Roundtable: *Message from Mungo* and the Scales of Memory

Rosanne Kennedy (RK), Jeanine Leane (JL), Ann McGrath (AM), Nicole Moore (NM) and Maria Nugent (MN)

INTRODUCTION

Rosanne Kennedy and Maria Nugent

ANN MCGRATH AND ANDREW PIKE'S RECENT DOCUMENTARY FILM *Message from Mungo* implicitly addresses several dimensions of the concept of 'scales of memory', including the 'deep time' of Aboriginal habitation of the land, transnational and national science in tension with local Aboriginal knowledge and presence, and justice, power and authority. We invited Ann McGrath to introduce and show her film as part of the conference program, and we asked literary scholar and author Jeanine Leane, who comes from Wiradjuri Country in south-west New South Wales to respond. The film screening and Jeanine's deeply felt and thoughtful response prompted an intense discussion. We were keen to represent that previously unrecorded discussion in this Special Issue, so we later invited a few of the participants to reconvene to discuss the film again and to revisit some of the issues that had been raised. We recorded that session and the following is drawn from it.

Message from Mungo is a fascinating and powerful film for the ways in which it cuts across different frames and scales of memory—the national, the transnational, the local, familial or intimate. It opens with beautiful panning

shots of the landscape, which introduces from the outset the scales of geological time and implies questions concerning a deep memory of place.

Just as quickly, though, the film introduces other scales—such as very recent history, including the history of Australian archaeology and scientific research into the Aboriginal past, in which the so-called 'discovery' of Mungo Lady in 1968/1969 was a seminal moment, and the political struggles that ensued as Aboriginal people asserted their own authority over her. These histories are only a few decades old. A significant time scale that the film engages with is the period from the 1960s to the 1980s and into the present—a mere fifty years that is set against the 50,000 years that Mungo Lady documents. As is well known, this was a period of considerable change in Australian understandings about the Aboriginal past. It was also a time in which Aboriginal people insisted on the right of ownership of their history. By focusing on the 'discovery' and disputation about Mungo Lady, the film tells a really important history about a sometimes fraught relationship between archaeologists and Aboriginal people, turning particularly on the question of who is 'authorised' to tell stories about deep time—not to mention recent history—in Australia, and what methods are now considered appropriate. Various people in the film—archaeologists and Aboriginal people alike—reflect on these changes. Many different views are expressed, with some scientists, for instance, disavowing their previous practices while others decry changes to the conditions under which research can now be conducted. Indeed, much of the first part of the film is taken up with archaeologists remembering a time which, although only a few decades ago, is quite different from now.

This narrative strand brings to the fore another meaning of 'scale' that is central to the film's narrative—the scales of justice. How were and are competing claims about knowledge, ownership, and authority negotiated? How does the film work to enact a kind of reconciliation of conflicting claims and positions by the end? Does this work in a satisfying way?

The effect of these questions and concerns is that throughout the film the focus—or action—constantly shifts. It can move in a minute from the transnational scale of world science, with which some of the archaeologists interviewed are primarily concerned, to the intimate and proximate scale of human relationships—of both rivalries and friendships—through which various ethical and moral issues are given expression.

The film is composed almost entirely of extracts from filmed interviews with various players without any overarching narrator. It works in an autobiographical register, in which the interviewees witness to their own experiences. The first section of the film focuses mainly on the scientists. This is

followed by a section which concentrates on Aboriginal people's experiences and perspectives, before it reaches a conclusion centred on the return of Mungo Lady in 2006 and some reflections on what is happening in the present.

For this edited version of our roundtable discussion, we follow the film's trajectory, beginning with reflections on the ways in which the archaeologists perform memory work before moving onto a discussion of Aboriginal people's remembering and its contexts. We finish with a brief discussion on the film's ending—asking whether it enacts a reconciliation narrative.

1. Archaeologists and scales of memory

RK: I was interested in the first section of the film, during which a couple of the archaeologists are talking about the 'find', saying: 'We found these remains and they were very close to the surface and could have been blown away any minute', and then 'we put them in a suitcase and went off to a party in Canberra'. I felt that was a moment of recording something that was disrespectful.

In some of the interviews with archaeologists and with National Parks employees, there is a sort of distancing at work. They take the position of the 'unknowing white person'—'we had no idea when we took these remains', 'we didn't consult because…'.

NM: Yet for me there was also a sense of the scientists, who were working with the bones, wanting to articulate a feeling of disturbance—of there being psychological problems at stake in their work that they didn't have a language to express or a frame to place it in. That put me in mind of literature. There's a very haunting story of Henry Lawson's 'The Bush Undertaker' about dealing with Aboriginal remains. It's a very haunting story. At the same time as the protagonist lugs his dead white mate home through the bush, he's also raiding a burial site and taking the bones with him, and then he's haunted by these black goannas that chase him through the bush. It's a really extraordinary story of the haunting of white landscapes.

AM: When you said that the scientists seemed to have wanted to speak about emotional disturbance, this is not exactly the case. These were very long interviews, and, as I'm interested in emotion, I was hoping to get beyond the archaeologists speaking to a standardised scientific narrative. A lot of them had told their story many, many times and they do want to talk about the science. So it took a long time to draw them out and for them to feel motivated to talk about their emotions—sometimes up to two hours before they opened up in that regard. So that's not to say that they weren't giving consent to share this side of

the story, but rather that they weren't eagerly offering such insights from their first breath.

So, no, it was not necessarily their idea to talk about it. While I was particularly interested in ascertaining how the science featured in their lives on a personal level, I knew that I had to ask later in the interview. After the scientists entered the flow of a long interview and revelation, they often became very candid and the from-the-heart stuff didn't come during the first half an hour. Sometimes it was not until a second or third interview. During a long and fascinating interview, John Mulvaney shared things that he had not included in his own autobiography. He basically explained the politics of why he left the whole field.

RK: He was an interesting character because he voiced a certain grief for a loss of what he expected to flow from the find of Mungo Lady.

JL: It was really personal though and what leapt out at me, and several other Indigenous people, was his comment: 'if this is the kind of Australia' … and then 'why don't you just leave'. I mean that was offensive.

AM: We were conscious that John Mulvaney might not like the way he came across in the film and in fact at several screenings he kept popping up in the audience as soon as it finished. And he's always upset. But many viewers find his segments the most compelling of all.

RK: What's he upset about?

AM: It's a topic he's passionate about. In part, he's upset that Aboriginal interests make research difficult for scientists, and thus for knowledge about humanity.

NM: What has been the reaction of the archaeologists to the film?

AM: Some have thought that the film had been very unfair to archaeologists. Some have said that they felt that it should have ended on a note of the many good achievements that archaeologists had contributed to the Willandra people and all the collaborative research that was going on now with scientists and archaeologists today. And they wanted to know why did we stop when we did, which was basically Mungo Lady being taken back to Country. Why did we end there? Co-director Andrew Pike and I decided that this was a good narrative arc and a very powerful, iconic moment to trace about transforming relationships.

RK: One of the things that is interesting as the viewer—and you may have a different insight into this as the filmmaker Ann—is that we're seeing these people (archaeologists, pastoralists, Aboriginal people and others) in the space of

a film, which means that we get to see them together as part of a filmic conversation, when they're not necessarily or actually having conversations with each other. Effectively Ann you're staging what these conversations might have been had they been speaking to each other. It's hard to remember that.

AM: I like that concept: we're staging a different conversation through our editing.

2. Aboriginal people and the local politics of memory

We found that our discussion kept returning to the 'local'—to the landscape in which Mungo Lady was buried as a dynamic, inhabited, social space. Nicole Moore grew up at Balranald in the 1970s, so we were particularly interested in her responses to the film and whether it articulated with her experience and sense of that place.

NM: One thing I was struck by was how strong the representation of an alliance between the 'landholders', as they're called, and the Mutthi Mutthi in particular was in the film. That is an allegiance that is articulated in opposition to scientists. It was really very striking. Whereas my sense of growing up in that environment in the 1970s was of strong apartheid structures of division in small town life in particular. When I was growing up, the school was the only place in which there was interaction and where you had ordinary and real everyday encounters, because the rest of time Aboriginal people were on the mission, which was way out of town.

But in the film you could also see that some of those individual 'landholders' (who are really leaseholders—on 99-year leases) had particular and individual responses to the claims of Aboriginal communities, Mutthi Mutthi in particular, to that Country. This reminded me that things are never simple or straightforward and that there are interesting layers and ways in which interaction between those communities occur—and are forgotten as well—through time.

To put this into context, it is worthwhile remembering how long that Country has been 'settled'—its relatively long colonial occupations. This makes the narratives of Aboriginal survival in the film especially important because colonial occupation there was really early—Sturt is going through there in the 1830s and has a quite famous interaction with the local people. By the time Burke and Wills go through in the 1860s they stay at Paika Station—pastoral holdings are all in place by then. There is still this notion of exploration, but really the pastoral holdings are all there by then.

The politics of naming is really interesting in that area. I was thinking today that the street I grew up on was Ballandella Street, which is near Turandurey Street. They are named after the Aboriginal women (daughter and mother) who helped Thomas Mitchell (explorer). It is a very interesting case about memory in that town that those streets are named after them. But the main street in the Aboriginal mission is called Endeavour Drive.

Within the 'structures of long memory'—of deep time—is the degree to which Mutthi Mutthi and Barkindji have had really, really long histories of having to stay there and insist that 'this is our Country', 'this is where we live', 'we are not going anywhere'. In the film, one of those women—Dorothy—says: 'I'm not going anywhere'. And these claims are made against a sense of a history of them 'being wished away' by settler Australia.

AM: There's ambiguity in the relationships between Aboriginal people and pastoralists. They're longstanding, so you do have kinship elements, and you have memories of growing up alongside each other and seeing families grow. Even if people don't talk to each other, they see each other—they are in and part of the same environment.

I think that the government was very successful in creating an apartheid-style effect through missions and lack of opportunities. But Aboriginal people were still employed by pastoralists, whether it be the town or the rural. You also had people like Lottie who had a white father, and there were plenty of people like her who were protected because of that. These families had some wealth and they had land. So, they were protected from the 'protection' system. There were people who managed to struggle to live in towns—like the Pappins and Alice Kelly. They got off the missions and they married other people who got off the missions, often other Aboriginal people. So there were different ways of creating some power in the locality. This sort of intermeshing can be ambiguous and complicated.

JL: There were relationships between Aboriginal people and farmers, because they had shared experience of the land. There was tension, but it wasn't total apartheid. There was also a shared interest in the land.

MN: This conversation about the local is very interesting. These are really, really complicated places that are not very distant from the frontier.

JL: The local and the intimate in these towns really travel too because places like buses, or schools, or shops where anything that might happen to Aboriginal people, or with Aboriginal people, that gets on the news. These places are the coalface of base grade racism about who owns the place. If anything that an

Aboriginal person says or does makes the news, it can make 'big waves' in small country towns. The extreme was the Mabo case and people worrying about their backyards.

NM: I take your points about the diverse ways in which relationships happen within these very small communities, which I think is a strong and important point to make.

One of things I was thinking about in terms of the effect of the scientific 'discovery', to call it that, for those local paradigms and structures was to open up Mungo as a leisure place—to name it a 'park' where people could go and slide down the sand dunes. The fact that it was called *The Walls of China* says something. It was given a name to make it a leisure park—not Mungo Station, not Mungo Lady, and not an Aboriginal site in that sense. It did make it a place where young modern families—white families—would go on the weekend to take their kids to play and not just locals would come and do that. So that is an extra dimension those scientists would have brought to that local place.

AM: It is the scientists that are coming in as 'outsiders'. They are part of the whole colonial system and they are part of the imperial knowledge system. They're representing not just Australian nationalism, but the universal belief in Western science that delivers so much confidence and prestige. To make an amazing discovery that goes back a really long way delivers much kudos. So there's a complex value system that's different from the local value system.

3. Ancestors and affect

Our discussion about localised 'race' politics and histories of Aboriginal and settler/pastoralist relations led us to reflect on the ways in which Aboriginal people in that area expressed their relationship to Mungo Lady. Jeanine Leane had particular insights to offer here, especially because she had been commissioned to write the study guide for the film. We were interested in the emotional registers of Aboriginal people's witnessing to the history, politics and place—the ways in which the many layers of the past reverberated for them now.

JL: I have watched the film many times and I also had the opportunity to read the transcript. I recently used a two-minute excerpt from the end of the film for a conference presentation—the section where Gary Pappin says: 'She gave us a voice'. It was interesting to watch the reaction of the audience. I played the bit at the end where there is an elder woman called Lottie Williams. She says: 'There's us and then there's the scientists', and then she laughs as she has made a point here. Then she also says something like: 'I don't know what they took her for in the first place, what that was to prove'. This section is very quick, about 60

seconds, and then the next bit, which is in the last segment of the film called 'Reflections' flashes to Gary Pappin in the old shearing shed, where he says: 'She gave us a voice and we're using it'. People in the audience were really struck by how emotional Gary was.

NM: There's another point in the film where Lottie says: 'Because we were always there, we always knew'.

JL: Yes, that's right.

The reactions from people in the audience at the conference were interesting. Mainly people were intrigued. These were two completely different demeanours that were shown at the end—Lottie was so 'resolute' and Gary was 'hugely emotional'.

People wanted to know who Gary was. Gary did say that she (Mungo Lady) is his ancestor, so that gave people a hint, but they wanted to know more clearly.

AM: It's interesting how different audiences, or different individuals, respond. Partly this goes to the talent of Gary and his style of narrating. Sure he has anger, and so does Dorothy, and so do lots of people, but Gary has a certain style. When you ask him a question he actually *goes* there. He puts himself in that moment and he rethinks it, and I think that's why he became emotional. I think it was very genuine. He was thinking of his old aunties and grandma, who have passed away now. And I believe that as we were interviewing him, he felt the love for them, and that was driving his emotion - even more than anger. It was the love of his brave courageous aunties and his grandma that he found inspiring.

NM: I was really compelled by the anger in Gary Pappin's whole presence in the film—the way he enacts a kind of inherited trauma about loss. You know, when he puts his head down and you can't see his eyes under his hat. And then looks up at the end to say: 'we've got a voice and we're going to use it'. It's really very powerfully filmed.

RK: The claim in the film that 'she's our ancestor' and 'it's our obligation to care for her' is very powerful, especially as science is saying: 'well how would you know that?'

4. Reconciliation and redemption?

After presenting a conversation drawn from many different interviews with various people, and covering a great deal of ground, the film works towards its conclusion. It gradually builds to the return of Mungo Lady, which happened in 2006.

RK: We wanted to ask you Ann about the narrative of the film because one of the main episodes is the hand back—or return—of Mungo Lady. This is effectively a moment of reconciliation. It comes towards the end. It's about one hour in and there's about 10 minutes left to go.

Archaeologists Alan Thorne and Isabel McBryde both talk about the drive back to Mungo to participate in the hand-back. Actually, one of the really moving moments is listening to Isabel McBryde talk about the drive in the night, which she says was a really important drive.

There's this kind of ceremonial move towards the space. Aboriginal people are also all coming to this space. In the film, there's actually a newspaper image shown at that point, so it's interesting that a photographic memory or media memory comes in here.

And we see the handing back. As this is shown, Alan Thorne (archaeologist) talks about everybody passing by the remains and paying their respects.

And then we come to the point about Aboriginal survival, which is the point that Gary Pappin makes.

This is an interesting ending because throughout the film one of the main narratives is effectively about a conflict between the Aboriginal people and the scientists around questions of appropriation and injustice, which fits in with the longer, and broadly transnational, story about human remains in museums and global knowledge. So this ending can be read as resolution to that dispute. I'm interested in the narrative trajectory of the film and the fact that it ends with this reconciliation scene, that's at least the way in which I viewed that. Why did you end with that?

AM: Okay, I don't quite see it that way. For me, the high point, I guess, the denouement, is probably when Gary Pappin says: 'She gave us a voice and now we're using it'. To me that's very powerful. It's about power—about having power—and how the local Aboriginal custodians see the power as coming to them.

And then there's the quiet bit that follows, where it goes back to the landscape and to another empowering moment, which basically is what's happening now. It's real, and it's relived on a regular basis. Aboriginal rangers lead daily and weekly tours and share science and traditional knowledge together with mainly white visitors.

In another reflective moment, Tania was very soft the way that she said: 'We're learning the scientific words'.

JL: She says 'there's nothing they can say to us'.

AM: And I thought that was a point about education, mutual education, not so much reconciliation. For some reason that word to me doesn't apply. I'm thinking of power sharing.

JL: I thought there was a real moment of agency there.

AM: I was thinking about empowerment, education, learning, and curiosity, and the power of more of this, and more sharing of knowledge. To me that's what the ending moments signalled, personally, and it is something that a lot of local Aboriginal people are very proud of.

RK: That's interesting. For me, the return of Mungo Lady felt like it was a redemptive moment for the white scientists.

5. The bones of memory and the politics of return

As our conversation was drawing to a close, we turned our thoughts to the film's insights into the materiality and politics of memory. We began to think about the meanings of bones in memory and other cultural work. Beyond the scales of time the 'discovery' of Mungo Lady had opened up, what political and cultural spaces had she helped to prise apart as well? At the same time, though, we ruminated on memory and forgetting. Mungo Lady's bones have been accorded considerable value across a number of contexts, but what of all the other bones, the other deaths, that go unrecorded and which barely register in popular discourse and imagination?

MN: I've been wondering how Mungo Lady works as a memory object? She 'embodies' both the deepest claim to deep time and continuity, as well as being a 'thing' around which many other contemporary and changing claims accrue. At the same time, she might also work to displace or overshadow other claims. It is said in the film that she comes to the surface. What does her surfacing allow? What space does she create or make possible?

NM: We've been talking about the remains of deep time. But that landscape is full of Aboriginal death and remains of people. It's not as if there aren't bones between now and then.

AM: Just listening to you saying that makes me think of the inertia, it's not all about scientists made a discovery, scientists took it away, scientists took it back. What about the time in-between where it's sitting at ANU?

RK: Where were the remains? That wasn't made clear in the film.

AM: They were here at the ANU.

JL: Mungo Man is still here, isn't he?

AM: Yep. Nobody will tell you exactly where.

Jim Bowler, who is the scientist who first identified the remains of Mungo Man, was running a campaign all year to try and expedite their return, and the Traditional Owners were not really as keen because they had not yet arranged a suitable resting place. So, it seems what is going to happen is that all the human remains that ANU has, including Mungo Man, will be repatriated to the National Museum of Australia, where they have a proper process and when the Traditional Owners are ready. They desperately want them to go back to Country.

Now many, though not all, scientists agree. Because of the power of Alan Thorne's redemption story, some other scientists are now trying to cut in and have a share of the cake - the redemption cake. Once science in the area was about the prestige of discovery and now there's the prestige of return.

JL: You touched on an interesting point: you can't just take things back… It's easy to take, but it's very difficult to take back, appropriately and respectfully.

RK: So that raises a question about the role of institutions. Watching the film, I kept thinking 'where are the remains?' What institution? Where does the responsibility lay?

MN: The responsibility lies with institutions, but the burden is often shifted to Aboriginal communities.

RK: The film raises questions about forgiveness and the dependency of these kinds of reconciliation processes on a forgiveness that is not always necessarily acknowledged or stated.

NM: Or available.

MN: The burden of return—there's a huge level of generosity, responsibility and resourcing that's required when material is returned that is often just not recognised.

AM: Well Tania Charles makes it clear that having Mungo Lady back is very disturbing and troubling for her because Mungo Lady is still not in the right place yet.

The Willandra elders hope for a Keeping Place to be built on their own country, where all the human remains can be respectfully stored. Until a longer term solution could be found, the Aboriginal elders requested that the collection of human remains from Willandra should be removed from the Australian National University (ANU) and placed in the National Museum of Australia. To mark this move, in early November 2015, a formal Apology was delivered by the Vice Chancellor of ANU and a smoking ceremony followed, led by local Ngunnawal and visiting Willandra elders. Hopefully the momentum to gain an appropriate Keeping Place in the Willandra district will continue and be well supported by research institutions.

Conclusion

While telling a story about the competing interests concerning the regimes of truth and authority that govern the production of knowledge, *Message from Mungo* also constitutes and affirms Lake Mungo as a 'site of memory' (Nora) with local, national and transnational significance. As the film reveals, the significance of the site varies, of course, for different groups, as will the meanings and significance of the film depending on the affiliations and locations of viewers. The two endings of the film—the return of the remains to the community, and Gary Pappin's reflections on the hard-won struggle for recognition of Aboriginal custodianship and authority—powerfully indicate the layered memories of a site such as Lake Mungo, occupied and visited by groups with differing and often contested interests. Through its compelling insights into the memory of place and of the peoples inhabiting it, the film suggests that the local remains a powerful scale in memory studies, even or especially in this era of globalisation. The local, though, is always cross-cut by other scales—in the case of Lake Mungo, the national and transnational. Furthermore, our discussion of the film suggests that deep memory is of crucial significance. Thus, the transnational turn in memory studies should perhaps be thought alongside a non-national geographic or spatial approach that is attentive to the materiality of memories associated with deep time.

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Jeanine Leane is a Wiradjuri woman from south-west NSW and an academic, writer and poet who teaches creative writing at University of Melbourne. Her novel, *Purple Threads*, won the David Unaipon Award and was published by University of Queensland Press in 2011. She has published widely on Indigenous and Australian literature, and wrote the study guide for *Message from Mungo*.

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