

Critical Analysis of *Mystery Road*

Commented [1]: Critically discuss the ways that social identities and differences contribute to the social meanings of your chosen media item, drawing on the three chosen scholarly readings.



Figure 1: From *Mystery Road*, Blair & Thornton (2020)

Blair & Thornton's (2020) TV series, *Mystery Road* Season Two, features a rich and complex array of social identities and differences, contributing to the series' authentic depiction of First Nations Australian identity. This outback noir reinvigorates the neo-western genre with contemporary Indigenous Australian perspectives, particularly in its fourth episode, *Broken*. Unlike much Australian media, which undermines Aboriginal political aspirations, Blair & Thornton's (2020) TV series aligns with Thomas et al. (2019) description of the empowered Sovereignty/nationhood narrative. The Indigenous Australian directors, as well as the majority of the writers and cast, demonstrate a breadth of belonging experiences in Australia, as explored by Moreton-Robinson (2015). Characterisation is authentic and layered, demonstrating an understanding of how aspects of identity compound to create marginalisation, corresponding with the work of Joyner et al. (2018) on intersectionality. Overarchingly, Blair & Thornton's (2020) *Mystery Road* Season Two is a conscientious example of Australian media that engages audiences with modern Indigenous Australia.

Within a media environment where dominant discourses fail the Aboriginal polity, as discussed by Thomas et al. (2019), Blair & Thornton's (2020) series presents a credible and comprehensive narrative of Aboriginality. Thomas et al. (2019, p. 233) identified

the three overriding narratives used to depict Aboriginality with mainstream media as disempowering: the White Mastery narrative values Aboriginal absorption into the wider population; the Irreconciliation narrative recognises the problem but sees no solution, and; the Subordination narrative observes demands which do not threaten existing politics (p. 238). However, *Mystery Road* aligns with the fourth narrative of sovereignty/nationhood, validating First Nations Australians' continuing identity and the right to 'aspirations for land, self-determination and agreement-making (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 238). Like most media created within the sovereignty/nationhood narrative, it is authored from a First Nations perspective. This collaboration of Bunya Productions and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation is directed by Warwick Thornton (of *Samson and Delilah* and *Sweet Country*) and Wayne Blair (of *The Sapphires* and *Cleverman*). The series syncs neo-western genre conventions with reality as detective Jay Swan (Arrernte and Arabana man, Aaron Pedersen) must arbitrate both the law and deep lore in the fictitious town Gideon - captured by Western Australia's Dampier Peninsula. While it takes the format of entertainment rather than direct journalistic discourse, the nuanced depiction of Aboriginality presents the polity as an equal negotiating partner.

Mystery Road aligns with Thomas et al. research and presents a nuanced and empowered narrative of First Nations Australian identity, employing an aesthetic symbolism and plot accessible by the masses. In the opening of episode four, *Broken*, time-lapses of an ethereal dawn rising over mangroves are contrasted with a kangaroo carcass rotting in the shadows; city lights twinkling like a mirage on the desert horizon



Figure 3: Kangaroo rotting. From *Mystery Road*, Blair & Thornton (2020)

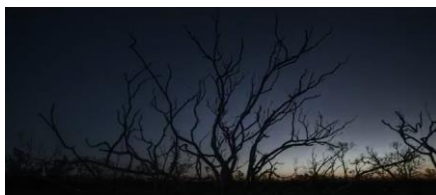


Figure 2: Dawn over mangroves. From *Mystery Road*, Blair & Thornton (2020)

are juxtaposed against the sun glaring through rusting metal. Such aesthetic symbolism is consistently used to portray the Australian landscape as a place inextricably of otherworldly beauty and disturbing brutality. This contrast reflects a recent Australian history where Aboriginality has both suffered horribly and continued to persevere beautifully within a contemporary culture built on dispossession. Blair & Thornton's (2020) also show complexity more directly in their subversion of national stereotypes regarding criminality. The drama's drug-lording villains are white men, shown to be exploiting compromised populations. Local people are used as pawns to keep criminals' hands clean, and missing Aboriginal children are neglected by local law enforcement, leaving unhealed trauma in communities. Episode *Broken* features the white police Senior Sergeant threatening

Indigenous detective Swan that could "be down on his arse quicker than shit off a shovel" (Blair & Thornton, 2020) for dropping his service revolver. This psychological manipulation is designed to bring Swan to take the blame for a drug-bust shootout he did not perform, and is part of a larger narrative of subordination and threat within the series. Unlike most media narratives that undermine Aboriginal perspectives, Blair & Thornton embrace their role as "gatekeepers of Aboriginal political aspirations" (Thomas et al., 2019, p. 241) and present a comprehensive and publicly engaging narrative that encourages Aboriginal sovereignty.

Blair & Thornton's (2020) depict the complex Australian landscape of belonging post colonisation, as detailed by Moreton-Robinson (2015), through an authentic diversity of Indigenous perspectives. Moreton-Robinson (2015) explains Australia as "postcolonizing" - rather than postcolonial like India, Malaysia, or Algeria - as First Nations Australians are a minority to their migrant colonisers, unable to forget the ongoing colonising process (p. 10). The diasporic identity this creates in Indigenous subjects is demonstrated in the episode *Broken* when detective Swan peers at his reflections in two motel mirrors - one whitewashed and shadowed black. Symbolism highlights Swan's conflicted sense of belonging - discriminated against as a black police officer and distrusted within the Aboriginal community for enforcing white law. Blair & Thornton (2020) also represent the problematic colonial sentiment of belonging through the sub-narrative of conflict over an archaeological dig site. As Australia was claimed under the fiction of terra nullius - land belonging to no one - unlike usual doctrines of conquest (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, pp. 4-5), new migrants forging lives on the country developed a sense of belonging as "battlers" with a "right to be here" (p.6). Australia's postcolonizing sense of belonging forged from dispossession is embodied in *Broken* by archaeologist Sandra, who's eternally burnt skin and tattered hair demonstrates her dislocation on the landscape. Sandra's colonial sentiment of belonging, as Moreton-Robinson



Figure 4: Sandra. From *Mystery Road*, Blair & Thornton (2020)

(2015) explains, is enhanced by the possession of the "Indigenous sacred" in the form of a historically significant women's business site which she is excavating. Like the disapproving local community dismissed by Sandra, the majority of Indigenous Australians lack rights to their land (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p.10) despite "an ontological relationship to country derived from the Dreaming" (p. 11). The multicultural Indigenous community is reflected in the variety of opinions on Sandra's dig, from clan leader Amos' support in return for knowledge and financial support to Leonie's disapproval from old wounds from having her ancestor's remains taken. In episode *Broken*, Leonie explains how her great, great grandfather was taken by

Sandra's university "to bag, tag and display. Now they consider him their property" - ironic as "you know - all those books you write about us - how dead can't rest until their bones return to the country" (Blair & Thornton, 2020). Despite Leonie's disapproval, repatriation is denied, and the dig continues, actualising Moreton-Robinson (2015) description that "even though we were dispossessed of our lands by white people, the burden of proof for repossession of our lands is now placed on us" (p. 16), and often does not affect gaining land rights. Corresponding with Moreton-Robinson (2015), *Mystery Road* presents a variation in Indigenous Australian ontological connections to land, which are largely unrecognisable by non-Indigenous people, and overall form the entangled Australian landscape of belonging.

Within their exploration of Aboriginality, Blair & Thornton's (2020) complex characters and relationships embody intersectionality and how it can create privilege and marginalisation, as explored by Joyner et al. (2018). Understanding that multiple identities "fuse together into a whole" (p. 98), Joyner et al. (2018) propose the concept of Positionality to make meaning from one's position in relation to structures that limit access to political, economic, and organisational power. These structures include race/colour/ethnicity; gender and sex; socioeconomic status; national origin and language; ability; spirituality/religion and; sexual orientation - some of which provide access to privilege, and others, oppression (p.101-102). By applying Positionality to the lead character, Jay Swan, we see complexity in how the detective is discriminated against as an Aboriginal man, yet empowered as male in comparison to his police



Figure 5: Fran and Jay. From *Mystery Road*, Blair & Thornton (2020)

partner Fran - an Indigenous female. Joyner et al. (2018) also highlight that Positionality depends on context (p. 101), and while Swan may have been privileged as an officer within white law enforcement, this status caused discrimination and hostility within the local Aboriginal community. When Swan ignores a found dead body, suspected to a missing Aboriginal teen girl, and instead focus on a drug bust - his colleague Fran explodes, saying, "I took this job because black women are going missing and men who think they're cowboys are too busy having pissing contests to give a shit." (Blair & Thornton, 2020) The directors' employ Swan and Fran's dynamic to demonstrate how privilege can limit a person's ability to see obstacles faced by others (Joyner et al., 2018, p. 105), and show the complex ways in which Positionality can shape intersectional identity.

Blair & Thornton's (2020) Australian outback noir, *Mystery Road* Season Two, conscientiously engages audiences with modern Indigenous Australia, notably

evident in its fourth episode, *Broken*. Blair & Thornton's (2020) reject traditionally disenfranchising narratives of Aboriginality, as presented by Thomas et al. (2019), aligning with an empowered Sovereignty/nationhood narrative. The series presents the layered situation of belonging in a postcolonising Australia, as explored by Moreton-Robinson (2015), through its directors, writers, and cast's authentic Indigenous perspectives. Understanding Joyner et al. (2018) concept of how layers of identity can compound privilege and marginalisation, the series features an engaging and diverse array of characters that candidly capture intersectionality. Overall, Blair & Thornton's (2020) *Mystery Road* Season Two captures dynamic social identities and differences within contemporary Australia, thus engaging audiences with an authentic and thought-provoking depiction of First Nations Australian identity.

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