Documenting Redfern: representing home and Aboriginality on the Block

CERIDWEN SPARK, Monash University

Introduction

The Block is an area of Aboriginal-owned housing in Redfern, New South Wales, Australia. An irreducibly complex place, it is comprised of ‘heterogeneous details … practices that cannot be put into representation [and] fragmentary pasts that cannot be read by others’ (Game, 1991, p. 53). Reflecting an interplay between emplacement and displacement, the Aboriginal person–place relationships here would seem to be a ‘matter of degree’ (Merlan, 1998, p. 174) rather than absolute. And yet, as I discuss in this article, Aboriginal people are struggling to remain in this place to which they are intimately connected. Constructed through constricting dichotomies and in relation to drugs and dilapidated housing, Redfern inhabitants are frequently seen to represent absolute displacement.

The construction of Block inhabitants as displaced reflects the binarist logic which makes both Redfern and Indigeneity ‘comprehensible’ to non-Aboriginal Australians. Indicative of wider cultural discourses which interpret contemporary Aboriginality as non-traditional and therefore unauthentic (see Wolfe, 1994; Jacobs, 1996; Spark, 2001), these reductive representations have material consequences, including the ongoing displacement of Block inhabitants. Because of these brutal effects, it is not uncommon to find the ‘truth’ of media representations questioned, either at the level of ‘popular knowledge’ (Threadgold, 1997a, p. 138) or by more expert commentators (see Muecke, 1992; Langton, 1993; Jennings, 1993).

This is not the case, however, when it comes to documentary. In this mode, the accumulation of facts continues to be equated with ‘truth’. Despite the elisions and silences comprising them, documentaries frequently seek to present a certainty of knowledge. Thus, as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1992, p. 186) notes, while it may be ‘quite common to challenge facts vis-à-vis truth it is quite uncommon to see this incorporated in documentary practice’. As a genre, documentary goes to extraordinary lengths to ‘tidy up’ ambiguity.

As a site of Aboriginality in the city, Redfern has featured in several documentaries in recent years. In this article, I consider two of these to explore how the ‘tidying up’ process in documentaries effects the representation of Redfern, an inherently ambiguous place which continually ‘striates’ (Trinh, in Anderson, 1998, p. 203) the discourses that purport to describe it. The first, entitled The Block, was made by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Four Corners programme and screened in May 1997. The second is a special made by the Special Broadcasting Service’s (SBS)
Indigenous Cultural Affairs Magazine (ICAM) programme. This screened in April 1999. Examination of the Four Corners documentary reveals how the complexities of Aboriginal embodiment in Redfern can be reduced to singular, unreflective and colonizing meanings, which construe the suburb in terms of displacement. In contrast, analysis of the ICAM documentary shows that it is possible to represent the emplaced–displaced ambiguity of Aboriginal embodiment within the public domain.

While detailed discussion of the different cultural and production contexts of these documentaries is beyond the scope of this article, it is necessary to give brief consideration to the distinct aims and projects of the ABC and SBS. As a national broadcaster, the ABC presents numerous current affairs programmes and documentary series, of which Four Corners has often been seen as the apex. Indeed, Steve Mickler (1998, p. 174) writes, Four Corners is ‘a program which had a long reputation of reporting social and political issues to viewers addressed as the nation’s broad intelligentsia’. In light of this and of the broadcaster’s claim that Four Corners represents ‘investigative journalism at its very best’ (www.abc.net.au) my argument that the documentary is problematic may surprise some readers.

Despite depictions of it as ‘solidly Anglo-Celtic’ (Jacka, 2000, p. 57), the ABC claims to ‘reflect the diversity of interests and perspectives in the community nationally’ (www.abc.net.au). Nevertheless, when SBS TV was established in 1980, it was in response to the ABC’s ‘perceived failures’ in the areas of race and ethnicity (Jacka, 2000, p. 54): SBS TV describes itself as ‘the voice and vision of multicultural Australia’ (www.sbs.com.au). As a show which claims to present an ‘Indigenous perspective on contemporary Australia’ (www.sbs.com.au), ICAM is an important part of SBS TV’s explicit attempt to exhort the citizens of a multicultural society ‘to tolerance and understanding of difference’ (Jacka, 2000, p. 58).

Within academia, the ABC and SBS tend to be perceived as stations which provide ‘intelligent and informative broadcasting rather than ratings-boosting sensationalism’ (Mickler, 1998, p. 80). As such, they are often depicted as providing ‘fair’ representations of Aboriginal issues. Contrastingly, current affairs programmes on commercial television—for example, Sixty Minutes, Today Tonight and A Current Affair are seen as being ‘structurally aligned with conservative views of the world’ (Turner, 2000, p. 89), and as guilty of stigmatizing Aboriginality. This makes them an easier target for ideological critique than the former. Nevertheless, as this article demonstrates, the representations of Aboriginality generated by public broadcasting stations also need to be critiqued. My desire to challenge the problematic depiction of these as ‘fair’ is one reason why I have focused on ABC and SBS documentaries, rather than anything from commercial channels. The other is simply that the existence of two documentaries about the Block allows for a neat comparison.

Before embarking on the analysis of the documentaries, there is a need to describe the Block and Redfern more fully. Acknowledging the problematic positivism of all descriptions, I do this in the following section.

The Block

As an Aboriginal gathering place, Redfern has evolved over time and in response to particular histories of colonialist oppression. In 1966, a daily bulletin described ‘the plight’ of fourteen Aborigines who had just joined ‘about fifty big Aboriginal families’ in ‘Caroline Street, Redfern’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 24/2/1966). In 1973, when the newly elected Whitlam-led Labor government granted funds for the purchase of
approximately seventy terraced houses on the block bounded by Eveleigh, Vine, Louis and Caroline Streets, optimism ran high and rightly so: the newly formed Aboriginal Housing Company’s (AHC) ownership and control of this now valuable inner city land represented a ‘considerable lands right victory’ (Anderson, 1999, p. 219). Yet, for all the excitement and joy generated around this suburb, with its All Blacks football team, Black Theatre, Aboriginal services and capacity to provide a sense of belonging, it continues to be constructed in relation to ‘two centuries of … colonial capitalism’ (Anderson, 1999, p. 215). As tempting as it may be to imagine spaces apart from their corporeal realities, these are illusory: there are no places of self-determination that exist outside places produced through colonialism and assimilation.

It is in this context that the Block of today must be understood. A symbol of hope when it was purchased by the AHC in the early 1970s, the Block has been described variously as a ‘dream for self-determination’ and a ‘shameless slum’ (*The Block*, 1997). More recently, the Block has been associated in the mainstream press with heroin, as well as with crime, dilapidation and various forms of conflict—not the least of which has been between Aboriginal people who wish to remain living there and the AHC which is demolishing houses in order to redevelop the land. The AHC’s abandonment of its maintenance responsibilities, while in some sense an understandable response to a lack of funds resulting partly from unpaid rent, reflects the assumption that displacement is inevitable. By the time the ICAM documentary was made in early 1999, only thirty-two of the approximately seventy terraces remained. According to local church minister John McIntyre, the AHC’s demolition of houses has been ‘real bulldozers-at-night stuff’ (pers. comm., May 2000).

From the outset, the plan to remake the area has been opposed by some tenants and locals on the grounds that ‘we should just have housing for families on the Block’ (*Guwanyi*, 1997). Indeed, despite the many differences between tenants (whose varying cultural backgrounds and diverse perspectives on issues including community, drugs and police presence make it impossible to construct Aboriginal inhabitants as a unified group), they share a concern that the Block not pass into developers’ hands (Anderson, 1999, p. 219). This is because many Aboriginal inhabitants—including more transient ones—think of the Block as home (Anderson, 1999, p. 219). And they do so despite the fact that the area would seem to be a site of ruined and wrecked Aboriginal bodies. This apparent contradiction is addressed by the philosopher Edward Casey, who writes: ‘home can be experienced at one and the same time as perfectly amicable, at another time as hostile, [even as] it remains one and the same place through these vicissitudes and not just despite them’ (Casey, 1993, p. 294, emphasis in original). This view of home enables tenants to draw attention to the inadequacies and brokenness of their homes and bodies, while sustaining a view of the Block as a place which is valuable to well-being.

As a somewhat unhomely homeplace, Redfern evinces a profound ambiguity. Yet it continues to be constructed as an unequivocally destructive force in Indigenous lives. This has led Kay Anderson (1999, pp. 213–214) to remark that although the ‘everyday, place-specific realities of Australia’s heterogeneous Aboriginalities are … complex and contradictory … a content analysis of media representations of the district would be unremarkable in the consistency of its derogatory themes’. Trinh (1991, 1992, 1999) notes that documentaries are heavily implicated in the production of meaning as singular. This is certainly clear upon viewing the *Four Corners* documentary, *The Block*. There is, however, evidence that the ICAM documentary depicts Redfern more equivocally. In what follows, I examine these documentaries, highlighting the relationship between their respective representations of Redfern and their construction of Indigenous embodiment.
Arguing that dominant Australian discourses about Aboriginality produce Indigenous subjects according to a binarist logic—that is emplaced or displaced—I suggest the need to conceptualize Indigenous entitlement as an interaction between these apparent extremes.

The Documentary Mode

Both of these documentaries explore the housing on and Aboriginal inhabitation of the Block. The Four Corners documentary relies on the ostensibly authoritative pronouncements of the key narrator, Liz Jackson, a well-known, non-Aboriginal television journalist. The second, SBS’s ICAM special, is presented by Michael Watson-Bayles, an Aboriginal man who has variously lived on and visited the Block for more than twenty years. To a great extent, this latter documentary is constructed as an ‘insider’s’ perspective.

The process of documenting (and thus interpreting and constructing) other stories, lives and places has been considered by a number of scholars (see Trinh, 1991, 1992; Corner, 1996; Grant and Sloniowski, 1998). Trinh (1992) provides a particularly incisive analysis of documentary and its effects. Her approach is exemplified by her deconstructive critique of the category ‘documentary’. The problem with documentary, she argues, is that it encourages people to ‘expect information and truth’ (p. 161). Arguing that ‘meaning has to retain its complexities otherwise it will just be a pawn in the game of power’ (p. 154), Trinh emphasizes the plurality and destabilization of meaning, the prevention of closure and the presentation of ambiguity. Noting that documentary ‘sets a value on intimate observation and assesses its worth according to how well it succeeds in capturing reality on the run’, Trinh (1991, pp. 33–34, emphasis in original) discusses the apparatus as an instrument that ‘provokes people into uttering the “truth”’. The result, she suggests, ‘is the elaboration of a whole aesthetic of objectivity and the development of comprehensive technologies of truth capable of promoting what is right and what is wrong in the world’ (p. 33). The documentary’s status ‘as record’ increases its capacity to influence the construction of places. This is particularly so for places like the Block, which most audience members will never ‘know’ through more ‘direct’ encounters. Considerations of how ‘the real’ is produced illustrate that paradoxes and complexities are continually suppressed in favour of easily stabilized meanings. Although it is becoming almost commonplace to assume that things seem ‘real’ less because they simply are, than because they are constructed as such, documentaries continue to be interpreted as the presentation of ‘truth’ and ‘evidence’, rather than as sophisticated fictions. This is evident, for example, in The Australian’s weekly media lift-out and Australian Screen Education (2001), both of which tend to discuss documentaries as though they were ‘windows on the world’. The omniscience that pervades documentaries ‘in their structure, editing and cinematography, as well as in the effacement of the filmmakers, or the invisibility of their politics of non-location’ (Trinh, 1992, p. 113) means that they are constructed as though from a non-place, and the images they present as truth, ‘objectively’ realized.

A public speech act performed as though the camera is the addressee (Corner, 1996, p. 68), the interview is one of the main ways the documentary constructs evidentiality. According to Trinh:

Interviews … [which] occupy a dominant role in documentary practices—in terms of authenticating information; validating the voices recruited for the sake
of the argument the film advances (claiming however to ‘give voice’ to the people); and legitimising an exclusionary system of representation based on the dominant ideology of presence and authenticity—are usually sophisticated devices of fiction (Trinh, 1992, p. 193).

The documentary sequences I consider both involve ‘interviews’ which help to promote a sense of evidentiality. In order to understand this process, it is necessary to consider how the choice of interview subjects impacts upon the strength of the ‘evidence’ and thus my reasons for focusing on the sequences in which these interviews appear.

Meaghan Morris (1992, p. 30) has noted that there are descriptive problems associated with non-canonical film study, including the fact that readers may not have seen the film being discussed. These descriptive problems partly explain my decision to analyse particular sequences rather than the entire documentaries. The belief that it is often the easily overlooked details that enable one to ‘gain an insight into the popular expression of beliefs and values’ (Jacobs, 1999, p. 17) was also a contributing factor. The most important thing, however, was that these sequences had the most impact on me as a viewer. Indeed, it is precisely because of their persuasive power that I am interested in critiquing them. The intensity of the included scenes supports the notion that in documentary, ‘truth has to be made vivid, interesting; it has to be “dramatised” if it is to convince the audience of the evidence, whose “confidence” in it allows truth to take shape’ (Trinh, 1991, p. 35). Affected by the intensity of the scenes, I was also struck by the similarities between them. Both are centred around an interview with a (different) woman inside a house on the Block (in The Block this is with a young woman, Chrissie; in ICAM, with a thirty-two-year-old woman called Marilyn). Both emphasize Aboriginal women’s perceptions of housing on the Block, and in each case the woman can be described as suffering forms of sickness that mark Aboriginal lives, including (between them) profound despair, drug addiction and homelessness. Witnessing personal distress, the sequences are particularly intense and ‘our observation of them is meant to be instructive’ (Corner, 1996, p. 118); that is, viewers are directed to contemplate the meaning of the Block through and for these women. These two factors—the intensity of and the similarities between the sequences—led me to posit that they constitute ‘key evidence’ in the separate contexts of the documentary of which each is a part. As with a legal case, the ‘key evidence’ in a documentary is presented in an attempt to persuade the ‘audience’ of the veracity of the argument. Thus, a close look at these sequences makes it possible to see what ‘case’ each documentary is trying to make about Redfern.

I consider there to be three main aspects to the coding of the material as key evidence. The first has to do with the domestic setting of the interviews. The domestic focus of the sequences promotes a particular kind of viewing relation in which the audience is placed in close proximity to personal matters. Associated with the private, and thus with the supposedly unmediated world of the emotions, the internal sphere tends to be constructed as more ‘authentic’ and ‘feminine’ than the public realm. This highlights the fact that the documentary manufactures ‘truth’ through reference to pre-existing notions of this, including the assumption that intimate observation captures the ‘truth’. In The Block, women, seen as the ‘correct’ inhabitants of the private sphere, are interviewed in domestic places, such as kitchens, lounge rooms and (at the most external) the front porch. Indeed, the only exception to this, in the case of The Block, involves an on-the-street interview with a white doctor, who, because she is being asked to comment on health issues, is constructed as inhabiting a distant and ‘official’ position. In contrast, in the ICAM documentary most of the interviews with women and girls take place
outside the home, in the street and local parks, for example (although Marilyn, the subject I am focusing on, is inside her ‘home’). Thus, the ICAM documentary—which is generally more balanced in its portrayal of gendered belonging—shows a proclivity towards constructing the whole suburb and not just the domestic realm as a homeplace. In contrast, The Block reproduces the notion that questions about the Block are best answered by women discussing housing conditions from their lounge rooms or rat-infested kitchens. As such, dwelling is represented through images of failed domesticity rather than the typically more felicitous local race- and culture-based forms of belonging that exist in and around the streets of Redfern.

Chrissie and Marilyn’s status as wounded or traumatized subjects is the second feature of the material that codes it as key evidence. According to Hal Foster (1996), abject bodies are seen as providing the evidentiary basis of testimonies to truth. This is supported by Brian Wilson (in Hartley, 1999, p. 96) who writes that ‘the victim [has] become the staple of the realist documentary’. As such, the drug-addicted (The Block), suicidal and bandaged (ICAM) bodies of these women are likely to be interpreted as connotative of the truth. Finally, because black bodies and women’s bodies are seen as closer to nature and thus as ‘unconstructed’, Aboriginal women (more than Aboriginal men or white women) are interpreted as epitomizing the real. Thus, via a complex set of interacting signifiers—the private, the internal, the female, the Aboriginal and the authentic—Marilyn and Chrissie’s embodied pain seems to represent the real Redfern.

The following discussion is divided into two sections, analysing the Chrissie and Marilyn sequences, respectively. In that these documentaries focus on a woman in her woundedness, they might both be expected to be constructing the ‘real’ Redfern as a place of wounded bodies—thus reinscribing the ‘Redfern equals displacement’ text. However, conducting a postcolonial reading of the texts, I argue that these ostensibly similar testimonial scenes are ultimately framed to connote differently ‘real’ Redforns. While The Block suppresses ambiguity to construct Redfern as a (dis)place, the ICAM documentary constructs the relationship between Marilyn and the Block in such a way that Redfern is shown to be homely and unhomely at once. As such, this latter documentary illustrates the value of going beyond binarisms in representing Aboriginality.

**Incarcerated Bodies: Chrissie**

In this section, I discuss the Chrissie sequence and the apparatus’ placement of Chrissie to argue that The Block constructs Redfern through images and narratives of displacement. The sequence occurs about twelve minutes into the fifty-minute-long documentary with the main commentary being provided by Liz Jackson. The first shot in the sequence is of a dirty bathroom in an empty house (Fig. 1). In a voice-over Jackson discusses the house: ‘It lay abandoned and was for a while squatted by drug users and street kids who were drawn to the Block’. The next shot reveals the kitchen sink area of (what is presumably) the same house. A young woman of about fifteen or sixteen years of age enters the kitchen. The name ‘Chrissie’—which appears in quotation marks and is obviously a pseudonym—is inserted at the bottom of the screen as she stands in front of the kitchen sink. Making assumptions about what environments are appropriate for which bodies, the documentary has produced the specific context of ‘the slum’.

Spoken for by the subtitle, Chrissie does not introduce herself, nor is she introduced by the reporter, whose presence, along with the rest of the crew’s, is silent and invisible throughout. This effacement of the filmmakers can be seen as a tactic of power for, in
order to maintain its credibility, that is, ‘for the “fake” to look “real” … [power’s] workings must remain invisible’ (Trinh, 1992, p. 172). As Chrissie looks into the nearby bin, the camera follows her vision (Fig. 2). A close-up of the bin’s contents reveals a dead and bloody rat. Having entered immediately after the word ‘squatted’ was used by Jackson, Chrissie’s status as ‘street kid and/or drug addict’ has been established by the documentary’s timing and placement of her, even before she speaks. Thus, the notion that she is representing herself is, to a great extent, a convenient fiction. Confirming rather than indicating her drug-ravaged embodiment, Chrissie’s slightly hunched stance and somewhat slurred speech are thus made to testify against her and to the film’s own exclusionary system of representation (Fig. 3).

There are walls on three sides of the scene and the camera’s position in relation to Chrissie (near the sink) constitutes a fourth wall (Fig. 3), creating the effect of a small space (i.e. half the size of an already small kitchen). The angle highlights the bare and impersonal environment. In this ‘slum’ context, isolated and temporarily ‘incarcerated’ by the camera, and addressing the off-screen figure of Auntie Pam, Chrissie says the following (bodily and camera movements and shot changes are noted in italics):

Oh I’ve been a street kid for nearly at least 6/7 years hey Auntie Pam and y’know I, I’ve lived here and these houses has just been the same y’know to tell you the truth, I, I, I’m a criminal [points to self; Fig. 3] but I, I, I’m cleaning my act up at the moment y’know, going to court and fixing everything
up but y’know we [cutaway to three young men standing outside is shown; Fig. 6] all just hang out on the street, we need a 24 hour hostel or a refuge, [returns to shot of Chrissie] y’know what I mean and we [points to self] might be alright [laughs and briefly covers her face with her hand], we might be alright y’know [she looks down and the camera zooms in to a close-up shot]. That’s all I can say, sorry, that’s all I, that’s just comin’ from my heart. I dunno [she shrugs, the zoom in continues]. Sorry. Bye. [Leaving as she says these last words, Chrissie then walks toward the camera in order to go past it; Fig. 4.]

As a ‘place of performance’ (Threadgold, 1997b, p. 57), the scene, like the courtroom, is almost invariably a place in which the filmmakers as ‘the other players know the script, the spatial organisation, the rules of the game … and have performed … before’ while the interview subjects, unfamiliar with the code, are ‘expected to participate in the performance unrehearsed’ (p. 57). This pattern is especially evident when Chrissie, who started off by speaking about housing conditions, turns almost immediately to giving a confession—a response no doubt elicited by the similarities between her current circumstances and a police interrogation. ‘Alone’ and telling what she purports to be the ‘truth’, Chrissie ‘confesses’ ‘I’m a criminal’ before going on to speak about her current efforts to redeem herself. Responding to discourses which construct her as a ‘bad black’, Chrissie’s construction of herself as a ‘criminal’ who is trying to ‘fix things up’ creates an implied audience of judges, a circumstance which reflects the imbrication of the legal and televisual apparatuses.2

According to Michel Foucault (1977), the spatial distribution of individuals is one of the major ways in which discipline proceeds. ‘Most often this is done by enclosure. In the case of the prison the criminal is separated from others in the community by being confined to a single place’ (in McHoul and Grace, 1993, pp. 68–69). Prison-like, the camera ‘traps’ Chrissie who literally has almost to go ‘through’ it in order to remove herself from its gaze. Reading Chrissie’s awkward laughter and retreat as a sign that she feels uncomfortable trying to discuss this public matter from a position of authority, I consider that the apparatus, by placing Chrissie in such a way as to encourage self-revelation rather than critical comment, has problematized her capacity to speak about the possibility of a refuge. This illustrates the ‘deafness of the public version to the private and individual and … very specifically black and juvenile one’ (Threadgold, 1997a, p. 193). Although Chrissie’s mild polemic about the need for a refuge is spoken as though to Auntie Pam, she is addressing a wider audience. Chrissie’s self-awareness (indicated by her self-conscious laugh and apologies) belies the possibility that she has ‘forgotten’ the public gaze. Thus, the audience is made aware that they are seeing a subject who knows she is being observed, even as Chrissie attempts to address a caring, proximate individual rather than an anonymous public. By saying ‘that’s all’, Chrissie signals the end of her willingness to address this public. At precisely this moment, the camera begins to get closer to her face. The timing of this focus is no coincidence: the very fact that Chrissie is seeking to retreat from the public gaze makes her a more interesting focus. ‘Cornered’ into a confession of her criminality, Chrissie is made to epitomize displacement. Ultimately her placement in the kitchen—and her inability to remain there—are construed as evidence of the Block’s failure to produce ‘appropriately’ placed feminine subjects.

Immediately following this somewhat abrupt end to the ‘interview’, there is the sound of a sob and an accompanying shot of Chrissie hugging Auntie Pam (Fig. 5). The camera, turned invasively despite Chrissie’s attempt to remove herself from the frame
FIG. 4. Chrissie has to walk past the camera (source: ABC, 1997).

FIG. 5. Chrissie hugs Auntie Pam, the woman she has been addressing (source: ABC, 1997).

(Fig. 5), ‘captures’ the embracing figures who are standing on the previously unfilmed side of the kitchen. The value documentary places on intimate observation and on ‘capturing reality on the run’ (Trinh, 1991, p. 33) is thus confirmed to be greater than that placed on respecting the subject’s desire to end her participation in the film. Perhaps the only ‘problem’ from the filmmakers’ perspective is that the camera, almost certainly on a tripod, took some moments to re-orient, a factor which makes its presence more obvious. As a ‘fixed observation post’ the camera is able ‘to put its intrusion to use’ (Trinh, 1991, p. 34). Indeed, it may be because of its extraordinary capacity to provoke truth utterances that this, rather than a mobile camera was used. Despite the accidental noticeability of the apparatus and the fact that truth ‘does not yield itself … in (filmic) frames’ (Trinh, 1991, p. 30), Chrissie’s movement away from the camera that is, her very ‘on the run-ness’, would only serve to heighten the veracity of these moments.

In a voice somewhat muffled by tears and the embrace, Chrissie says ‘I’m hurt, y’know’. As before, when Chrissie began to hide behind her hands, the camera zooms in, indicating the perversely proportionate relation between Chrissie’s withdrawal and the apparatus’ scrutiny of her. Again, Chrissie responds by moving out of its frame. Saying ‘I’m going Auntie Pam’, she leaves the embrace and begins to walk towards the front door, and thus finally escapes the (relatively immobile) invasive gaze of the apparatus.

Chrissie’s address to Auntie Pam—‘hey Auntie Pam’—exposes the camera as subordinating mechanism, interpolating a personal element into the otherwise alienating scene. The appeal to an intimate other enables Chrissie to refuse something of the isolation imposed on her by the camera’s placement of her body. The words connote a place and a person ‘outside’ and beyond the ‘four walls’ of this cell-like space where she has stood ‘alone’ in front of a silent, invisible and anonymous crew, who confirm her status as the subject of the ‘interrogation’ (Saint Genet, 1985). By placing herself through Auntie Pam, Chrissie reminds the audience that, far from being alone, she is surrounded by other bodies, at least one of which is familiar to her: the Aboriginal meanings of Auntie enhance the sense of care and emotional support that Chrissie manages to convey, despite the odds. Because it complicates the apparatus’ alienating placement of her as an isolated other, Chrissie’s address to Auntie Pam may initially seem like a ‘mistake’ in the eyes of filmmakers aiming to render all forms of mediation discreet. If it was a mistake, however, it is one which pays off from the filmmakers’ perspective. Connotative of the idea that intimacy lies outside the ‘organized’ frame, in the place where
Auntie Pam is, Chrissie’s address establishes this initially unframed place as the locus of the intimate and true. As such, and despite the awkwardness of having to turn the camera around, the place to which Chrissie spontaneously moves is constructed as a site of unmediated and authentic emotion and thus of the seemingly, incontrovertibly ‘real’. This version of ‘realness’ might have been less problematic—from the Redfern equals displacement perspective—if Chrissie had not chosen this moment to confess her ‘hurt’. Having failed to deter the camera crew by repeating the statement ‘that’s all’, Chrissie becomes more pointed. She says ‘bye’ and moves out of the camera’s range (Fig. 4). Because Chrissie has conveyed her desire to end her public ‘availability’, the shot which follows (Fig. 5) is readily interpretable as one in which Chrissie is presenting an unmitigated version of her reality, one not meant for ‘public’ consumption. That is, the shot of Chrissie crying with Auntie Pam may appear to reflect that the ‘dismissed’ camera crew have captured the ‘real’ Chrissie. Precisely because of this, viewers primed to see these moments—where the public self breaks down—as authentic, are likely to construct these moments as ‘real’. The collapse of the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ which occurs here is necessarily considered in the broader context of contemporary culture which has become obsessed with the ‘real’, frequently assumed to dwell in the realm of the ‘private’. Because the ‘binary division of private and public neatly replicates the gendered difference of nature and culture’ (Mohanram, 1999, p. 75), and as the female and the natural continue to be associated with the private, the abject body of the Aboriginal woman ‘in private’ comes to be seen as ‘natural’, rather than constructed. In this way, the ‘real’ Redfern is symbolized through the seemingly unconstructed image of Chrissie in her ‘private’ pain, rather than through the matrix of embodiments which comprise this place. As such, the footage is made to support the dubious and related notion that Aboriginality manifested thus is ‘real’. Consequently, it is suffering, and, associatively, displacement, which are likely to be construed as the truth of Aboriginal life in Redfern.

Chrissie’s self-surveying response to the apparatus is, however, not the only form of ‘criminal’ surveillance which occurs in this brief sequence. The cutaway shot of three
young men (Fig. 6) at precisely the point where Chrissie states ‘we all just hang out in the street’ is construed as evidence of her claim. Trinh (1991, p. 37) notes that the practice of pointing the camera at ‘silent common people’ is consistently represented as enough to make the film seem ‘morally right’. Yet, reminiscent of secret/stake-out police photos, the shot has (immorally) been taken from a hidden ‘surveillance’ point. If Chrissie is framed as though in a cell, the three Aboriginal men in this shot (obtained from behind a drawn back curtain in the upstairs room of a house), look as though they are in a prison yard. As viewers look down over the men, who are standing in a concrete area surrounded by wire fencing, the racist characterization of Aboriginal men as idle, criminal and potentially dangerous is confirmed. Moreover, by establishing a visual link between Chrissie’s ‘we’ and these criminalized figures (‘on the street’), the documentary reframes homelessness, making it less a problem of disadvantage than of social control.

Implying that Chrissie is endangered rather than enabled by this ‘we’ (a construct of the editing process), the documentary opens up a gap between Chrissie as a young Aboriginal woman inside, and ‘them’, as idle and seemingly ‘predatory’ males loitering outside. Framed as threat, these men are made to seem less like individuals who might comprise this potentially positive ‘we’ and more like they are part not only of a social problem but also of Chrissie’s problem. As such, the solidarity that inheres in Chrissie’s ‘we all just hang out in the street’ is undermined by a depiction which highlights gender differences rather than racial unity.

For Chrissie, whose street existence undermines the association between women and home, Redfern seems to represent a kind of houseless home. And yet, because the documentary insists on constructing her body through forms of dislocation (i.e. from the *domus*—as represented by the kitchen—from Auntie Pam, from the men outside and from her narrative about the need for a refuge), Chrissie’s status as an emplaced subject is suppressed in favour of a focus on displacement. By implication, Redfern seems exclusively to connote displacement. This conclusion is supported by narrator Liz Jackson’s final statement that, on the Block, ‘the dream is over’. While this notion is only articulated at the end of the documentary, it has informed *The Block*’s construction of meanings throughout.

I would argue that the Chrissie sequence in this *Four Corners* documentary manufactures meaning as singular. Constructing Redfern through images and narratives of displacement, *The Block* perpetuates the view that this is an unequivocally damaging and damaged place. In the next section, I consider the ‘Marilyn sequence’ from the *ICAM* documentary, demonstrating the interplay between emplacement and displacement that seems to characterize Aboriginal embodiment in Redfern.

**Bodily Ambiguity on the Block: Marilyn**

Screened in April 1999, the SBS *ICAM* documentary is thirty minutes long and presented by Michael Watson-Bayles, an Indigenous Redfern affiliate. The sequence I consider occurs about eight minutes in. Depicting Marilyn inside a squat on the Block, it bears several similarities to the Chrissie sequence. However, although both documentaries construct Redfern through reference to Aboriginal women in pain, there are significant differences between the ways in which the two films frame the bodies and places of these women, and consequently, between the Redfern(s) which arise from their wounded and differently ‘homeless’ bodies. Specifically, and as I argue, the *ICAM* documentary constructs the Block through reference to both emplacement and displacement. Drawing on the notion that the Marilyn sequence (like the Chrissie sequence) constitutes ‘key
evidence’, I show how, in the ICAM documentary ‘meaning … [is] prevented from coming to closure at what is said and what is shown’ (Trinh, 1991, p. 30).

Identified in a subtitle as ‘Marilyn—squatter’, the interviewee is first shown from a distance. Standing outside what is presumably her home, Marilyn leans on another Aboriginal woman (who is not identified) and together with Watson-Bayles the three appear to be having a conversation (Fig. 7). The shot conveys the sense of a prolonged doorstep greeting or farewell: connoting a sense of friendship, it establishes Watson-Bayles’ difference from non-affiliated interviewers such as Liz Jackson. In the next shot, Marilyn and her friend sit close together on a couch inside the lounge room of a simply furnished ‘squatter’s’ house covered in graffiti (Fig. 8). Marilyn is clutching her handbag and this, and the fact that her friend still has sunglasses on her head, give the women a temporary look, as though they are ready to get up and leave at any time, an option which proved, in Chrissie’s case, to be necessary. Neither looks relaxed; in fact Marilyn’s friend has her arms tightly crossed and appears worried. Her closeness to Marilyn conveys a solidarity which provides a striking contrast with Chrissie’s alienation by the mechanism. Watson-Bayles, who assumes an informal interviewing role, is also seated close by. Whereas in the Chrissie sequence, the crew made itself silent and invisible, leading Chrissie to appeal beyond the frame to the unseen Auntie Pam, from the outset, Marilyn is placed by others whose care for her is evident. Moreover, despite being a ‘squatter’, Marilyn, unlike Chrissie, is not filmed in some corner of an abandoned slum, but in her ‘home’, a well-established squat. However inadequate this home may be in other ways, it provides Marilyn with a securer place from which to speak her story than the abandoned and filthy kitchen where Chrissie was placed.

Marilyn introduces herself in a somewhat formal way, thus conveying her awareness that this representation will be broadcast to strangers. Touching her heart she says: ‘My name’s Marilyn, Marilyn Carver. I’ve been livin’ here for, oh since the age of three and I’m thirty-three this year. I’ve been a squatter here practically all me life.’ The ironies of Marilyn calling herself a ‘squatter’ when she has virtually always inhabited Redfern, are multiple and acute, indicating the extent to which Aboriginal emplacement and displacement seem to be imbricated in this suburb. Towards the end of this sentence, the shot, which has been a midshot of the two women, with Marilyn in the foreground, changes to a high-angle shot which reveals more of the room (Fig. 9). Although wider or higher framing is no less a framing than a closer shot (Trinh, 1991, p. 34), the higher angle’s reframing of Marilyn—by making the presence of Watson-Bayles, an Aboriginal girl and a sleeping child (Fig. 10) apparent—reveals her emplacement by others.

After Marilyn introduces herself, the first exchange proceeds as follows:

Watson Bayles: How long youse been in this house?
Marilyn: I’ve been here now for about eight months.
WB: Eight months.
M: Yeah, eight months.
WB: How many live here? How many squattin’?
M: There’s two, four, six. There’s seven of us here, stay here.
WB: Have you been on the housing list?
M: [swinging leg] I’ve been on the housing list since I was pregnant with me boy at the age of 15 and I’m still waiting for a house and my boy’s 17 now, y’know, it’s wrong. He’s still over there living with my grandmother and I know she’s
not gonna be around for much longer [puts arms out] so then what’s gonna happen? Where’s me boy gonna go? He’s not gonna come to me [points to self] cause look where I’m livin’. Until I get a house, until Micky puts a roof over my head, this is it, this is my home.

At this point the film uses an intertitle to introduce ‘Micky’, or Mick Mundine, the director of the AHC. The intertitle states: ‘Mick Mundine is the CEO of the Aboriginal Housing Co. His corporation has been accused of pushing the residents out of Redfern.’ As shots of the AHC office building are shown, Mundine’s voice can be heard (Fig. 11). In this way, the film places Mundine before we see him in his office at the AHC (Fig. 12). In contrast to Chrissie and Marilyn who are constructed through their respective relations to ‘squats’ (i.e. ‘unofficial’ forms of inhabitation), Mundine speaks from an ‘official’, non-residing perspective. Whereas Marilyn emphasizes Redfern as home, Mundine’s talk is very much about housing: he doesn’t even approach the issue of the Block being a homeplace. Amid cutaways to housing (Fig. 13), Mundine responds to Watson-Bayles’ question regarding how many houses are left on the Block. As with
Marilyn, the interview proceeds in an ‘as-if-spontaneous’ (Corner, 1996, p. 78) fashion. In answer to Watson-Bayles, Mundine states:

Well, at the present moment we have thirty-two houses because we trying, we’re trying to restructure the old place. We’re in a very vicious cycle at the present moment of what’s happening with the drugs and the crime rates and the lack of government, government funding.

Mundine’s comments, which draw attention to ‘the drugs and the crime rates and the lack of … funding’, constitute a kind of litany and ‘official’ response to Redfern as a ‘problem’ place. Mundine also speaks about the surveys the AHC did which indicated that of all the tenants, only 25 per cent wanted to continue living on the Block. Later, he adds: ‘some of the people that are complaining are people who don’t really live here’ (ICAM). With this statement, Mundine constructs Marilyn’s ‘squatter’ body as one which doesn’t ‘really live here’, and thus as one which can be ‘denied and … made deniable’ (Nast, 1998, p. 112).

Revealing the injurious effects of constructing inhabitants’ bodies as insufficiently connotative of emplacement, the ICAM documentary returns to the squat scene, showing Marilyn, arms folded in front of her torso and crying. She states:
I'm that way where I don’t care anymore y’know, like a month ago I tried to [spreads out arms] kill meself mate ‘cause of this shit. I’m sick of fighting Micky for a place, I'm sick of [crosses arms again], it’s fucked, sorry I'm just … [she hides her face with her hand and the scene is cut].

Watson-Bayles’ claim that people in Redfern ‘feel good about who they are’ is rendered problematic by Marilyn’s suicide attempt and evident sense of displacement from home, as this is constructed through gendered notions of belonging. However, as I discuss below, the placement of Marilyn’s body by proximate and caring others bespeaks a co-existent, more felicitous emplacement. As such, the ICAM documentary can be said to produce meaning as ambiguous, rather than singular.

I have already noted how the proximity of Marilyn’s friend amply conveys that she is supported and cared for in this place. I turn now to the presence of the girl in the doorway and the child sleeping on the nearby couch/bed (Figs 9, 10). Like Watson-Bayles and Marilyn’s friend, these other bodies diffuse the sense of isolation that the apparatus imposes on its subjects. Sitting in the open front doorway of the house and outside the circle of intimacy created by the two women and Watson-Bayles, the girl occupies an interstitial position between inside and outside, intimate and audience. Whatever her relation to Marilyn, as a non-participant and largely un-framed observer, she places the apparatus. While for Chrissie the camera was an unseen wall which momentarily cornered her, in this instance the mechanism is itself placed by the girl’s bodily nearness. As such, it is less the girl’s viewing practices (as though by ‘looking back’ she is subverting the apparatus’ power to dominate the gaze), and more her very presence which conveys the sense that place-making within the frame is reciprocal and intersubjective, rather than one way. In addition, her position in the doorway highlights the lounge room’s permeability, its openness to light, air and the public space of the street. This contrasts significantly with the cell-like space in which Chrissie was located. Silent and without the power to narrate, neither the girl in the doorway nor the friend on the couch are ‘subjects’. However, this is precisely what enables them to perform the function of placing the apparatus, something which ‘subjects’—by virtue of their position as subjects—can rarely do because subject surveillance is one-way, rather than reciprocal.

As with Marilyn’s friend and the girl in the doorway, the shots of the child asleep on a nearby couch-bed establish Marilyn as part of a relational web, enhancing the impression that she is surrounded by bodies to whom she is variously connected. Moreover, in contrast to Marilyn’s claims that this place is unfit for her son, the image of a sleeping child connotes a place which is (at least momentarily) safe and peaceful. Thus, rather than being collapsible, the said and the shown of the ICAM documentary reveal the Block’s multiplicity, its paradoxes and apparent capacity to produce subjects who are emplaced and displaced at the same time. Where the Chrissie sequence reflects social voyeurism and a flagrant transgression of the codes of permission, the social element in this scene conveys a sense of the apparatus’ accountability to Aboriginal bodies. Connoting Marilyn’s interpersonal connectedness, the four people who appear in the frame provide a key to understanding Redfern as a site of emplacement.

Later, when the documentary returns to this interview scene, Marilyn’s emplacement enables her to articulate that Redfern is home through the vicissitudes of its unhomeliness, and because of the intimate relations between Aboriginal people and this place. She states:

This is home. This is where I grew up. This is my family. This is all the family I have, here, Redfern. And I honestly believe if they, if they took this away
from us, they’d be breaking a lot of, they’d be causing a lot of heartache, a lot of pain. They’d be pulling families apart, and it would that’s that’s what’s gonna happen, and I mean fair enough if they wanna give you a place outer suburbs, but I don’t wanna live outer suburbs, I don’t wanna leave here, this is my home, y’know, this is all I’ve got.

Marilyn’s emplacement by these proximate others points towards the suburb or neighbourhood-based relationality which appears to be crucial to the articulation of the Block as a homeplace. Thus, while the private and typically feminized place of the domus is presented as unhomely in both the Chrissie and the ICAM sequences, in the latter this is not made to signal the idea that ‘the dream is over’ (The Block, 1997). This is because the ICAM documentary considers the Block’s local race- and culture-based connections alongside its (in)capacity to provide home in the conventional, gendered sense. ICAM demonstrates that for Marilyn, as for many Indigenous people, it may be necessary to claim emplacement, even when this is constituted by an intersecting sense of displacement.

**Conclusion**

I have discussed the Block as a complex place with multiple histories and identities. Conceptualizing homeplace as something which persists in and through vicissitudes, I suggest that ‘being at home’ involves a range of bodily experiences, which show emplacement and displacement to be a matter of degree. Following Trinh, I posit that documentaries, in their structuring, editing and production, tend to work against the production of meaning as ambiguous and multiple. Elucidating key aspects of the documentary-making project to expound the idea of ‘key evidence’, I argued that the Chrissie and Marilyn sequences constitute ‘key evidence’, and interpreted these sequences as a crucial part of each documentary’s framing of Redfern. In sum, I have demonstrated that while both films rely on women’s wounded bodies to construct the Block as a place of Aboriginal suffering, there are crucial differences between their representations of Redfern. Whereas The Block constructed Redfern as a place where women, displaced from the kitchen, could not possibly be emplaced, the ICAM documentary went beyond this gendered and enclosing categorization of home to one in which gendered articulations of displacement intersected with, and were partly subverted by, racialized articulations of emplacement. While both documentaries depict the private feminized space of the domus as at least partly inaccessible, the ICAM documentary, because it also constructs home through racialized belonging, depicts Redfern as a place of profound displacement and emplacement.

The ICAM documentary’s construction of Redfern is instructive, connoting representations which contrast with the documentary mode’s usual suppression of ambiguity. Media representations reflect wider cultural discourses which see Aborigines as either ‘traditional’—and therefore emplaced—or ‘non-traditional’—and thus displaced. Yet, various paradoxes—of emplacement and displacement, connection and disconnection—are embodied in Aboriginal claims to belong to places. If documentary making is not to be the modern medium of neocolonial relations, these paradoxes must be taken into account, and meaning, rather than being fixed, must be allowed to retain its complexities.

Correspondence: Ceridwen.Spark@arts.monash.edu.au
Notes

[1] My comments should not be taken as an attempt to account for the interpretations made by other viewers. [2] It is more common to discuss the apparatus as ‘cinematic’ (Threadgold, 1997b). However, significant differences between the cinematic and the televisual modes (McKee, 1997) make it necessary to distinguish between them.

References


**Documentaries**

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*The Block* (*Four Corners*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation Television, 12 May 1997).

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Ceridwen Spark is an Honorary Research Associate in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University.