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Identifying complex issues surrounding the construction of Indigeneity in film and documentary

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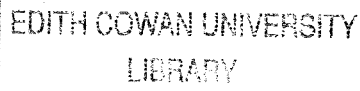
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Identifying complex issues
surrounding the construction
of Indigeneity in
Film and Documentary

By



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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
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USE OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous identity can only be located within a framework of historical dislocation from where white notions of assimilation are shattered. Therefore Indigeneity can only be defined in relation to the black experience within colonialism's hegemonic structures. I will argue this by looking at constructions of Indigenous Australians in the feature film *Radiance* (1998) directed by Rachel Perkins, and the documentary *Sissy* (2000) directed by Debbie Carmody (previously known as Debbie Gittins), which was made as part of this thesis.

This raises questions: What is the black experience and the process of black survival within colonialism's hegemonic structures? How does the discourse of Indigenous identity disfigure white notions of Indigeneity? To what extent does the discourse pluralize Indigenous identities, and how are filmmakers who are Indigenous representing that? How do non-Indigenous filmmakers and theorists break free from iron girded outdated notions of white superiority?

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature

Date

3/7/06

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Table of Contents

| | Page |
|------------------------|------|
| Abstract | II |
| Declaration | III |
| Acknowledgements | IV |

Chapter

| | | |
|---|----------------------|----|
| 1 | Introduction | 1 |
| 2 | Marcia Langton | 10 |
| 3 | Radiance | 16 |
| 4 | Sissy | 24 |
| 5 | Conclusion | 40 |
| | References | 47 |

Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will argue that constructions of Indigenous identities are paradoxically located within a framework of historical dislocation from where white notions of assimilation are shattered, and that Indigeneity can only be defined in relation to the black experience within colonialism's hegemonic structures. The constructions of Indigenous identities is a two-way process, because it will be argued that white Australians can only define their identity/white Aboriginality in relation to the white experience within Indigenous social, cultural, political and religious structural power that has always existed despite colonialism's hegemonic structures. I will argue this by examining the identities of Indigenous Australians in the feature film *Radiance* (1998) directed by Rachel Perkins, and the documentary *Sissy* (2000) directed by Debbie Gittins (which was produced as part of this thesis.) In *Radiance* the discourse of contemporary black Australians pluralizes "identities that emerge through historical dislocations" (Thomas, 1994, p. 194). *Sissy* presents a rare insight into a subculture of Nyoongar gay men where the postmodern identities of Indigenous gay men stem from individual experiences and the process of black survival within colonialism's hegemonic structures. The construction of Indigeneity in *Radiance* and *Sissy* looks not just at the micro-picture of perceived white notions of Indigeneity but also at a macro-picture where the juxtapositioning of black and white images call into question the right of the

dominant gaze, and creates uncertainties in the fluidity of cultural identities.

Before an exploration of Indigenous identities and ideological power in the films *Radiance* and *Sissy* can be undertaken there is a need to examine what the notion of Indigeneity is. Throughout the years there have been many debates and attempts to define who is Indigenous. Most widely accepted is a definition from the High Court of Australia, which states:

An Aboriginal person is defined as a person who is a descendant of an indigenous inhabitant of Australia, identifies as Aboriginal, and is recognised as Aboriginal by members of the community in which he or she lives as Aboriginal.

The word Aboriginal/Aborigine has come under the microscope because of the term's inability to define Indigenous identities. It is a term that the colonising English used to describe different nations of people, including those of the islands of the Torres Strait whose languages and cultures differ considerably from the languages and cultures of Indigenous Australia. It was a standard practice of European colonisation to place English above Indigenous languages, because it "was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (Ngugi, 1986, pp. 10-20).

The word 'Aborigine' as defined through the English language, is a noun referring to an individual or collective of a race of primitive tribal peoples, and is used to describe original inhabitants from any country around the world. In the 1970s,

the Australian Government decided that Indigenous nations should be known as a collective Aboriginal, despite the fact that it would be used ungrammatically with the term Aboriginal being an adjective, a describing word. Langton (1993, p. 32) writes that before European “contact, there were Yolngu, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri, Waka Waka, Guugu Yimidhirr,” and thousands of other nations of people with their own language and culture. It must be pointed out that many of these nations of people continue to exist today.

Omitting to acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous cultures demonstrates how the English language has been used to grant a single identity to colonised Indigenous peoples. Today, more and more Indigenous people demand to be known as being from a regional group. It is not simply a case of redefining identity in a politically correct world, but rather to bring into the centre from the periphery identities that have *always* existed, and have *always* been used within Indigenous cultures in acknowledging each others identity and place in contemporary Australia.

Just as other races in the world are known as Dutch, Armenian, Swedish, etc. similarly Indigenous Australians desire to be known as Wongi, Yamatji, Bardi, Nyoongar, and so on. If one does not know what nation of people one is from, then the term Indigenous should be used because the use of the collective name Aboriginal allows for racist colonial terminology such as ‘abo’, and ‘boong’ to originate. Therefore it can be said that the term and notion of Indigenous throws

light on a specific identity while the nondescript colonial terms of Aborigine/Aboriginal curtains black identity by acting as a contrived or artificial foundation upon which racist stereotypes are built. Langton (1993, p. 33) writes, "Textual analysis of the racist stereotypes and mythologies which inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal people is revealing." This is because from generation to generation white Australia has strived to reproduce myths about their forefathers invasion so as to deny the existence or truth of the intransigent predicament of the colonising event. White histories of other cultures usually write Indigenous people in terms of being less civilised than Europeans with this being presented as 'factual'. The terminology used reveals notions of 'white' superiority with the 'other' being 'savage', 'primitive' or 'exotic'.

This terminology is *still* extensively portrayed within a colonial framework even when contemporary modes of representation have been utilised. This only serves to reinforce the continuation of an imperialist history and reinforces the dominant 'gaze'. It must be pointed out it is not that filmmakers who are Indigenous will construct Indigenous peoples in a culturally appropriate way, "simply because being Aboriginal gives 'greater' understanding" (Langton, 1993, p.27). For example, even though filmmaker Tracey Moffatt attempts to reverse the dominant colonial gaze of Anglo-Saxons in *Nice Coloured Girls* (1983) through the eyes of Koori women she may be seen to have failed in her attempt because it is the patriarchal Anglo-Saxon that holds the hierarchy of discourse. Moffatt, a Koori

woman, fabricated 'other' Indigenous women as morally unrestrained, perpetuating white supremacist notions of the immoral black woman, allowing white women to draw the "distinction of their whiteness, which qualified their gender as being pure, in contrast to the licentious women of colour" (Bulbeck, 1998, p. 129). In relation to the empirical position within dominant white culture, Said (cit. Hodge & Mishra, 1990, p. 27) contends that dominant culture takes on a "smugness and sense of superiority, racist stereotypes, and assertion of rights of ownership in the intellectual and cultural sphere to match power in the political and economic sphere." These white dominant notions are elements in a circuitous connection with a set of principles and rules that manufacture and maintain its existence.

Since 1898 when A.C. Haddon filmed Indigenous Australians and Islanders from the Torres Strait on Moa (Murray) Island, superficial images of Indigenous Australians have been shown on screen. For example, Gaston Melies presented imagery of exoticism, primitivism, and savagery in *The Black Trackers, Captured by Aborigines*, and *Cast amid Boomerang throwers*, (1913) with these images presenting strikingly unusual black men in white 'war paint' charging towards the camera in an unorganised mass of animalism, their spears waving threateningly in an uncivilised act of barbarity. Indigenous people were "cast in the role of 'Indians' in outback westerns," and the characters were "trapped by their supposedly savage nature" (Australian Film Commission, 1995, p. 10).

From these early crude images, the basis for ethnocentric filming of Indigenous people began. These people, many of whom were confined to reserves controlled by the Government and the Church became the material for film projects which “were most often concerned with establishing a racial typology of the continent, and this typology both reflected the scientific concerns of the day and influenced the decisions of governments” (Australian Film Commission, 1995, p. 7). These projects coupled, with Social Darwinism, assumed without proof a basis for reasoning that Indigenous Australians were the least evolved race in the world. Consequently they were classified and compared with European notions about the ‘superiority’ of white civilisation which “dramatized and legitimized what many people from scientists to politicians had obscurely felt to be true” and that the “real wild pagan savage” would inevitably “disappear”, because of the progressive onslaught of white superiority in physical, cultural, intellectual and western religious ideologies. (Farrar cit. Evans, 1975, p. 14).

These notions journeyed forth and when, in 1954 Charles Chauvel’s film *Jedda* was released. Within a historical context the film was a very progressive movie because it challenged the Australian public that Indigenous people had a right to be central in an international film. The film also reflected the argument amongst white Australians at the time: the (im)possibility of Indigenous people’s ability to ‘live’ like Europeans. “The debates were conducted within a framework bounded by parameters of ‘blood’ (full-blood - mixed-blood), and ‘culture’ (nature –

education)” (Jennings, 1993, p. 34). In the film the white station owners, Doug and Sarah McMahon are a representation of the cultural and economic rationality of the era. That they own and control the land, which is seen as economically productive for the good of all, including “nature”, is an unspoken given. Similarly, this economic imperative is reflected in the cultural one with Sarah providing “the film’s clearest statement of an assimilationist and interventionist position” (Jennings, 1993, p. 34). Sarah’s attitude towards Jedda is paternalistic and a representation of the contemporaneous notion of white racial superiority in that she wants to bring ‘them’ closer to ‘our’ way of living. The issue of concern in scientific and government debates, and forefronted in *Jedda*, was “whether the ‘inferior’ races could legitimately aspire to improvement” (Harris cit. Evans, 1975, p. 14). If “nature” in the form of the Indigenous female is not controlled it would be unproductive, irrational and rebellious, and therefore in constant need of civilised white supervision and control, whereas Doug, the voice of superior white rationality, argued that ‘they’ should be left alone to live in the bush, making clear that ‘they’ were redundant and on the periphery doomed eventually to disappear.

Time passed and in 1967 an actor/singer named Kamahl played the character of an Arunta man in James Trainor’s film, *Journey out of Darkness*. “[A]t the time, no white consciousness was pricked by the fact that a Singhalese pop singer from Sri Lanka played an Arunta man” (Australian Film Commission, 1995, p. 48). In

contrast Nicholas Roeg's, *Walkabout* (1971), and Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977), used David Gulpilil in their films who typified the essence of something in its purest form - "a narcotic dream of the noble savage, ... that is the ambiguous position between pre-history and modernity – that...[Indigenous] people are asked to occupy" (Muecke, 1993, p. 26). Nearly a decade later Bruce Beresford's, *The Fringe Dwellers* (1986) attempted to highlight white enforced 'living' conditions for Indigenous people on the outskirts of town, but instead issues of unemployment, gambling, drinking, and poverty reinforced dominant ideological notions that the 'Aboriginal problem' is innate, typical black behaviour.

In 1993, *Blackfellas* directed by James Ricketson, set up contentious issues through both black and white discourses, which failed to acknowledge land rights with the film, skirting around the issue. In particular, black discourse was not allowed a 'voice' with Nyoongars, even though they speak of a relationship with the land, being depicted as passive in accepting dispossession. In analysis, this raised contemporary questions on issues of Native Title. If Nyoongars, as depicted in *Blackfellas*, have lost their relationship - culturally and spiritually - with the land, then Native Title Rights are automatically extinguished. The film solved this issue through Dougie's dream, (and it's only a dream) to buy back the farm, Yetticup - but it can only be achieved through a white economic system - not through a fundamental right. Achievement through a white economic system devalues Nyoongar religious beliefs - it's only a 'dreaming' anyway. By purchasing the

property Dougie admits to the impurities that have invaded Nyoongar culture, therefore it is not an automatic claim of rights. The act of buying Yetticup swings the notion of Indigenous spirituality around. How 'real' is Indigenous spirituality and Indigeneity if it has to be bought?

Foucault (cit. Rabinow, 1984, p. 74) states that the very nature of these white dominant notions dictate a "regime" of truth that is not just a way of thinking, but "a condition of the formation and development of capitalism" where patriarchal Anglo-Saxons hold asymmetrical power and control in both the centre and the periphery and power relations produce discourses for/of the subject as an object.

Chapter 2.

MARCIA LANGTON

Since 1979 an influx of filmmakers, who are Indigenous, has been occurring. Currently (2003) they are setting up Indigenous Screen Australia. This is an important movement for filmmakers because, as Langton writes, there is a “need to convey to other Australians in the film and television industries a sense of the political and aesthetic issues which concern Aboriginal people” (1988, p. 26).

Little critical attention by cultural study theorists has been given to films about Indigenous people with the emerging problematic and complex Indigenous characters being seen sporadically in the feature film *Radiance* and the documentary *Sissy*. Langton writes, that there is a

need to develop a body of knowledge on representation of Aboriginal people and their concerns in art, film, television and other media and a critical perspective to do with aesthetics and politics, drawing from Aboriginal world views, from Western traditions and from history (1993, pp. 27, 28).

Developing such a body of knowledge would locate it, not on the periphery, but within a core position, where constructions of Indigenous identities are paradoxically located within a framework of historical dislocations, from where Indigenous experiences and the process of black survival within colonialism's hegemonic structures constitute a platform from which other related issues

disfigure white notions of Indigeneity. To what extent does the discourse pluralize Indigenous identity? Langton (1993, p. 31) says, “‘Aboriginality’ arises from the subjective experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in any intercultural dialogue”, and that it is not a “fixed thing ... It is created from our histories.” So by focussing on the *process* of Indigenous identification (individually or as a collective), this may transform dominant structures as ideologically powerless and reveal indigeneity, not in terms of hybridization, where Indigenous relationships with colonialism give rise to “ironic” and “split identifications” (Thomas, 1994, p. 40), but rather in a syncretic moment that allows for the simultaneous expression of Indigeneity and the pluralisation of Indigenous identity.

For example, the Marrugeku Company’s play *Crying Baby* illustrated the syncretic moment when performed at the Perth International Arts Festival 2001. Enacted beneath the night sky against a backdrop of projected video images, banks of TVs, a huge satellite dish and a lone telephone box *Crying Baby* is an epic narrative drawn from Creation stories of Western Arnhem Land, the encounter with the first white man, and the contemporary legacy of the Stolen Generation. Led by a song man of the Kunwinjku People, Bruce Nabegeya is shadowed by a white man as he takes centre stage. Nabegeya begins his people’s story in language whilst simultaneously transposing the story in the sand. A video camera zooms in on the storyteller’s hand as it moves across the sand, and as the image is broadcast on

strategically placed television sets, the white man interprets the story into English.

In a moment of syncreticity the two different 'voices' are on stage together. Nabegeya tells of his people's past historical experiences with colonialism, while the white man translates the story into English. It is an attempt to unite white and black Australians, despite their opposing histories. It is a public statement by a black voice that tells the black experience of the process in which the Kunwinjku Community and Indigenous culture survived despite the progressive onslaught of colonialism. At the same time it is also a public statement of the white voice admitting to the progressive onslaught of colonialism and acknowledging the black experience of survival because of the strength and power of Indigenous social, political, cultural and religious structures. Therefore the performance is a social and political history that allows for the power of colonialism and the recognition that the power of Indigenous structures have always existed even though Indigenous power only began to emerge within a dominant white culture in 1963 when the Yirrkala People "sent a petition on bark to the House of Representatives" in Canberra protesting about Land Rights (Broome, 1982, p. 177). *Crying Baby* opposes policies of assimilation and existing social, cultural, and political power relationships within society.

The performance of the white man is a demonstration of the willingness of a

dominant white culture to unite with an 'opposing' culture. Within that black and white public sphere there is space to allow people not just to unite but also to celebrate difference. That space allows for the expression of Indigeneity and White Aboriginalities.

In expressing Indigeneity and White Aboriginality, identities are opened up for inspection, as Langton (1993, p. 32) writes, Indigeneity and White Aboriginality

arises from the subjective experience of both [Indigenous] people and [non-Indigenous] people who engage in any intercultural dialogue ... It is created from our histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white dialogue.

Just as it can be argued that colonial power gave way to a production of "truth" (Foucault cit. Rabinow, 1984, p. 74), it can also be argued that Tjukurlpa (Wongi Language) gives way to a production of "*truth*". Tjukurlpa is impossible to define in English. Tjukurlpa exists across all Indigenous nations. Tjukurlpa may be interpreted as being an 'entity of knowledge' that holds a position of complete sovereignty that can never be superseded because it governs all life forms in the heavens and on the earth, and dictates all relationships between all life forms whether it is social, political, cultural or religious, and therefore cannot have a hegemonic relationship with colonialism.

Tjukurlpa rises above colonialism even when Indigenous culture and practices have been tainted by dominant white society, and is an explanation as to why Indigenous

sovereignty is not, and never has been extinguished, despite dispossession of land, and government and church institutionalisation of Indigenous nations. As seen in the theatre performance *Crying Baby*, it was self evident that the performance changed the way in which the non-Indigenous audience thought about Indigenous Law and power. But as Langton asks, is this an indication

that non-Indigenous people are beginning to see what [Indigenous people] see? Or is there a grand appropriation, a consumption of the 'primitive'? It is naive and racist to view the acceptance and popularity of [I]ndigenous art as simply hegemonic appropriation. This view accords no intention to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and musicians, and many others, who make explicit the project of communicating with others their own view of the world. To theorise that their works have been appropriated in some deterministic way is to fail to see and locate their power (1994, p. 43.)

Film reviewers Williams, Diwell, Juddery, and Banks (all 1998) failed to see and locate the power within *Radiance* by dismissing the issue of Indigeneity in the film. By keeping *Radiance* within the status of universality it exposes the "problematic ways in which contemporary white culture deal[s] with ... [Indigeneity]" (Thomas, 1994, p. 28).

Radiance opens another aspect that is not dependent on the stereotypes desired by the reviewers in their discussion of Indigeneity: the prioritised universal themes. So it can be said that the two different readings of *Radiance* are hegemonic by their very nature. In analysis the issue of Indigeneity is in the forefront with universality being a backdrop for the issue of Indigeneity, which is the main motive/motif for/of

the text. It has a distinct 'voice', one of Indigenous Australia, that "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (Bhabha, 1993, p. 190). The framework from which *Radiance* operates is postcolonial because it challenges dominant white notions on issues of "cultural differences, social authority and political discrimination" (Bhabha, 1993, p. 190) in an attempt to reveal the ambivalence of colonial reasoning in laying the foundations for modernity.

Chapter 3.

RADIANCE

There needs to be an eradication of the structures that frame Indigeneity, which acts as a framework for dominant Australian culture to marginalize representations of the 'other'. The films *Radiance* and *Sissy* liberate Indigeneity from constructions as represented in films' such as *Blackfellas*, *Walkabout*, and *Jedda*.

The issue of Indigeneity in *Radiance* glares back at the viewer from the screen. The narrative of the film's discourse of contemporary black Australians pluralizes "identities that emerge through historical dislocations" (Thomas, 1994, p. 194).

Radiance concerns three sisters who come together after the death of their mother, Mary. Firstly, the deceased mother's - and therefore the daughters' - state of dislocation from Indigenous social, political, and economic security was replaced by European Government handouts, and dependence upon the generosity of Harry, the white sugar cane farmer who allowed Mary to live in a isolated house on the farm. Harry's generosity positions him as having self-appointed sexual rights over Mary and "allows" the rape of Chrissy, the oldest daughter.

Secondly, the family was further dislocated when the government welfare agency took the young Chrissy and May away to be institutionalized in separate missions.

However, May returns to the house to look after Mary and Nona, while Chrissy goes on to be an internationally acclaimed opera star. She divorces herself from her family through distance and does not acknowledge 'them' or their existence. Chrissy is positioned in a state of denial - through the trauma of historical dislocation - not just a denial of family but also a rejection of identity. Thomas (1994, p. 21) describes this distancing as a "detemporalization of colonialism." Chrissy uses her new found face of identity as a mechanism to put off confronting the ghosts of colonialism, choosing dislocation via the high culture of opera - the culture of the colonial elite. In this environment Chrissy is "almost the same but not white" (Bhabha cit. Thomas, 1994, p. 40). Chrissy is caught between two cultures and denies her Indigeneity. She only returns home for her mother's funeral. Nona questions Chrissy, "Why didn't you mention us in your media stories?" Chrissy had reconstructed her past - denying her blackness. May sarcastically states, "She's white now, we don't exist. I don't even know why she bothered coming home." But Chrissy's arrival is a clear indication that no matter how 'white' one tries to be your Indigeneity 'haunts' you until a conscious admittance of heritage is acknowledged. Once home Chrissy chooses to stay, she has accepted her actual place and is comfortable with that, once they all come to terms with their fragmented past. Chrissy cancels a concert in London. Her black identity is much stronger and therefore it can be said that Indigenous relationships with colonialism gives rise to "ironic" and "split identifications; these threatening expressions of hybridity disrupt and subvert colonial hegemony"

(Thomas, 1994, p. 40). Even though Chrissy is 'assimilated' and centred in a high cultural institution, she is able to reclaim her Indigeneity by returning to Mary's house. What emerges are complex Indigenous characters that are paradoxically located within a framework of historical dislocations where the discourses of Indigenous femininity "are postcolonial because they disfigure the workings of colonialism's culture" (Thomas, 1994, p. 195).

Thirdly, Chrissy and May, like thousands of other Indigenous children, were systematically removed from their parents for the purpose of assimilation. The aim of assimilation was to bring Indigenous children up so that they would acquire the basic attitudes, habits and mode of life as white people. It was based on a belief that "within one hundred years the pure black will be extinct", and that by absorbing "half-castes into the white population" (Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia (Inc), 1995, pp. 1, 2) it would be guaranteed that Australia would become a white nation.

The act of such policies of dispossession has had a devastating impact on Indigenous people and their identity today. Therefore the film's discourse "demands that viewers position themselves in relation to the changing historical and social dynamics that are occurring in Australia today" (Laseur, 1993, p. 76). It remotivates Australian identity discourse in order to point out that history exists within the lives of Indigenous people and their Australian identity today.

Indigeneity can only be defined in relation to the white experience whose dominance caused the breakdown of Indigenous family structures, the displacement of cultural and spiritual identity and the loss of individual self-esteem.

The tension between Chrissy and May can be traced to their perception of their mother's rejection of them - despite Mary's lack of power and control over their being removed. This tension arises from the historical dislocation, alienation, loneliness, and painful legacy that shatter colonial notions of assimilation. As one participant in the "Telling our Story" Report on the removal of Aboriginal children from their families in Western Australia stated (1995, p.5), "The nuns who were in charge of us were always telling us we were wicked, evil, dirty savages." It is this fragmented past that imprisons Chrissy and May while Nona, who doesn't know the truth of the past, acts out the operatic role of *Madam Butterfly* from Chrissy's CD.

The audience is interpellated in this sequence which is a site for inter-cultural gender relations. Nona's performance questions dominant white patriarchal placement of Indigenous women within the cultural and social realms. Her 'free' performance is an act of "reappropriation or resignification which ... affect and alter the imaginary" (De Lauretis cit. Kaplan, 1997, p. 7). Nona's brown skin is wrapped in a kimono style dressing gown and the depth of her feelings is expressed through the movement of her arms as she mimics the Japanese woman on her knees

plunging a knife into her body. It is black subjectivity that positions the audience to look from the 'othered' woman's point of view where the 'othered' woman has feelings and is able to express them.

This sets up a new way of looking at, and seeing, the imagined 'othered' woman. Chrissy's statement to Nona that "your acting is kind of free I wish - I could be like that" is also an admission of the impact of historical dislocation that has psychologically and spiritually disadvantaged Indigenous social and cultural norms and includes the trauma of dealing with life in a racist society. Therefore, the film's discourse "demands that viewers position themselves in relation to the changing historical and social dynamics that are occurring in Australia today" (Laseur, 1993, p. 76). It remotivates gender and race via discourses deflecting assimilationist notions and contemporary paternalistic determinations to point out that history lives within the lives of Indigenous people today. It is a discursive construction that remotivates the white male gaze for what it is - the gaze of colonial racialized sexuality.

For example, in one scene Nona and May call into the local hotel to buy alcohol. The white men sitting along the bar with middies of beer permanently in their hands stare at 'them', who seem oblivious to their gaze and are deep in conversation. While May consciously ignores their white gazes, the younger Nona briefly returns the look. The camera takes on Nona's point of view offering the

audience an awareness of the white patriarchal gaze even though this is dismissed as Nona holds the hierarchy of the discourse. But the white patriarchal gaze does not go away. Nona looks back at 'them' asking, "What are you staring at, bug eyes?" and 'they' look away. Thus the question may be posed: is this the imperialistic 'gaze' of white patriarchy - looking from behind the rims of their middies that hide *their knowing* expressions of the *other*?

Their gaze does not falter until Nona speaks - Nona "reclaim[s] the body - the maimed immoral black female body" (Hammonds, cit. Gittins, 1998, p. 3) - jolting them out of their racialized trance into a conscious state of exposure to a contemporary black woman's awareness and knowledge of their racialized, sexual gaze. Kaplan (1997, p. 177) stresses, "that the impact of inter-racial looking relations within films need to be balanced by inter-racial looking relations at the film." Nona as a black subject sets up a question for the audience: who or what are they looking for? Her dominant black discourse, and its filmic aesthetic, demand that the audience rejects white supremacist notions of the 'other'. This demand could stem from the black experience and the process of survival within colonialism's hegemonic structures and, as a Nunga songwriter wrote, "we have survived the white man's world and you can't change that." Therefore it may be suggested that whiteness must be defined in relation to Indigenous people's experiences within a dominant European culture, which in turn makes it possible for "real recognition of black subjectivity. ... It would be an essential opening

toward recognition of the black autonomous subject” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 300).

Radiance constructs a conscious Indigenous femininity that is in control. Chrissy and May methodically throw petrol around the house, the site where Harry raped Chrissy. This is enacted beneath the sightless eyes of the Virgin Mary’s painting hanging stately on the lounge room wall. The flames leap around the virgin and this immolation becomes a symbolic display of Chrissy’s brutal loss of innocence. This notion of a conscious Indigenous femininity in control is further enhanced by a cut to Chrissy standing in a crucifix position with the flames of the burning house behind her.

It is a powerful image of “black people” commanding “the look” and startling “whites into knowledge of their whiteness” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 4) by inviting the viewer to look as the colonized. Chrissy and May’s catharsis invokes redemption from their past through their burning of Harry’s property - “revenge for us and Mum.” At this point a process of Indigenous identification takes place. Their Indigeneity is defined “through the experience of assimilation and its rejection” (Thomas, 1994, p. 191.) Chrissy and May’s ritual-like dance purges their souls from *assimilation* and its *rejection* as they shout abuse at Harry. It is a conscious act of the anger Indigenous people sometimes feel when expressing Indigeneity to white people.

These angry Indigeneities are the embers that are fanned into flames when one feels they cannot take oppressive white behaviour anymore. As the flames leap higher one can almost hear Chrissy screaming, "look at me, Harry, I'm black; look at me Harry. You've raped me but I am still black. Look at the way you treated our mother, Harry, she was black and I am black." It is this anger within Indigeneity that frees Chrissy from a dominant culture's rejection of Indigenous people. According to Gunew and Rizvi (1994), it generates a new hybridised identity "which acknowledges the inevitable cross-cultural interactions of the past 200 years." But it is an expressionistic reaction against the continuous pressure white people put on Indigenous people about Indigeneity which opens up diverse "multiple and diffuse sources of representation interacting to open new possibilities and many-layered identities" (Kalantizes & Cope, 1987). As Laseur (1993, p. 76) states, it destabilizes "white Australian history as a master narrative ... [and] suggests the vital and ongoing processes of cultural definition and redefinition."

This ongoing process of cultural definition and redefinition can be seen in the documentary *Sissy* which illustrates how black constructions of Indigeneity create a radical politics of difference unrestricted by outdated dominant white notions of Indigeneity.

Chapter 4.

SISSY

Sissy is about a Nyoongar gay man, Charlie Colbung (Charlene), and his two friends John Collard (Anna Mae), and John Fitzgerald (Ella). The film presents a rare insight into a subculture of Nyoongar gay men where the identities of Indigenous gay men stems from their experiences within dominant white culture and, the process of their black survival within colonialism's hegemonic structures.

The film begins with Charlie relating childhood experiences such as living his earlier life on the Mount Barker Reserve located on the outskirts of the town - a place delegated to 'them' by white society. By expelling Indigenous people to the outskirts of white communities it "served to reinforce local white community solidarity and civic consciousness" (Reece cit. Haebich, 1988, p. 129). As a consequence of exclusion, Indigenous people were denied access to public infrastructures, such as health, education, employment, and housing. Indigenous Australians were almost exclusively part of the economic fabric, but only as dependants with no future of self-determination. Their position on the outskirts of town locates 'them' in white society, but as a marginalised group where dominant white notions constructed 'them' as a whole community of drunk Nyoongars living in shanty-like homes.

The Nyoongar presence on the outskirts of town was a “useful negative definer” for the white community and what “they stood for; for example ‘cleanliness’ and ‘orderliness’ versus ‘disease’ and ‘dirtiness’ ” (Haebich, 1988, p. 129). An editorial in the *Bulletin* (1901) asked, “Do you want Australia to be a community of mongrels?” (cit. Evans, 1975, pp. 1-23). This act of racial segregation treated Indigenous lifestyles as spectral, as Sturmer (cit. Langton, 1988, p. 39) wrote

They fight too much, they drink too much, fuck too much, they
are too demanding, they waste their money and destroy property.
So it has to be annulled, denied or driven off precisely into
the realms of infantilism and irresponsibility, into fantasy states.

Therefore it can be said that the black township is a symbolic display of ‘poverty of community’ - an inherent notion of the marginalised in white western society. This poverty is not only about wealth, it’s about deviance from what the white community considers the ‘norm’. So the Nyoongar community “constructs a second world and a second life outside officialdom” (Fiske, 1987, p. 241). It is a reflexive response to a dominant white culture who have imposed upon ‘them’ social conditions that are far removed from their own set of cultural values and beliefs. Nyoongars are designated a ‘low’ status within white society through the dominance of ideological white discourse, which in turn suggests the notion of a poverty of *participation* in a wider (white) community.

Despite being racially segregated Charlie’s father, Mr Colbung, made sure that

Charlie attended the state school though Indigenous people 'held on' to their cultural ways of learning, it was also recognised that white culture was dominant, and education based on European ways of learning was necessary for Indigenous youth in the future. Some Europeans assumed that Indigenous people with white blood running through their veins were more intelligent, but they "looked on this intelligence as 'low cunning' and they warned against the educated people who 'reverted' to a 'more evil' " way because, of an "educated barbarism" within 'them'. Amateur anthropologist Daisy Bates was "firmly of the opinion that no matter how extensively they had been trained in white ways, 'the only good half caste [was] a dead one' " (Haebich, 1988, p. 129). These cultural and textual constructions of the black township/community are perceived representations of Indigenous Australia – white notions of Indigeneity. Indigenous people had lost their economic way of life and were forcibly placed into an institutionalised state of welfare mentality, which, as can be witnessed in the film, Mr Colbung fought against by lobbying and debating with the state government and local government bodies for years for the rights of Nyoongar people to live within the white township of Mt Barker. These interrelations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are both social and political, and are discursive. From this, abstract representations of black Indigeneities and white 'Aboriginalities', and intersubjectivity develop with this being a process "of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation" (Langton, 1993, p. 24).

It is from this social and political environment that Charlie leaves in order to 'come-out', and position himself so that he is able to publicly identify his homosexuality. Charlie (Charlene) meets up with two other Nyoongar gay men, John Collard (Anna Mae), and John Fitzgerald (Ella), and together they live within the Perth gay community. But upon arriving in Perth Charlene discovers that white gays are held captive to outdated dominant racist notions of Indigeneity.

While they are feted as being acceptable within the gay community, there are boundaries of exclusion from white gays where difference is highlighted. White supremacist behaviour can be hidden under a cloak of whitewashed acceptance of Indigenous people. As Hooks (1995, p. 5) stated, an overt act of racism "is not as fashionable as it once was and that is why everyone can pretend racism does not exist, so we need to talk about the vernacular discourse of neo-colonial white supremacy."

Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella talk about their observations and experiences of white supremacist behaviour in a comedic way, but there are glimpses of black anger that rises to the surface. As Sartre (cit. Kaplan, 1997, p. 10) states, "these black men have fixed their gaze upon us and our gaze is thrown back into our eyes." Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella talk openly about white supremacy as they sit on pink and blue couches. Charlene states, they "ostracize" us and are "racist" towards us, but "you don't mind laying back in bed with us rockin' and rollin'."

At this point it is necessary to ask, what is this racism that Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella experience? Racist behaviour is often associated with “vicious abuse or physical violence” (Pettman, 1992, p. 55). This discourse of white supremacy that Charlene, Anna Mae and Ella experience is a racialized ‘look’ that mirrors their ethnocentric thoughts of white cultural superiority over Nyoongar culture. White superiority is shown by gestures, actions and their way of speaking, and is therefore “rooted in pathological responses to difference” (Hooks, 1995, p. 27). “Why can’t you speak English?” asks one white queen, barely concealing his distaste for the Nyoongar language. Indigenous people fully understand the painful and wounding message of white supremacy, as Lillian Holt (cit. Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1994, p. 4) wrote on encountering racist remarks and how she may react to a situation, “clam up and internalise the hurt, lash out, roll with the punches, fit in, or pretend racism didn’t exist.”

In the film Charlene recounts a story where ‘she’ is invited into a room with three white gays, and is included in their private social gathering. When Charlene leaves, ‘she’ hears the three white gays talk about ‘her’ in a racist way behind the closed door. Charlene makes an angry affirmation of Indigeneity that ‘frees’ her from a dominant white gay culture’s rejection of Indigenous people. ‘She’ marches back into the room and asks “you are talking about me?” The three white queens deny this, to which ‘she’ replies, “yes you are.” She then as she states ‘bashes-up’

the three white queens. When Charlene walks away from them, one white queen runs after her, "leaping five feet in to the air, all *Bold and Beautiful* style, and lands on her knees, saying Charlie, Charlie I ache for you." Charlene turns around, walks towards the white gay queen saying, "ache for this cunt," and kicks the queen in the chest. So it can be said that Charlene, though assimilated into gay culture, experiences its rejection, which is a rejection from a group of people who are also rejected by the dominant white culture, and who are seen as deviants because of their homosexuality. It is this act of white supremacist talk that strengthens Charlie's Indigeneity. White supremacist ways of talking oppress, and devalue Indigenous people as human beings. Pettman (1992, p. 58) writes, "Whatever the form, racism is always about power - about constituting and treating others as 'different' for the purpose of excluding, exploiting or containing them."

But how does white supremacist notions strengthen Indigeneity? Those who experience white supremacist actions are often empowered by it because of the values that are contained within Indigeneity. These values stem from a fundamental notion of Indigenous survival in a dominant white society where issues of Indigeneity are based upon the social, cultural and spiritual identity with homelands; respect for quality of life for human beings where dignity and self worth is respected; having control over one's life; and having a respect for harmony within social relationships. White supremacy fails to recognise the fundamental

notion of humanistic behaviour that occurs between different cultures, therefore Charlene expresses a black anger when the white queens talk about him in a racist way, just as Chrissy's anger is on display in *Radiance* when she, stands outside the burning house. This is Charlene's conscious outward act of anger which all Indigenous people sometimes feel when expressing their indigeneity to white people. This black anger is an expressionistic form of Indigeneity, which comes to the fore when Indigeneity is threatened as having no fundamental value. Therefore Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella challenge white gays about the naturalness of race stereotypes, as Ngugi (1996, p. 6) wrote about,

They develop a distinctive culture and history. Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe.

The development of a distinctive Nyoongar culture creates confusion within white gay queens because, as Langton (1993, p. 32) writes, Indigeneity "only has meaning when understood in terms of intersubjectivity, when both... [Indigenous and white Australians]...are subjects, not objects." Therefore Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella challenge the white supremacist gaze to look, to paraphrase Marcus, *bifocal* (1994, p. 51), and not just at the micro-picture of perceived white notions of Indigeneity, but at the social, political, and cultural relationship between black and white Australians – the macro-picture. By challenging white gays/gaze to look through a bifocal lens it raises a question about the right of the centred dominant gaze.

Though Indigeneity can only be defined in relation to the impact dominant white culture has upon Indigenous social, cultural, political and religious ways of life, the centred, dominant gaze allows no acknowledgement to a definition of Indigeneity in relation to internal structural changes communities make as a result of colonial impact. Non-Indigenous Australians often attempt to construct Indigeneity in relation to the notion of the relationship black people have with a 'perceived' environment as to time, space, object and person. As Colin Johnson wrote, the notion of

a stone-age culture (static and unchanging) is a myth created by those who should have known better and still put forth by those who should know better. All societies and cultures change and adapt, and this is fact not theory (1985, p. 21).

There is no community, no matter how isolated, that has not been touched by modernity. Therefore Indigenous communities see a continuation of 'past' structures and beliefs with modifications made in relation to a changing society that has been interfered with, or influenced by, European culture. But dominant perceptions of pre-colonial Indigenous lifestyles have been accentuated so that Indigenous people are misplaced, and "therefore [it is] not surprising that the political and aesthetic critique of [Indigenous people and their] images [are] so muted" (Langton, 1993, p. 39). It is this history of being misplaced, controlled and excluded which has had a deep and lasting spiritual and psychological impact on Indigenous people and this strongly influences the way in which Indigenous people construct and communicate with each other and white society.

Charlene states their language, and their way of talking is, by its very nature, “social and political.” The ‘girls’ are acutely aware of what and how they speak and its impact upon white gays. When white queens ask them, “What are you saying?,” the ‘girls’ refuse to tell them, as Charlene says, “it’s a need to know basis and you do not need to know.” In *Sissy*, white queens often feel intimidated by this, but as Ella states, ‘she’ feels “empowered” talking ‘her’ way, because “we are doing what we want to do and not what ‘they’ want us to do.” This is admittance to the position of Indigenous people in a dominant white colonial society, where the ‘girls’ are able to hold a form of hierarchal control where the discourse of Nyoongar identity “disfigure the works of colonialism’s culture” (Thomas, 1994, p. 195). White queens realise that Indigenous people have not assimilated into white society, but rather they have constructed their own reality within their cultural, social, and political environment that is surrounded by dominant white culture. So it can be said that Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella experience the world differently to the English Language construction and representation of the world. As O’Shaughnessy (1995, p. 26) writes, the relativist philosophical system for thinking about and understanding the relationship between language and the world suggests that language “constructs the world through naming it and constructs the concepts through which we understand life and the world.”

For example, while editing this film, the white editor wanted to cut out a sequence when Charlene and Ella are in the change rooms at Industria - a fashion boutique.

We see Charlene's shoes and feet under the change room door as she puts on silver trousers. Charlene says, "jin-nu boo-gu-des and all showing" - 'she' is referring to her feet (jin-nu) and shoes (boo-gu-des) being on camera. The film's editor wanted to cut this piece out, as "it doesn't mean anything." But the language had to stay in because, it may mean nothing to a white audience but to a Nyoongar audience the language has meaning. The white editor then began a debate on who the audience is, and that the majority of the audience will be white. If this were the case, all the more reason to keep Nyoongar language in, because the film is about Nyoongar identity that strongly exists within a dominant white culture.

The way that Charlene says "jin-nu boo-gu-des and all showing" is comedic in the Nyoongar way of speaking, with a hint of goonda (shame) at the lack of privacy in getting changed. Though the use of Nyoongar language is a recognition that Nyoongar culture exists. Wallace, (cit. Langton, 1993, p. 36) points out in an analysis of the intertextual relationship of Afro- American and mainstream American culture, "a pure Afro-American culture untainted by the marketplace ... is inconceivable." Throughout *Sissy*, the 'girls' constantly speak Nyoongar-English. Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella recognise that the fragmentation of the English language reflects that their communication is an acknowledgement of an ever moving and changing Nyoongar culture, which has its roots in colonialism. The way in which the 'girls' use language is not neutral; it is a deliberate choice in setting boundaries for the expression of indigeneity in a white dominated society.

Therefore, Indigenous use of the English language carries different connotations and values. In one sequence of the film the 'girls' talk about the way they speak to each other when they are having an argument.

Ella states that this upsets her, but Charlene and Anna Mae say that swearing and fighting is a natural part of their interaction with each other and helps to build up their relationship with each other. Eades (1993, p. 188) writes, "Swearing, like fighting, is considered to be a normal part of [Indigenous] social interaction, and in particular a necessary part of settling disputes." Indigenous people will argue in a public place where non-Indigenous people view their actions, and impute such actions as a fault. Indigenous people may conduct their personal life in public because of their open way of living, as opposed to European people where swearing and arguing will be carried out in their privacy of their homes. Therefore, Indigenous people are more susceptible to this 'fault'. White queens are horrified, and ask, "Why do you talk to each other like that?" Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella take-on such language using it in a comedic form. Obscene language is less likely to be offensive because it can carry different connotations and value within the Indigenous community.

From personal experience there is an unspoken competition as to who can say the most insulting thing to each other. For example, during the making of the film Charlene used the most vulgar terminology when having a serious disagreement

with another black gay queen. The black gay queen defended himself, swearing back at Charlene, but would burst out laughing at how Charlene spoke to him, because it is not so much the words that Charlene uses, but how she puts those words together. Whoever uses the most insulting language wins the argument. Charlene explains that they use such words to “glamorise” the English language. Indigenous use of obscene and derogatory names and terms such as “you lazy black bastard” is racialized language, and in analysis stems from the way white people, historically, used such stereotypes on Indigenous people.

Thus as Jean Cohen writes, ethnocentric stereotyping “can be the worst form of oppression ever invented” (cit. Evans, 1975, pp. 1-23). British imperialism knew that when colonising other lands the “mental universe” of the colonised had to be dominated, imprinting on the minds of Indigenous people a concept that devalued Indigeneity with “pictures and images, which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality” (Ngugi, 1986, p. 16). Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella mimic ethnocentric stereotyping and dismiss it through the laughter of the oppressed. Their response is reflexive because dominant white culture has imposed upon ‘them’ social conditions that are far removed from their own set of cultural values and beliefs. It can be said that Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella are aware of the dominant culture’s attempts at devaluing Indigeneity and that is why they focus on their construction of language because they know it is a site of power and struggle, and that it is hegemonic. Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella, by rejecting the traditional

and that it is hegemonic. Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella, by rejecting the traditional narratives of the West, reclaim and reassert their Nyoongar cultural identity, which is a fundamental right.

This expression of Indigeneity is something that can only be articulated in the space allocated for interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people which becomes a site for Indigenous ideological power over a dominant white culture. In the final scenes of *Sissy Anna Mae* leads Nyoongar gay men in the Pride Parade, 'her' arms outstretched as 'she' holds her head high, an expression of being an Indigenous gay. 'She' walks boldly in black leather boots, and a short red leather skirt. The crowds that line the street cheering are mostly white.

There is a carnivalisue aura that surrounds this Nyoongar public performance as didgeridoo music echoes into the night, but at the same time the 'girls' are attempting to "negotiate a meaningful intermediate space, a space where an alternative identity could be discovered and expressed, [a] distinctive quest for a measure of autonomy" (Hebdige, 1993, p. 450). It is not one identity they seek but many alternative identities, which allow 'them' to pick and choose which character they will 'play' with today.

Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella fabricate a performance of carnivalisue play by existing not in a fixed or defined position of gender, but rather from a fragmented and blurred position, a postmodern position, taking on a variety of feminine

personae, in which they always refer to themselves in terms of strong black women - "mooditch yorgas" - solid women, - neicy, jij, or tiddas. Solomon (1988, p. 211) states, postmodernism "is not merely a style: it is a cultural attitude, a new mode of perception fostered by an age of instant communication, a perceptual montage." Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella take on many identities, such as Patsy and Delvina in the television sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*, and/or Ricky Lake, whilst quoting from classic movie Hollywood characters such as Clarke Gable in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), "Frankly, I don't give a damn," and lyrics from songs such as Loretta Lyn, "Stand by your man," and Gloríá Gaynor, "I am what I am."

The 'girls' act out perceived notions of femininity - they scream, bitch, pull hair, worry about their weight, change their clothes a hundred times before going out, gossip, and dream about Mr. Right. 'They' subvert the perceived status of Indigeneity by mimicking characters from other social and political groups that have already been constructed through film and television culture.

Anna Mae, who performs as a drag queen, wears a black leather micromini dress with a love heart neckline, blonde wig, platform leather lace-up boots (she resembles Tina Turner), but performs to Macy Grey. 'She' moves around the stage seductively mimicking black American performers, 'she' has soul; 'she' is, as Charlene describes 'her', a "cock in a frock." Charlene states on behalf of Anna Mae, "Naomi Campbell eat your heart out sister, because I'm better than you."

Naomi Campbell is a commodified haute couture icon of the late twentieth century whose image produces a surface satisfaction where Charlene, Anna Mae and Ella have access to a pleasurable place of style. This surface satisfaction that the 'girls' have access to works, as Fiske (1987, p. 250) writes, "directly on the sensual eye." The impact of pleasure and style enacts upon Charlene, Anna Mae and Ella and generates a multivocality of excess in which the high world of fashion fits into a sphere, not just reserved for a capitalist economy, but into an expansive postmodern space where three Nyoongar gay queens strut and pose with an attitude that speaks out to dominant white society. Just as Charlene stated on camera, (in a piece that wasn't included in the final edit) "we are big, black, bold beautiful bitches."

Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella in analysis align themselves to comments Naomi Campbell made when she visited Australia during Fashion Week 2000, when she questioned the Australian fashion industry's importing of 'other' black models at the expense of using Indigenous Australian models. Her comments discreetly published in the media received no real acknowledgement from the Australian Fashion Industry, but was discussed within the Indigenous community from which emerged a postmodern attitude that challenged, "the 'inevitability', the 'naturalness' of class [race] and gender, stereotypes" (Hebdige, 1993, p. 450). In the constructed space of Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella they ideologically challenge

white society, and that challenge is a spectacular symptom that characterises past and present relationships between black and white Australians. Therefore it can be said that Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella's polysemic 'playing of games' is a form of Bakhtin's carnivale where they experience pleasure from the freedom of making and controlling meanings in a symptomatic world of fragmentation. As Charlene states in the beginning of the film we are "out on centre stage, being noticed, we are glamorous, we are here, and we are queer."

Chapter 5.

CONCLUSION

Susan Lowish, (1998, p. 7) in her paper 'Hybrid and Multicultural Traditions in Australian Art: Tracey Moffatt's Photographs and Films', asks "What kind of ... [Indigeneity/Identity] is being represented?"

It can be argued that there has been a deterritorialization of Indigeneity in the films *Radiance* and *Sissy*, and that the filmmakers 'play' with the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, not so much to make sense, as to open the senses to it. Edward Said insisted, "The construction of identity...involves establishing opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of their differences from 'us' " (1995, p. 332).

The construction of Indigenous identities in Tracey Moffatt's films (not including *Nice Coloured Girls*) and her photographic work,

seems to be playing a conscious game with those critical theorists who wish to use her work as an example to back up their own arguments, providing indicators and suggestions which either end up leading nowhere or subvert the critic's argument (Lowish, 1998, p. 11.)

Yet it can be argued that the 'tension' for critical theorists lies not in Moffatt's positioning of herself into the mainstream, by refusing to "bear a burden of

[Indigenous] representation” (McLean, 2003, p. 7), but with the difficulty that a dominant culture finds itself in when trying to apply its static frameworks to a moving, living culture that in analysis ‘dominates’ the ‘dominated’ because of its knowledge of how white ideological notions are applied to the ‘other’.

Moffatt is extremely aware of this and constructs diverse Indigeneities to suit her own social and political affiliations at a particular time, just as other filmmakers such as Perkins, Sen, and Glynn have constructed different types of Indigeneities. It is a reflection of Indigenous peoples’ awareness of the importance to expose the diversity of Indigeneity within Australian film. It destabilizes “white Australian history as a master narrative...[and] suggests the vital and ongoing processes of cultural definition and redefinition” (Laseur, 1993, p. 76). There needs to be an eradication of the structures that surround ‘Indigeneity’, which acts as a framework for dominant ‘Australian’ culture to marginalize representations of the ‘other’. Moffatt, Perkins and other Indigenous filmmakers have liberated ‘Indigeneity’ from the ‘Australian’ context as represented in *Blackfellas*. Lynne Cooke in her essay, ‘Tracey Moffatt: Free Falling’, stated that *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989) “is no more exclusively local or [I]ndigenous...it speaks to generic familial ties in broad, layered, and nuanced terms” (1999, p. 2). Moffatt included *Night Cries* in her solo exhibition in New York “where parallels were being drawn between Moffatt’s work and American mid-west narratives” (Lowish, 1998, p. 2). So while it can be said that while Indigenous filmmakers ‘naturally play’ around with the

diversity of Indigeneity, others have restricted themselves to outdated dominant notions about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Outdated dominant notions “want a narcotic dream of the noble savage, and that is the ambiguous position between pre-history and modernity – that...[Indigenous] people are asked to occupy” (Mueke, 1993, p. 26). Since 1898 Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders have occupied that ambiguous position in Australian film. The defining of Indigenous identity within a colonial framework constructs Indigenous people in terms of being less civilised than Europeans with this being presented as ‘factual’. The terminology used reveals notions of ‘white’ superiority and only serves to reinforce the continuation of an imperialist history and reinforces the dominant ‘gaze’. Indigenous identity defined within a colonial framework reveal notions of ‘white’ superiority as having no depth; or understanding of Indigenous culture; a rudimentary knowledge of sacred religious sites; ‘real’ Indigenous people are considered to be confined to those ‘full-bloods’ living a ‘traditional tribal lifestyle’; and that the predominant stereotype is of a primitive, nomadic people who are passive and lazy, and have become virtual alcoholics under the influence of white society.

In order for non-Indigenous filmmakers to break free from frameworks of outdated notions of ‘white’ superiority, whiteness must be defined in relation to dominant European cultures experiences with Indigenous Australians, which in turn, makes it

possible for “real recognition of black subjectivity [and therefore] be an essential opening toward recognition of the black autonomous subject” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 300).

It can be argued that white Australians have begun the process of defining themselves in relation to their experiences with Indigenous Australians, not just through reconciliatory coloured hands planted in parks across Australia, but on an international level, such as the winning performance of Australian cultural identities at the Atlanta Games where Indigenous musicians blew into their amplified didgeridoos; and Indigenous dotted and lined art decorated plastic kangaroos riding around on bicycles; or the national carrier QANTAS with its Indigenous designs; Australia Post Indigenous designed uniforms; the recognitions of Indigenous art overseas as Australian; and cultural festivals, such as the one in Paris in 2002 where Indigenous art and films – including *Sissy* – are showcased as Australian.

But perhaps the most telling moment in the white Australian process of defining themselves in relation to Indigenous Australians must be when Cathy Freeman in 49.11 seconds won the 400 metres at the Olympic Games in Sydney on the 25 September 2000. Gary D’Amato from the Milwaukee Sentinel Newspaper wrote, in *For 49.11 seconds, you had to be there*:

I know what you saw, but you don’t know what I heard. Television couldn’t possibly have captured it, not with all the fancy technology known to man. In 23 years of covering sports, I have never heard,

have never felt anything like it. As Cathy Freeman rounded the final turn in the 400 meters Monday night, 112, 524 spectators at Stadium Australia stood as one and raised a mighty voice to the heavens, louder and louder they cheered, until the roar became something you could feel, stealing the air from your lungs and reverberating in your head, frying the circuits that process sound waves. Surely, no single gathering of men and women on earth had ever produced a noise this big... in 2000 seemingly all of Australia is eager to embrace Freeman not only as an Aborigine champion, but as its champion... Perhaps 98% of them were white, and some undoubtedly were descendents of the British settlers who pushed the Aborigines off their own land... Now they were standing on their tiptoes, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman they have come to adore.

It can be said that these examples are defining moments of the evolutionary process in which white Australians are coming to terms with identity and their expression of white Aboriginality. This is occurring not just through the arts and sports but also through the Mabo decision, "a site of national redemption, where Australia can reaffirm its most cherished beliefs about itself; that is, as a fair-minded, just, and compassionate global citizen" (Batty, 2003, p. 4). This evolutionary process in which white Australians are coming to terms with their identity in relation to Indigenous Australians, opens up new territories for the uncertainties of black and white "racial identities to offer a useful reminder, not only of the fluidity of cultural identities, but by extension, of the volatility of the positions that may be espoused in the search for a radical politics of difference" (Carter cit. Lowish, 1998, p. 3).

Therefore the concept of a multifarious culture sprouting, flowering, and flourishing in contrasting environments - dominant culture's hegemonic

environmental conditions – needs to be conceptualised, via the reworking and display in the artistic endeavours of the film, actor and artist. This work of conceptualisations needs to be done before any type of foundational work is laid, so that the similarities between Indigeneity and White Aboriginalities can be constructed within a dynamic framework that recognizes different systems and different sets of rules and protocols.

By working within a dynamic framework that recognizes different systems and different sets of rules and protocols allows for the emergence of a black subjectivity. Nona in *Radiance* symbolically reclaims her grandmother's homeland island - an act that strengthens her and her family's collective Indigeneity ensuring that their links to the land continue despite their physical absence. Similarly Charlene, Anna Mae, and Ella are merging from the (twin) margins to claim an essence that is essentially theirs to enable them to move on by remotivating "constructed and disputed historicities, sites of displacement, interference and interaction" (Clifford cit. Kaplan, 1997, p. 5.) by exposing the "problematic ways in which contemporary white culture deals with [Indigeneity]" (Thomas, 1994, p. 28). The postmodern myth has rejected the "centering structures that have long given meaning to human history" (Solomon, 1988, p. 216). No more is there a notion of the metanarrative in a privileged central position but rather one of many 'voices' of the margins that demand to be heard. The Indigenous experience can best be described as a sequence of abruptly alternating or superimposed scenes or

images shaped by contemporary industrialized civilization, a global cacophony from which the black 'voice' can be raised and understood. As Freeman later said, "I was totally overwhelmed, because I could feel the crowd all around me, could feel them pushing me" ("For 49.11 seconds, you had to be there", 2000).

Therefore the black experience is a two-way process between black and white, and in the understanding of the construction of Indigeneity, and therefore the white experience, and its process of survival within its own dominant colonial structures. It is this notion coupled with the relationship with Indigenous Australia that may lead to the foundational work of understanding issues of Indigeneity. But, from past dominant ideological experiences, perhaps the black 'voice' will never materialize fully because of the hegemonic relationship between Euro American ideologies over the 'other' where once again the camera will zoom in on an Indigenous face or a fragment of a culturally significant event revealing nothingless, only adding to the mute and unstable images of global homogenisation where staying cool in the face of chaos is the only thing one can do. As Freeman ("For 49.11 seconds, you had to be there", 2000) stated after she lit the Olympic cauldron, a symbolic olive branch that so perfectly fitted the spirit of the Olympic movement, "In my simple world, I will wake up in the morning and eat my breakfast and clean my teeth. Nothing will change."

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