

“If This Is Such a Great Country, Why Haven’t We Heard of Their Football Team?” Configuring Identity and Belonging in Lucky Miles by Michael James Rowland

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INTRODUCTION

THIS ESSAY EXAMINES AUSTRALIAN DIRECTOR Michael James Rowland’s film *Lucky Miles* through the notion of “post-Western” cinema, as discussed by Neil Campbell in his book *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Regions, West* (2013).¹ *Lucky Miles* has received relatively limited scholarly attention; nonetheless, there is a notable variety in the film’s characterization as alternatively a “no-road movie,” “walkabout film,” “buddy movie,” and, in an international context, a festival film in which the characters undertake “journeys of hope.”² By analyzing the film through the lens of post-Western cinema, then, this essay adds to the multiple and contested classifications of the film to depict the complex range of affective and material networks that the notion of “Global Wests” invokes. Neil Campbell defines “post-Westerns” as a filmic space in which the major generic forms of the Western are “challenged, interrupted, and disturbed by the

¹ Neil Campbell, *Post-Westerns: Cinema, Regions, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

² Specifically, Catherine Simpson suggests that the film can be located alongside what Yosefa Loshitski has referred to as a growing array of festival films that depict migration from homelands to host countries and the associated struggle and suffering endured along the way. Catherine Simpson, “Tinkering at the Borders: *Lucky Miles*’s ‘Difference, Distance, and Dud Maps,’” online proceedings of “Sustaining Culture” (2008), annual conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA), UniSA, Adelaide, December 6–8, 2007, 1, <http://unisa.edu.au/com/csaa/onlineproceedings.htm>.

minor forms of prolonged and abjected cinematic styles.”³ In an earlier work, Philip French alternatively defined post-Westerns as “films about the West today [that] draw upon the western itself or more generally on ‘the cowboy cult.’”⁴ While French’s definition is helpful in identifying films that might qualify as post-Westerns, Campbell’s observations about the themes and qualities of this form are more useful in the case of *Lucky Miles* because they allow an exploration of minor themes that are reliant, not on the identification of a “cowboy cult,” but rather on cinematic hallmarks such as “haunting,” “dislocation,” and irresolution.⁵ Indeed, these aspects feature heavily in *Lucky Miles* and shape both the physical and the psychic landscapes of the film.

The film is set in 1990, before the *Tampa* Crisis of 2001 and the ensuing legislative restrictions on asylum seeker rights in Australia and, through its gentle and at times awkward comedy, represents asylum seekers not as flattened others but as people who are afforded the complexities that attend the populace regarded as “legitimately” occupying Australia. While the film can be located alongside other Australian films that depict journeys through central and nonurban Australia, such as John Heyer’s *The Back of Beyond* (1954), Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout* (1971), and Ted Kotcheff’s *Wake in Fright* (1971), it also presents Australia as a multicultural society.⁶ In this respect I agree with Catherine Simpson, who suggests, “*Lucky Miles* is one of the first Australian feature films to let diasporic ‘others’ into the ‘heartland’ of Australian cinema,” that is, the space of the “Outback,” which is frequently depicted as a unicultural space.⁷ For the purposes of this essay, however, I want to explore how the film also engages with the genre of the post-Western and how this might pertain to the notion of Global Wests. The director, James Michael Rowland, has explained that the “genesis” of the film is found in his reading of Thomas Friedman’s book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (1999), a work that describes the social impact of globalization through the use of technology.⁸ Rowland notes that he was interested in the structure of contact cultures and the formation of “winners” and “losers” as by-products of this exchange.⁹ The use of the terms “winners” and “losers” is one that we might commonly associate with the historical Western genre. However, in *Lucky Miles*, these categories are not readily apparent, or rather, characters are not assigned a discrete personality as either a “winner” or a “loser” but rather demonstrate the complexity of cultural difference—as well as its productivity—within the contact zone.

NEW JOURNEYS THROUGH OLD TERRAIN

Lucky Miles depicts the adventures of three men after they and their fellow travelers—“boat people” to use the domestic governmental misnomer—are unceremoniously dumped onto the

³ Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 24.

⁴ Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005), 135–36.

⁵ Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 40.

⁶ The foundational myth of Western Australia was created by “new” stories in a “new” land (mirroring the doctrine of *terra nullius* under which Sydney Cove was settled). Jill Milroy notes that “in 1829, James Stirling’s ‘Swan River’ settlement dispossessed Aboriginal peoples physically and legally, beginning with the Noongar peoples of ‘Perth’ and the surrounding southwest, then spreading to the north and east, a moving violent frontier, with recorded massacres of Aboriginal peoples in the remote north of Western Australia well into the late 1920s.” Grant Revell and Jill Milroy, “Aboriginal Story Systems: Re-mapping the West, Knowing Country, Sharing Space,” in “Comparative Wests,” ed. Brian Codding, *Occasion* 5 (2013): 3.

⁷ Catherine Simpson, “Tinkering at the Borders: *Lucky Miles*’s ‘Difference, Distance, and Dud Maps,” 2.

⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999).

⁹ Brian McFarlane, “A Road Movie without a Road: An Interview with Michael James Rowland,” *Metro Magazine* 153 (2007): 22.

northern coastline of Western Australia by an Indonesian vessel. The captain of the rickety boat tells the men, falsely, that there is a bus to Perth just beyond the sand dunes. Arun (Kenneth Moraleda) wants to travel to Perth to find the Australian man who fathered him in Cambodia in 1972, while Youssif, an Iraqi engineer (Rodney Afif), seeks political asylum. Their adventures start on the Western Australian coast (though filming took place in South Australia), about 2,000 kilometers north of Perth, without a map and with little water. After walking for a day, they find Ramelan (Sri Sacdpraseuth), one of the fishermen on the vessel that brought them to Australia—a vessel that he inadvertently destroys. Equipped with little but their clothing, the men set off into the Pilbara region, hoping to eventually arrive in Perth or Broome. The lack of clarity about whether they are heading north to Broome or south to Perth encapsulates their multidirectional quandary. The film charts their journey through the desert, a “road movie without a road,” as the director, James Michael Rowland, has described the film.¹⁰ I suggest that as a “post-Western” film, *Lucky Miles* continues a tradition of presenting the cinematic West as a landscape as difficult to define as it is to navigate. The opening title credits are spliced with images of maps, which appear to represent areas in Australia, Iraq, and other places, yet they are quickly removed and difficult to read. This illegibility prefigures the contested role that maps will play in the film proper: while Arun carries a map, he and the others read it incorrectly, and later in the film, viewers discover that it contains hand-drawn shapes that are barely legible. In the final third of the film, this misreading is confirmed when Youssif finds a map of Western Australia in a dilapidated shack and realizes with horror that the men are a few weeks’ walk away from Perth rather than a few days’ as they believed. Their physical displacement produces an effect similar to what Jill Milroy explains as the loss of meaning in settler-colonial societies, where “new maps showed nothing of the meaning of Country or the ancient stories embedded in it.”¹¹ In their cinematic configuration in *Lucky Miles*, the men’s journeys are characterized by a “loss of meaning,” although this is undercut by other characters’ informed readings of the land. Lacking directions and gridlines, then, the landscape’s contours resist a normative “Western” lens.

As a deterritorialized space,¹² the Western Australia of the film is also defamiliarized. The arrival of the men onshore provokes questions about where they are, where they belong, and among whom they walk, and in this way, old and new stories about the West “fold into one another.”¹³ The mythic terrain of the landscape elevates their journey into an encounter with a spatial sublime; the vast space of the bush and desert hold their journey within its ample reach. The film colors the men with broad affective dimensions, and viewers are exposed to their moments of ecstasy, such as when the men stumble across a waterhole, and to their fear, anger, and immense frustration, as well as the tenuous connections and understandings between the men as they traverse the land. Only minutes into the film, the audience is introduced to three Army Reserve officers, who travel as a unit known as “Kangaroo Four.” The unit is engaged to track and collect men, and their approach to this task is noticeably relaxed. For example, when the officers are first contacted to commence their search for the men, they are kicking an Australian Rules football against the backdrop of the Australian desert. Their response to the call is professional but grounded within the reality of the film. That is, they finish kicking the football, agree on which

¹⁰ Ibid., 26.

¹¹ Revell and Milroy, “Aboriginal Story Systems,” 4.

¹² Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 35.

¹³ Ibid., 30.

path they will follow, and only then set off in their jeep. The final shot in this sequence locates the jeep against the expansive landscape, with the camera remaining static as the jeep drives out of the frame of view. This shot seems to prefigure the “real” endeavor of the search, in which the Kangaroo Four are not figured as an omnipotent bureaucratic machine but rather as a group of skilled men who must also confront challenges in their search for the other men.

The film’s script is based on the true stories of several refugees who survived the ordeal of being abandoned on the Australian coastline between 1989 and 1990 and draws most specifically on an incident in which a group of forty people from southern China became lost in the Western Australian desert for two weeks after being dropped off by people smugglers. In preproduction, Rowland employed refugees who had arrived in Australia as “boat people” to be cultural consultants on the project and to play minor roles in the Cambodian and Iraqi groups. He then amalgamated and adapted these narratives to incorporate humor and comedic elements; these lighter, humanizing elements are largely absent from the representation of refugees and asylum seekers in the Australian mediascape. Rowland has also claimed that *Lucky Miles* is the first Australian film since *My Year of Living Dangerously* (1982) to feature Indonesian characters.¹⁴ More broadly, he suggests that Australian films rarely acknowledge Australia’s geographical neighbors and poses the question “When did we last have a film with a New Zealand character, or one from Papua New Guinea?”¹⁵ If, as Simpson suggests, Australian filmmaking has been “produced by, and featured people from, diverse cultural backgrounds”¹⁶ since its early years, Rowland’s question asks us to reconsider this inclusiveness in terms of cinematic visibility. Highly successful upon its release in 2007, *Lucky Miles* went on to win the audience award for Best Film at the Sydney Film Festival and numerous awards at other international film festivals, with critics noting the film’s engaging treatment of the plight of asylum seekers and other “boat people.”

One of the Army Reserve officers, Tom Collins, is an expert Indigenous tracker, on whom his colleagues rely to trace the movements of the other group. In contrast to Tom’s expertise, Kangaroo Four’s overall progress is humorous and clumsy, and their portrayal highlights misunderstandings and confusion in the search. In contrast to the unhelpful maps that populate the film, Tom’s expert knowledge allows him to read the land in ways that are not evident to the audience or to the camera’s eye. Far from a militaristic “border patrol,” these officers are likable, and the audience is deliberately exposed to a multitude of activities, like swimming, kicking a football, and joking with one another, in which they engage during their search. I suggest that by contrasting the movements of the “boat people” with those of Kangaroo Four, the film exposes the audience to the uncertainty and progress that mark both journeys, thus complicating the configuration of the powerless (asylum seekers, boat people) against the powerful (army). The audience observes that Kangaroo Four appears to approach its task of locating the men as it would any other, and its search is devoid of moral panic.

In another interview, Rowland states that for “our three main guys that are lost in the desert with each other, for whom the landscape is . . . a foreign place outside of history,” “they’ve got the added thing of trying to communicate to each other and they’ve got nothing in common.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Catherine Simpson, “Tinkering at the Borders: *Lucky Miles* and the Diasporic (No) Road Movie,” in *Diasporas of Australian Cinema*, ed. Catherine Simpson, Renata Murawska, and Anthony Lambert (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2009), 36.

¹⁵ McFarlane, “Road Movie without a Road,” 26.

¹⁶ Simpson, “Tinkering at the Borders: *Lucky Miles* and the Diasporic (No) Road Movie,” 20.

¹⁷ Interview with Michael James Rowland and Kenneth Moraleta, *Movie Show*, July 12, 2007.

No doubt the landscape is a foreign place for the three men, but I suggest that one of the film's strengths is precisely that it privileges these characters as people who can and do interact with the landscape, in ways that are embedded within a historical context. In contrast, dehistoricizing the space of the Australian landscape arguably continues the Australian colonial project by emphasizing the land as a kind of terra incognita, instead of recognizing the men's subsistence as a difficult achievement. This is not to say that the relationship between the men and their surroundings is romanticized—far from it—but unusually, the Australian desert landscape is partially enlivened by the placement of the refugees within it as they mark their own contours within this space. Throughout the film, the camera not only picks out the men as small figures in an overwhelming landscape, a common representational mode that emphasizes the harshness of the Australian desert environment, but also shows the men engaging more intimately with the land—be it when they discover a waterhole or by focusing in on the small tufts of dust that record their presence.

SPECTRAL REMAINS

In a review of the film, Dave Hoskin makes the comment that “where most road movies seem to be about white people, these films feature characters from outside the racial mainstream.”¹⁸ Hoskin considers that *Lucky Miles* follows the tradition of Roeg's *Walkabout* and suggests that this genre of film be called “walkabout” films rather than road movies. Hoskin goes on to criticize the film's seeming lack of direction, including Kangaroo Four's unhurried search for the men, citing that it made him feel “drowsy” while watching it. These are all understandable observations, and yet, they also raise questions about how audiences might expect the film to unfold. In itself, the term “walkabout” suggests that a film will adopt an ambulatory pace—and perhaps a narrative seemingly devoid of a teleological agenda as its main agent of desire. Yet even within a filmic walkabout tradition, *Lucky Miles* presents a twist in that it is a road movie “without a road”: roads are a rare source of hope in the film but do not always fulfill the promise they present. The cultural framework in which the film is received is worth considering. For example, Rowland has explained that in South Korea, audiences regarded the film as a “road movie” “like the story of Burke and Wills updated to reflect immigration patterns of recent years.”¹⁹

Following their initial abandonment, a group of Iraqi men with whom Youssif initially associates splits up to collect firewood. Youssif's partner is Saleh (Majid Shokor), who will soon bring a haunted past to bear on the present. As the men gather wood, Youssif notices Saleh carrying a knife, which he recognizes as bearing the insignia of the Iraqi Republican Guard—an elite branch of Saddam Hussein's army. The reason for their conflict is not clear—we are yet to learn that most of Youssif's family was killed in Iraq—but Youssif suddenly comprehends that Saleh wants to kill him, the shadow of their respective pasts rears sharply into the present. As the men tussle, Youssif falls over a cliff and Saleh leaves him for dead. Back with the group, Saleh pretends the event was an accident, leaving the audience with questions about the unspoken histories that have led to this point. In this way, the film engages with Campbell's suggestion that the

¹⁸ Dave Hoskin, “Going Walkabout: *Lucky Miles*,” *Metro Magazine* 18, metromagazine.com.au (accessed February 10, 2015).

¹⁹ McFarlane, “Road Movie without a Road,” 27. In 1860–61, Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills led a landmark expedition traversing Australia from Melbourne to the Gulf of Carpentaria, a distance of approximately two thousand miles. While the journey to the gulf was successful, the return journey was beset by numerous problems, leading to widespread loss of life, including that of both Burke and Wills.

post-Western is a site in which the viewer is presented with spectral remains.²⁰ More broadly, the film exposes audiences to a variety of hauntings—in physical forms (such as the derelict sheds and car), as well as psychic engagements (with missing fathers and loved ones). Sometime after Youssif, Arun, and Ramelan band together, they stumble upon an abandoned shack in which there are meager resources that allow them to continue surviving. This discovery raises questions about who was here before and why the shack is now abandoned. The notion of haunting is particularly strong in relation to the Indigenous populations along the western coast of Australia and the contact history that has shaped the social, and ecological, landscape of the film. The city of Perth itself remains a remote object of desire, only depicted briefly in the final sequence of the film when Arun rings the doorbell of his father's house.

This haunting also finds expression through the film's representation of the Australian littoral zone as a historical contact space between local Australians and British and French colonizers becomes a filmic palimpsest as earlier encounters are reinscribed with new arrivals. The littoral zone is highly significant in an Australian historical context. As Zeller and Cranston have argued, "it was in the littoral zone that the first contact between white and Indigenous people occurred and where the white explorers or invaders had to begin to come to terms with an almost totally alien environment."²¹ In much the same way, the film's narrative begins in the littoral zone, where the boat first makes contact with the coastline. Specifically, the camerawork focuses on the arrival of the men via the Western littoral zone. One of the most beautiful scenes occurs early in the film; the scene is divided vertically between the sea and the shore, as two of the men walk along the beach and away from the camera, which hovers at a forty-five-degree angle above the action. The subtitles that track their conversation are placed along the shoreline. This technique incorporates the men and their words into the tapestry of the shore. In this way, the space is framed not as a place of resistance but rather as a more capable locus, one that seems to "hold" the men as they attempt to come to grips with their fraught arrival.

Every primary sequence in the film opens with a striking shot of the landscape, and each shot is different; bathed in the colors of dawn, dusk, midday, or afternoon, audiences are reminded that the landscape itself is alive and living in full color. This schema renders the physical (and psychic) space of Australia as an unstable and shifting locus. I suggest that this offers a useful textual adjunct to Campbell's observation that "Westerns often reflect beyond themselves to contemporary themes and issues,"²² and we can see the relevance of this form in a contemporary Australian context. The cinematographer, Geoff Burton, has commented that the landscape functions as a character in the film, not merely a backdrop, and that this creates a useful way of considering the unusual depiction of outsiders in what would be regarded as a quintessentially "Australian" backdrop. The relationship between the land and its contents is an ambivalent one, shaped in part by an indirect knowledge of the local populations who have been driven out of its many places. What is left behind is an Australian West marked by different strands of history that unravel to produce an unfamiliar frontier space.

²⁰ Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 46.

²¹ C. A. Cranston and Robert Zeller, "Setting the Scene: Littoral and Critical Contexts," in *The Littoral Zone: Australian Writers and Their Contexts*, ed. C. A. Cranston and Robert Zeller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 8.

²² Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 32.

BORDER PROTECTION

Indeed, reaching the Australian mainland today does not guarantee asylum to those seeking it. In May 2013 the Australian federal government passed amendments to the Commonwealth Migration Act of 1958 that excised mainland Australia from the “migration zone.” Previously, asylum seekers who reached the Australian mainland could not be sent offshore for processing. Now, they are transferred to the Pacific nation of Nauru and to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, where they are held in mandatory detention. In this context, it is noteworthy that although the film was produced in 1997, it is *set* in 1990, two years before mandatory detention was introduced in Australia.²³ Rowland has stated that the film speaks to the notion of a globalizing, shrinking world, and that although Youssif’s character is seeking asylum, he is the only one who does so of the nine characters we meet at the start of the film. For Rowland, the point is that all these characters must communicate across a “void, across some kind of ‘deafness’ in understanding each other’s cultures.”²⁴ In light of the legislative incursions to the Migration Act, it seems even more important to imagine interactions with our others in a different, more respectful way. Ghassan Hage offers a useful critique of “multicultural Australia” as initiating “a power structure which always positions the migrant or Asian in the position of the Other, the tolerated rather than the tolerator . . . where White Australia as occupiers of the national space control, tolerate, enjoy and manage difference, diversity and ethnicity.”²⁵ Indeed, despite their displaced status, the men in the film are afforded a considered subjectivity often denied to refugees and asylum seekers in the present mediascape, as well as to Indigenous Australians.

There is significant overlap between the plight of Australian Aborigines and that of asylum seekers to Australia. Emma Cox offers a useful analogy from Noeleen Ryan-Lester, an Adnyamathana (in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia) woman and social justice campaigner: “Baxter is not the first detention centre in Port Augusta. The first one was the Davenport mission, where they put Aboriginal people. It had a fence around it too, to stop the Aboriginal people from coming to Port Augusta. Port Augusta was just for the whites.”²⁶ Indeed, the colonization of Australia’s west, as with the American West, spelled the beginning of a structure whose impacts on local populations are still (in)visible today. Although the men in *Lucky Miles* are not colonialists in the traditional sense, framing their arrival in this historical context raises important questions about the interaction between migrants and Indigenous peoples of Australia as part of the ongoing colonial structure of the country. As Mark Minchinton notes: “Like refugees, Indigenous people are exiles. But exiled in their own country. Both groups have much to offer each other: much to learn in terms of resistance, of perseverance, of working together to make

²³ Under the third-country-processing regime introduced in August 2012, asylum seekers who arrive by boat in Australia must be transferred to a third country as soon as is reasonably practicable, unless the minister for immigration exercises his or her discretion to exempt them from transfer. Since August 2012 hundreds of asylum seekers have been transferred to and are in immigration detention on Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. For more information, see the Australian Human Rights Commission website, humanrights.gov.au (accessed June 15, 2015).

²⁴ McFarlane, “Road Movie without a Road,” 24.

²⁵ Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 1998), 3, 9.

²⁶ Emma Cox, “Welcome to Country? Aboriginal Sovereignties and Asylum Seekers,” *Australian Studies* 3, no. 2 (2011): 6.

Australia a place that welcomes difference and diversity.”²⁷ The persistence of Indigenous people and migrants is highly visible in *Lucky Miles*. For example, the movement of Kangaroo Four and the three men is poised precariously between survival and demise, between sight and blindness, and this tension precipitates a productive ambivalence about the status of these often-marginalized groups. The audience can perceive the knowledge that Youssif, the Iraqi “highly qualified structural engineer,” brings with him, just as they see Tom’s knowledge as an expert Aboriginal tracker. And yet, as Simpson argues, any notion of the “noble savage”—which I would apply here to both the expert tracker and the “professional” Iraqi—is largely dispelled through the respective characterizations of Youssif and Tom.

The editors of a *Studies in Australasian Cinema* special issue on border protection, migration, and the Australian cinema have observed, “If one thinks classically about a threat to a nation’s borders, one imagines a military incursion. It is only in recent times that the arrival of a fishing boat containing unarmed asylum seekers would of itself seem to put into question the integrity of a national border.”²⁸ As Angela Romano notes, news media reports between 1999 and 2001 frequently appended the term “boat people” to phrases such as “contagious disease,” “disaster,” “invasion,” “attack,” and other fear-inducing words.²⁹ The term “boat people” itself, along with the image of boats that are mostly unseaworthy and crowded, encourages the thinking that the people on the boats belong on the boats—as though their beings are somehow rightly attached to a precarious existence on board. Importantly, “boat people” are not depicted as being “genuine refugees,” a phrase that has recently found a home in some Australian media productions, as though the designation “refugee” is not good enough. When we consider the definition of the term “refugee,” a status afforded by the federal government to a person who cannot return to his or her place of origin for fear of persecution because of religious, ethnic, national, or political membership, we can see how the misnomer “boat people” obscures the meaning and significance of “refugee.”

ARRANGING DIFFERENCE

Lucky Miles differentiates between the individual characters who arrive by boat. Youssif is framed as an assertive, grumpy, and sharp-witted character from the film’s outset, and his physical appearance confirms his importance as a central character. His light, dune-colored clothing and his reserved yet spiky manner distinguish his presence on-screen and are reminiscent of antiheroes in Western films such as “The Man with No Name” in *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). For example, he is the first in his group to arrive at the top of the sand dune and realize that Perth is nowhere to be seen. He also uses humor to dissipate tension in a way that earns recognition from his fellow travelers. One of the early signifiers of this cinematic enlivening takes place as Youssif and other men cross the sand dunes—having avoided being picked up by the police, unlike most of the other travelers. He throws out a question to the group: “Maybe this is not Australia? Maybe

²⁷ Mark Minchinton, “The Living Dead: Asylum Seekers and Indigenous Australians,” context paper for launch of report: Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives and Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning Program, *Relocation of Refugees from Melbourne to Regional Victoria: A Comparative Evaluation in Swan Hill and Warrnambool* (June 20, 2007), 2.

²⁸ “Editors’ Introduction,” in “Compulsory Screening: Border Protection, Migration and the Australian Screen,” special issue, *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2009): 10.

²⁹ Angela Romano, “The News Media’s Representation of Asylum Seekers,” in *Yearning to Breathe Free: Seeking Asylum in Australia*, ed. Dean Lusher and Nick Haslam (Sydney: Federation Press, 2007), 185.

those fishermen have left us on a big rock island!” One of the men reacts angrily to these suggestions, insisting that they have indeed arrived on Australia and that there will be a city nearby. The irony, of course, is that they are both correct. As the man clutches Youssif’s collar, the latter asks, “If this is such a great country, why haven’t we heard of their football team?” The man pauses and is unable to answer; letting go of Youssif, he laughs briefly and walks on, the tension between the men dissipating for the moment. In a reversal of the dominant imaginary of white Australia’s claim over sport, the men demonstrate their own claims—via football, or soccer as it is called in Australia—and in this scenario, “Australia” is shown to be lacking. More abstractly, Youssif’s comment creates a parallel between him and the footy-kicking Kangaroo Four, as well as with the popular imagery of the sport-loving Australian.³⁰

Within their respective groups, Youssif and Tom are the characters who most clearly decode the landscape and work with its contents. In Youssif’s case, this is most clearly demonstrated through his recognition, by looking at a map, that Perth is three weeks’ walk from their current location and through his ability to bring an old car back to life. For Tom, his knowledge of the land in which he and his teammates are trying to locate the others is the guiding force behind Kangaroo Four’s movements. His authority is also recognized by Sergeant O’Shane (Glenn Shea), whose repetitive questioning—“Where are we now?” “Which way should we go?”—leads to moments of humor. In one scene, Tom informs his teammates about the upcoming weather, and Plank asks him how he knows that. Tom responds that he heard it on the radio—which the audience understands because they have seen him wearing headphones while brushing his teeth. This response appears to unsettle the other men’s assumption that Tom’s knowledge is entirely due to his expertise as a tracker. As Emma Cox has noted, O’Shane is lighter-skinned than Tom and, furthermore, is as ineffective as Plank, the white Australian officer, when it comes to tracking human activity and understanding the land.³¹ The nonunitary depiction of the Indigenous characters is important here, because of its humanizing effect. Moreover, Kangaroo Four is not infallible—both in their actions and in the way in which they read the movements of the other men. For example, in one scene, the officers realize that the men spent the night by a waterhole and then set off in different directions. Wondering why this is the case—along with how nonlocals discovered the waterhole in the first place—Plank suggests that splitting up is a technique used by the Special Air Service Regiment (SAS). Here, the audience is privy to the knowledge that the men have fought with one another and have thus split up. The misreading by Kangaroo Four is important because it destabilizes their position as experts in the field, and this impression is reinforced when Plank fails to secure the jeep’s handbrake, causing it to roll into the waterhole.

Cars play an understated but essential role in the film; like horses in Westerns they provide the essential mobility without which the action could not progress. Throughout the film, there are several long-range shots where Collins or Plank walks in front of the car as they search for the men. These sequences are reminiscent of films such as Rolf de Heer’s *The Tracker* (2002), where the eponymous character walks as a slave-guide, in front of *The Fanatic* (Gary Sweet), who rides on horseback. In his discussion of post-Wests, Campbell notes a scene in *Back to the Future* in which Marty McFly’s car is chased by horses in a scene “borrowed from *Stagecoach*”

³⁰ The humor amid the tension is reminiscent of Western films, as well as of “Australian screen outback characters” more broadly. National Film and Sound Archive, nfsa.gov.au (accessed 25 June 2015).

³¹ Cox, “Welcome to Country?,” 15.

that encloses the past and present of the Western in a single sequence.³² So too in *Lucky Miles*, the long-distance shot of a man “leading” a car immediately conjures associations with horses in any number of Westerns. Indeed, the significance of mobility associated with cars (and with the tradition of the road movie) leads to one of the film’s most joyful moments when Youssif manages to reanimate a shell of a car that sits next to the discovered shack. The camera spends a significant portion of time observing his efforts to bring the car back to life, mostly in mid- to close range. It is this endeavor that also reunites the three men—as Arun and Ramelan assist Youssif in pushing the car, Youssif steering the car “backward” as it were. As the car sputters into life, the camera depicts Arun and Ramelan’s joyful response in slow motion as they whoop and leap into the air. Within moments, however, their faces register concern, and as they mouth “Stop,” the car crashes into the shack, demolishing its main structure. The stop-start thrust of the film is frequently apparent as though to highlight the treachery of direction, be it through “dud maps” or the vehicles that offer some semblance of mobility.

RECOGNIZING THE “OTHER”

As the film approaches its climax, Kangaroo Four come across the now-destroyed shed. As they gaze upon the debris, Tom states, “This is like Captain Cook.” The statement is delivered with extraordinary brevity, but immediately it galvanizes one of the unspoken hauntings of the film: the destruction of Indigenous lives following colonial arrivals to Australia. Tom’s statement also raises questions about the arrival of the men and what their presence means under the ongoing structures of Australian colonialism. At the film’s climax, the paths of the men and Kangaroo Four finally meet, and their encounter is marked by an antithetical rendering of what audiences might expect to emerge as a spectacular “showdown.” Youssif and Ramelan surrender and slowly walk toward the officers. Tom approaches them and Youssif finally presents his claim, “I wish to claim asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention,” to which Tom responds, “Yeah, okay.” Youssif reiterates his claim to Plank, who winks and gives him the “thumbs up.” Whether Plank has understood the import of this claim is unclear, and one suspects he does not, but his treatment of Youssif here is not unsympathetic and casts a humorous sheen on Plank’s good-natured naivety.

In the final scenes of the film, Arun—who has run away from the group—is given a lift to a bus stop, from where, he is assured, a bus will travel to Perth. The driver refuses to accept payment for the lift and presumably for the food and shelter he has provided Arun the night before. The sign above the bus stop states “Lucky Miles”, the name of a transportation service. At this penultimate resting point, Arun breaks down in tears as he experiences the intensity of his journey in a new way. The audience can similarly feel the relief of what promises to be an easier journey to Perth for Arun to find his father. The final frame of the film begins to deliver this promise as we observe a man opening the door of a suburban house to Arun, linking his past to his present within this as yet unknown west. A

³² Campbell, *Post-Westerns*, 22.