

Synopsis :

TERRA NULLIUS

Photographic documentary by

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Australia 2010 – 2012

Terra Nullius, from Latin, describes a land without an owner, an empty land. Whilst it may be inhabited, it is not actively farmed. During the colonisation of Australia by the British, the principle of Terra Nullius was evoked in a bid to legitimise the continent's invasion. The indigenous population was considered to be an inferior race destined to become an insignificant part of the population, perhaps even to disappear over time.

On 28th April 1770, the British explorer James Cook declared the continent Terra Nullius. This declaration paved the way for the creation of a new penal colony: between 1788 and 1868, 165.000 British convicts were sent to this new continent by boat.

Over two centuries later, in 1992, the High Court of Australia declared the country never to have been Terra Nullius and retroactively invalidated this principle following a fierce battle for the recognition of Aboriginal land rights.

2012, and Australia now has a population of over 22 million inhabitants. The big majority of Australia's population lives on the continent's periphery in large cities such as the capital Canberra, Sydney or Melbourne. Nevertheless, the interior is home for about ten percent of Australians, otherwise known as the Bush and the Outback, an area which covers over two thirds of the territory.

The following photographic essay was largely undertaken in the state of Northern Territory, where time and distance seem endless, at 360 degrees, the horizon becomes an obsessive sight.

The people of the desert adapt to the lifestyle that their isolation imposes, accepting their vulnerability to an often savage landscape. The roots of these people, some established here longer than others, run deep. Others have come from a faraway land, the Outback has given back more than they ever wished for. In the middle of nowhere it is then a new beginning and all remains to be done.

The silence allows us to better hear ourselves. We leave nothing behind.

Gaye Nichols

Sarah, Flying postwoman, Northern Territory.

24-year-old Sarah is a tall, robust woman with a serene air and a delicate face like a China doll. Fine-tuning the last settings on her plane's dashboard, she looks out for the control tower's green light so that she may take off at last.

Sarah flies off to Tennant Creek, a 90 minute flight from Alice Springs. It's the longest round for a postman in the state of Northern Territory. 221 000 people are spread over a surface area close to 1 400 000 square kilometres, or the equivalent of 0, 16 people per km².

In order to set off at the break of dawn, Sarah must leave the night before : 2 000 kilometres, 13 landings in 8 hours in one of the most remote areas of the state.

Mustering.

In Australia, the land belonging to a cattle station can be the size of a French department. Mustering of cattle in pastures takes place over three weeks all year round, apart when there is flooding. With 27 million head of cattle, Australia is the world's largest exporter of meat and wool.

In the south of the Northern Territory, in a semi-arid to arid region, Don and Colleen Costello are the owners of three stations spread over a property of 20 000 hectares, the equivalent of 220 square kilometres. Their herd is composed of the following breeds - Harford, H Angus and Drought Master – a total of 22 000 head of cattle.

In November 2011 the Costellos and their team carried out a mustering in the riverbed of the Flinke River, completely dry at that time of year. Rounding up the herd itself takes a day and mobilizes around fifteen people, one to two helicopters, twelve motorbikes and two 4WDs. On this occasion, and against all expectations, Don's team rounded up 2 500 cattle, almost twice the amount they had been hoping for. Once the animals are penned, they are treated – vaccinated, tattooed, their horns trimmed – and then loaded for the abattoir or directed towards another pasture.

Acting as an alarm clock, the generator has woken the team up and now all are busy preparing for the day ahead. Shaun is the first to rise. The bacon sizzles on a hotplate placed over the campfire. Lost in their own thoughts, everyone grabs a rasher of bacon or two, and gulps them down sandwiched between two slices of white bread. A very long day awaits and as the sun breaks through the horizon one can already feel the heat rising.