

# UNSETTLING FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY: AN ENCOUNTER WITH TRACEY MOFFATT'S *NIGHT CRIES*

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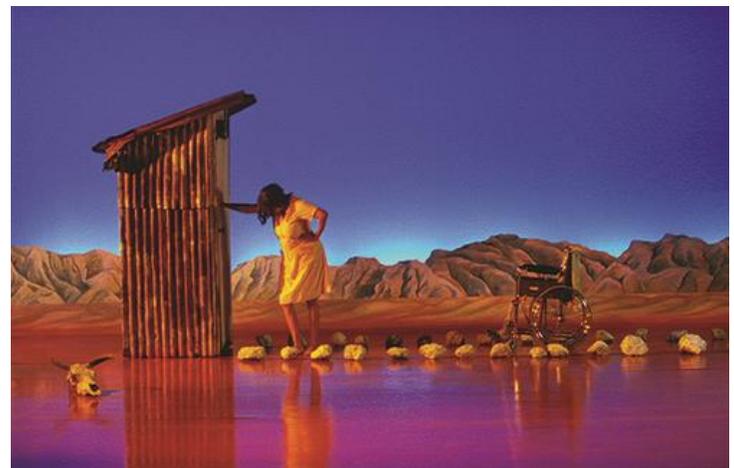
**Abstract:** This paper explores feminist motherhood studies through an encounter with Aboriginal artist Tracey Moffatt, whose perspectives on motherhood are shaped by her experiences as the Aboriginal child of a white foster mother growing up in Brisbane, Australia during the 1960s. Moffatt's short experimental film *Night Cries* provides an important glimpse into the violent intersections of gender, race and power in intimate life and, in so doing, invites us to see how colonial and neocolonial policies are carried out through domestic labor. This film holds important lessons, I contend, not merely for filmmakers but for feminist philosophers as well. These lessons

reside in both the content and the style of the film, in both the cultural memories it preserves and its techniques of interrupting and interrogating those memories, in both its lessons about coloniality and its refusal to offer easy solutions. I conclude by applying these lessons to reflect on mentoring as well as feminist studies of motherhood.

## Moffatt's *Night Cries*

*Night Cries* is a poignant and unsettling portrayal of a complicated mother-daughter relationship that resides at the intersections of domesticity and settler colonialism. In it, a middle-aged Aboriginal daughter who cares for her dying white mother oscillates between resentment and tenderness in a drama of irresolvable psychic tension as memories conflict with hope, death with life, and night terrors intrude on daydreams.

The daughter sighs and grimaces as she helps her mother eat, pushes her wheelchair to the outhouse, and washes her clothes; yet she also demonstrates genuine care for her mother as she washes her and eventually shrouds her. There is no dialogue between mother and daughter in the film. Their vexed relationship plays out in the coming together and moving apart of their bodies in different permutations against the backdrop of a stylized and clearly artificial rural setting and a soundtrack including sighs, screams and train whistles as well as carefully placed music evocative of a past era that continues to intrude on the present.





The film engages in memory work<sup>1</sup> as it invites us to draw connections between domesticity and settler colonialism. Throughout the film, memories of the daughter's past intrude on her present as she recalls first in fragments, then more fully, a scene of childhood loss and abandonment. The enormity of the child's terror is presented in the style of a horror film fear-inducing crescendo as shrieks accompany the transformation of children's play into a scene of strangulation.



The mother who leaves the children alone is clearly at fault; yet all that the white mother has done is to turn her back on her daughter for a fleeting moment to gaze out at the ocean. This seems quite literally a screen memory—a memory that stands in for a larger trauma too dark to remember (the loss of her Aboriginal mother and of her Aboriginal culture).

*Night Cries* also invites us to engage in imaginative work. As the daughter reads travel brochures and dreams of escape on a train that is always approaching but never arrives, we wonder where she would go if she could. The daughter dutifully remains with her dying white mother as she recalls the imperfect but loving care that she received from her; the daughter is trapped in what Secomb aptly calls “the exchange economy of reciprocal colonial love”—an economy of intimacy that obligates the daughter to care for her mother who, in caring for her, isolated her from the other life of which she dreams (Secomb 2006, 92).





Yet, when the mother draws her last breath, the daughter does not seem relieved. She curls up in a fetal position beside her mother; the soundtrack features a loudly crying child. We do not know if she is mourning for this mother or another, for her lost past or her truncated future. The story ends here without suggesting that she will be able to move beyond this or, if so, how.

The short film speaks to the lasting legacies of adoption practices in Australia. From 1869<sup>2</sup> until the 1970s, children of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent (who would later be known as “the Stolen Generations”) were removed from their families by government agencies and church missionaries with the sanction of state and federal parliaments. In most cases, the children were placed into institutional care by religious organizations with a significant number of young girls “fostered out” due to the perception that they were especially ‘at risk’ in their Aboriginal homes and culture.<sup>3</sup> In both missionary schools and foster homes, the goal was to assimilate Aboriginal children into Anglo-Australian culture by teaching them English and training them for agricultural labor (boys) and domestic service (girls).<sup>4</sup> The training of Aboriginal girls as domestic servants for white families is evoked in Moffatt’s film by the white uniform the daughter wears. Aboriginal singer Jimmy Little symbolizes the “era of the mission school where black Australians were re-educated and re-clothed in an attempt to whiten them” (Murray 1990, 19). A “success” story of Australian assimilation, Little frames the film; opening and closing scenes feature him singing his hit song, “Royal Telephone”:



*Telephone to glory, oh, what joy divine!  
I can feel the current moving on the line.  
Made by God the Father for His very own,  
You may talk to Jesus on this royal telephone.*

*Central's never busy, always on the line,  
You can hear from heaven almost any time.  
'Tis a royal service, built for one and all,  
When you get in trouble, give this royal line a call.*

Little’s framing presence as an Aboriginal man civilized through Christianity<sup>5</sup> is mirrored in the daughter’s caretaking of her dying mother. As the daughter tenderly washes her mother’s feet midway through the film, she evokes Christ’s command to his disciples to “wash one another’s feet” as he has humbly done for them.<sup>6</sup> Undertones of violence accompany even this gentle display of love toward her mother, however. As the footwashing occurs, mother and daughter hum “Onward Christian Soldiers,” reminding us of the entanglement of Christianity, saviorism, and imperialism.<sup>7</sup>

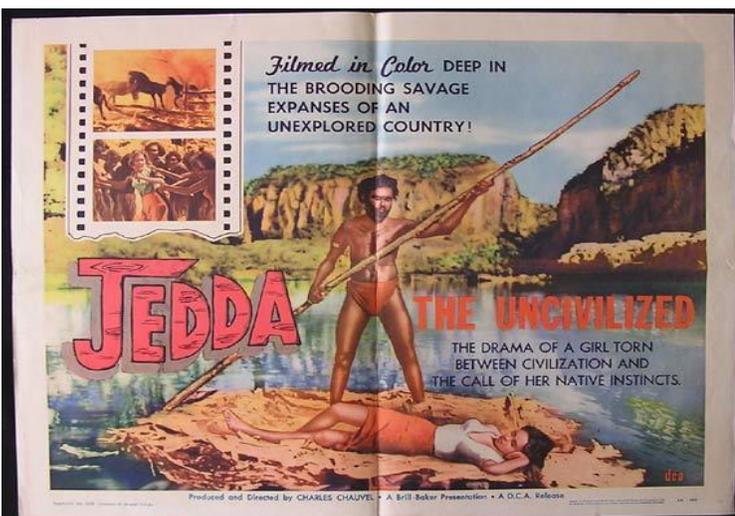




The intermixture of violence and tenderness in this scene mirrors that of an earlier scene, wherein the daughter maniacally cracks a whip near where her mother dozes; interrupting the scene is a clip of Jimmy Little silently mouthing the words to “Love me Tender.” In these and other scenes, the buried contradictions, tensions and ambiguities of colonial love are starkly revealed.

Moffatt’s critique of Australia’s assimilationist past acknowledges the significance of that past in constructing present white-Aboriginal relationships. The past is never simply past and there is no pristine indigeneity after assimilation. Aboriginal children raised in residential schools and/or in white foster or adoptive families cannot undo their training in western culture. Indeed, Moffatt uses that training in making her art, unapologetically drawing on cultural tropes and techniques of western cinematic production precisely to *unsettle* them.

Part autobiography, part cultural history, *Night Cries* is also a response to the ways in which white-Aboriginal relationships are mediated by western *representations* of indigeneity. In the climactic flashback scene the young Aboriginal girl becomes increasingly distressed after being left alone on the beach by her mother and teased by two young boys who wrap her in strands of seaweed. At the peak of her distress, the strands of seaweed turn into streams of film tape that threaten to choke the young girl, thereby representing the terror not merely of being *unwatched* but also of being viewed *through* “racist regimes of representation” (Lloyd 2014, 1056). *Night Cries* pushes back against those representational regimes by responding both narratively and aesthetically to a 1955 Australian film (Chauvel’s *Jedda*) about the risks faced by young Aboriginal women who fail to properly assimilate.



*Jedda* is the story of an Aboriginal orphan girl raised by a white woman who teaches her European ways and forbids her to learn about her own culture. As a young woman, however, Jedda meets an Aboriginal man who lures her away from the white man who loves her, takes her on a treacherous journey back to his tribe (who rejects her), and ultimately causes her death. Although starting as a family drama, *Jedda* transforms into an action film offering adventure, suspense and the high drama of nation-building and jumping off cliffs underwritten by images of male Aboriginal savagery and female vulnerability (Morris 2004).<sup>8</sup>

The first Australian feature film to be shot in color, *Jedda* was also notable for its casting of two Aboriginal men in leading roles. Moffatt responds to *Jedda* in her casting and staging choices. Whereas *Jedda* casts well-known white actors against unknown Aboriginal men in a story filmed against expansive, vivid Australian landscapes, *Night Cries* casts popular indigenous icons (Jimmy Little and Marcia Langton<sup>9</sup>) against two unknown white actresses in a sequel that is filmed against a sparse interior set that looks out onto a clearly fake and dreary exterior landscape. *Night Cries* also interrupts the linear colonial narrative of *Jedda* by jarring scenes, sounds and shifts in genre that force the viewer to observe it at a critical distance (Senzani 2007).



At the same time, Moffatt engages in a dialogue with that earlier film by extending its narrative into the present and asking us to imagine the relationship between *Jedda*—had she lived—and her mother, absent the mediating influences of husbands, fathers, and boyfriends. In this imagined future, the house has run down, its windows are dirty and patched and the space of “settlement” has contracted (Periz 1990, 16). As Morris (2004) notes, the new frontier is now the domestic space and it is no longer a frontier between two radically disparate cultures: “The identities of mother and daughter are too blurred and shifting for that. It is the frontier on which state policy impacts on the psyches of black and white women in a continuous, prolonged abrasion.”

### Unsettling Feminist Philosophy

How does an encounter with Moffatt’s film help us to transform our own feminist work? The unsettling mother-daughter relationship at the center of *Night Cries* urges us to remember that care work may embody the violence of settler colonialism through becoming sites of assimilation. It also illustrates how to interrupt and interrogate the legacies of colonialism within feminism without imagining that we can undo them. In the time that remains, I wish to apply these insights to two sites of feminist philosophical work: feminist philosophies of motherhood and feminist mentoring projects.

Moffatt’s work suggests that we cannot address colonialism adequately without making visible its domestic landscapes. This suggests that feminist scholarship has a critical contribution to make to projects of decolonization. Like Chauvel’s *Jedda*, traditional ethical, social and political theory have largely ignored intimate, domestic and familial life, erasing struggles based in the gendered politics of home and domestic labor in favor of more panoramic visions of political justice. Insofar as domestic space has been an invisible presence in philosophy, the ethics of care, including motherhood studies, has been an important corrective. Feminist studies of motherhood place domesticity, rather than great events, at the core of ethics and social theory.

At the same time, feminist philosophical studies of motherhood require decolonization. The book that initiated feminist philosophical attention to the practice of mothering, Sarah Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1989)<sup>10</sup> has been widely critiqued for its focus on white, middle-class mothering within bio-normative families, its

focus on normative training, and its desire for legitimacy (see e.g. Khanna 2009). As Ruddick herself anticipated, normative maternal practice seems “apt for nationalist and xenophobic preservation;” yet, Ruddick’s assumption that mothering practice lends itself to a politics of peace largely ignores “the violence it often takes to maintain perpetual peace” (ibid, 303). White wives and mothers who “shor[e] up colonial identity by maintaining proper domesticity” (J. Lloyd 2014, 1053) may look peaceful in comparison to men who wage wars. Yet, as Moffatt’s film reveals, training children to follow rather than resist dominant norms may do violence to the children subjected to those domestic practices—especially if those children are colonized female subjects.

Nearly three decades after the publication of Ruddick’s work, feminist philosophies of motherhood continue to focus largely, albeit not exclusively, on the experiences and practices of white mothers without interrogating how those affective and domestic landscapes may be related to white motherhood’s vexed position vis colonial and neo-colonial projects.<sup>11</sup> Between 1990 and 2017, *Hypatia* published 119 articles on some aspect of mothering. These essays focus on a variety of topics including most commonly: reproductive technologies, abortion rights, maternal embodiment, pregnancy, breastfeeding, intensive mothering, maternal ambivalence, and mother-blaming. Without suggesting this body of work is useless (it is not), it is noteworthy that only two of these 119 articles explicitly focused on the connection between mothering and colonialism. Feminist philosophies of mothering have, to date, largely glossed over the imperialist projects and colonial histories that continue to shape and disrupt contemporary practices of intergenerational care.

Moffat’s film suggests ways to unsettle these patterns. Most obviously, *Night Cries* suggests that feminist philosophies of motherhood might include closer attention to the ways in which we define neglect and abuse and how such definitions excuse the violence inherent in practices of “good” (white) mothering, while continuing to foster practices of cultural genocide through removing children from indigenous mothers and also through the surveillance and forced assimilation of indigenous mothers themselves. As this suggests, decolonized politics of mothering would also explore critically the racialized politics of adoption, whereby white mothers continue to be the vehicle for “saving” and “civilizing” indigenous children. Although the development of transracial adoptions took place at the time of decolonization (1950s-1970s), an “imperial sentimental narrative” (Wexler 2000) that can be traced back to settler colonialism continues to guide the white imaginary in shaping narratives of adoption of non-white native children as a drama of redemption and reconciliation. The form that this takes under globalization is an “antiracist transracial fantasy of postcolonial reconciliation, white cosmopolitanism and a vision of a future global family” (Hubinette and Arvanitakis 2012, 703). Moffat’s work rightly encourages suspicion about such reconciliation narratives.

To illustrate the impossibility of escaping (or transcending) the tragic legacies of colonialism, Moffat provides us with a mother-daughter relationship that evolves but never resolves. Feminist philosophies of motherhood would benefit from also developing a philosophical imaginary that allows mothers and daughter to age, thereby revealing differently experienced and recalled experiences and allowing non-dominant narratives of mothering to emerge. Unlike the infants and toddlers that currently permeate much of the mothering literature, teens and young adults would insist on their difference and resist assimilationist parenting. This resistance need not lead to the child’s demise, as per *Jedda*. But it will unsettle mother-daughter relations in ways that may be both painful and necessary. Philosophies of motherhood would be further transformed by including attention to aging mothers who, as per *Night Cries*, become vulnerable and dependent on their adult children (most often, their daughters). The reversals of vulnerability and care that often take place over the familial life course allow for—indeed demand—transformation in relationships; these transformed relationships will nonetheless carry forward a historical legacy. Understanding such relations thus requires us to look back rather than merely treating the present moment (as we are apt to do with infants) as a *terra incognita* to be domesticated as we please.

Unlike feminist mothering, feminist practices of mentoring begin with an adult to adult relationship. However, relationships between “senior” and “junior” members of the profession are never equal and their inegalitarian nature is pronounced when the mentor is white and the mentee is a woman of color.<sup>12</sup> The troublesome power dynamics, the entwining of violence with care, seem an inescapable consequence of legacies of colonialism through which Philosophy as a euro-american discipline was formed and through which white and indigenous women’s relationships are mediated

combined with institutional conceptions of mentoring as normative training. There is no easy resolution here. This suggests white feminists need to think carefully about how and whether to actively recruit indigenous women into philosophy. Who is recruited? What are their histories? What are their alternative futures? How is their well-being served by becoming philosophers? Could senior white women support the well-being of younger indigenous women in ways that did not require grooming those younger women to become one of “our own?” To what extent is feminist philosophy, like the transracially adoptive family, involved in a drama of “redemption and reconciliation” driven by ideals of white cosmopolitanism?

Together with indigenous women who are members of our profession, white feminist philosophers need to ask this: How might feminist philosophers transform the space of mentoring as assimilation into a space of struggle and negotiation—a workable terrain though which *the success of indigenous women as imagined by indigenous women* can be achieved? Disciplinary practices discipline; yet, as Moffatt’s experimental film illustrates, the practitioners of a craft can push back against their disciplinary heritage and practices.<sup>13</sup> I have tried to do that here by deliberately engaging an indigenous *filmmaker*. In conversing across disciplinary lines, we redraw territorial boundaries in an effort not to expand our own territory but to transform the spaces we inhabit. Philosophical canons and textbooks function like colonial archives; they are built on institutional structures that esteem certain kinds of knowledge (and modes of delivery) while erasing others. Moffatt shows us how to develop an aesthetics of resistance to such archival practices that asks us to improvise. How can we, as feminist philosophers, interrupt and disrupt the colonial tendencies of philosophy? How do we engage in work that remembers philosophy’s history without memorializing its products? How do we destabilize the canon? What should our practices of citation and intertextuality be? How can we *unsettle* our discipline through creative, disarming, disorienting juxtapositions of content, form and style?<sup>14</sup>

There are no “right answers” to these questions. I raise them merely to highlight some directions for experimentation as we attempt to decolonize feminist philosophy. Moffatt’s work makes visible “a set of possible transformations of, as well as continuities within, enduring colonial power relations” (Lloyd 2012, 1) that might inform our own work if we are able to listen to its night cries. By revealing the turbulent and shifting dissonance of intimacies between white women and indigenous women under colonial policies of domestication, *Night Cries* holds important lessons not merely for filmmakers but for feminist philosophers as well. These lessons reside in both the content and the style of the film, in both the cultural memories it preserves and its techniques of interrupting and interrogating those memories, in both its lessons about coloniality and its refusal to offer easy solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lloyd (2014) on the distinction between memorializing (which fixes memory as static) and memory work (which is a fluid practice of everyday ‘unofficial’ remembering that is frequently shaped and reshaped as memories come into contact with other memories), p. 1048.

<sup>2</sup> The Victorian Aboriginal Protection Act (1869) granted the colony of Victoria the right to forcibly remove Aboriginal children from their families of origin, encouraging this especially for “at risk” girls. Similar policies and legislation were subsequently adopted by other states and territories. In the 1997 Australian Human Rights Commission Report “Bringing Them Home: The Stolen Children” condemned this practice and in 2008, the State issued a long awaited apology to Aboriginal peoples for this history. State support for Aboriginal families and culture continues to be questionable, however.

<sup>3</sup> Few formal adoptions occurred prior to 1950 when permanent placements of Aboriginal children into white families became widely promoted

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous families were torn asunder in very similar, albeit non-identical, ways in other settler colonial nations. In Canada, for example, a residential school system implemented by the government and administered by various churches in effect from the 1880s until 1996 also prevented the transmission of indigenous Heritage from one generation to the next. When the residential school system started to close in the 1950s and 60s, provinces implemented child protection laws resulting in what became known as the “Sixties scoop”—a phenomenon in which culturally biased social workers acting in the putative “best interests” of First Nations children removed massive numbers of indigenous children from their communities and placed them into foster and adoptive care with white families. In the U.S., boarding schools intended specifically for Native American children were run by the federal government from 1880-1930; children were taught Euro-American culture while performing manual labor for nearby white families. By the 1950s, fiscal responsibility for boarding schools was passed to state and local governments, leading to their eventual closure and the abandonment of students during the so-called “termination era.” Private adoptions facilitated by the Indian Adoption Project (1958) served as a cost-cutting measure for governments during the next two decades until the Indian Child

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Welfare Act of 1978 affirmed tribal sovereignty over matters of indigenous child welfare. In all three countries, the neglect and abuse of indigenous children in boarding schools and other forms of state custody has been well-documented, as have the deleterious effects on indigenous families, communities and culture. In Canada and Australia, public discussions of these colonial histories have resulted in government apologies, while the U.S. government has ignored their historic role in practices of abuse and cultural genocide of indigenous peoples.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Little is an evangelical Christian; his first media role was in a 1960s Australian-made Billy Graham film.

<sup>6</sup> "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:14–17).

<sup>7</sup> "Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus going on before." The militaristic overtones of this hymn—which also discusses "kingdoms, nations, and empires"—are unmistakable.

<sup>8</sup> It was released in the UK as *Jedda, the Uncivilised*.

<sup>9</sup> Langton is a well-known Australian author, film critic and indigenous rights activist

<sup>10</sup> Notably this book was published in the same year that *Night Cries* was released.

<sup>11</sup> It feels like I should name names here in order to "evidence" this and subsequent claims. However, I am reluctant to do so because what I am describing is a *pattern* of scholarship that is not attributable to any single person or group of persons. Attention gets diverted from this pattern when we involve ourselves in debates about whether some specific author is or is not correctly interpreted in this or that way.

<sup>12</sup> These power dynamics are exacerbated when the mentoring relationships is between a white feminist professor and a student of color.

<sup>13</sup> In Ahmed's (2005) terms, we do not need to return our inheritance.

<sup>14</sup> Such creativity—especially if used in unsettling ways—requires abandoning the desire to be recognized as a "good" philosopher or perhaps even as a philosopher at all. Abandoning the norms of the dutiful daughter and/or refusing to be the good wife or mother carries risks. These risks are, of course, easier to bear for those with tenure.

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