

# 'Going Back': Journeys with David MacDougall's *Link-Up Diary*

Catherine Summerhayes

Imagine there'd been a battle on a battlefield. It's over, and people are moving away. But the wounded are still lying out there. Well, someone must go back for those wounded. What we're doing is going back for the wounded and bringing them with us because they can't be left back there.<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyses several journeys of memory and 'return' that are derived from ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall's<sup>2</sup> 1987 feature-length documentary film, *Link-Up Diary*. The first section of the paper addresses the history and social issues that lie in the film's content. The second section analyses the film further via the text of a conversation held about the film in 2007 and the third continues with my analysis of how the film and this conversation interact.

The primary journey described in this paper is the one represented in the film: the week-long car trip from Canberra to Sydney in the 'Link-Up Falcon'<sup>3</sup> undertaken by the Link-Up New South Wales team as it was constituted in 1983—Coral Edwards, historian Peter Read and trainee Robyn Vincent together with David MacDougall. When the film was made, the Link-Up organisation had been formally in operation for two years.<sup>4</sup>

*Link-Up Diary* is a testimony to Australia's Aboriginal 'Stolen Generations' and therefore is embedded in those memories of loss and grief experienced by Aboriginal children and their families who were separated from each other

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1 Coral Edwards in MacDougall, David (dir.) 1987, *Link-Up Diary*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.

2 David MacDougall is a world-renowned ethnographic filmmaker, film theorist and author. He is currently Adjunct Professor in the School of Humanities and the Arts at The Australian National University. He has filmed in Africa, Aboriginal Australia, Sardinia and India. MacDougall's filmography includes the prize-winning *To Live with Herds* (1968–72), *Good-Bye Old Man* (1975–77), *Tempus de Baristas* (1992–93), *Doon School Chronicles* (five films, 1997–2000) and *Gandhi's Children* (2005–08). For more information on MacDougall's work, see <[http://rsh.anu.edu.au/people/profile\\_system/public.php?id=115](http://rsh.anu.edu.au/people/profile_system/public.php?id=115)>

3 This is the name given to the vehicle that was used in the journey to Sydney depicted in the film, as well as many other trips undertaken by the Link-Up team in its early days.

4 Although government funding was not provided until several years later, Read dates the beginning of Link-Up to 1980, when Edwards invited him to come back with her to the NSW town of Tingha to meet some of her relatives for the first time. Under MacDougall's mentorship, Edwards made a short film about her reunion with her family, which she called *It's A Long Road Back* (c. 1981). The 1983 journey was in fact a prototype for the many other journeys undertaken by members of the Link-Up organisation and the Indigenous Australians they serve. For information on the present structure and activities of Link-Up, see <<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/fhu/linkup.html>>

according to Australian Government policy and interventions, predominantly during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Through this film, we also witness the story of the early days of the Link-Up organisation and the personal cost of working for Link-Up at that time; it is an organisation now run solely by Aboriginal people, to assist in reuniting Aboriginal families.<sup>6</sup> *Link-Up Diary* was one of the first public acts of communication that addressed this conflict-embedded issue.

As well as describing the context and historical significance of the film, my account of the various journeys of the film *Link-Up Diary* includes other journeys of memory, recollection and interpretation. The journey of interpretation is my own; I viewed the film many times, interviewed MacDougall and Read in 1999 and included my analysis of the film as part of my doctoral thesis. My personal, intellectual and emotional journey of interpretation permeates the third journey: a journey of recollection that occurred when MacDougall, Read, ANU scholar Ursula Frederick and I met in 2007 and recorded our discussion of *Link-Up Diary* and some of the times and places it represents.

This paper emerged from another journey of recollection and exposure: a screening of excerpts from the film at the 'Cruising Country' symposium in Canberra in 2005, which included all the memories that the film evoked in the people present. MacDougall and Read attended this event. The screening was introduced by Read speaking the words of Stolen Generations member Sharon Condren, which included reflections on her own journeys in a Link-Up vehicle.

## The Stolen Generations<sup>7</sup>

The historical dislocations of Australian Indigenous people, and especially the taking away of their children as the enactment of policy, occurred most significantly from early in the twentieth century and continued into the 1960s. These separations and dislocations were endorsed by policies of both Commonwealth and State Governments. The histories and stories of this cataclysmic separation of Indigenous families entered the wider public arena of debate and political action only during the 1990s. *Link-Up Diary* was made during a period when the Stolen Generations were still coming to conceptualise themselves through this identity term. Read powerfully describes how Link-

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5 See Haebich, Anna 2000, *Broken Circles. Fragmenting Indigenous families 1800–2000*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, WA.

6 This now government-funded assistance includes historical document research, information provision, counselling and travelling with people to meet estranged family members.

7 This term was first introduced into the public domain by Peter Read in his paper 'The Stolen Generations', which he wrote for the NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs in 1981. Read credits his wife, Jay Arthur, with 'coining' the term.

Up contributed to a turning point for Aboriginal people, when they realised that they had been accepting various governments' bureaucratic lies about themselves and their families. In Read's words:

Think back to the early Eighties: no one knew bugger-all about this. It's really such an incredible transformation to think, to historicise, to see it in terms of government policy rather than just 'slack mothers', which many of our clients thought at the time. Even mothers themselves who had lost their children still blamed themselves. But the community knew nothing about it.<sup>8</sup>

In May 1995, nearly 10 years after the filming of *Link-Up Diary*, the Australian Government instigated the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. In June 2000, *Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Children' report* was tabled in Parliament as a submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Reference Committee's Inquiry into the Stolen Generations.<sup>9</sup> The report investigated individual histories and the continuing plight of generations of Aboriginal children—now adults—who were removed from their families under a succession of assimilation policies, particularly between 1916 and 1969.<sup>10</sup> As Read makes clear above, not only were the stolen children injured by these removals. The agony of the families from which they were taken is also difficult to imagine.<sup>11</sup> Amongst other major social and emotional challenges, Stolen Generations children grew up not knowing to whom they were related. Due to the span of time over which Aboriginal children were taken from their families, and to a persistent debate after the report's release about whether or not the children were 'stolen' or 'removed', the plural term 'Stolen Generations' had gained common usage by 1999, although Read had described the Stolen Generations as such in 1981.<sup>12</sup> Since the release of *Link-Up Diary* in 1987, many individual stories from the Stolen Generations have been exposed through media coverage of the *Bringing Them Home* report, subsequent court cases, and in the publication of many books and web sites.

During the hour-long conversation about *Link-Up Diary* convened in 2007 as a stage in the research for writing this paper, we discussed what the film meant at

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8 Summerhayes interview with Peter Read, 4 May 1999.

9 Information concerning this report is available at: <[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/bth\\_report/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html)>

10 A comprehensive account of this disastrous scheme can be found in Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation and Tikka Jan Wilson 1997, *In the Best Interest of the Child? Stolen Children: Aboriginal pain/white shame*, Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation and Aboriginal History.

11 Anxiety and grief are the legacies of all people who are involved in reunions with family members from whom they have been separated for a long time. In the case of Link-Up clients, the tensions are greater because they are also members of Australia's Stolen Generations with all the cultural distress that lies behind that identification.

12 Read, Peter 1981, *The Stolen Generations: The removal of Aboriginal children in New South Wales, 1883 to 1969*, Occasional Paper No. 1, NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, Sydney.

the time of its making and what it meant to all of us at the time of our talking together. The edited and transcribed conversation presented below traces all three journeys described above, using the words of three people closely involved in the film's production of meaning. The structural core of this paper is this recorded conversation. It is presented here as testimony both to the film itself and to the stories and people that inform the film's content. The vernacular nature of the conversation, as transcribed, offers interpretative insights both into the poly-vocal nature of filmmaking and into the dialogic nature of the filmic text itself. *Link-Up Diary* reaches out to audiences and evokes new dialogues—new interpretations of the events that it recorded.

Recalling Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, the text of the film together with the conversation about the film, held 20 years after the film was released, weaves together many 'voices', developing 'a plurality of relations, not just a cacophony of different voices'.<sup>13</sup> Here, several voices—both of people themselves and of the two texts' overall narrative—are presented as authoritative 'points of view'. My argument is that these two texts also exist as narrative entities that are transpositionally inter-textual with each other. In other words, when seen in relationship to each other, they create another, new kind of signifying practice that could exist without each of the original practices—that is, the film and the recorded conversation.

My account of the different kinds of journeys associated with the film also illuminates some of the ways in which a film's story, as it is made and as it is remembered, 'travels' over time. This use of time to provide better understanding is described well by Gadamer: 'Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged, because it separates, but is actually the supportive ground of process in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome.'<sup>14</sup>

I use the trope of 'journey' in this paper for two reasons. First, it denotes travel, and car travel in particular is integral to the film's structure: it is what the people in the film are shown doing. The filming begins in Canberra and often takes place inside the Link-Up Falcon itself, and includes the packing and unpacking of this car as well as depictions of the places where rests were taken in motels, restaurants and public buildings, and finally, at Cronulla Beach in Sydney. Second, a journey is an event that does not need to be linear in time or space or even to be contiguous in these dimensions. For example, although this film was edited as a chronological chronicle of a particular journey, film editing usually uses the timing of events in ways that suit the main story rather

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13 Holquist, Michael 1990, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his world*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 89.

14 Gadamer, Hans-Georg 1978, 'The historicity of understanding as hermeneutic principle', in Michael Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, p. 181.

than the chronology of shooting events. In the case of this film, it would need to be at least as long as all the rolls of film used in shooting for it to accurately represent what MacDougall captured through his cinematic equipment. As with most documentary filmmaking practice, MacDougall needed to edit this footage to suit the time requirements of the final film—so time was edited too although the chronology of events was in the main, accurate. The word 'journey' also conjures aspects of memory. The 'vehicles' for these kinds of journeys might be times of quiet reflection, conversation, interpretative understanding and commemoration.

I have edited but not restructured the 2007 conversation, presenting it as it flowed but also embedding within it my comments and additional information in some places. Its sprawling style reflects the drift of new and old memories as people move over, around and then return to the main stories that grip their attention. My telling of these journeys around this conversation as it travels through countryside, city and recollection describes the experience of *Link-Up Diary* as one of travelling through time, space and history. This account especially relates how people can and do travel with goodwill, courage and determination through experiences of difficulty and distress as they retrieve people and their stories from unspoken histories.

## The Film

Coral Edwards allowed MacDougall to join the original Link-Up team, herself and Read with their trainee Robyn Vincent (also a member of the Stolen Generations) for the making of this film. Edwards was happy to include MacDougall because of her previous experience of him as a filmmaker who could participate in the activities being filmed while at the same time minimising his intrusions on these activities.

In making this film, MacDougall adopted a participatory 'reportage' style. He was the sole filmmaker and juggled the new, experimental (at the time) equipment that allowed him to film and record sound simultaneously by himself. This was one of the challenges he set himself in making *Link-Up Diary*. Some of his difficulties during this experience are described in the conversation transcribed below. The uneven sound and image quality, however, contribute to the overall gesture of difficulty and vulnerability that the film presents. *Link-Up Diary* particularly provokes two sensual experiences of reception, and these experiences are intrinsic to the film's narrative content. One of these

involves the exposure of people's secrets, problems and histories. The other involves experiences of risk when the destination is unknown. In this sense, *Link-Up Diary* can be considered a 'journey of exposure'.<sup>15</sup>

The film begins with a set of photographs selected by MacDougall from the archives of the NSW State Aboriginal Protection and Welfare Board. They show Aboriginal men, women and children sitting outside small, simple shelters made from bark and timber. In a voice-over, MacDougall presents a summarised history of how the Stolen Generations came to exist in Australia during the twentieth century. In these opening moments, the film performs, through a disturbing juxtaposition of audiovisual images, a story of the horrific displacement and distress caused by the separation of children from their families. MacDougall's relaxed and yet deeply concerned voice is heard over images of Aboriginal people in family groups, and in conjunction with sounds of some of the technologies that have been used to take their children away: motor vehicles, trains and the typewriter (a sound that was still associated with large bureaucracies during the mid-1980s). These sounds are finally embodied in the Link-Up office, but MacDougall's keen sense of timing as an editor keeps these photographs in place just long enough to provoke a sense of disturbance and interruption. They are then replaced with two photographs of the Link-Up team as it was constituted in the week of 1983 when the film was made, one of which includes MacDougall and his camera. At this point, MacDougall introduces this road trip/car journey by speaking the following words over an image of a frosted-glass door panel at the entrance of the Link-Up Office in Canberra:

The journey began for me in front of this door of the Link-Up Office, one morning in Canberra. A year earlier I had been invited by the Link-Up people to spend a week on the road with them, with the idea of some day making a film together. Now, a year later, we had decided upon an experiment. We would see if it was possible in the space of another week on the road to make a film which would represent the work they had been doing for the past five years. But I didn't know where we were going this week, and I hadn't asked.

Notice that he mentions earlier trips he made with Link-Up, whose destinations and purposes are also commented on in the conversation transcribed later in this paper. For MacDougall, these earlier trips were an important stage of his research for *Link-Up Diary*.

Thirteen distinct narrative segments organised by the trope of a car journey follow the film's highly reflexive introductory opening. *Link-Up Diary* does not include all of the Link-Up team's activities in the filming week, but it does

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15 For a closer analysis of *Link-Up Diary*, see Summerhayes, Catherine 2001, 'Going back for the wounded: cultural performances of exposure through *Link-Up Diary*', *Metro*, vols 127-8, pp. 30-41.

describe much of the business undertaken by the team during that time. Read and the 'Link-Up Falcon' ferry people to and from meetings that take place in private houses, in a hostel, a car park, a motel room and, finally, on Cronulla Beach in Sydney, where the team, exhausted by the week's activities, muses on the inherent sadness of their work.

MacDougall's stated quest in this particular filmed journey was to explore how a particular group of people, including the filmmaker, coped with the difficult task of finding information concerning the Stolen Generations, and also how they coped with the traumatic and heartbreaking stories they discovered. He has described documentary film as an 'irrevocable inscription of acts of communication between filmmakers and the people they film'; 'in the end, each stands exposed to the other in a new way'.<sup>16</sup> Although MacDougall has always claimed that he is essentially an 'outsider' to the situations he films, *Link-Up Diary* shows that he was a passionately committed 'witness' to the continuing questions and distress experienced by people directly affected by the complex issues and horrors suffered by the Stolen Generations.

## 'Questions You Can't Ask'<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting here the difficulties experienced by the early Link-Up team when dealing with people's private and traumatic histories. In the following short dialogue from *Link-Up Diary*, we hear Coral Edwards and Peter Read in the Link-Up office in Canberra, on the phone to Link-Up clients while at the same time juggling their welcoming conversation with filmmaker MacDougall. Here, early in the film, Read and Edwards describe how one of the jobs undertaken by Link-Up is to help people find answers to difficult questions.

*Coral Edwards (CE)*: This is Coral again. You were disconnected. Sorry, go on. Thanks, I've got all that. Your mother's and father's names. Where you were born? Now I need your address and telephone number...

*Peter Read (PR)*: Very hardworking this morning, aren't we?

*David MacDougall (DM)*: Is it always like this? Or are you just putting on a show?

*PR*: We usually start at 10.30, sitting around with coffee, talking about the weekend—

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<sup>16</sup> MacDougall, David 1998, *Transcultural Cinema*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> David MacDougall, Transcript of *Link-Up Diary* dialogue, pp. 2–4.

What's that? You found your mother? Did you? Where was she? She's already found her. Tremendous! She's in Walgett? What amazing luck!

...We're here to help people through the first part, when they meet their families for the first time...when you have worries and doubts...and questions *you can't ask*.

## Memories, Reflections: 19 November 2007<sup>18</sup>

The following conversation, recorded in 2007, explicitly expands the information given in the film. In places, I have inserted subheadings as a way of commenting on the content of the conversation as it travels along. These subheadings usually quote some phrase from the section of dialogue that follows. Here, memories are invoked according to questions and recollections.

This first part of the conversation introduces MacDougall's and Read's reflections on how long it had been since they had seen the film themselves. It also introduces the central narrative position of the car used in the trip to Sydney, together with some of its history.

*DM*: I haven't seen the film for so long.

*PR*: No, me neither.<sup>19</sup>

*DM*: Just looking over the [film] dialogue, it really brings back all sorts of things. Maybe more than even seeing it would.

*Catherine Summerhayes (CS)*: It was called the Link-Up Falcon, wasn't it?

*PR*: The car? Yes, it was. That's quite right, it was a Falcon.

*Ursula Frederick (UF)*: So was it the same car every time?

*PR*: Yeah, they've got a fleet of about 20 cars now of course...Well maybe that's exaggerating a bit but there are a huge number of cars there because all the staff have them...Yeah, someone from the Aboriginal Ministry of New South Wales rang us up and said, 'We are disposing of half a dozen Falcons from some project or other'. And I think they rang us simultaneously, Coral and me, and I said, 'Yes, of course, we'll have one' and Coral said, 'No, we don't want one'. I don't know why she said that because we used to hire them all the time up until that point. So we

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<sup>18</sup> Transcription of this recorded conversation by Jessica Wilds.

<sup>19</sup> Although MacDougall and Read were present at the showing of excerpts from the film during the 2005 Cruising Country symposium, neither had watched the entire film for some time.

got our heads together and to cut a long story short we rang back and said, 'Yes we definitely do, thank you very much'. And that became the Link-Up car until, well [pause] until I left anyway. 1985.

## Link-Up cars: 'what looked like a white government car was never a particularly welcoming sight...'

In this section, Read and MacDougall describe how the meetings with people were arranged, and how and where they took place. Read notes here that arriving in a white government car was often not a good beginning to a meeting with people who identified anything to do with the Government as threatening their way of life. MacDougall also describes a trip he made to rural Australia with Read, before he filmed *Link-Up Diary*. One of the conditions of him filming the Sydney trip was that he should first accompany them on the earlier trip.

CS: David had gone out before with you on the week before—

DM: Yeah, we went west to Mildura and out that way.

CS: So you'd already been out that way to Dareton, Broken Hill?

PR: Dareton, that's right, yeah.

CS: What did it feel like?

DM: It was sort of the rural version of the urban version that we made the film about. But it was a great introduction of seeing the car on the road. Rather than just sit in the office... We would head for a rural centre and we would find out, or maybe you and Coral would already know, people in the local Aboriginal community. We were generally looking for somebody specific and we would track them down and have a chat.

CS: But you weren't seconded by the communities?

PR: No, we just lobbed in, although I think we actually went on a plane to Dareton, via Melbourne; very inconvenient place to get to as I recall—but when we were going anywhere we'd often go into the—well, we were looking for someone in particular but we would lob into some relevant office. Generally [the] DOCS<sup>20</sup> office would have an Aboriginal staff member or Housing Co-op or whoever would give us a welcome. Link-Up wasn't very well known at that time and so the arrival of Link-Up in town didn't cause much of a stir or people [would] run for cover even... Yeah, well until we learned to travel incognito and not go round

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20 Department of Community Services (New South Wales).

saying 'Hooray, Link-Up's here!' People would say once they got to know about Link-Up, 'Oh Christ, this is about my child I never told my husband about...So I'm not sure I want to talk to these people.'

We would go and see the person, generally a parent, almost always a mother, and say, 'Can we see you privately?', particularly if husbands came to the door. But of course arriving in what looked like a white government car was never a particularly welcoming sight for Aboriginal people...If it was too far away, we just used to hire a car after flying there, and have a word with mum on her own. It might be half an hour or something and then make arrangements from there. I think it's still done like this more or less, although I'm a bit out of touch with what they do with fieldwork now. And then we'd make arrangements to bring that person back again in whatever time was convenient, and we learnt from experience it is much better for people to make the best relationship they can before it happens—i.e., by telephone calls and writing rather than hopping in the car and going down next weekend, which generally is very rarely a good idea.

*DM:* It was brought out during the film, with Willie and Susan.

*PR:* Indeed, that's right.

*DM:* You had second thoughts—certainly afterwards—about whether that was the best way to meet.

*CS:* [When I interviewed you in May 1999] I think you called it a 'stuff-up' to me.

*PR:* Yeah, it was a bit actually.

The incident referred to in this conversation was a team meeting with an older man called Willie, soon after they arrived in Sydney. Willie had been looking for his daughter, Susan, and Edwards told him that they had found her. She asked if he would like to meet her that same day since she lived quite close by. Then the team met with Susan, a heavily pregnant young woman who had been looking for her birth parents. The team had convincing evidence that Susan was Willie's daughter and told her about Willie, and that her mother had died. Susan agreed to go back with them and to meet him straight away.

This particular meeting is dramatically crucial to the film's narrative. It is a 'reunion' scene and as such it is highly charged with emotion. Later in the week, there was a return meeting between the team and Susan with her husband, Robin, who was not present at the previous one. In the film's scene of this particular meeting in Susan and Robin's flat, the audience learns that they are both unhappy about the authenticity of her relationship to Willie. Read has

always regretted the way in which this reunion—one that happened very early in Link-Up's history—was organised. During our conversation in 2007, he drew attention to how the organisation now prepares their teams and monitors such situations.

*PR:* It is done much more professionally now. All the staff goes through huge numbers of courses in management, and drug and alcohol counselling, and violence counselling, and community awareness counselling and more things than you can poke a stick at.

*CS:* Well, that was in the days of experimenting to a certain extent.

*PR:* It's got more bureaucratised now, really. It has to be. And some of that intensity probably has gone from it a bit but it has been replaced by extremely efficient management and a red-hot executive committee...

*CS:* So let's see, when you were talking to me [in the 1990s], you said you dated the time of Link-Up starting to 1980 when Coral took you back out to Tingha. So that would make it 27 years.

*PR:* About 27 years. A lot of people have gone home now. We used to rejoice a bit, it was one a month, but now they take back a 100 people per year so it's more—as it has to be—high powered and organised.

*DM:* And they [people from the Stolen Generations] are getting older...

*PR:* Well, there are still a surprising number of young people coming through though all the same.

*DM:* Which tells a lot about how long the program [of removal] operated.

*UF:* I guess that circles back to that original idea of when people were taken away. You know, I remember, Peter, some time back you mentioned to me that the car is significant for that reason as well. And given that it was a government car it must have brought back all kinds of—

*PR:* That's right, in fact I was reading Joy Williams' [a Link-Up client] transcript the other day and she actually said, 'Oh my God!' going back to Cowra in 1985, in the white car. I don't know whether it was the Falcon or not, but she said something like, 'It brought back so many unpleasant memories because I was taken away in a car and here I am coming back in one'...

*DM:* It's always felt uncomfortable arriving in these cars, and I mean in other films as well. When I have had the use of a very new, flashy car it is often an embarrassment.

## Cars

The following section directs our attention to the Link-Up Falcon itself and how it featured in, and affected the making of, the film. Read and MacDougall talk about how the confines of a car itself contribute to the nature of the conversation between passengers and how the car itself became a major site for filming.

*DM:* But there's another aspect of it though, it's a private place, like a moveable office, where you can talk privately to people. And I think a lot of the more interesting sessions we had with people is where we'd take them off somewhere and have a chat and, you know, they felt in a way [pause] When you're inside maybe it feels safe.

*CS:* Well, I think of it as a domestic space because it would be when you are travelling. It would have been quite a friendly space inside for other people as well...

*PR:* Yes, and we were training up Robyn at the time and in my last year in Link-Up, when I was working there, we had Stan in the back as well, Stan Bowden. So there were two trainees there and we were talking about what we were doing all the time.

*CS:* Sort of like a teaching space in some ways?

*PR:* Very much so, yeah.

*DM:* And the odd thing about it is you are not face-to-face. You can have these conversations where you are talking to the back of somebody's head, or you are talking to someone and they can't see behind them. And because of the acoustics of the inside of a car you can hear each other generally pretty well.

*CS:* It's like almost like a dreamlike, monological quality. [Yet] you're talking to someone—

*DM:* And you are travelling through space and time.

*PR:* And don't forget the music is pretty significant, too.

*DM:* It can be.

*PR:* Well, Coral always used to put on something in the last five minutes before arriving somewhere or taking somebody home. I've forgotten what it is.

*UF:* The same piece of music?

*PR:* I think so.

*CS:* She had a soundtrack to that part of her life?

*PR:* Yeah, 'coming home' type of music. It might have been Emmy Lou Harris. We used to be quite fond of her. It might have been one of her numbers. Especially in the last 10 minutes of arriving anywhere...

*DM:* Also if you have music playing you don't have to talk, if people feel awkward about talking.

*CS:* But there can be problems with music in that not everyone wants to hear that music.

*DM:* And copyright problems, if you are a filmmaker [laughter]...[It] would have been against the aesthetic of the film actually [to intentionally insert music into a soundtrack].

*UF:* Were there any other sort of challenges to do with the filmmaking that you had to discuss as a team before undertaking this journey? Or was it you really going, as you were going along, trying to manage the situation?

*DM:* Well, Peter knew a lot about the problems in advance because he had been involved with filmmaking before and could anticipate problems.

*PR:* Coral wanted you and nobody else as I recall, didn't she? That was the first issue...

*CS:* And you had all that new sound gear to manipulate by yourself.

*DM:* I had to manage. I seem to remember constantly changing batteries because I had two radio microphones, so for each radio microphone set you have a transmitter and then you have the receiver and each one of them has batteries that are constantly running down...I was carrying around an analogue cassette recorder...

*CS:* And the levels were a problem a little bit, too.

*DM:* The sound as a result is pretty crappy, let's face it.

*CS:* I was thinking, with people getting in and out of cars or leaning in to say something or—I didn't mind that at all, as you know. I've written about it as being a gorgeous gesture for the difficulties in communication, which are what the film is about to a large extent. So I felt when the sound distorted or wasn't perfect at different times, it was really nice.

*DM:* Actually, the best sound was in the car...And the worst sound was when we would go into someone's house...like filming Willie, when we first met him...It was a ground-floor flat with the windows open and a huge amount of traffic going by.

*PR:* I think the door was open, too, actually.

*DM:* I had to put the microphone down wherever I could.

*CS:* Did everyone have enough room in the car?

*PR:* Well, we only had four people there and it's quite a big car, so yes. Two bucket seats in the back.

*PR:* But the other advantage of cars—and as David said, music can cover awkward silences—in cars there aren't really any awkward silences, especially on the open road. If you stop at traffic lights and there are just two people [in the car], it can be, but for four people on the open road, you can go on for 10 minutes or 20 minutes and not say anything—which you couldn't possibly do with us four sitting here [now].

*UF:* How long were the journeys on average?

*PR:* A week. Generally a week and David's week on the road.

*CS:* It was about four days, I think; the one out west [Dareton] was, wasn't it?

*PR:* Probably. Generally, coming home lunchtime on Fridays or something.

*UF:* So quite a lot of time was spent actually getting to these places.

*PR:* Or doing a lot of work in one place.

*CS:* They went from Canberra in this particular one, Canberra to Sydney and then all round Sydney. But there's a beautiful shot towards the end of the film that I thought again used the car very well as an image, and that's where the rain is on the windscreen wipers and Coral's beautiful [monologue] about 'going back for the wounded'.

*DM:* I love shooting inside the car to see the things [pause] to try to capture [pause] You look out the window and see something passing by or you look through to [pause] It's almost like a cinema screen in some ways.

*PR:* And you got that. There's a neon sign 'Remake your own life' or something, remember that?

*DM:* You just pick up the details like that.

*PR:* What Jay [Dr Jay Arthur, Read's wife] liked actually was all the closure all the time, like red lights, and level-crossing gates and things saying stop, stop all the time. Jay really picked that up, actually. I didn't notice it.

*DM:* And the sounds of the directional signals. I still remember that.

## 'Absolutely an Aboriginal project'

In the next segment of our dialogue, Peter Read notes what he perceives to be a change over time in the uses people make of the Link-Up organisation. He emphasises that it is now a solely Aboriginal enterprise, and introduces the idea of Aboriginality as part of what was being returned to people through Link-Up.

*CS:* That space in the car, that warm, thinking space. [pause] Did the journey in its entirety feel like an Aboriginal project? It was for Aboriginal people and these days it is full of Aboriginal people in the car doing it. But in this case it was two [non-Aboriginal] men and two Aboriginal women totally convivial and totally supportive and I was wondering what the project felt like at that stage.

*PR:* Absolutely an Aboriginal project in a way that it perhaps isn't anymore.

*CS:* That's interesting.

*PR:* We were really, really full-on in returning Aboriginality to people, and it was just as important as returning people to the family. And that's something that was part of the '80s actually, not just Coral and me. Although looking back, I think I did a fair bit of pushing too and I'm not taking the credit for it because maybe it was something we could have done without, maybe it was a little bit full-on... That's how Link-Up was in those days. Coral and I were both pushing it hard. And that's not quite the—

*CS:* —the approach now.

*PR:* No, it's more about finding your family, actually. There's a very strong element of 'our people' still; all the staff are Indigenous.

*DM:* But all founded on the realisation that, you know, taking children away was to rob people of their Aboriginality and in effect to take apart Aboriginal society, wasn't it? We felt that very strongly.

*PR:* There was a kind of semi-mystical, quasi-mystical element to it. That's the point. And that's not there anymore.

*CS:* And it was very much a car, you know, of this incredible goodwill going down the road, with incredible good intentions and determination as well.

*DM:* And there's also something about travelling over roads and from one place and another that is a bit like travelling into history. There is a sense you have of discovery of the past as you go from one place to another.

## 'A road movie'

In the following section, MacDougall describes the film as a 'road movie'. The road movie is now considered a film genre. Consequently, the conversation expands the meaning of the film itself to include some of the tropes of the road movie, such as the connotations of long-distance travelling by a group of people who often see themselves as marginalised by society.

*PR:* There's a kind of road-movie feel about it of course.

*DM:* It is a road movie!

*PR:* There are hundreds and hundreds of films about Link-Uppers going home. Well, not hundreds, but lots and lots. But people going home to find their families. These films generally don't have that [journey] element at all. There's talking here and scene two is arriving where your mother lives...instead of the journey. So not only is it different for the viewers but it's different for everyone involved in it.

*CS:* ...and [throughout the film] there is that kind of feeling of 'I just want to be on the road!'

*DM:* Well, there is always attached to that a sense of freedom from responsibility because you are leaving behind all the work that is back there...So you do feel the freedom of the road and just the opening up of possibilities. You don't know what may happen to you or what's going to happen next or where you are going.

*CS:* ...the teams that go out to these places, I imagine, it's like 'Well, this could be a happy ending'.

*UF:* ...and the idea of not knowing the outcome, the horizon ahead.

*DM:* That was also one of the premises of the film. I told Peter and Coral not to tell me where we would be going, because I didn't want to know. I just wanted to discover it while I was filming...I wanted to make the film a reflection of the experience of travel and of finding out how Peter and Coral worked, so that the audience would be put in the position of the filmmaker. I think that's what lies behind it, to give the audience a sense of discovery that they are going through everything at the same time as the filmmaker.

*CS:* You always said that the film was about the team even more than the interactions that they had with the people that they were finding. It was to do a lot with the effect that these searches and the work had on the people doing the searches and the work. This is one of the things that you became very interested in, the effect it was having on everyone else.

*DM:* Yeah, because there is a kind of cumulative strain and burnout, I think, going on if you do [this] kind of work day after day, just because you are so exposed to other people's distress. You know, how long can you take that week after week, given the fact that there are moments of joy when things work out well and all that?

*PR:* Although the modern staff don't go out every second week. That's a big strain.

*CS:* Well, the car would very much become the gypsy caravan.

*PR:* Yeah, true, that's right, it was.

*DM:* But this trip for me was a kind of—It wasn't totally unfamiliar in a way because one of the first trips I remember in Australia was going on a journey with Bob Reece who's an historian, out in WA [Western Australia] now, who was trying to find out more about the Moree [western New South Wales] massacre and other massacres that went on around [the place]. We discovered many in fact in that region. Judith [MacDougall] and I made a long trip, a couple of weeks, I think, with him visiting Aboriginal communities around Moree and talking to people who remembered stories and the massacre. And then talking to the white farmers around there, some of whom were amazingly defensive, and were speaking about it as though it had happened 10 years ago instead of a hundred years ago—So it was very real and very much part of contemporary history. This was the feeling. This was in '75 or '76—But there were farmers who remember finding skeletons in their paddocks—that was another trip in the car—Very much the same feeling of going out to try to find out about the past from people who were living today.

## City space/country space: 'the travelling is different'

This section of dialogue highlights how the team distinguished between working in the countryside and their work in urban Sydney.

*UF:* You made that point about the city space and then there's the going into country bit—literally, sort of urban versus 'not urban'. Were there any kinds of distinct differences in that experience for you, Peter?

*PR:* Well [pause] more a sense of the rolling miles, I guess.

*CS:* The travelling is different.

*PR:* The travelling is very different, yeah. Once we got to Sydney it was sort of half-hour dashes through in heavy traffic, yeah [pause] which is very different from 200 kilometres without a bend in it.

*DM:* I was actually a little bit disappointed we were going to Sydney [for the filmed journey]. I don't know if I ever said that before. I had hoped for another trip like the one we made out west.

*PR:* No, I don't think you had said that before but it doesn't surprise me.

*DM:* And one thing about these country towns is that the pattern is very different. There was generally an Aboriginal mission somewhere outside the town, or there would be a part of town where there would be a community, and people would come off the station or come off the mission. And of course in the city you met people who had had that history but they had passed through a whole set of other stages...So I was disappointed but then it had its own interest.

*CS:* I think as a document it was incredibly good because it really demonstrated just how much people moved, and how much people moved to the city as well, and the resources of the city.

*PR:* How many separated people there were in the city.

*DM:* And the whole aspect of it that was very interesting to me was the documentation of it and how all the detective work that was required by this sort of—Peter was the Phillip Marlowe [laughs] of Sydney going into these archives or trying to deal with these bureaucrats who didn't want to give you information...And knowing the ways and means to find out, to match up one record with another, to prove that somebody was somebody else's child.

*CS:* But the place of confidence was the car. Confidence and education. And safety.

*DM:* ...I think in a way for me reading the transcript is more evocative than maybe seeing the film because it's the text that is burned into my memory, having edited the film. You know, every line is like a line out of script now for me. And I can just see in the text the situation, the humour—if there's humour—and the tone of voice. And I know who exactly is speaking even though this transcript doesn't tell you who is speaking...So you replay the film in your imagination.

One thing that occurred to me about the relationship between cars and life, I guess, is that when you travel, the car is always part of the complex of other things including restaurants, petrol stations and motels. A car journey is punctuated by these stops, and so the film has the scenes of eating in restaurants, and it has discussions at night about what happened that day, in the motel room. And of course in people's houses where you would go. If you are talking about car trips, you have to talk about these other places and spaces.

## Gestures of respect

Two repetitive features in the film are the welcoming hug given to Coral Edwards by the people the Link-Up team come to meet and that Australian ritual of mutual respect—the 'cup of tea'—that is inevitably offered to them when they arrive at their homes. These two gestures combine to show again and again the social intimacy that existed between the Link-Up team and the people they were working for.

*CS:* Well, one of the lovely things I was interested in was all the cups of tea, you know.

*DM:* You've got to have a cup of tea when you arrive.

*CS:* You've got to have a cup of tea every time, and you stop for a cup of tea every time. Also the way Coral would hug everybody when she met them and left them. So for me those two gestures really came out strongly. It was like bodily contact but also this cup of tea. 'Yeah, we'll have a cup of tea', you know.

*DM:* And cigarettes in those days as well.

In an earlier discussion, MacDougall said that with *Link-Up Diary*, he was interested in departing from his previous filmic practice in order to depict on film his own personal experience of the social situation he was in with the Link-

Up team: 'By having that experience, to learn something about what it meant to the people involved...not only the people who had lost their parents, or who had lost their children, but also the Link-Up people.'<sup>21</sup>

Through MacDougall's careful exposure of how this particular group interacted with one another and with other people, the film achieves another gesticulant practice that is not only one of exposure and journeying. As mentioned earlier, this practice is also one that suggests an attitude of careful respect towards both people and the complex relationships that are described throughout. This practice can be described in terms of the number of 'greetings' and 'farewells' that are included in the film. Every meeting between the Link-Up team and their clients is introduced within the film by images of people hugging, kissing, shaking hands or verbally greeting one another. Edwards in particular is depicted in this film as someone who gives not only of her emotions but also of the touch of her body to these people as comfort and support. Whereas these segments can be understood as MacDougall's intention to portray the emotional burden that was borne by this early Link-Up team, the persistent, recurring imaging of such behaviour between people also can be considered to mark a 'showing of respect' towards the people whose lives are presented by the film. Through the filmmaker actually participating in these introductions, the film viewer is not only 'introduced' to these people, but is also shown the appropriate behaviour that enabled the meetings that the filmmaker witnessed. This film makes all who view it also witnesses of the human distress and complexity of problems that are the experiences of the Stolen Generations.

The experiences of the Indigenous families separated from each other over the past 100 years are not yet healed scars; they are still open wounds. Read eloquently describes these experiences as part of every Australian's history.

*PR*: ...when I reflect on it now as an historian 30 years later, well, the whole bloody racist wound is not just people who were taken away, but everybody...Those who stayed behind had just as hard a time but in a different way.

*CS*: But you go back for the wounded—you don't just leave them there.

*PR*: No, no, that's right.

*UF*: So in the context of that, how did you feel being part of that process?

*PR*: There's one thing to say 'we are older and wiser' but that's one thing I haven't lost: my rage about it all, the whole thing about the Stolen Generations. And just going through Joy's story again now has

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21 Summerhayes interview with David MacDougall, 2 November 1999.

me boiling with rage about what happened to her and all her family. So I was delighted to be part of the undoing of that terrible part of our history. So, it was a real privilege to be there.

## Renewal, but never a journey of closure

You think you become immune to the hurt, and the pain you listen to, but you just don't.

By the end of the week, it becomes just one great feeling of sadness.<sup>22</sup>

Coral Edwards speaks these haunting words in the closing scenes of the film, over an image of rain washing the Link-Up Falcon's windscreen as Read drives the team through grey, wet Sydney streets. Towards the end of the film, we see Edwards and Read walking along the sands of Cronulla Beach in Sydney's south. They are subdued and tired, in need of fresh air and healing from the distress they found and witnessed during the past week. In this next section of our 2007 dialogue, MacDougall and Read appear to 'make light' of this excursion to the beach, and yet the filmic apparatus captured a moment of reflection that summed up the exhaustion and sadness that was incurred during the week's work.

CS: ...you drove to that beach and walked—

DM: Oh, Cronulla.

CS: There was this real melancholy look of all you people sitting down, like once again you are out of the safe little space of—the thinking space of the car and suddenly—

DM: Fresh air and sea breeze.

CS: But also the sadness.

DM: We were tired. It was the end of the week.

The filmmaking performances of *Link-Up Diary* show the viewer conversations with people who have only just come to realise that they had been accepting government-derived lies about themselves and their families. Read has spoken to me about a meeting he had with senior Aboriginal bureaucrats when he was seeking funding for Link-Up early in the organisation's history: 'Pens stopped

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22 Transcript of *Link-Up Diary* dialogue, p. 69.

mid-flight and people stopped looking up their airline tickets—and you could feel the questions dashing around the room, people saying, “You mean, my mother didn’t put me away after all?”<sup>23</sup>

Read’s words recall Marcia Langton’s comments on how the very concept of being an Aboriginal person has been made problematic for people by persistent intrusion by the Australian Government into the domestic space of their family relationships: ‘For Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the State. They find white perceptions of “Aboriginality” are disturbing because of the history of forced removal of children, denial of civil rights and dispossession of land.’<sup>24</sup>

As shown in this paper’s transcribed conversation and in the film itself, MacDougall’s respectfully interactive filmmaking involves a high degree of ethical and cinematic risk taking. Yet in taking such risks, the filmmaker allows the film’s viewers a wide range of sympathetic insights into other people’s experiences of coping with the past that would be difficult to comprehend otherwise. His filmic practice brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s hope that film could become society’s jolting weapon against the ‘shocks’ administered by the massive bureaucracies and mechanisations of modernity: ‘The film is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man’s need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him.’<sup>25</sup>

The information about the Stolen Generations is sensually exposed and compassionately communicated in *Link-Up Diary*. It is both shocking and deceptively contained within the mesmerising rhythm of a car journey. Together with the film’s gestures of respect, we also experience a filmic practice that ‘shocks’ with a seemingly casual elegance.

Although the particular journey described by the film is through the metropolis of Sydney, many other journeys also lie behind the story of this film. As described earlier, these include trips made to western New South Wales and Victoria by MacDougall with the Link-Up team, as well as those MacDougall made with his wife, Judith MacDougall, around Moree in western New South Wales. Then, and most importantly, there are the many terrible journeys by members of the Stolen Generations and their families, as documented by the *Bringing Them Home* report. Finally, the stories behind the film *Link-Up Diary*

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23 Summerhayes interview with Peter Read, 4 May 1999.

24 Langton, Marcia 1993, ‘Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television’: A chapter for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things, Australian Film Commission, North Sydney, NSW, p. 28.

25 Benjamin, Walter 1969, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Schocken Books, New York, p. 250.

have also journeyed over time and history: from the time of its making and release in 1987 to 2008, when Australian society formally recognised the wrongs done to the Stolen Generations and Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, finally said 'sorry' in Parliament, on behalf of all Australians for the past and ongoing suffering of the Stolen Generations and their families.

The 2007 conversation represented in this paper shows how the film continues to travel. Although the meanings of what we see and hear sometimes change over time—as in the case of Sharon and Willie's premature meeting—these changes do not obliterate the original voices present in the filmic text. We are given, rather, a new dimension of meaning that is drawn both from memory and from the unfolding of actual events over time. The opportunities for 'going back' with the film itself, and through conversation with the people involved in making it, result in two significant outcomes. The first is an understanding of how film needs to be understood as a cultural performance that both endures and evolves over time. The second lies in the way that the film, in combination with the conversation, can now be better embedded within the historical fabric of how we understand what happened and is still happening for the Stolen Generations in Australian society. It is clear that the conversation itself speaks with a strong voice. The conversation gives even more information about the issues addressed by the film and reframes the film as a historical artefact.

My intention has been to present the conversation as a dialogic vehicle, in and of itself, for interpersonal communication about events pertinent to the film. Together, *Link-Up Diary* and the 2007 conversation form a new text comprising cultural meanings that intersect and extend the work each does independently. The Cruising Country symposium's screening event should be included in this inter-textual structure of communication and understanding: its performance launched the film's journey through time and space into the twenty-first century.

## People Quoted in the Film and Conversation

CE: Coral Edwards

DM: David MacDougall

PR: Peter Read

CS: Catherine Summerhayes

UF: Ursula Frederick