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# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

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# ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Az Őslakos Nők Ábrázolása az Ausztrál Filmekben*  
*The Representation of Aboriginal Women in*  
*Australian Cinema*

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**2021**

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## Abstract

This thesis discusses three types of representations of Aboriginal women in Australian cinema. The colonial era had oppressed and marginalized Aboriginal women. At this time Aboriginal women were depicted in Australian cinema by way of racist characterizations such as 'primitive' and 'promiscuous.' Such representation was present in films like *Jedda* (1955), and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978). The films after the *Mabo* case have shifted the representation of Aboriginal women and Aboriginal people notably, emphasizing the 'post-colony apology' trope. This type of representation was portrayed in films like *The Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), *Sweet Country* (2017), and *Jindabyne* (2006). The third type of representation is the one exhibited in films like *Night Cries- A Rural Tragedy* (1990), and *Samson and Delilah* (2009). This representation is regarded as the most progressive and most inclusive.

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## Introduction

This thesis explores the progress of the representation of Aboriginal women from the colonialist era to the present day by analyzing some of the canonized films of the colonialist era, and films after *Mabo*. The first chapter discusses the subjective representation of Aboriginal women of the colonial 20th century, and the adamant fixation on the classified representation of the ‘primitive’ in early Australian cinema. This representation was dominant in that period because it satisfied the imagination of the white consumer and relaxed their doubts and fears of the Aboriginal people as ‘the other’ (Torgovnick 244-46). For the first chapter, *Jedda* (1955) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) are discussed to show how this type of representation portrayed Aboriginal women. The films after *Mabo* are divided into two chapters and each category is regarded as a different type of representation; even though they are from the same period. Since the 1990s, Aboriginal representation has progressed. The second chapter discusses the shift to a “post-colonial apology” narrative (Carah and Louw) to correspond with the recent Australian apology after *Mabo* and the *Bringing Them Home Report* (Carah and Louw 1). Furthermore, the second chapter explores how this type of representation utilizes the Aboriginal female characters as redemptive devices for the Australian ethics and cleansing of the corrupt colonial past. This type of representation is present in films like *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, *Sweet Country*, and *Jindabyne*. The last type of representation discussed in the third chapter is the one that adds humanizing elements and inclusive narratives that allow unlimiting engagement of Aboriginal women and does not focus on the apology trope. For this type, films like *Night Cries – A rural Tragedy* (1990), and *Samson and Delilah* (2009) are analyzed.

DeCarvalho notes that historically Aboriginal women have been marginalized in Australian cinema, and their roles are usually controlled by non-aboriginal filmmakers who dictate the way Aboriginal women are represented (3). However, whenever they are represented, there are many reasons why the representation of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginals will remain questionable. There is a great diversity of the Aboriginal communities, that may seem unified to outsiders. Therefore, it is not possible for one Aboriginal person to represent the experience of all Aboriginal people and regard their cultural and individual differences and experiences as his or her own (Langton 27). Moreover, awareness of institutional racism does not equate knowledge of the Aboriginal reality, as what might seem a politically correct representation to white people, might be perceived otherwise by the Aboriginal people (Turner 136). The point is that no rigid representation is needed, as no two aboriginal people will identify identically. The films discussed in the third chapter exhibit the inclination to avoid predictable representations, as opposed to the primitive representation of the colonialist period, and the victimized representation in the films after *Mabo*, that tend to overgeneralize.

### **1. Colonialist film**

This chapter discusses the earliest representation of Aboriginal women in Australian cinema. The early representation was captured through a subjective 'colonialist eye'. The colonialist eye is one that is determined to sharply differentiate between the blacks and whites. Turner explains two strategies in which this is achieved. The first method is to bond black blood with black behavior, and the outcome is a biologically determined animal-like character who is hopelessly obedient to nature; a 'primitive' (140). Moreover, Gauthier notes that Aboriginal women have been "exoticized, objectified, and hypersexualized" (283) in Australian cinema.



*Jedda* (1955) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) are two colonialist films that depict the Aboriginal women characters in such ways.

Firstly, it should be mentioned that for Aboriginal people 'primitive' is not a negative representation, if primitive is what the colonizers use instead of Aboriginality. For almost twenty years after the white settlers arrived in Australia, Aboriginal people accepted the white people as co-habitants (Langton 32). It was not until the British military was well established that Aboriginal people started to realize that their land was being hegemonized by the European settlers. That is because for Aboriginal people, the concepts of evolution, advancement, and racial hierarchy, that are dominant in European culture, do not exist (Langton 32). These classifications are not perceived as setbacks to their culture. What is primitive for European culture is a way of living for a native civilization of thousands of years. Langton notes "From inside, a culture is 'felt' as normative, not deviant. It is European culture which is *different* for an Aboriginal person. Aboriginal people had no eugenicist theory, no need to theorize a racial superiority to justify exploitation or land theft" (36-37). Therefore, 'primitive' cannot be a negative representation in the eyes of Aboriginal people (and anyone who does not subscribe to this way of thinking). Aboriginality is a matter of cultural difference; it is neither regression nor progression. Nonetheless, what makes this representation problematic in Australian cinema is when Aboriginal people are subjected to a dehumanizing misrepresentation, when they become almost inseparable from their Aboriginality, with an extreme and inappropriate emphasis on their 'instinctive' features. This representation of Aboriginality crosses over to primitivism. Mackinotly and Duffy refer to the exploitation of Aboriginal people in films as an "exotic backdrop", "mysterious", and "children of nature" (9). For example, *Jedda* in Charles Chauvel's 1955 film acts rather frantically and out of control (Gall 67). She is dominated by her

instincts, rather than reason. The colonialist eye in Australian cinema has dehumanized the Aboriginal identity and have appropriated it for the fulfillment of its imagination, and finally has labelled Aborigines as 'primitive', merely because they are different.

*Jedda* (1955) is a film that is a prototype for the colonial film genre whereby the Aboriginal characters are depicted as 'primitive'. The film is a projection of all the doubts and imaginations the colonizers had about Aboriginals as the 'primitive' (Langton). Despite its racist connotations, *Jedda* was ahead of its time. It did not correlate with the movies of its time. The early colonialist films served as a source of amusement about the exoticism of Aboriginal people, but they had no appearances of any Aboriginal characters (Gall 64). The primitive representation is manifested in different ways in the film *Jedda*. One way is to outrightly call the characters 'savages' and 'primitive'. Another way is to place *Jedda* in a white civilization and plant in her the seed of instinct that she cannot be separated from. The instinct that draws her towards her Aboriginality. In *Jedda*, this instinct is irrational and defies all reason. *Jedda* cannot be detached from her primitivism from childhood. This is first shown when she shows more interest in drawing animal tracks, than learning the alphabet. As she grows into teenage hood, *Jedda* begins to fathom her instincts and demand to be reunified with her people. The more she is suppressed by her white mother, the more her instinctive emotions start to appear in a dramatic performance. *Jedda* hysterically plays the piano as she stares longer at the Aboriginal art and her seemingly uncontrolled sexual desire elevates beyond reason. *Jedda's* instincts also lure her to Marbuk as a reciprocation of his chant. In the time *Jedda* spends with Marbuk in nature, she eventually transgresses and submits to her eroticized emotions towards Marbuk. However, there is a duality in this representation because even though *Jedda's* sexual instincts rise to the surface and become plainly a part of her, her survival instincts seem fruitless, as she begs Marbuk not to

die or else she would not survive alone. Therefore, only the wildness in her sexuality and her submissiveness to the alpha male Marbuk fulfils the fascination of the viewer. The perfect image of Jemma is one when she is sex-crazed yet is ladylike and does not get her hands dirty wrestling crocodiles. Hence, Jemma is a 'civilized primitive'. She progressively loses pieces of her clothes as she spends more time with Marbuk in nature, however, she remains fully clothed as white civilized women do. Moreover, the more she connects with her instincts, the more she is represented in a hypersexual way. Her breasts are accentuated by the camera angle, her clothes are torn, and she is always wet. Gall points out that "Jemma and Marbuk are eroticized in the way that the white characters are not" (68). Therefore, it could be concluded that the sexualization of Jemma and the Aboriginal characters is a byproduct of the perception of 'primitive'. That is her primitive instinct which will not allow her to assimilate into white civilization.

In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978)*, the female roles were scarcely displayed intelligibly. There were no lead roles of Aboriginal women, and the ones that appeared were hardly coherent characters that did not possess any developmental value to the plot. In all of the few appearances of the Aboriginal women in the film, they were naked and drunk. The film is focused on conveying the intellectual and emotional interaction of Aboriginal men with white women and never with Aboriginal women. Jimmie shares a bond other than just sexual with his wife Gilda, and a sharp-witted quarrel with the other white women like Miss Graf. The Aboriginal women do not serve a meaningful purpose other than voyeuristic entertainment. They seem to be naked in scenes which did not call for nudity and are placed at times in the film where they did not make much sense. The only provocative scene that can be justified is when Jimmie is raping an Aboriginal woman. Jimmie's reason for raping her is his angry reaction to one of the white men smacking him, and the many others who exploited him. As a response to being

exploited and abused, Jimmie exploits and abuses the Aboriginal woman. Moreover, Jimmie asks her “which animal has your soul you black bitch?”, but Jimmie would not talk in this manner to his wife Gilda. Jimmie would not have a sense of entitlement over the white woman’s body; however, he would feel superior to the Aboriginal woman. According to Andrews, due to colonialist interventions, Aboriginal values, especially in Aboriginal men, have been distorted. Additionally, the Aboriginal socio-economic and gender structures have been corrupted. As a result, Aboriginal women have been victims of sexual violence committed by Aboriginal men (928). Therefore, this fact merits this part of the representation as accurate and authentic about the issue of violence against Aboriginal women by Aboriginal men.

*Jedda* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* are two films from the colonial era that portray Aboriginal women in a demeaning way. *Jedda* was ahead of its time as it was the first Australian colour film, and the first to cast Aboriginal people in leading roles (Gall 64). However, it did not do the Aboriginal women justice when presenting them for the first time to the world. It presented the character of Jedda as an irrational and sexually driven person, who also belongs to nature and lacks the ability to assimilate into a society that goes against her ‘natural instincts’. Moreover, Jedda is objectified; in the same way that the background women in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* are. Nonetheless, the roles of the women in the latter film are sidelined in comparison to Jedda. They have not been given active roles or any functionality in the plot. They can also be compared to the white women, who served a function to both the plot and dialogue. However, the very act of marginalizing Aboriginal women’s roles in Australian cinema is itself a reality. According to Senzani, “Black women were indeed at the bottom of the social scale and the most vulnerable subjects in colonial Australia” (41).

## 2. Representation of Aboriginal women in Australian cinema after *Mabo*

The previous chapter discusses the limitations of casting Aboriginal characters in Australian cinema, and the typecasting of Aboriginal women in primitive, sexualized, and objectified roles. This chapter explores the revision of the representation of Aboriginal women post 1990. The role of the female characters in *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, *Sweet Country*, and *Jindabyne* are analyzed and compared to the female characters in the films discussed in the previous chapter. The representation explored in this chapter is regarded as progressive and improved, considering how the Aboriginal women in these films were represented legitimately, and with no extreme and biased judgement.

The new and improved type of representation includes the canonized films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This era in Australian cinema witnessed an increase in representation of Aboriginal people. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Aboriginal people were never given parts in Australian cinema during the colonial 20<sup>th</sup> century, except for background and exoticized roles. The Australian Film Commission (2002) found that there were no Aboriginal roles in television in the year 1992. However, Screen Australia (2016) found that Indigenous Australians now make up 5% of television characters. The representation of the Aboriginal people in these films is noted by Carah and Louw as “post-colony apology film”. According to them, since the 1990s, Australian cinema has been increasingly supplemented by this allegory (7). By expressing guilt over the imperialist past of Australia, these films work as a reconciliation tool (1). What the white filmmakers and consumers gain from such films is a sense that Carah and Louw describe as “rejuvenated, happier and more ethical individuals” (2). Carah and Louw describe this narrative as more prominent in tourism media, whereby the apology allows both Australians and tourists alike to feel guiltless about consuming a national brand that thrived from oppressing the

Aboriginal people (14). Such narratives are present in films like *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, *Sweet Country*, and *Jindabyne*.

Collins explains why such a transformation in Australian cinema took place and describes the success of the films produced after the Mabo case (1992), and the positive response these films have received by Aboriginal people. According to Collins, the Mabo case was a turning point for Australian cinema, and the leading effect for the “backtracking” (Collins) of Aboriginal representation (3). The Mabo case and the films that were produced after it, forced Australians to recognize the dark history of Aboriginal people, and discredited the myth of *terra nullius* (Collins 4). Furthermore, the representation in these films focused on uncovering and condemning the institutional oppressive acts such as the assimilation policy. Therefore, in addition to Mabo, *The Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) was another prompt for this second wave of Aboriginal representation. *The Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Sweet Country* are analyzed in terms of how they gave Aboriginal female characters active involvement in the narrative to tell the story of Aboriginal reality during the colonization, in contrast with the colonialist films like *Jedda* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* which depicted the Aboriginal women as passive. The analysis of *Jindabyne* will focus on the apology allegory, and the representation of issues prevalent amongst Aboriginal women in both *Jindabyne* and *Sweet Country*.

According to Carah and Louw “The gesture of apology presents indigenous people as legitimate custodians of the land and settlers as foolish, contemptible and unnatural intruders” (8). This was mostly apparent in *Jindabyne*, as the Aboriginal women were seen as the dominators of the narrative and possessing control over the guilt of the white characters, who were represented as obnoxious, and insensitively beseeching to be relieved from their torturing guilt. The film gives the Aboriginal women a chance to respond to the allegorical (and literal)

apology presented in the film. In addition, Aboriginal women dominate the narrative in other ways too. Knopf explains why Aboriginal women are marginalized in Australia today and in the past century. Historically, Aboriginal women have been viewed as promiscuous and lacking the autonomy over their bodies because it was the settler's right to their body to abuse. As a result of being further oppressed by the authorities, Aboriginal women never resorted to the law for protection (69-76). Knopf argues that *Jindabyne* addresses the issue of sexual abuse against Aboriginal women. The story revolves around an Aboriginal woman, Susan, who was raped and murdered. Firstly, the film refrains from objectifying Susan's body by diverting the camera away from her body and instead focusing it on her surroundings, as opposed to the 'voyeuristic camera gaze' (Knopf 71) in *Jedda* and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*. The intentional avoidance of centering on Susan's naked body is a recognition of the humiliating camera gaze of the colonialist films, and therefore is in itself a gesture of rectifying the representation of Aboriginal women and brings forward the ongoing issue about the objectification of their bodies. Secondly, the film highlights the issue of twice-committed violence, once by the rapist and murderer, and another time by the men who find her. This signifies what is identified by Knopf, as the abuse committed by the police towards the Aboriginal women when reporting the first abuse; an issue that exists in contemporary Australian society (Knopf 68). The significance of the second abuse is shown visually on Susan's feet. Stewart and his friends do not abuse Susan, but they symbolically inflict a second abuse to her body. By tying her body, the men do not allow Susan to peacefully drift off after the first tragedy, instead they extend the abuse and tragedy on Susan and her family. Stewart and his friends do not view the Aboriginal woman in the scope of their ethics, and do not deem her worthy of stopping their leisure time for. This is later emphasized in the film when one of Susan's relatives says "I don't know how any civilized human being could

do what they did. And I really wonder how differently they would've acted if she were white.” (Knopf 77). Lastly, the silence of the men signifies the silence surrounding victims of sexual assaults. In a 2017 study by Cripps et al, their findings suggest that promoting positive attitudes towards “bystander intervention” (Cripps et al) can help Aboriginal communities fight against domestic and sexual violence. *Jindabyne* showcases the tragedy inflicted on the women and families of Aboriginal communities when instances of violence are witnessed and not reported. In a revisionist view, Susan could be thought of as Jedda. Susan’s narrative is a continuation of Jedda’s narrative when she is found dead in the river after being thrown off a cliff. However, in *Jindabyne*’s version, the issue of violence is in favour of Aboriginal women’s representation. By addressing the issue of crimes committed against Aboriginal women, the film participates in the movement of backtracking that was motivated by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in response to Mabo and *The Bringing Them Home Report*.

As it is projected in the films discussed in this chapter, part of adjusting the representation is abandoning the ‘primitive’ representation. However, these films do not abandon altogether the notion of closeness that Aboriginals have to nature. Kwaymullina writes “... the strangers named ‘primitive’ all peoples closer to the earth than they were” (Indigenous Law Bulletin). However, in the films discussed in this chapter, the representation of closeness to nature is transformed from depicting Aborigines as primitive, to depicting them as innate inheritors of the land. It remains however, an issue of over-compensatory representation. According to Rekhari, Australian cinema continues to attempt to depict Aboriginals in presumed realities (6). In explaining the standard ways in which filmmakers in Australian cinema depict Aborigines, Turner explains “... that of collapsing distinctions between the Aboriginal and



nature. Aborigines have been and continue to be seen as metonyms for an Australian landscape” (140). Nevertheless, the films represent the Aboriginal women in a more positive light.

*Jindabyne* and *The Rabbit Proof Fence* show the different attitudes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals towards land. For the latter, Australia is their unnatural country, and therefore signifying that the land belongs to the Aboriginal people. In describing the colonial mindset of America, Kolodny argues that the land is analogous to the female body; that the land is “essentially feminine” (4). The land is ought to be seized, conquered, and raped, like the female body (Knopf 70). On the other hand, for Aboriginal people, the land is analogous to a mother. In comparing how the land is viewed by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people, Kwaymullina conveys that for the settlers the land is viewed as an entity to be claimed and exploited, whereas for Aboriginal people, land is a nurturing mother that provides fruitfulness to the Aboriginal people. Kwaymullina writes: “They had left their Mother country far behind and sought no new Mother here. They came to tame, conquer, subdue; not to be nurtured, taught, cared for” (Indigenous Law Bulletin). As for the Aboriginal women in *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, they are also depicted as being close to nature. This is particularly shown in the scene when the children are taken away from the parents and the mothers lie still on the ground, and their hips start to appear as mountains. This image portrays the women as having a bodily and emotional tie to earth. Their physical and emotional response to trauma and abuse is to revert to the ground. Moreover, nature is represented as a place of security and freedom for Aboriginal women in both *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, and *Sweet Country*. For example, the girls in *The Rabbit Proof Fence* are able to hide their footprints by the rain, tricking the tracker in the river, hiding in the bushes, and drinking desert water. Nature directs them home. In *Sweet Country*, Lizzie is expressive and communicative in nature, but she is silent and passive among the colonizers. She expresses

herself only when she is in a setting away from the abuse and trauma. However, when she is interrogated by the judge in the court case, she becomes so extremely overwhelmed that she cannot speak. Nature also provides Lizzie with protection, guidance, and hope. In the scene when Sam gets shot, it is revealed that Lizzie has been all along dreaming of escaping with Sam into the lush green landscape. Lizzie does not picture her safety in a house, but in nature. Nature is where she envisions her belonging. For Lizzie and Molly nature is home and security. In contrast, nature intimidates the colonizers. In both *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, and *Sweet Country*, the colonizers avoid the wide deserted landscape because they consider it barren and frightening. Moreover, when in *The Rabbit Proof Fence* Constable Riggs is confronted with Molly's mother and grandmother in the bushes, he is intimidated and eventually escapes, even though he had a gun, and the women did not. The women themselves were not afraid of the gun and were approaching him with just sticks as weapons. This is an indication that the Aboriginal women feel wholesome and protected by nature, whereas the white man feels vulnerable and threatened both by nature and by Aboriginal women's empowerment through nature.

So far this chapter has discussed how these films have represented the reality of Aboriginal women in terms of their struggle with violence, and on the other hand their relationship with nature and land. In addition to refining the authenticity of the representation, Aboriginal women in all these films were depicted as having agency in the dynamics of their families and communities. Grieves proves through the accounts of several anthropologists during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the assumption about women's marginalization in the power structure in Aboriginal culture is a distorted conception, and that in reality, Aboriginal women highly contributed to Aboriginal culture. Nevertheless, Aboriginal women's authority has been somewhat reduced by the patriarchal influence of the colonial state. However, even then,

Aboriginal women took active roles in leading theirs and others' lives, as well as having complex identities (Grieves 15). Senzani argues that the scene in *The Rabbit Proof Fence* where Maud and her mother scare away Constable Riggs in the forest, reveals not only that nature is in favor of the women, but also that Aboriginal women practiced a high degree of power (383). The tension between colonialist patriarchy and Aboriginal non-hierarchical culture is particularly shown in *Sweet Country*. Lizzie is treated as an equal by Sam. For example, he insists that she recites the prayer at dinner. However, Sam eventually falls victim to the patriarchal ideology. Sam's resentment towards Lizzie grows and he starts to blame her for the pregnancy. However, Lizzie is able to defend herself when she says "He is the one that did it. Why blame me?" (*Sweet Country* 2017). This scene indicates that Lizzie is able to fend for herself when she needs to and does not feel ashamed of the fact that she's pregnant with an illegitimate child, which ultimately shows that Lizzie holds enough power in Sam's presence to vindicate herself when she is being falsely blamed. However, Lizzie is not able to provide a testimony to the white judge. This shows how patriarchy was imposed on Lizzie even though she did not suffer the same with Sam. Furthermore, in addition to showcasing her autonomy in her role as a character in the plot, Lizzie is also given autonomy in her own narrative. Lizzie's character takes part in telling her own reality in a reliable way. In the rape scene, the black screen depicts to the audience what Lizzie is experiencing in the moment she is getting raped. In this case the subject is not her body, but the trauma of the event. This scene can be compared to the rape scene in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, whereby the rape victim was scarcely depicted as a victim.

However, even though Lizzie is sexually victimized, she is not shown as an agent of her sexuality, whereas Nell who does not play a big part in the plot is shown in a romanticized and mellowed sequence of shots, that she is confident in her sexuality and even makes advances on

Sergeant Fletcher. Lizzie's sexuality is on the other extreme of *Jedda*, where she is depicted as passive and disempowered in her sexuality. DeCarvalho argues that it is important to deploy agency of sexuality in the roles of Aboriginal women in Australian popular culture, and in the characters they play on television (2). Moreover, Robinson argues that Aboriginal women are depicted as either of the two extremes, the promiscuous primitive, or as the passive victim of sexual violence. Robinson notes that representations of Aboriginal women rarely show them as agents of their sexuality (2000). In case of Lizzie, she is the passive victim that does not exhibit desires for intimacy. Nevertheless, compared to *Jedda*, Lizzie is an elaborate character and plays a meaningful part in the film.

In comparison to *Jedda* and the female characters in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, these characters are part of the new wave of representation in films after *Mabo*. The films engage Aboriginal female narratives to portray a side of Aboriginality that was not prominent in colonialist cinema. Through these films the audience becomes aware of the adversities of Aboriginal women. However, the viewers also gain insight about their culture and social dynamics. Susan, Lizzie, and Maud each endure an extreme form of oppression that brutalises their lives and their families'. Lizzie and Maud face overt colonialist oppression, whereas Susan is a victim of systematic racism. However, the women in *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, *Jindabyne* and *Sweet Country* are also shown to exercise independence, freedom, and dominance, which shows historical accuracy about Aboriginal culture. In contrast to *Jedda*, and the female characters in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* who were misrepresented as being constantly oppressed and sidelined by their communities. Lastly, the films show the reality of the lives of Aboriginal women, where their suffering is no longer dismissed or seen as a source of entertainment. The

films produce a form of apology for the colonial past and raise awareness and knowledge about the present Aboriginal culture.

### 3. Inclusive Representation

The last two chapters have discussed the representation of Aboriginal women in the colonialist era and the modification in the general representation in films after *Mabo*. The representation of Aboriginal women has yet to be more inclusive of narratives other than the reoccurring narratives such as the ‘lost child’ (Collins 139) like in *Jedda* and *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, ‘victim of rape’ like in *Jindabyne*, or the typical victimized role prevalent in all of the female characters discussed so far. This chapter will discuss the inclusive representation of Aboriginal women in complex and enigmatic narratives produced in films that respond to the “racist regimes of representation” (Lloyd 2014, 1056), and the possibility these films provide for interpreting Aboriginal women through artistic expression instead of formulaic themes and narratives. Whereby it is hard to classify them under any specific representation. This type of representation does not differentiate between black and white, while still emphasizing Aboriginality as an identity marker. However, not as “limited and constrained by their race”, as Turner describes the typical representation of Aboriginal people in Australian cinema (Turner 136). In her examination of the Australian prison drama *Wentworth*, DeCarvalho argues that Aboriginal women’s Indigeneity is a crucial part of their character because it acknowledges their struggles with racism. Nevertheless, it should not be their only identity marker (DeCarvalho 2). For this chapter, *Night Cries-A Rural Tragedy* (1990), and *Samson and Delilah* (2009) are analyzed to demonstrate how this type of representation is prevalent in these films. The Aboriginal women in these films are depicted as complex, and their complexity hinders the act of stereotyping.

The remake of *Night Cries* by Tracey Moffat is a corrective adaptation of *Jedda*. However, Moffat abandons all efforts to stitch over the misrepresentation. *Night Cries* is abstract, therefore it is open to interpretation. Moffat was deliberate in this because it has become acknowledged that part of the problem of misrepresentation is trying to represent a minority in a uniform and in unvarying individual identities. In addition, Langton points to the fact that Aboriginal people are not better representatives of all Aboriginal people. "... This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated *Other*" (27). *Jedda* does not allow *Jedda* the opportunity to be perceived independently and is predominantly fixated on one stereotype: the primitive. Whereas *Night Cries* allows the audience to independently interpret the character of *Jedda*, allowing the art to be the representative, rather than the stereotypes of Aboriginal women.

*Night Cries* is an adaptation of *Jedda* which offers a more flexible representation of *Jedda*. There is not one characteristic prominent enough that the viewer can associate with *Jedda*. If any concrete association is created, it is that *Jedda* is ambitious and possibly feels confined. This is indicated in the scene where she is reading a travel brochure and her daydream is interrupted by the sound of the train (Gall 71). The sound of the train symbolizes *Jedda*'s desire to escape or travel to a different destination (Park 100). According to Lloyd, *Night Cries* allows *Jedda* the possibility to have ambition, as well as the possibility to travel. Whereas *Jedda*'s approach to this narrative was the "orientalist fantasy of abduction" (1056).

However, all other aspects of *Jedda* remain abstract and open to interpretation. *Night Cries* offers a multi-dimensional representation of *Jedda*, and does not centralize her Aboriginality, but more importantly represents her as a woman. Moreover, the film presents an abstract representation of a mother-daughter relationship. *Jedda* in this context is not confined to

her identity as just Aboriginal, but also as a daughter. She is seen lying and weeping like a baby beside her diseased mother. The use of the baby cries instead of her real cries rebuilds the emotional distance that Jedda and her mother experience in *Jedda*. Park interprets *Night Cries* as one of the films that had been produced by Moffat to project her experience as the child of a white mother, and the intersectionality of race in their relationship. Furthermore, Park notes that the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship is accentuated by the juxtaposing sentiments projected by Jedda. These sentiments mostly concern her mother, as Jedda is in a dilemma in her feelings towards her mother. This is achieved in the film with several techniques, one of them is by the movement of their bodies to each other (98). For example, Jedda's distant body from her dead mother's body as she cries beside her builds on the ambiguity because it is not clear what Jedda is mourning (101). The second example is when Jedda is causing symbolic pain to her mother with a whip, despite her love and care towards her mother. All these images give the freedom to Jedda to become ambiguous and complex. As a last observation, according to Lloyd and Gall, the seaweed wrapped around young Jedda, that eventually appears to be video tapes, is in itself an act of protest towards the restrictive representation of Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginals (1056,72). *Night cries* challenges these strict representations in *Jedda*, and allows for complexity, depth, and ambiguity.

Like *Night Cries*, *Samson and Delilah* is considered an art house film, that depicts the realism of Central Australia (Huijser 70, Collins 73). Huijser claims that even though *Samson and Delilah* is a story about two disadvantaged Aboriginal teenagers, it does not follow the conventional 'sorry themes' prevalent in contemporary Australian cinema, such as the 'noble savage' and 'lost child' (69). Rather the sense of identity that *Samson and Delilah* explore is elaborated through universally understood struggles, rather than struggles rooted in Aboriginal

history. This does not mean that the film is “out of step” with Aboriginal reality, but out of step with representations of Aboriginal people in film (69). *Samson and Delilah* diverts from the commercial conventions of films featuring Aboriginal people, making the film more aligned with contemporary perceptions of Aboriginal identity (70). Lastly, Huijser notes that the film shows images of “profound humanity, haunting beauty, humour, love, and thus potential hope” (71). Such images were lacking in the films discussed in the previous chapters.

Delilah is a deeply complex character. Delilah’s first “transgression” moment is when she cuts her hair as a response to her grandmother’s death. This is followed by the beating from the women in her community. However, these incidents strip Delilah from the strength and purpose she once had (Ryan-Fazilleau 5). Delilah gained her strength from her grandmother, whom she shared the hobby of painting with. With her grandmother dead, Delilah loses her sense of purpose. After this incident, Delilah spends a large portion of the film defeated and desolate. Nevertheless, *Samson and Delilah* deconstructs preconceived ideas about strength and weakness that are associated with the Aboriginal identity (Huijser 79). Unlike the films discussed in the first and second chapter, Delilah’s strength and weakness is not in connection to, or a result of, her being Aboriginal. However, the issue of exploitation of Aboriginal art is presented in the film. When Delilah discovers that her art is being appropriated by an art gallery, she falls into depression and falls victim to substance abuse.

Nonetheless, Delilah is mature and oriented in comparison to Samson. She is active and retains a structure around her daily routine by keeping herself busy with painting and caring for her grandmother (Ryan-Fazilleau 5). Furthermore, like Jedda in *Night Cries*, Delilah in *Samson And Delilah* takes on the role of a caretaker for an elder woman. The other similarity that Delilah shares with Jedda is that she too lives a mundane life, and clearly aspires to have a more creative



one, and in the process, she has conflicting feelings about her current life and the one she dreams of. Delilah, like Jedda, cares for her grandmother but she has ambition like Jedda to transform her life. This is mostly apparent in the scenes when Delilah is in the car listening to music. However, despite her silence and her monotonous life like Jedda, Delilah shows a shocking side to her personality. In the beginning of the film she is depicted as an innocent helpless girl. However, progressively we discover that Delilah carries resentment due to the injustices she faces by both her community and the white people in the urban town. Nevertheless, she remains the kind and caring girl she is first introduced as.

Lastly, Delilah is in some ways different from Jedda in *Night Cries*. For example, Jedda's end does not indicate that she will ever be able to get over her grief (Park 101). Whereas Delilah who faces the same fate as Jedda resumes her life and overcomes her tragedy. Secondly, by traveling to another city, Delilah accomplishes what Jedda in *Night Cries* could not have. Despite their similarities, Delilah's end signifies a more optimistic future, and presents the possibility that Delilah will achieve her creative goals. Nevertheless, both women are one step ahead of Jedda in *Jedda* (1955).

Delilah and Jedda are not easy characters to interpret. They have narratives that extend beyond generic representations that were typical in colonialist films and films after Mabo. They possess profound qualities and emotional capabilities; often contradicting ones, such as grief, resentment, malice, strength, weakness, ambition, and hopelessness. Jedda's representation is ambiguous because of the abstract nature of the film. Whereas Delilah constantly presents new possibilities with the changes in her personality and the different ways she reacts to tragic events. Because of their ambiguity, Jedda's and Delilah's representations are more sophisticated than Jedda in *Jedda* and more authentic than Maud, Lizzie, and Susan. Even though they do not fully

achieve their desired goals of transforming their lives, they were given the opportunity to go through the journey of discovering themselves and narrating through these films their complex identities. Lastly, Jedda and Delilah are victims, but not in the stigmatized way as Maud, Lizzie, and Susan. Rather, they are agents of the narrative. Furthermore, their tragedy is not directly linked to their Aboriginality as it is the same for all the other female characters discussed in this thesis. This type of representation is the most diverse and inclusive despite its emergence in the period with the films after *Mabo*.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the representation of Aboriginal women has gone through a drastic change from the colonialist 20<sup>th</sup> century cinema to the present day. The colonialist era oppressed Aboriginal women in Australian cinema as it did in reality. Aboriginal women were confined to racist representations such as the 'promiscuous primitive'. However, in the films after *Mabo* there was an improvement in the quantity and quality of Aboriginal women's representation. This wave of films mainly focused on a type of representation that was apologetic. Therefore, despite its more progressive approach than the previous period, these films were not inclusive of narratives that involved complex Aboriginal female characters. In the films after *Mabo*, Aboriginal women's representation was mostly limited to the way they are viewed by their representors (the filmmakers), and this view is heavily linked to their oppressed state, and Aboriginal identity and history. Moreover, it raises the issue of over generalizing Aboriginal women, and not allowing for diversity and individuality. The most inclusive type of representation that this thesis discussed is the one where the female characters' identities are not solely dependent on their Aboriginality. The films chosen for this thesis follows the journey of Aboriginal women from being marginalized to becoming powerful and creative women. Each female character has a

varying possible discourse and finality. Lastly, it is imperative for representatives and consumers alike to consider the complexity of Aboriginal women as any other human with a set of values, societal importance, ambitions, sexual desires, and people of reflections and ambiguity.

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