians approach the sacred texts, stories, and people of “biblical Israel” and “living Israel” as “second readers” who are invited into a story already in motion. Gentile Christians enter and commune inside “Israel’s house,” where new identities and ways of belonging are created. Jennings’ posture of “Gentile positionality” has implications in a range of contexts, including the relationships between First and Second peoples. Ten Canoes offers a cinematic encounter that schools Second Peoples in a posture of “overhearing,” as they are included as guests rather than hosts of the unfolding story, with much to learn along the way.

Part One: Ten Canoes

The collaborative film Ten Canoes broke new cinematic ground, with film scholar Therese Davis describing it as Australia’s “most ambitious and most expensive cross-cultural project to date.” Ten Canoes is a parable of forbidden love shot in and around the Arafura Wetlands in Arnhem Land, with a Yolngu cast including the iconic actor David Gulpilil as the voice-over Storyteller. Ten Canoes also features Gulpilil’s son Jamie Gulpilil in his debut performance playing the love-struck Dayindi, as well as Dayindi’s equally love-struck ancestral counterpart, Yeeralparil. Yeeralparil’s story unfolds simultaneously alongside Dayindi’s to instruct him in the proper way to live. The overall narrative interweaves these two separate plotlines. Ten Canoes is the first feature film to be made entirely in Australian Indigenous languages, in this case languages from within the Yolngu Matha language group, mainly Ganalbingu and Mandalpingu. Humour is interspersed with vivid scenes mediating ceremony, law, and connection to Country, adding a playful component to the film that disrupts viewer expectations that this is going to be a serious, ethnographic film. A dynamic interplay between harmony and conflict is also conveyed. Pre-contact life is shown as harmonious in terms of relationship with land for the Yolngu storyteller. For example:
This land began in the beginning. Yurlunggur, the Great Water Goanna, he travelled here. Yurlunggur made all this land then. He made this water . . . and he made this swamp, that stretches long and gives us life. I come from this waterhole in this land Yurlunggur made.10

Yolngu law provides structure for relationships and the means for dealing with conflict when it arises. The landscape, Yolngu Matha languages and Yolngu people situate the story in a certain location. At the same time a universal story is being told where jealousy, gender relations and rash actions lead to implications for the individuals involved and for the community at large.

As inter-cultural cinema, Ten Canoes is an example of collaboration between Balanda director Rolf de Heer, Yolngu co-director Peter Djigirr and the community at Ramingining.11 Anne Rutherford’s film analysis uses the evocative metaphor of “an intercultural membrane” to denote the production process that shaped Ten Canoes.12 Cross-cultural negotiation, pragmatics and aesthetics all contributed to the final form of the film.13 Rolf de Heer describes part of the collaborative process as follows:

Rolf de Heer: My hopes were simply to end up with something that satisfied the desires of the mob, so to speak. And what the mob wanted was something that, this is my sort of parsing of it I guess, something that both played the cinemas of the world and was something that their children could look at to remember their culture. Playing the cinemas of the world, if I could say it in a better way, is to have something that people would go and see and would validate their culture. And so, the hope was that we could somehow end up with something that did that. And that satisfied them.

Katherine Rainger: And so, the process of writing Ten Canoes, how did that come about?

Rolf de Heer: That was a long and tricky process . . . It’s a film that I tried from the beginning to subsume myself as a filmmaker. I felt that I couldn’t afford to want . . . I sort of learnt early that it really had to be me being the agent
of them making a film . . . And they can’t make a film so I have to do more than an agent normally would but never forget where you are in this. At the same time, I knew that I had to provide all the glue and all the means by which they could do this. The writing process started off fairly simply. I turned up. I rang David and said “yeah all right then, let’s . . . make a film together with you and your mob up there.” And he said “ok come.” So, I came. We talked about what to do. What sort of film did they want and there were a few other people involved. They would speak in language for a while and David and I would speak in English for a while.  

The inter-cultural framework continues on-screen and in the mode of reception as Gulpilil as the storyteller guides a non-Yolngu audience into the knowledge of his people:

But I am going to tell you a story. It’s not your story . . . a story like you’ve never seen before. But you want a proper story, eh? Then I must tell you some things . . . of my people, and my land . . . Then you can see this story and know it.  

The storyteller demonstrates agency as he guides the non-Yolngu audience through a story that they have “never seen before” and into which they are invited. The relationship between production and knowledge is highlighted in inter-cultural cinema as diverse cultural epistemologies are synthesised into new forms of expression and “new kinds of knowledge.” This is demonstrated in the way that the story which appears in the film has been incorporated into existing Yolngu song cycles and traditional painting forms without disjuncture. For example, cast member Bobby Bununggurr painted the artwork Ten Canoes Story after the film was made. The painting and the film bear witness to Yolngu life pre-contact using both traditional and new mediums of communication. As will be discussed in part two, the use of the anthropologist Donald Thomson’s photographs provides an additional layer of existing knowledge used in new formats.

Elizabeth Heffelfinger and Laura Wright provide a necessary reminder that the transmission of knowledge and inter-cultural exchanges “are never equivalent or equitable.” Rather, relationships of power between dominant and minority cultures, “are often explicitly constructed by and through the
histories, geographies, and experiences of imperialism.” For this reason the category of Fourth Cinema also applies to *Ten Canoes*. In 2002, New Zealand filmmaker Barry Barclay proposed the term Fourth Cinema to refer to Indigenous Cinema, thereby creating a new category in global cinematic practice. Barclay describes Fourth Cinema as the cinema which overlaps with the politics of Indigenous visibility, laws, cultures, languages, relationship with land and sovereignty. Barclay argues that Fourth Cinema requires Indigenous control in all areas of production. Corinn Columpar, however, envisages a continuum in Fourth Cinema which includes collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers.

*Ten Canoes* does not explicitly critique the impact of colonialism that is present in other collaborative films made by Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil such as *The Tracker* (2002) and *Charlie’s Country* (2014). The Fourth Cinema camera in *Ten Canoes* is concerned with sharing Yolngu culture in Yolngu languages. Yolngu culture survives within the nation state of Australia and the filmmakers are proud to share it both with their children and with those within the broader community. In terms of critical reception, *Ten Canoes* was widely celebrated. Critique of de Heer’s authorial presence and the representation of Yolngu cultural practices was also present in responses from some film critics and anthropologists. Through examination of both *Ten Canoes* and the accompanying documentary, *Balanda and the Bark Canoes* (Tania Nehme, Molly Reynolds and Rolf de Heer, 2006), Davis concludes that *Ten Canoes* involved the work of reappropriation and cultural adaption which lead to the renewal of many forms of Yolngu culture that had been discontinued.

This discussion from within film studies is an important backdrop for the use of Donald Thomson’s anthropological record in *Ten Canoes* and any theological insights which can be gleaned because it foregrounds two important aspects concerning *Ten Canoes*: 1) the challenges and rewards of inter-cultural interactions and 2) the persistent questions that Fourth Cinema raises concerning: who is holding the camera; the way First Peoples are represented and for whom the film is made.

**Part Two: Screening anthropology in Ten Canoes**

The production history of *Ten Canoes* has a compelling quality of its own. Initial consultations with the community at Ramingining centred around a western that contained colonial violence and a massacre in a similar
vein to de Heer and Gulpilil’s previous work, *The Tracker* (2002). De Heer recounts what happened on the day he was about to return home after a trip to Ramingining:

Then David, just before I left, just before I got on the plane, about an hour or so before I got on the plane. He came to me and said, “we need ten canoes.” . . . And I said, “what do we need ten canoes for? You mean for the film.” And he said, “yes.” I said “David, we don’t even know what the story is. How can we need ten canoes?” And so, he found the photo, the Thomson photo and all of that. Then I went to Sydney and began to, from there, and put some of the finance together the next day . . . But then by the time I came back everything had shifted already. I came back a few weeks later and it had shifted. It now had to be about goose egg hunting.25

Gulpilil explains his motivation in using the picture as inspiration for the film:

I wanted to introduce Donald Thomson, was a true story of Dr Thomson. He met the traditional people and he recorded, and it was my uncles, my father and my grandfather, and this is a story I wanted to come out.26

The anthropologist and biologist, Professor Donald Thomson, lived and worked in Arnhem Land for several months over two time periods in 1935–37 and 1942–43. His brief from the government who funded his work was to try to understand the Yolngu people, to assist in peaceful relationships amongst Yolngu clans and with the outside world. Although massacres had occurred on Yolngu land, at the time of Thomson’s work the Yolngu people had resisted colonial influences and retained their ancestral culture. Thomson’s extensive collection of artefacts and still and moving images is significant as it records daily life, body wear, canoes, tree platforms, mosquito huts, and special events such as the goose egg hunting expedition, all of which feature in *Ten Canoes*.27

The Yolngu people at Ramingining (a community established in the 1970s) refer to the time that the photographs capture as “Thomson Time.” Thomson is affectionately remembered. Copies of the photographs have been made available to the community at Ramingining as part of collaboration
with source communities, the Thomson family and Museums Victoria. Once the decision was made to use the photographs as inspiration for the film, creative decisions about how this was to occur had to be negotiated. The result was the three distinct time periods in *Ten Canoes*: the voiceover Storyteller speaking directly to a contemporary audience, the black and white story sequence representing “Thomson Time” and a more distant ancestral past in “mythical times” shot in colour. A metaphysical connection with the ancestors was experienced by cast members, who were cast on the basis of their relatives who appeared in the Thomson photographs. Bobby Bunungurr describes the way the ancestors communicated with him, offering their protection, during filming:

> When I’m acting out on the swamp in the canoes, I feel full of life. The spirits are around me, the old people they with me, and I feel it. Out there, I was inside by myself, and I was crying. I said to myself, why I being like my people from long ago? And I would think way back and then I feel. Everything, like my hair, I’m going to be like my people and I said “Yeah!” because I remember . . . because the spirit of my older people they’re beside me and they’re giving me more knowledge. And that never happened before ... and that’s why we all worked and no one was bitten by crocodile, because the spirit of the older people were with us. I feel them, and I see them through the dream, they talking to us, slow, smooth.29

This comment, and others like it from the cast and crew members, demonstrate some of the reactions off-screen which the photos and participation in *Ten Canoes* evoked. On-screen the interplay between Thomson’s photographs and *Ten Canoes* can be analysed in several ways. *Ten Canoes* re-creates the composition of scenes from the Thomson collection, at times with the still shots appearing as “the live version of the photograph” as the actors move and interact. Alternatively, according to Rutherford, a “freezing or slowing of a moving image into stasis” may be experienced. This alerts the viewer through a momentary gap in the narrative to the cinematic devices at work in the film which include “temporal manipulation” and directorial control. De Heer described the Thomson picture of the ten canoeists as
Djarri, a Djinba man, and Rraywala, a Mildjingi man, on a cooking platform, Arafura Swamp, Arnhem Land, 1937.
Screening anthropology and theology in *Ten Canoes*

Jamie Dayindi Gulpillil Dalaithngu, playing the part of Dayindi, on a tree platform during the filming of *Ten Canoes*. *Reproduced courtesy of Rolf de Heer.*
“profoundly cinematic.” Rutherford also sees this quality in Thomson’s work which she describes as containing a “cacophony of textures.” She states,

> It is a dynamism that makes the image bristle with contrasting planes, which confound the rules of perspective by their multiple points of focus within the frame, and produces a sense of human figures as agents in an environment in which every other element in that environment is just as alive and animate as the people. This is a fibrous world of reeds, leaves, reflections, feathers and shadows... It creates a sense of a world that swirls around the figures.32

This sense of a world that is connected and animated flows from Thomson’s photographs and into the cinematic world of *Ten Canoes*. Rutherford also notes the “masterful soundscape” of the film which produces “a sonic texture with a phenomenological density of its own” that can produce a sense of immersion into the environment of the wetlands.33 The performance of anthropology connects people, from the past and present, with place in *Ten Canoes*. It is this connection between people and place which resonates with Jennings’ theology of creation to which I now turn.

**Part Three: screening theology in *Ten Canoes***

There are limitations to this dialogue between theology and *Ten Canoes*. Bringing together discourse from within the Christian theological tradition and the film *Ten Canoes* which contains Yolngu cosmology requires careful negotiation. The opening creation story in the film is David Gulpilil’s story. My aim is not to reconcile his story with creation stories from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Rather, my aim is to show the way that aspects of Jennings’ theology are encountered in *Ten Canoes*. *Ten Canoes* and Jennings’ theology are on their own autonomous paths. For the purposes of this article their paths intersect and provide mutual illumination and interpretation, before once again continuing their own separate journeys.

Jennings asks the question, “What work should a Christian doctrine of creation do now?”34 His answer includes addressing the following:

1. The inversion between guest and host in the colonial moment.
2. “Gentile positionality” and “Gentile remembrance” that require a posture of “overhearing” biblical Israel’s story in terms of what it
means to be a creature as part of creation and in relation to God; and

3. Exploring the implication of a “pedagogy of joining” for a Christian theology of creation.35

1. **The inversion between guest and host in the colonial moment**

Jennings constructs his theology of creation within his broader theological schema. His schema takes seriously the huge disruption that colonialism wrought on people and place, the legacy of which Jennings argues theology has not yet grasped. Jennings writes from his North American context. He acknowledges that colonialism and postcolonial realities are not uniform throughout the world with both historical circumstances and geography being distinguishing factors. His framework, outlined in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, addresses an overarching feature of colonial logic: the value of land was conceived in terms of what it could produce and how it could be tamed. Jennings also locates a “theology of extraction”, where the value of the land is only truly recognised through the divinely sanctioned work of extraction and modification performed by humans, as emerging in colonial space. This, in turn, signified “the death of the world” as an “animate and communicative reality for Christians and so many others.”36

Jennings contends that the world as creation was lost with the emergence of a way of seeing which transferred identity from land, water, sky and animals to the body. This had the effect of creating two symbiotically related forms of enclosure: new world private property, and racial existence. These two are interrelated as race is, “fundamentally a matter of geography. Racial existence came into being at the site of geographic enclosure.”37 Private property, as an enclosure, is responsible for a “geographic unconscious” that is not only haunted by race (and in the case of settler states original occupancy) but it also, “desensitizes us to place, to plants, animals, and earth.”38

Jennings affirms that prior to colonisation, and due to the survival and resistance of First Peoples, identity for First Peoples was and is located within family and language groups in relationship with waterways, land, sky, geographic features and animals. This connection to land was disrupted by both economic and soteriological markers in the colonial moment. Identity was construed by the colonial agenda through bodies, both white and black, rather than in relation to place. Jennings argues that black flesh, along with
land, was commodified. Furthermore, relationship with God, understood as salvation of the soul, was used to justify the Christian/colonial mandate. People were then categorised on a continuum of soteriological possibilities determined by race. He contends that whilst salvation may have extended to black flesh, the responsibility of leadership, and teaching, remained the function of white missionaries. There are exceptions in mission history, however, Jennings states that the Christianity on offer was one without the necessity of joining with each other.

According to Jennings, the profound transformation due to modern colonialism has not been adequately addressed by Christian doctrines of creation. Jennings argues this is ironic given that from the fifteenth century, Christianity, and specifically the doctrine of creation, was a fundamental contributor to this transformation.

Like an essential enzyme that catalyses change at an organic level, Christians reframed the world and bodies and in so doing reframed thought itself as an action upon the world rather than an action of the world.

Part of the corrective he offers is a Christian vision of the world that is “fully at home with the realities of being creature” and the implications for relationships with people and place which is associated with such a vision.

2. Overhearing Israel’s story

What made this form of theorising and acting shaped by a Christian doctrine of creation possible? The answer, in part, is found in a way of reading the world informed by supersessionism. Supersessionism is the notion that Christians and the church have replaced Israel as God’s chosen people. Negation of Gentile identity founded on joining to the people and promises of Israel coincided with rejection of the Jewish people as “first readers” of creation, as those who “saw the world as the creation of their own God.” Jennings argues that as second readers of creation, Gentile Christians are people “who have entered the stories of another people.”

Jennings transfers the posture of “Gentile positionality” to Second Peoples in relation to First Peoples. This has a range of theo-political implications beyond the scope of this article, not least the complex relationship between Jews and Gentiles, power imbalances present in settler states such as Australia, and the fact that identities are multi-faceted and dynamic. It is
important to note, in the space available, that a direct correlation between the relationship of Jew/Gentile and First/Second peoples is not what Jennings is implying. Rather Jennings is drawing on the way that supersessionism formed European Gentile Christian self-perception and imagination so that in new contexts they placed themselves at the centre of the story, rather than at the margins of someone else’s story. In my Australian context, “Gentile remembrance” reminds me as a Second Person that I live on a land which is imbedded with other people’s stories, languages, ceremonies and cultures as Ten Canoes demonstrates.

3. “A pedagogy of joining”
Closely related to “Gentile positionality” is Jennings’ notion of a “pedagogy of joining.” This answers his initial question of what a doctrine of creation must do, that is:

situate us as creatures in process of joining other creatures in and through life with God whereby we constantly enact second readings that build with and within the ways others see the creation.  

Gentiles enter the story of Israel; and within the New Testament biblical Israel is invited to join with Gentiles in new and radically profound ways. JOINING and developing new ways of being and belonging alongside the lives of others is the modus operandi of Christian communion. The joining that Jennings proposes is formed in and through “second readings” as we learn and listen carefully to the ways of others in terms of how they perceive the world and God’s life within it.

A Christian doctrine of creation which incorporates “Gentile positionality”, “Gentile remembrance” and a “pedagogy of joining” will be open to the voices and experiences of First Peoples which have historically been neglected, denigrated and suppressed. First Nations people, and First Nations Christians, have insights into the animated and connected nature of people and place which need to be part of the formation of creation theologies. For example, Adnyamathanha Christian theologian Denise Champion outlines in Yarta Wandatha the deep connection between her people and Adnyamathanha country. Yarta wandatha ikandadnha is translated as “the land speaks and the people speak.” A posture of “reading after” begins “with listening to the ways of others in the world in order to hear the world in
This does not require a monolithic, static or idealised view of Indigenous peoples. Rather, a “sober recognition” that Christian history exhibits the twin failure of not listening to the earth, “because we have not listened to enough co-inhabiters of the earth.”49 Ten Canoes is an invitation to engage in this listening and, in line with Jennings’ theology of overhearing, to encounter a mediated vision of creation.

“Mediated visions of creation” in Ten Canoes

Ten Canoes invites viewers into a world that is before contact with Europeans. It is also a cinematic representation produced through collaboration of Yolngu and non-Yolngu people in 2006. It visually and aurally articulates a Yolngu way of seeing and hearing creation. This cinematic hospitality illuminates crucial aspects of Jennings’ theology. Story, sight and sound interweave to present creation as communicative, connected and animated rather than simply a resource to be commodified. Ten Canoes also addresses the inversion between guests and hosts through enacting a pedagogy of respectful joining.

From its opening scene people and place are connected in Ten Canoes. The land and water that the camera pans over and follows have been created through the movement of Yurlunggur, the Great Water goanna who the narrator explains, “gives us life.” The interconnectedness of all forms of life is conveyed through the narrator’s descriptions of a Creator Spirit who shapes the land. Leaves, body paint, fire and dirt form part of the mourning and funeral ritual conveyed in the film. The wide-angle shots of the Glyde River and the bush position Yolngu country as featuring in the film alongside the actors.

The Storyteller’s description of pre-existence in the waterhole and returning there after death demonstrates his connectivity and co-habitation with the land and with ancestors. As this narration is taking place the camera glides through the waterhole capturing the sunlight shining through the trees as sounds from within the landscape are heard creating an atmosphere of aural and visual intimacy. The Storyteller spends over four minutes sharing this information about himself and his land before judging that the audience is ready for the story to start. An explicit movement between teaching and learning is being communicated and this has pedagogical implications for both the viewer, who is invited to see and hear, and the Storyteller who is sharing his knowledge.
A pedagogy of joining is embodied off-screen in the friendship between David Gulpilil and Rolf de Heer. It was David’s invitation that lead Rolf to make a film in David’s country, in his language, with his people. The cast and crew participated in cross-cultural joining in making the film and Yolngu man Peter Djirrir became the co-director. This was not always a straightforward or easy process. The documentary *Balanda and the Bark Canoes* provides testimony of the frustrations experienced by Yolngu and Balanda cast and crew. Misunderstandings required negotiation and sensitive solutions. This reflects the fact that joining takes place within lived encounters which are messy, unpredictable and ultimately, according to the testimonies arising from *Ten Canoes*, worth it.\(^5\)

On-screen and in the mode of reception the Storyteller positions himself and the non-Yolngu audience of second hearers. Joining does not mean appropriation or assimilation of the other. Neither is “borderland silence in the face of other’s difference” required.\(^5\) Rather respect begins with an openness to dialogue, to being changed and transformed by the encounter. In settler states such as Australia, there needs to be an appreciation of the historical and contemporary power dynamics at play between First and Second peoples. The audience is invited to “overhear” a story already in motion and to see this story and know it for themselves. Respectful distance and difference are also maintained. This is the gift of *Ten Canoes*.

**Part Four: Conclusion**

It will hold them in the heart, the people who will see it, it’ll take you way down to the wilderness. That story is never finished that *Ten Canoes* story, it goes on forever because it is a true story of my people, it is the heart of the land and people and nature.  

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Ten Canoes contains multivalent interpretations. The integration of Yolngu and western modes of storytelling, the representation of Yolngu culture and the politics of the use of Indigenous languages are further areas for investigation which are beyond the scope of this article. The focus of this article has been the mediation and transformation of the anthropological record provided by ancestors of the cast and Donald Thomson alongside a theological viewing informed by Willie Jennings.
Theology and anthropology make unique contributions to the interpretation of *Ten Canoes*. Anthropology provides an insight into the production history which adds a rich layer of history, memory and connection for cast members and their families as “Thomson Time” is performed in a new time and place. Thomson’s photographs informed the film’s aesthetics and acted as a guide for re-awakening cultural knowledge such as making the canoes. The theological response articulated in this article derives from my experience as an audience member. I have argued that *Ten Canoes* illustrates characteristics Jennings views as necessary for a Christian theology of creation. The characteristics of correcting the inversion between guest and host, “overhearing” as “second readers” and enacting a “pedagogy of joining” can be seen off-screen, on-screen and in the mode of reception. The vision of creation mediated in *Ten Canoes* illustrates Jennings’ contention that creation is communicative and people and place are interconnected.

The individual performances of theology and anthropology each offer their own insights. The question remains: how do they intersect and inform each other? In short, the use of the anthropological record which is adapted in *Ten Canoes* illuminates Jennings’ theology. *Ten Canoes* uses image, sound and story to present the Arafura swamp as life-giving and part of the Storyteller’s identity. Rutherford notes that Thomson’s photographs also conveyed a sense of “human figures as agents in an environment in which every other element in that environment is just as alive and animate as the people.” In this way Thomson’s photographs incorporate a sense of Jennings’ theological vision of the animated nature of creation and Yolngu ways of knowing where identity is constructed in relation to waterways, plants, animals, sky and other features of the landscape.

When a camera takes a still or moving image an interpretation has already taken place as a moment in time and space is captured within a frame. In the case of *Ten Canoes*, however, this is not a static process but one that is open to dynamic understandings of culture and spirituality which address new times and spaces whilst still maintaining a link with the ancestral past. The community’s commitment to using the anthropological record to make a film which shared their culture with their children and with a global audience offers insight into Jennings theological insight of “overhearing.” “Overhearing” does not mean appropriating the lens of another. In the case of *Ten Canoes* it means attempting to see through the
Fourth Cinema camera that which you are invited to see and discovering how that vision may enrich your own.

Approaching *Ten Canoes* with a posture of “overhearing,” and respectful joining, a posture experienced in a non-supersessionist Christianity, anticipates transformation from the inter-cultural encounter.54 This encounter is not straightforward. Rather, like the relationship between Jew and Gentile it requires honesty, repentance and openness within what can be a complex and contested space. The audience is invited into the cinematic world of *Ten Canoes* where the potential for “overhearing” someone else’s story is mediated through a patient Storyteller and vivid sights and sounds. This encounter is a place to be schooled in a cinematic pedagogy of respectful joining where “second hearers” join with the Storyteller to see and hear a story of his people and his land. “Not like your story, but a good story all the same.”55

**Endnotes**

1. *Ten Canoes* won the Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. It was the Australian Film Institute (AFI) award winner in 2006 in the following categories: Best Film, Best Direction, Best Original Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Editing and Best Sound.


3. As part of his overall critique of Jewish and Christian nationalism, Jennings makes a distinction between the modern State of Israel and “living Israel.” “A Christian commitment to Israel does not entail a commitment to Zionism, or to the statecraft of the nation-state of Israel. It does entail, however, a commitment to a witness born of the Jewish Jesus toward Israel and all whose lives encircle Torah and are encircled by Torah. That witness must present an option beyond assimilation or cultural nationalism. This however remains the unfinished business of the modern church. We cannot hope to present a vision of life together that would capture anyone’s imagination if we cannot imagine and enact it ourselves.” Willie Jennings, “A Response to A. J. Walton,” *Syndicate*, 2014, accessed October 25, 2017, https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/the-christian-imagination/.


8 The theatrical release version includes narration and subtitles in English.


11 *Balanda* is a Yolngu Matha word for European.


14 Katherine Rainger interview with Rolf de Heer, October 10, 2017.


First Cinema refers to North American cinema. Second Cinema refers to European Art House cinema. Third Cinema refers to cinema from the developing world that addresses poverty, decolonisation and underdevelopment.


Davis, “Working Together” Original emphasis. Interviews with cast members make it clear that the content met the dual purpose of education for their own community and the sharing of culture with the wider community. Ten Canoes Press Kit, 21–25.

Rainger, interview with Rolf de Heer.


For a reference in Thomson’s field notes to “ten canoes” and the undertaking of a goose hunting expedition see Nicholas Peterson’s edited collection Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2006), 50.

Louise Hamby, drawing on anthropological research, provides critical assessments of the way these time periods have been understood by de Heer and the Yolngu cast. Louise Hamby, “Thomson Times and Ten Canoes (De Heer and Djigirr, 2006),” Studies in Australasian Cinema 1, no. 2 (2007).

Ten Canoes Press Kit, 22.

Ten Canoes Press Kit, 25.

Rutherford, Ten Canoes as ‘inter-cultural membrane,’ 141.

33 Rutherford, “Ten Canoes and the Ethnographic Photographs of Donald Thomson”, 129

34 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

35 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

36 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

37 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

38 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”


40 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

41 For this reason, Jennings does not separate theological anthropology from creation theology.

42 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

43 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

44 Jennings, “Reframing the world.” (emphasis in original).


46 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”


48 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

49 Jennings, “Reframing the world.”

50 There is much to celebrate in the professional and personal relationship between de Heer and Gulpilil; however, their relationship is not without its challenges. Rainger, interview with Rolf de Heer.

51 McCredden, “Ten Canoes”, 54.

52 *Ten Canoes* Press Kit, 25.

