

## Social Identities

Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture

ISSN: 1350-4630 (Print) 1363-0296 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csidi20>

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To cite this article: Joseph Pugliese (2018): As above so below: drone visualities of the aftermath, testimonies of the more-than-human and the politico-aesthetics of massacre sites, *Social Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/13504630.2018.1514159](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2018.1514159)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2018.1514159>

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## As above so below: drone visualities of the aftermath, testimonies of the more-than-human and the politico-aesthetics of massacre sites

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### ABSTRACT

In the wake of the 200th anniversary of a massacre that was foundational to the expansion and consolidation of the Australian settler-colonial state, two Indigenous curators, Tess Allas and David Garneau, staged a landmark exhibition, *With Secrecy and Dispatch*, to commemorate this event and to place it in dialogue with other colonial massacres. Adrian Stimson, Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation, southern Alberta, Canada, contributed a drone-enabled, 2-channel video installation titled *As Above So Below*. Stimson's work deployed drone visualities in order to expose layered histories of genocidal violence that inscribe both the Appin massacre and the Cypress Hills colonial massacre in Saskatchewan, Canada. In this essay, I discuss the complex and layered regimes of visibility that were enabled by an imaging technology, the drone, usually associated with its own contemporary military massacres. In deploying drone visualities, Stimson challenges and overturns doxic understandings of two foundational categories of Western aesthetics: the beautiful and the sublime. In the absence of the bodies that originally inscribed the bloody sites of two colonial massacres, Stimson mobilises more-than-human testimonies to give voice to the disappeared dead and to re-inscribe the colonial past into the colonial present.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2018  
Accepted 28 June 2018

### KEYWORDS

Indigenous art; colonial massacres; drones; settler-colonial state

In 2016, Tess Allas (Indigenous) and David Garneau (Métis) curated an exhibition, *With Secrecy and Dispatch*, to commemorate the infamous Appin Massacre and other massacres of Indigenous peoples by the Australian and Canadian settler-colonial states. In their curatorial statement, Allas (Australia) and Garneau (Canada) articulate the impetus that drove them to stage this landmark exhibition:

The 17 April, 2016, marks a significant date in Australia's history – the 200th anniversary of the Appin Massacre. Governor Lachlan Macquarie ordered the Aboriginal people be captured or shot if they tried to escape and the displacement of their communities within the Appin region of New South Wales. The Appin Massacre was one of the first upon Australian soil and has mostly been erased from our history books, as have other massacres which have taken place across our nation and around the globe in the wake of Western colonisation. Public acknowledgement of our bloodied histories and their commemoration of important dates from the frontier wars are long overdue. (Allas & Garneau, 2016, p. 1)

*With Secrecy and Despatch* was produced in collaboration with the local Dharawal community and the Campbelltown Arts Centre, New South Wales, Australia. Allas and Garneau engaged a number of Indigenous artists to respond to the Appin Massacre and other colonial massacres. Adrian Stimson, Siksika (Blackfoot) Nation, southern Alberta, Canada, contributed an art work catalysed by the Appin Massacre. His work, *As Above So Below*, consisted of a video installation that visually memorialised both the Appin Massacre and the Cypress Hills Massacre of 1873 in Alberta, Canada. In what follows, I proceed to discuss Stimson's video installation in the context of the complex and layered intersection of Indigenous art practice, visual modalities of historical remembering and memorialisation, the mobilisation and collision of aesthetic categories, and the past and ongoing regimes of violence that are constitutive of the Australian and Canadian settler-colonial states.

### Coordinates of massacre

*As Above So Below* is a 2-channel video that was projected onto a large screen in one of the darkened exhibition spaces of Campbelltown Arts Centre. The video opens with an entirely black screen underscored by the thumping pulse of a beating heart. From the depths of the black screen two longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates come into view, one on the left side of the screen and the other on the right:

Appin N 34° 13'36.654" E 150° 44' 32.156"	Cypress Hills N 49° 32' 59.042" W 109° 53' 20.655
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These are the coordinates of the two massacre sites. They mark the gridded geometry of settler-colonial space and they establish the cartographic epistemology essential to the colonial possession of Indigenous Country. The longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates of the gridded landscape function to enunciate the imposition of a settler-colonial order that exercises both control and mastery over all that falls under its cartographic purview. Stimson's use of these mapping coordinates to open *As Above So Below* is crucial in foregrounding the fact that the colonial explorers and mappers of Country must be seen as the vanguard troops that established the conditions of possibility for colonial possession, displacement and the consequent massacre of the people indigenous to Country. Matthew Edney has documented the relations of power that hold between the colonial technology of the grid and its material instantiations through the processes of surveying and mapping colonial territories. He terms the colonial surveyors the 'point men of British imperialism' (Edney, 1993, p. 62). Their surveys and maps facilitated the 'imposition of a new economic and spatial order on "new territory," either erasing the precapitalist indigenous settlement or confining it to particular areas' (Kain & Baigent, 1992, p. 329). The 'particular areas' were, of course, the infamous systems of reserves that quarantined and controlled the lives of the Indigenous people who were forcibly removed from their traditional lands and quartered in these penal spaces. In context of the Appin area, George Caley (1770–1829), explorer and naturalist, was one of the 'point men' of British imperialism (Else-Mitchell, 1966). Caley's exploratory and cartographic work enabled the subsequent expansive incursions of settlers into Aboriginal lands that, up to that point, had marked the boundary line of colonial settlements, and the consequent theft and absorption of their lands into the cadstral registers of the colonial state.

The settler-colonial gridding of space, as marked by Stimson's use of the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates, functions, moreover, to establish Western concepts of property while simultaneously inscribing space with asymmetrical relations of colonial power. Nicholas Blomley brings into focus the dynamics of this particular nexus: 'The codes of access and exclusion that structure the uses of the grid are saturated by conceptions of property ... The grid ... is a pervasive form of disciplinary rule, backed by sovereign power' (Blomley, 2003, p. 131). As both the Appin and Cypress Hills Massacres evidence, the sovereign power of colonial rule was, in turn, backed by the legalised right to kill Indigenous people who resisted the enforced displacement from their Country. As a technology fundamentally predicated on the seemingly apolitical discipline of geometry, the cartographic grid effectively appears neutral in its organisation of space and in the relations of disciplinary power it both enables and reproduces. As such, Blomley notes:

The grid is treated as abstract, objective, and prepolitical by virtue of its spatiality. Space appears inert and a priori ... In much the same way that the modern map encourages a view of property as concerned with a person and a space, so the way the space of the grid is imagined tends to deflect blame. Rather than focusing our attention on the socially differentiated violences of property and law, the temptation is to blame the outlaws for their own location, absent a critical analysis of the mappings and displacements that prefigure those locations ... Thus the violence unleashed against such outlaws appears either outside law itself ... or as a disinterested objective policing of collective norms. (Blomley, 2003, p. 132)

The longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates of gridded space that mark the opening of Stimson's video exemplify the seemingly abstract, objective and prepolitical status of gridded space. The coordinates emerge as mere geometric indices of particular sites that are devoid of political investments or genocidal motives. It is only by historicising these coordinates that their bloody agendas become manifest. In the case of the Appin Massacre, the point men of British imperialism had established the surveyed conditions of possibility that enabled the push by settlers, from the 1790s onwards, to secure Dharawal and Gandangara Country.<sup>1</sup> The acts of resistance exercised by the Dharawal and Gandangara people in the face of the waves of settler-colonial incursion into their Country led to Governor Macquarie's direct intervention and his issuing of an edict to

track down, capture or kill all Aborigines, with no distinction between 'friendly' and 'hostile' ... Macquarie ordered the bodies of the slain hung up in the trees 'in order to strike the greater terror into the survivors.' Women and children were not excluded – any who were killed were to be buried 'where they fell' (Karskens, 2015).

The militarised reprisal against acts of Indigenous resistance that led to the Appin Massacre was led by Captain James Wallis. Following Macquarie's orders, Wallis descended with his troop on the Aboriginal camp, which they found deserted, situated close to the Cataract Gorge. The cry of a child, however, alerted them to the hidden presence of the Aboriginal people:

Wallis immediately 'formed line rank entire' and the soldiers 'pushed through a thick brush' towards that cry. They were also heading directly towards 'precipitous banks of a deep rocky creek,' the gorge of the Cataract River, 60 m deep. The line of men pushed on, the dogs set up a frantic barking. As the soldiers opened fire on them, the Aborigines 'fled over the cliffs' and were smashed to death in the gorge ... The bodies of two warriors, Durelle

and Cannabayagal, were hauled up to the highest point of the range of hills on Lachlan Vale and strung up in trees. (Karskens, 2015)

Presently, I will discuss the details of the massacre in the context of Stimson's video; at this juncture, however, I want to underline that the perpetrators of the massacre were not only given legal impunity, but they were also duly celebrated and rewarded for their genocidal efforts: 'All the participants of the operation ... were handsomely rewarded in spirits, shoes, cash, clothing, blankets, food and tobacco' (Karskens, 2015). The expropriation and securitisation of Indigenous land through mass murder was paid for in a range of commodities that ensured, in a type of quid pro quo, not only the smooth exchange of various forms of capital in the fledgling colony, but, more insidiously, the transmutation of dead Indigenous bodies into fixed and portable goods that ran the gamut of the commodity spectrum: from spirits to shoes, cash, clothing, blankets, food and tobacco. With this massacre, a colonial-capital system of exchange was formally consolidated. This colonial-capital economy was premised on the nexus of the execution and displacement of Aboriginal people from Country and the conversion of both their bodies and land into trafficable commodities. The literality of this genocidal traffic in Indigenous bodies is clearly evidenced by the fact that three of the skulls of the victims of the Appin Massacre were stolen by some of the unnamed murderers and sold off to the Anatomy Department of the University of Edinburgh, where they were held for 175 years. It was only in 1991 that they were repatriated to Australia:

One is the skull of the Gandangara leader Cannabayagal, killed at the Appin Massacre. The bones still bear the 'clear cut marks' where the head was severed from the body. It is very likely that the other two are also massacre victims, probably Durelle, and an unnamed woman (Karskens, 2015).

The history of Western anatomical knowledge has been underpinned by the transnational traffic in Indigenous bodies. The scientifico-medical epistemologies produced by such illustrious medical schools as the Anatomy Department of the University of Edinburgh have been enabled by the violated ontologies of Indigenous bodies. Across a range of Western academic settings, the ontology of Indigenous flesh and bones was transmuted into the higher-order epistemology of anatomical atlases, epidemiological texts and evolutionary tracts. Indigenous bodies, in other words, have supplied the ontological substrate of the knowledge economies of the West, even as they have afforded, through their murder and displacement, the very material ground critical to the founding of settler-colonial states.

In the case of the Cypress Hills Massacre, a group of American wolf and bison hunters and Canadian and American whisky traders claimed that the Indigenous people of the Cypress Hills area had stolen a number of their horses. On the evening of 1 June 1873, the settlers formed their own vigilante group and descended on the camp of the Assiniboine people. Despite denials from Little Soldier that his people had not stolen the horses and the conciliatory move to offer some of his horses until the missing horses were found, the 'Assiniboine of the Cypress Hills ... were hunted and murdered by Thomas W. Hardwick and John Evans. Both were acquitted by the Canadian judiciary' (Stimson, 2016, 4). As Stimson notes in his Artist Statement, 'no justice for at least twenty men, women and children murdered in the Battle Creek Valley that evening' (2016, p. 4).

No justice for either the victims of the Appin or Cypress Hills Massacres. Rather, the colonial inversion of the victims into outlaws. The gridded space of colonial partition, displacement and consequent propertied occupation works, to reiterate Blomley's argument,

to deflect blame. Rather than focusing our attention on the socially differentiated violences of property and law, the temptation is to blame the outlaws for their own locations, absent a critical analysis of the mappings and displacement that prefigure those locations (2003, p. 132).

In the instance of the Appin Massacre, the repeated para-military campaigns of settlers in Dharawal and Gandangara Country and the Aboriginal acts of resistance to push back on these incursions are absented from the colonial schema of law and justice. Law, in this colonial context, only cuts one way: across the fabric of Indigenous resistance and through the very bodies of the Natives. Justice, in these operations of state-sanctioned colonial violence, remains outside the purview of the colonised subjects: the transnational acquittals of the settler-colonial murderers evidence as much.

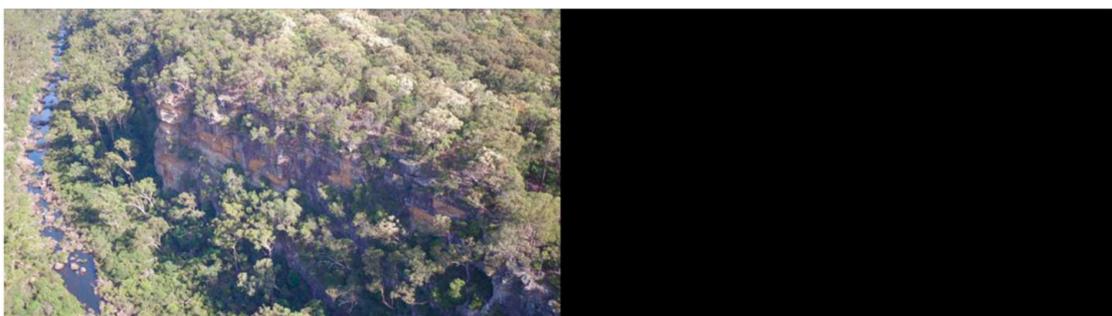
The categorisation of the wronged and the violated in terms of 'criminals' works to advance the expansion and consolidation of the colonial project: Macquarie's proclamation on the raid and massacre in the *Sydney Gazette* on 4 May ... only said that 'several Natives have been unavoidably killed and wounded' and that they were themselves to blame because they had not 'surrendered themselves on being called to do so' (Karskens, 2015).

Colonial law works on the premise of legal fictions. The foundational legal fiction of *terra nullius* establishes the epistemological coordinates for all the other colonial fictions that will work assiduously to legitimise the illegitimate status of the settler-occupier state. This foundational legal fiction supplies the originary ground for all the other acts of ficto-legal iteration that will follow: 'In his report to his superior in England, Macquarie added the fiction that the Aborigines on Broughton's land had "resisted the soldiers, and omitted the fact that five of the prisoners were women and children' (Karskens, 2015). In the context of the fictions of colonial law, 'the violence unleashed against such outlaws,' to re-invoke Blomley's words, are thus presented 'as a disinterested objective policing of collective norms' (2003, p.132). This is a crucial insight. It assists in explaining not only the genocidal campaigns waged against Indigenous peoples, but it also sheds light on the colonial state's capacious capacity to forget the massacres that have been constitutive of its very foundation. Military and para-military campaigns of mass murder cannot be understood as genocidal acts when they are scripted in the annals of state as *disinterested objectives policing collective norms*. It is upon the category of 'collective norms' that one must pause and reflect. Here is the key to the settler-colonial state's exercise of ongoing collective amnesia: why would one wish to commemorate or pay reparation for an event that has been celebrated as an act that was essential to the policing and securing of collective norms that would otherwise have been violated by the barbarous Natives? The collective nature of these norms is what binds the settler-colonial community in its complacent state of forgetting. The collective force and weight of these norms is what attempts to stifle Indigenous voices that attempt to articulate and identify acts of colonial policing as genocidal.

## Audio-visualities of the aftermath

It is in the face of this ongoing forgetting that Stimson's video installation resounds. Up against the collective amnesia of the colonial state, he mobilises a compelling audio-visual act of anamnesis. The black screen that opens *As Above So Below* is underscored by the sound of a beating heart. This is the heart of Dharawal and Gandangara Country. It is the beating heart of the Indigenous quarry being pursued by the hunter. As discussed above, on hearing the approach of the soldiers, the Aboriginal people fled their campsite and hid in the surrounding bushes. It was the cry of a child that exposed their hidden presence and that catalysed the order to kill: 'Wallis immediately "formed line rank entire" and the soldiers "pushed through thick brush" towards that cry' (Karskens, 2015). The push towards the child's cry orients the direction of the hunt. In the short interval between concealment and discovery, the heart of the cornered victim beats. In the soundscape of this beat, the coordinates of the massacre appear on the black screen for the space of a few seconds: the fate of the hunted Aboriginal people has been retrospectively sealed. The longitudinal and latitudinal coordinates deliver up their hidden prey: they numerically sign the locus of the massacre that will now unfold. The sound of the beating heart is no sooner heard than the sharp crack of a fired rifle renders the blackness of the screen. It enunciates the inception of the kill and total silence follows. The firing of the rifle emblematises the exercise of militarised colonial power. Its explosive force interpenetrates the body of the viewer and it thereby interpellates them in the scene of violence. The rifle shot reverberates across, through and beyond the exhibition space: it is a sound that resounds across different colonised continents; it traces, in the process, lethal lines of connection between diverse Indigenous bodies, the Dharawal, Gandangara and the Assiniboine, binding one with the other. The rifle shot is what stages a sonic crossing of heterogeneous geopolitical spaces and it is what ensures the militarised operations of colonial occupation and the consequent expansion and consolidation of colonial rule. The rifle shot of colonial occupation opens wounds of consanguineous relation between the surviving members of the Dharawal, Gandanagara and the Assiniboine nations. Mid-way through his video, Stimson will visually mark this consanguineous relation by deploying a split screen that juxtaposes the site of the Appin Massacre with that of Cypress Hills.

The sound-rupture of the rifle shot unleashes a process of re-visioning that is enabled by Stimson's use of drone-enabled optics: the blackness of the screen abruptly gives way to aerial panning shots unfolding in slow motion (Figure 1). The vista is of the Cataract



**Figure 1.** Cataract Gorge, Appin. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).

Gorge, site of the Appin Massacre. The beating heart has been stilled and the sweeping visuals of precipitous cliffs and the snaking Cataract River are underscored by silence. Silence, in Stimson's video, plays a constitutive role in the re-visioning of the massacre. Following the explosive reverberations of the fired rifle, silence assumes a textural materiality. Through the absence of sound that ensues, silence becomes its own palpable, quasi-aural materiality. It articulates the narrative of loss through the visual medium of silent temporal unfolding. In the video, the felt presence of silence becomes manifest as an affective materiality that proceeds to inscribe the surfaces of the muted landscape. Silence assumes the forms of visual extension and materialisation in the images of trees, rocks, bushes, cliffs and the snaking river: they become its inscriptive surface, signalling the absence of the people indigenous to the site. As such, silence emerges as a freighted and charged presence, specifically, as the felt presence of national erasure and historiographical redaction in the narratives of the settler state. The juxtaposition of the visuals of the massacre sites with a blacked-out screen underscores a movement of double visibility (Figure 1). On the one hand, the blacked-out screen emblematises the settler state's acts of historiographical redaction and obliteration. On the other hand, the dialectical montage of the split screen underscores the fact that what can be seen in the clear light of day fails, on one level, to do justice to what should be seen; paradoxically, in the face of this absence, it is the seeming void of the blackened screen that draws attention to what otherwise has been absented by the light-enabled images of the massacre sites. Stimson here interrogates the very optics of seeing and the dogma that light will self-evidently enlighten what it proceeds to image. Things, he suggests, are much more complexly entangled.

Due to the fact that the site of the Appin Massacre is now on privately-owned property and that he was precluded from filming on the actual terrain of the site, Stimson was compelled to use a drone mounted with a video camera in order visually to access the location. This raises the following questions: In what moral universe can a nationally significant massacre site be deemed to be off-limits to an Indigenous artist who is respectfully attempting to commemorate the event? How can a foundational site of massacre possibly be *owned* by a private individual? How can such harrowed ground be so easily transmuted into just another quantum of private property? Recursively, these questions compel a return to the logic of colonial capital, wherein all that is violated and usurped by the settler state can be seamlessly converted into the commodity form and its attendant proprietary law of private property.

Stimson's use of a drone to record sites of historical massacre evidences his critical resignification of this technology. Drones are principally renowned as military technologies of surveillance and at-a-distance assassination. As with all technologies, however, drones cannot be reduced to either a univocal function or monologic meaning. As polysemous technologies, they have also been deployed for disaster assessment and recovery operations. In such cases, they have operated as visual technologies that visibilise the aftermath of disaster. In the wake of the Fukushima nuclear reactor meltdown, for example, a drone developed by the US Department of Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency was deployed to assess the scale of the devastation in and around the Fukushima complex (Madrigal, 2011). Stimson appropriates this military technology and uses it, precisely as a visualising technology of the aftermath of catastrophe, to record sites of past colonial massacres. Through his use of the drone-mounted camera, Stimson breaches the proprietary law of private property and transgresses its boundary

lines of interdicted access. Stimson, thus, stages an insurgent act of trespass against the hegemonic law of the settler state: he is the rogue boundary rider who overrides the boundaries of colonial property. Overriding the coordinates of the gridded landscape of private property and their attendant legal interdictions, Stimson assumes the prosthetic form of a drone cameraman, an outlaw figure soaring above the law of the settler state. In this form, and through the visualisation of a transgressive drone optics, he emerges as visual cartographer of atrocities otherwise obliterated from the consciousness of the occupier.

In Stimson's video, the drone-mounted camera skirts the precipitous cliffs of the escarpment and stages vertiginous rotations above the void of the gorge. These drone visuals disorient and destabilise the viewer. Immediately following the shock of the rifle shot, they immerse the viewer in spaces of saturated trauma and violence. Through such immersive manoeuvres, Stimson disallows the possibility for the viewer to take safe refuge from the site of massacre. There is no place to hide. The viewer visually experiences the head-long plunge into the void of the gorge. In the course of the processual unfolding of the site of the Appin Massacre on the left side of the screen, the visuals of the Appin Massacre site are replaced on the right side of the screen with the sweeping drone visuals of the Cypress Hills Massacre site (Figure 2). The screen then abruptly juxtaposes the Appin site with the site of the Cypress Hills Massacre (Figure 3). The significance of the visible line that, through the use of the visual modality of the split screen, at once conjoins and separates the two massacre sites cannot be overestimated. This is the paradox of the filmic cut that both severs and sutures the visual narrative. Through this move, a move that refuses to efface the line of jointure, Stimson draws attention to his politico-aesthetic act of montage. It is this visual move that enables him to underscore the ethicality of his practice: one massacre is not equivalent to another; one atrocity cannot be homogenised and collapsed into another; all Indigenous people are not the same and their experiences are not serially interchangeable, despite the transnational and reiterative status of colonial forces of violence.

By juxtaposing two instances of colonial massacre, Stimson identifies and materialises the transnational homicidal grammar of the settler-colonial state that, on the one hand, codifies the rules of practice for genocidal killings, while ensuring, on the other hand, through the reproduction of these same ritualised practices, the reiterative citation of historical precedents across different geopolitical sites of occupation. As a homicidal grammar, it establishes the conditions for the very reproducibility of particular embodied



**Figure 2.** Cypress Hills Massacre site. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).



**Figure 3.** Split-screen image of Appin and Cypress Hills Massacre sites. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).

practices and the cultural intelligibility of the enacted practices' citational references. It is only due the fact that the settlers' murder of Indigenous people is enabled by an embodied grammar that it can maintain its iterative status across different states. In Derridean terms, its iterability is predicated on acts of originary reproduction, in which each fresh homicide at once references a past act, even as it is marked by the constitutive differences that accrue from its situated and contingent enactment. Across the different contexts of settler genocide, violent acts of originary reproduction recursively cite that event-trauma of originary violence: here the Appin Massacre, often cited as the first official, and thus legally formalised, massacre on Australian soil (Organ, 2016).

### More-than-human testimonies

Transfixed and yet profoundly unsettled by Stimson's video, I was struck by the total absence of human figures from the screen. This is an absence that underlines the genocidal extermination of the Indigenous people that inhabited these now-unpeopled landscapes. Yet, despite this marked absence of human figures in these zones of massacre, it appeared that a felt presence of the absent figures assumed other forms and that they insisted on materialising their absent-presence otherwise. Julie Gough, a Tasmanian Aboriginal artist who also exhibited a work in the *With Secrecy and Despatch* exhibition, succinctly captured this haunting sense of absence–presence. In an interview on the topic of the exhibition, Gough spoke of visiting the Appin Massacre site and viewing the interdicted space from across the gorge: 'I stood opposite the river and as I looked down, it was very strange because the rocks on the other side have an appearance of people kind of curled up. It was a very strange, eerie place' (2016b). Gough's observation serves further to illuminate Stimson's video. Stimson's video topologises the materiality of the now-absent Indigenous body by inscribing it in the very fabric of the landscape: the trees, rocks, cliffs, fields and rivers bespeak the absent-presence of the ancestors, precisely as they give form and material shape to their disappeared bodies. In her compelling analysis of the 'landscapes of massacre' generated by the war in Sri Lanka, Suvendrini Perera (2011) delineates 'how violence, history, and landscape write themselves in and through one another' (p. 215) and she identifies, in the process, 'the language in which massacres are written on leaves and rivers' (218). Perera's insight resonates with a number of Indigenous cosmologies. In Indigenous cosmologies, kinship stands in contradistinction to Western understandings of the term that restrict kinship relations solely to human bio-

genealogies. In Indigenous cultures, kinship cuts across and beyond human categories to include rocks, water, trees and so on. Rebecca Adamson, Cherokee founder and president of First Peoples Worldwide, amplifies this cosmology of the lived environment as what is 'perceived as a sensate, conscious entity' in which:

All particles of matter, property, position, and velocity are influenced by the intention or presence of other particles. Stated in simpler terms, atoms are aware of other atoms. According to this law of nature, a people rooted in the land over time have exchanged their tears, their breath, their bones, their elements, oxygen, carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, phosphorous, sulfur, all of their elements with their habitat many times over. In the words of the Diné traditionalist Ruth Benally, 'Our history cannot be told without naming the cliffs and the mountains that have witnessed our people.' (Adamson, 2008, p. 34)

In Adamson and Benally's vision, the cliffs and mountains are not inert and mute objects in the landscape; on the contrary, they are agentic witnesses inextricably enmeshed in the everyday life of their people. In Stimson's video, the cliffs, trees, fields and rivers are witnesses that continue to attest to the absent-presence of their Dharawal, Gandangara or Assiniboine kin and that, through the inexorable process of particle exchange between the different entities that inhabit the place, proceed to embody a flesh of the earth that consanguineously binds one to the other. What emerges in Stimson's video could thus be termed as a haunting more-than-human embodiment of massacre that stands in contradistinction to the abstracted, metricised and flattened grid of colonial cartography. The embodied dimensions of settler-colonial genocide cannot be erased despite the marked absence of bodies, cenotaphs or memorials; rather, the executed bodies of the Indigenous dead remain in situ and their corporealities assume the morphology of the diverse entities of the landscape: trees, rocks, cliffs and rivers. It is thus that Stimson topologises the materiality of the seemingly absent Indigenous body. Breaching proprietary understandings of the body as a unitary singularity, his work conceptualises the body as an extensive materiality that, in keeping with the spatio-temporal logics of topology, enfolds the human into the material reality of the more-than-human, precisely as it proceeds to contemporise the past dead into the living present. Gilles Deleuze elaborates on the logics of this topological formation:

The 'duplicity' of the fold has to be reproduced from the two sides that it distinguishes, but it relates one to the other by distinguishing them: a severing by which each term casts the other forward, a tension by which each fold is pulled into the other (1993, p. 30).

In Stimson's video, the absent humans are enfolded into the living presence of the more-than-human rocks, cliffs, rivers, fields and trees; one is related to the other, even as they are conceptually distinguishable; his work audio-visually generates an affective tension by which each fold is pulled into the other.

Furthermore, by deploying a military technology, the drone, in order to film the massacre sites, Stimson establishes lines of relationality between past imperial massacres, their attendant military technologies (guns, rifles, cannons) and the contemporary imperial atrocities that are being perpetrated by the United States in the drone killing fields of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen (see, for example, Gregory, 2018; Pugliese, 2016). The title of his work, *As Above So Below*, traces a genealogy of serial violences that connects the colonial present to its past. The integrative power of this hermetic phrase establishes lines of relationality between the macro and micro, the past and the

present, the old and the new, the living and dead. The viewer of Stimson's work is thus compelled to experience a superposed series of historico-visual histories, intertextualities and spectral figurations that topologically fold the past into the present and back again.

In the absence of the exterminated human victims to narrate their testimonies of massacre, Stimson invests the other-than-human figures in the landscape with the charge to tell the story, not as mere metonyms of the vanquished Indigenous figure, but through their own form, as their own embodied agents of historiographical narration. There are many ways to bespeak history aside from the verbal, and Stimson selects the modality of the more-than-human and its medium of non-verbal communication in order visually to convey his recount of two Indigenous massacres. The drone's slow-motion pan over the trees, rocks, cliffs, rivers and fields focalises the significance of these more-than-human entities: it invests them with a charged indexicality and it solicits them to bespeak their embodied histories. As collective indices of the site of the massacre, they delineate the ground of the killings. As entities that continue to endure in the locus of the massacre, and that have literally absorbed and incorporated the decomposed flesh of their Indigenous kin through the medium of water and rocks and in the flesh of the trees, they signify as living archives of the genocidal history of the massacre site. As living archives, the trees, for example, inscribe their sedimented histories in their concentric rings, even as they externalise their lived history in situ through their morphology and their rooted hold on place. The trees are, in the first instance, trees unto themselves; but their vegetal life also embodies the memories and desires of their surviving Indigenous kin. As such, they retain and continue to signify the power of the forensic trace. Standing their ground in the interdicted space of an otherwise effaced massacre site, the trees continue to signify as forensic traces of a past genocidal history. They are, as such, trace-phenomena of memory. They are at once vegetal forms of life that are inscribed in nature *and* cultural repositories of a relational history between the dead and surviving Indigenous people of Country. This biocultural history is intextuated in the postural extension of the trees' vegetal life and their concomitant marking of historically resonant space-as-place, despite the settler-colonial redaction of the massacres from the hegemonic maps and narratives of state.

### Double vision: sublime and pastoral visualities of massacre

As Stimson's video moves towards its conclusion, the vision of an unpeopled wilderness gives way to scenes of human habitation. He brings into view the civic and civilian infrastructure of the settler state that now overlays the expropriated Indigenous lands and that literally abuts onto sites of colonial massacre: weirs, bridges, barns and a replica of a colonial stockade (Figures 4 and 5). These are the normative symbols of everyday life that occlude the fact that they occupy forensic crime scenes of genocidal violence.

Stimson's work is here in dialogue with Julie Gough's video installation, *Hunting Ground: (Haunted) Van Diemen's Land*, also exhibited in *With Secrecy and Despatch* (see Pugliese, 2018, 2017). Returning to the multiple sites of the massacre of Tasmanian Aboriginal people, Gough films serene pastoral scenes that, on the surface, appear to be utterly remote from genocidal practices. Gough, however, re-inscribes the effaced histories of massacres in *Hunting Ground*. Mining the archives, she selected colonial texts that recorded or described the genocidal atrocities and produced silkscreen reproductions



**Figure 4.** Left screen: weir, Appin Massacre site. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).

of them that she affixed to the trees and rocks that stood their ground in these massacre sites. ‘The resulting film,’ she writes in her Artist Statement,

is an articulation of otherwise usually hidden histories; a demonstration of our island as a crime scene; and a record of my reconnection with these places, establishing there, onsite, that we continue, were not entirely annihilated, and that we remember (Gough, 2016a, p. 15).

In a consonant vein, Ivan Sen’s film (Sen, 2000), *Dust*, is set in the seemingly pastoral cotton fields of North-western New South Wales. The film examines the relationship between Aboriginal and white rural workers. As the film progresses, a storm builds and finally breaks. When the storm clears, bucolic farm fields expose an otherwise occluded history of an Aboriginal massacre: from the soil protrude the bones of the victims. Stimson’s work must be seen as interlocking with this larger Indigenous corpus that is unearthing buried histories of colonial massacre, commemorating the dead and speaking back to the redactions, erasures and the silences of the settler state.

Stimson’s *As Above So Below* operates, however, on yet another critical level. His work effectively interrogates and powerfully resignifies two of the foundational categories of Western aesthetics: the beautiful and the sublime. In his video, Stimson mobilises the aesthetic of the beautiful in the sweeping and panoramic shots of the Cypress Hills’ winding rivers, forests and pastoral fields. The Appin sequences clearly invoke the attributes of the aesthetic of the sublime: towering cliffs, soaring escarpments, precipitous gorges and turbulent white-water rivers. In disclosing the hidden histories of colonial violence that silently inscribe these aesthetic categories, Stimson exposes, in turn, the indissociably



**Figure 5.** Right screen: replica of a colonial stockade, Cypress Hills Massacre site. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).

political nature of these same categories. The beautiful and the sublime are, in the annals of Western aesthetics, a priori inscribed by their own tacit raciality and by histories of occluded genocidal violence. Stimson's work stages a critical interrogation of two of the canonical treatises in the field of Western aesthetics: Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764).

In his philosophical inquiry into the sublime, Burke articulates the key criteria of the sublime:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime (1887, p. 198).

Stimson's work does more than simply stage an analogous appropriation of these criteria; he at once re-inflects these criteria and generates a series of experiential embodied affects through his inspired mobilisation of audio-visual techniques, including: the sound of the beating heart, the rifle shot and the vertiginous visual plunges into the heart of the Cataract Gorge that reproduce the falling sensation of the Aboriginal victims who, in pain and terror, were compelled to jump into the void of the gorge in order to escape their hunters. In his inquiry, Burke elaborates on the affective dimensions of the sublime: 'No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as *fear*. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain' (1887, p. 231). Stimson's work affectively visualises the sense of overwhelming fear experienced by the Aboriginal victims, and the apprehension of pain and death that drove their desperate and fatal plunge into the heart of the gorge. In this instance, a collective act of agency over one's mode of death was exercised in that moment of sheer terror. 'A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power. The attention is roused by this; and the faculties driven forward, as it were, on their guard ... and we have a perception of danger' (1887, p. 278). The sudden explosion of the settler's rifle shot in Stimson's video immediately places the viewer on guard, as does the abrupt lapse into silence that follows the cessation of the sound of the shot.

'The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*,' writes Burke, 'when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment: and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror' (1887, p. 230). Positioned as a secondary witness to the atrocity of a genocidal hunt, in my viewing of *As Above So Below* I was compelled to experience a sense of astonishment inscribed by the horror of what I knew had transpired in the otherwise sublime visuals of the Cataract Gorge. In his concluding sections on the sublime, Burke turns his attention to the role of darkness, which he identifies as a 'cause of the sublime':

for in utter darkness it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves (1887, p. 382).

As the enemy approached in the darkness on the edge of the Cataract Gorge, the Aboriginal victims literally did not know in what quarter to defend themselves – except to take the fatal plunge into the void.

In his philosophical inquiry into the sublime, Burke draws upon Black bodies in order to illustrate 'darkness terrible in its own nature' (1887, p. 385). He evidences this in an anecdote of a boy born blind who, after an operation, 'received his sight': 'upon accidentally encountering a negro woman, he was struck by great horror at the sight' (Burke, 1887, p. 87). Deployed as either illustrative anecdotes or as anthropological specimens, people of colour populate the margins of Western philosophy's canonical texts. They represent everything that stands in onto-epistemological contradistinction to the enlightened subject of philosophical reflection: obtuseness, horror, vacuity. They are the tain of the mirror that enables the very reflectivity of the white philosophical subject. In Emmanuel Kant's canonical treatise on the beautiful and sublime, for example, he offers detailed profiles of those attributes that situate 'national' subjects as having the capacity to experience and appreciate either the beautiful or the sublime (Kant, 1991, p. 97). The privilege of experiencing and appreciating both categories is solely attributed to the Western subject. As for Indigenous people and Blacks, 'All these savages have little feeling for the beautiful' (Kant, 1991, p. 112) and they are framed as congenitally incapable of experiencing the sublime due to their lack of reason: 'So fundamental is the difference between these two races [whites and people of colour] of man' that 'it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color' (Kant, 1991, p. 111). In Kant's apartheid philosophy, the aesthetic topography of the beautiful and the sublime delineates a racialised chasm between whites and people of colour. The topos of the chasm is what ensures the tropological maintenance of what he terms the 'fundamental difference' between the two races. In Kant's racialised schema, Indigenous people are absented from the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful, even as they often form the onto-epistemological substrate of these same categories. For example, Sublime Point, situated on soaring cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean and only few miles east of the site of the Appin Massacre, is marked by its own buried history of colonial violence. Indigenous oral histories of the area speak of how the Thurawal people were hunted by a group of settlers, corralled and finally driven off the high cliffs. After the massacre, the settler state duly renamed this site of genocidal violence as Sublime Point.

In *As Above So Below*, Stimson appropriates the stock categories of Western aesthetics – the beautiful and the sublime – and overlays them across expropriated Indigenous lands and sites of massacre. He indigenises the categories of the beautiful and the sublime and fundamentally reorients them. Both categories are mobilised *contra* Kant. In Stimson's work, both aesthetic categories stage insurgent returns on two unexpected fronts: on the one hand, he demonstrates how the sublimity of Cataract Gorge and the beauty of the snow-covered Cypress Hills are inscribed by racialised histories of genocidal violence that were predicated on canonical texts of philosophical and scientific racism that, in turn, framed Indigenous people as sub- or nonhuman, and that thus positioned them as legitimate targets of extermination in the wake of the inexorable advance of the civilisational project of colonial conquest and expansion; on the other hand, he resignifies and mobilises these very categories in order to produce a contestatory Indigenous response to these same genocidal and racist histories. In the process, Stimson visually stakes out, in politico-aesthetic terms, the otherwise effaced sites of colonial massacres. In his overlay of stock Western aesthetic categories over the enframed landscape, he produces a type of double vision that brings into relief complex and multi-layered regimes of visuality: a contemporary military technology, the drone, is mobilised to image and

commemorate the site of a past military massacre; the soaring vision of the sublime Cataract Gorge emerges, in the process, as a site of genocidal violence: through an act of visual superposition, both visions coexist in the same place. It is through these acts of visual superposition that Stimson is enabled to materialise a double visibility. The testimonies of the Indigenous dead are what are released by these modalities of double visibility: they speak through the slippages that haunt the abyssal scene of superposition.

### The constitutive black void

In the closing scenes of *As Above So Below*, Stimson directs the hovering drone to rise above the Appin and Cypress Hills Massacre sites: a visual sense of spiralling ascension ensues. Through the resultant effects of distanced vision, the two sites that, up until that moment, had distinctly occupied the left and right of the split screen, appear to converge and meld into each other: for an instant, as the vision becomes out of focus and begins to darken, the two sites appear virtually coterminous: Appin enfolded into Cypress Hills, the one visually bleeding into the other (Figure 6). The blurred vision of the ascending drone finally resolves itself into another manifestation of the black void which mirrors the incipit of the video. The black void momentarily solidifies into a mural surface for the inscription of two historical citations that slowly come into consecutive focus:

[screen left] 'I regret to say some had been shot and others met their fate by rushing in despair over the precipice.'

Captain Wallis

17 April 1816

Appin Massacre

[screen right] 'My husband threw up his arms and broke away and was shot dead by another white man.'

Woman Who Eats Grizzly Bear

Wife of Little Soldier

2 June 1873

Cypress Hills Massacre

These historical citations evidence the homicidal grammar of the settler-colonial state and its mobile, flexible and transnational iterability. These testimonials emerge from the void: they appear faint, briefly gain a luminous intensity and then dim as they

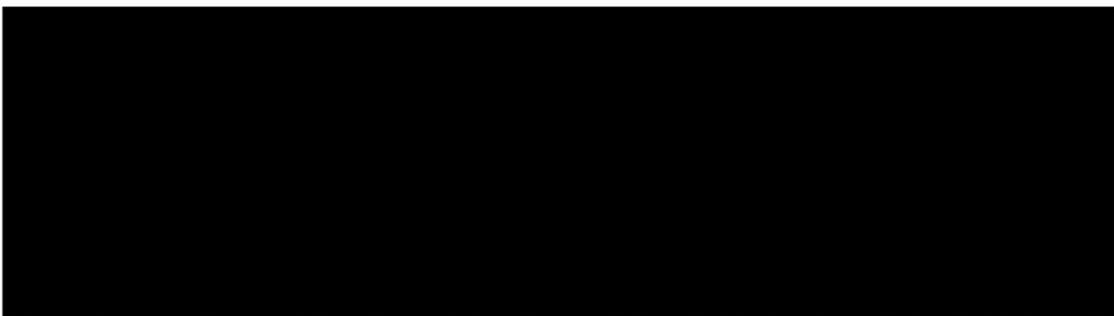


**Figure 6.** Final shot of Appin and Cypress Hills Massacre sites. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).

are gradually reabsorbed by the blackness and are extinguished. As one historical citation emerges and the other fades, an antiquated and scratchy version of the British national anthem, 'God Save the King,' intones. This is the iconic piece that belongs, in Allas' apposite term, to the imperial 'songbook of catastrophe' (2016). The nostalgic soundtrack to empire continues to ensure the effacement of the anthem's genocidal history. Triumphant and jingoistic, the anthem continues to assert sovereign power over Indigenous nations that have refused to cede their sovereignty in the face of catastrophic histories of colonial massacre. Stimson's work strips back the nostalgia, exposes the occluded sites of genocidal violence and asserts a politico-aesthetic response of survival, endurance and ongoing contestation of the settler state's practices of Indigenous erasure and occupation.

The black voids that are so integral to the entirety of *As Above So Below* must be seen as critically constitutive of the politico-aesthetic dimensions of the work (Figure 7). The black voids are generative of everything that cannot be articulated in the transparent language of light, specifically, in the rationalist categories of Enlightenment discourse when faced with genocidal campaigns of Indigenous extermination. The light of reason, in the historical context of these murderous campaigns, fails to illuminate the atrocities it has perpetrated. 'Black bodies,' Burke writes in his philosophical inquiry into the sublime, '... are but as so many vacant spaces.' They are, he concludes, mere 'vacuities' (1887, p. 389). What is Burke articulating here if not yet another figuration of *terra nullius*, in which the Western coloniser fails to see the Indigenous people of a 'discovered' land because, paradoxically, they can only appear 'as so many vacant spaces'? The black vacuities that haunt Stimson's work must be seen as generative matrices. Every actualisation of the black void emerges as a protean singularity that emits a multitude of significations. Beyond the figuration of the fiction of *terra nullius*, these vacuities emblemise the land that has been violently cleared of its Indigenous inhabitants; they evidence the black erasures of redacted text in the settler state's hegemonic historical narratives; they materialise the black site of a collective national amnesia that cannot countenance a history of genocidal massacres; and, in a defiant revalorisation of blackness, they metaphorise an iconography that defies settler acts of obliteration: every instantiation of seeming nullity embodies the spectral bodies of the Indigenous dead that continue to animate the sites of massacre.

Through his use of the black screen, Stimson stages a recovery of the buried black box of history. He displaces the photonic language of the filmic medium and thereby overturns



**Figure 7.** Closing shot of the black void. Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson (2016).

the seemingly inviolable sovereignty of light to establish the conditions of possibility for the very emanation of the image and the process of meaning production. The multivalency of the black screen materialises what has remained unrepresentable in the hegemonic histories of the settler-colonial state. The space-off that, in filmic terms, falls outside the scene of representation, that exiles from the space of the screen all that cannot be represented, is resituated as the central protagonist of his visual narrative. His use of the black screen illuminates the limits of enlightened representation, while simultaneously overriding these same limits by positioning the black site as the very *mise-en-scène* of the otherwise unrepresentable. A sovereign blackness opens the work, it inscribes itself in a process of dialectical montage with the light-enabled images of Appin and Cypress Hills, and it once again dominates the screen in a magisterial act of closure through which a palpable blackness overflows the space of the screen, redoubles itself, and thereby envelops both the viewer and the darkened gallery space. In this instant, the past can no longer be contained by the frame of the screen. It interpenetrates the present and becomes coextensive with it. What had been buried and forgotten is thereby projected into the present. The living bodies of the secondary witnesses are compelled to feel and reflect on its material presence.

## Out of the void

*As Above So Below*. This is art that challenges the field to its politico-aesthetic limits: it transgresses the propriety codes of private property; it upturns, through vertiginous visual inversions, doxic understandings of Western aesthetic categories; and it reclaims the spaces, voices and bodies of the disappeared. From the event horizon of the black void, the voices of the past escape into the present. They conjure up a re-visioning of everything that had seemingly been obliterated. They stage an otherwise unimaginable clash of categories: between the sublime and the genocidal, beauty and atrocity, amnesia and anamnesis. How does the genocidal voice speak? Through the explosive blast of a rifle shot. How do the silenced voices of the dead continue to resound? Through the muted visuals of more-than-human testimonies.

## Notes

1. I follow the local Aboriginal community's naming protocol and refer to the Aboriginal people killed in the Appin Massacre as the Dharawal and Gandangara peoples.

## Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to Adrian Stimson for permission to reproduce his art work and to Tess Allas for the unforgettable personal tour of her and David Garneau's landmark exhibition. My thanks to Michael Dagostino, Director, Campbelltown Arts Centre, and to both Kate Britton and Ashley Sime for their invaluable assistance in producing the video stills.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Picture credits

Adrian Stimson, *As Above So Below* (2016) (video stills). 2-channel 16:9 HD (1920 × 1080), 10: 24 s Copyright Adrian Stimson, 2016. This work was commissioned by the Campbelltown Arts Centre as part of the exhibition *With Secrecy and Dispatch* (9 April–13 June, 2016 at Campbelltown Arts Centre).

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