The Sapphires (2012) and *One Night the Moon* (2001): Song, History and Australian Aboriginality

By Victoria Herche, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract:
The two Australian Indigenous film musicals, The Sapphires (Wayne Blair, 2012) and One Night the Moon (Rachel Perkins, 2001) concern themselves with the representation of Aboriginality and by using song, dance and music, address the painful aftermath of the Stolen Generations, colonial displacement and racism. Showing the genre's typical testing of bonds of friendship and making use of the romantic subplot, The Sapphires brings the audience back to the utopian core at the heart of the genre. The historical lost child drama One Night the Moon, on the other hand, conceals the reconciling harmonies in the disharmonies of the music, the sadness in the lyrics and the polyphonous form and thus creates an awareness of the 'unfinished business' between Indigenous and white Australia. It is the female presence in both films that conveys the reconciling power; the women's struggle towards cross-cultural understanding has introduced optimistic tones in the self-confidence of Australian Indigenous filmmaking.

1 The film musical is predominantly perceived as an art form of pure entertainment, where everyone "may burst into magnificent, breathtaking song and dance in order to give unhindered expression to their emotions" (Grant 2). Musical entertainment hence seems to "effectively den[y] the legitimacy of other needs and inadequacies, and especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles" (Dyer 184). However, two Australian musical productions by Indigenous filmmakers have successfully shown that the genre can productively discuss urgent social issues of racial and gender politics and the question of reconciliation. Through the use of song, dance and music these productions address the painful aftermath of the Stolen Generations, colonial displacement and racism.[1] Both films advertise with the truthfulness of their stories and refer to real people and events (*One Night the Moon* set in the 1930s, *The Sapphires* in the 1960s). The films, despite their distinctive historical narratives, heighten the addressed problems by appealing to the universality of emotions and histories of oppression for instance through references to race issues in the USA. The commercially successful musical comedy *The Sapphires* (Wayne Blair, 2012) more closely follows the genre's conventions than the musical drama *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001). However, both films follow a heroine's musical journey towards reconciliation, in *The*

[1] The forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families was official government policy from 1909 to 1969. It is estimated that 100,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families and raised in homes or adopted by white families, up until the 1960s. The policy was designed to 'assimilate' or 'breed out' Indigenous people. These children became known as the 'Stolen Generations' (cf. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission fifth report 1997).

Sapphires through the search for her Indigenous roots and identity and the struggle for (sexual) liberation, in *One Night the Moon* through her role as non-indigenous cultural mediator.

2 In the essay "Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation," Marcia Langton credited the legacy of Australian film with a "dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people" (Langton 2005). In an assessment of estimated 6000 fiction and non-fiction films in the history of Australian cinema that have in some way addressed Aboriginality, Langton sees neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous filmmakers challenging colonialist representation because they are trapped in "the power of the visual realm to conceal social and political conditions" (ibid.). In the growing ambition to appeal to mainstream movie-going Australia and to provide narratives about Aboriginal people which are popular and commercially successful, many film-makers favour narrative themes which have proved popular in the past, but also popular genres such as melodrama, comedy and musical. If producers stick to the conventional styles and constructions of melodrama, documentary and popular genre, they are, according to Langton, bound to reproduce conventional racism and sexism. By contrast, Rose Capp argues that in the recent decade, a number of fiction films by Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers have "redressed that representational imbalance in some small measure and in the process, produced some of the most commercially and critically successful Australian films in recent decades" ("Seriously Funny: History and Humour in *The Sapphires* and Other Indigenous Comedies").

3 In 2001, *One Night the Moon* reached a mainstream Australian and international audience, winning several local and international awards (including two Australian Film Institute (AFI) Awards). The musical comedy *The Sapphires* has achieved a great box office success after its premiering in an out-of-competition screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012. It was picked up for American release and subsequently acquired for release all over the world. In its first two weeks it grossed around six million dollars (cf. Karena 84). Both films are written and directed by Indigenous filmmakers, dealing with Indigenous life under the impact of white settlement and racism.

4 Indigenous filmmakers have demonstrated that the issues debated in representations of Indigenous life can especially be deployed to express a range of universal modern human experiences, from psychological trauma (e.g. *Night Cries*, 1990) to the specific realities of social deprivation (e.g. *Samson and Delilah*, 2009). *The Sapphires* and *One Night the Moon* focus on the extraordinary achievements of Indigenous girls in the 1960s and the sufferings

of a white mother in the 1930s. Through humour, emotional appeal, and especially music, it is precisely the musical genre that has led to the universal success of these exceptional Indigenous films, and at the same time, enabled a different approach towards Australian particularities and reconciliation.

5 The adaptation of Tony Brigg's 2004 stage musical *The Sapphires* was inspired by the experiences of Brigg's mother as a member of the Aboriginal girl band that performed for US troops in Vietnam during the late 1960s.[2] In Blair's film adaptation, the three young Aboriginal sisters Gail, Cynthia and Julie, plus their cousin Kay, are spotted in a rural talent show by the scruffy Irish wannabe manager Dave Lovelace. He persuades the girls to switch from their preferred country-and-western repertoire to soul, as he believes it is the more appropriate music genre for black singers ("Can you make it sound blacker?" 28:57) With their new look, dance moves and sound, and renamed from the Cummeraganja Songbirds to The Sapphires, the girls go on to win a competition to entertain American forces fighting in Vietnam. The trip to the battlefront in Saigon proves to be a formative experience as the film's taglines indicate: 'It's what's in the groove that counts.' 'Follow your heart. Discover your soul' (imdb). Through the use of flashbacks we find out more about the girls' past and the daily racism they are confronted with. Yet, despite the historically relevant themes addressed – Stolen Generations and disrupted families; racism, prejudice and hostility; the Vietnam War – the film's mood is celebratory and cheerful as its protagonists "approach obstacles with good-humoured determination (Yatman 9)." *The Sapphires* is a "feel-good movie about bad things" (ibid.).

6 The film musical as a distinct genre refers to films that involve the performance of song and/or dance as an important narrative element (Grant 1). In the combination of popular music and cinema, both providing familiar stories about the relationship between our social and private life, the musical genre serves the ideological function to cast social debates into narratives making sense of the "large, abstract social forces that effect our lives" (4). Grant argues that most of the genre movies address the wider social context through the theme of community. Lead performers singing in the company of others; supporting players or a larger chorus joining as a diegetic audience in the dance and musical numbers, express a sense of communal solidarity, which then represents an "idealized folk culture" or tends towards "a vision of social integration" (44). Thus, a sense of social utopia is fulfilled: "[C]haracters are able to satisfy their desire or at least to feel better by dancing and singing. […] And when

[2] The story is set in 1968, a year after the 1967 Federal referendum that belatedly delivered Australia's Indigenous population the right to vote.

others join in, it is as if the entire world has become attuned to their *feeling*" (46, emphasis added). The performance embodies the *emotion* that a utopian depiction of community would create. Musicals, therefore, do not, present concrete models of unknown utopian worlds, but rather contain the utopian dreams in the feeling they embody, in an everyday, well-known setting (Dyer 177). The reconciling individual and group values thereby appeal to us "as cultural ritual, replaying the same narratives with slight variations time and again, and offering us comfortable narrative resolutions for irresolvable questions" (41).[3] In restoring this harmonious vision of society, the role of gender construction is essential to the ideological work of musicals, reinforcing heterosexual, monogamous couples and marriage as the status quo (43).

7 The categorisation of a film as 'Australian' raises issues of images and sounds that, according to cultural perception stand *for* Australia. Rebecca Coyle, in her anthology of Australian Feature Film Music, studies the relationship between music and Australian film and argues for the significant relationship of film to national identities, and therefore of film music to national identities (2). If one assumes that particular locations are charged with particular stories and hence certain musical acts and narrative rhythms only make sense in these locations, then Coyle clearly marks the absence of a special Australian 'flavour' in Australian music and film music. "Outside of Australia's indigenous artists there really has never been a homegrown sound, a musical groundswell that is distinctively Australian, easily recognised the world over. […] our popular music has been massively derived from the American and British artists we have been listening to and looking at" (Gudinski cited in Coyle 12). The musical numbers in *The Sapphires* are, indeed, relying on established soul classics rather than original (Australian) compositions. The group performs upbeat jukebox renditions like 'I'll Take You There', 'Land of One Thousand Dances', 'I Heard it Through the Grapevine', 'People Make the World a Better Place' and 'I Can't Help Myself (Sugar Pie Honey Bunch)', a Motown mix of "good-natured, life-affirming songs about love and independence" (Yatman 13). Coyle, however, also argues that certain connotations within the lyrics of film music will be particularly accessible to Australia-raised viewers, even though the musical texts do not originate in Australia (12). So despite the US-origin of those 'black'

[3] There are, of course, examples of Hollywood musicals that do not end happily and do not resolve in a harmonious solution of all imposed problems, examples including *Les Miserables*, *West Side Story* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Grant and Dyer, however, clearly argue that the majority of film musicals embody the optimistic spirit

soul pieces, it is their message of loss, relentless struggle for justice and independence that these girls appropriate for their own background as the Stolen Generations.[4]

8 Tony Brigg's approach to issues such as racism, oppression, voting rights and the Stolen Generations is deliberately light in tone: "I always wanted politics in there, but never on a soapbox about our plight. Ultimately this is about enjoying your life, especially your youth. But you can't tell a story about blackfellas in that time and ignore politics. […] I don't want to belittle our past and our people" (Briggs cited in Karena 86).

9 Briggs and director Blair manage to tell a universally accessible story with an Indigenous focus. When the young women go to Vietnam in 1968 – a time when young people all over the world started rebelling against the conservatism and racism of society – the battles for Indigenous rights and battles for black America's civil rights are paralleled. As Kay and Cynthia embark on affairs with the African American soldier Robbie and the band's drummer, the girls learn to identify with the struggles of African Americans. Hence the film explores the common ground of various minorities and further implies the shared dream for independence and equal rights. This culminates in the scene when the Sapphires sing for the American troops on the day of Martin Luther King's murder.

10 In a very brief but effective match cut, the correlation between the circumstances of the forcible removal of children in Australia and the violent wartime events in Vietnam is emphasized. In one of the flashbacks to 1958 the girls run away from the authorities who have come to pick up Kay, one of the so-called 'half-caste' children, to be fostered, adopted or put into an institution or mission dormitory. At one point we see children's feet jumping over a barbed wire fence, a hopeless last attempt to escape from their fate (61:22). In a similar shot, the grown-up women run away and jump over sandbags to escape the rifle shots, when a bombardment strikes during the climactic high-stakes concert in front of the troops in Vietnam, (78:44). The similarity of the two scenes – probably the most horrifying and threatening events in the women's lives – parallels the devastating and traumatic legacy of the policies of the Stolen Generations in Australia and the gruesome effects of the Vietnam War.

11 In contrast to the depiction of the shared fate of ethnic minorities such as Indigenous Australians or African Americans, the film strangely ignores the plight of the local Vietnamese. Apart from one minor appearance of a Vietnamese hotel boy and a grim-looking

[4] Dave favours soul over country for the following reason: "Country and western music is about loss. Soul music is about loss, too. But in country and western music, they've lost and they've given up and they're just whining about it. In soul music, they're struggling to get it back and they haven't given up" (32:00)

group of Vietcong by the wayside, there are no other Vietnamese characters involved in the narrative. A subplot, originally included in the stage-version, about a Vietnamese boy searching for his family, has been removed (cf. Yatman 12). Nor is there any mentioning of Australian military presence in Vietnam. The emphasis falls on the link between the black experience of oppression and segregation in the United States and Australia and, by highlighting the musical convention of romance, on the difficulties arising from a mixed-race relationship.

12 The importance of romance in film musicals inevitably raises further questions about the genre's representation of gender and sexuality. Barry Grant argues that the film musical's highest concern, the maintenance of the social order within a community, is mainly regulated by defining the parameters of sexual desire and hence the regulation of sexuality (46). Typically, the romantic plot in a film musical involves a "developing attraction between the protagonists that is […] eventually resolved with the couple getting together in marriage or its promise" (ibid.). *The Sapphires* conservatism and genre-conformity in terms of Gail and Dave's romance has been widely criticised, for instance by Ross Miller: "[W]hile you might hope that it would avoid the type of clichéd romance trappings often associated with this type of film it ultimately can't help itself, piling on romantic subplots that just feel forced and unneeded" ("The Sapphires Movie Review").

13 Characteristically in musicals, the narrative conflict is resolved when the couple reconciles after a series of delays and obstacles, and reunites through the mediating power of a dance or musical performance. "Before we know it, the leading players are smoothly in step" (Grant 47). Wayne Blair's musical uses this musical convention precisely whenever the story starts to unfold the girl's sorrowful past and hence uses a group dance, song performance, or a humorous remark by Dave, to return to the upbeat nature of the film. This happens most disruptively in the scene when Gail, in flashbacks and supported by dramatic instrumental music, tells Dave the events of her cousin Kay's removal by the government authorities from their community in 1958. She further explains that Kay was then raised by a white foster family and after years of distance has denied her Aboriginal heritage, expressed in Kay's harsh remark towards their grandmother and Gail: "If you people worked as hard as you fished, you'd be really rich, you know" (62:51). This flashback gives an insight into the disrupted relationship between Kay and her Aboriginal family and comments on the remaining gap between Gail and Kay ("I've never been able to forgive her, or myself" 62:52). Dave's only and sudden reply, clearly in an awkward attempt to cheer Gail (and the audience) up, is "We should dance!" (62:59). After a comical discussion about Dave's dance

skills and whether or not Gail's belief that white men cannot dance is “racist”, they eventually do end up dancing in close embrace and there is no further mentioning of the past events. The scene thus combines a self-conscious reference on the genre’s romance conventions and the dance as expression of a sense of solidarity. The film refuses to further debate the political and historical situation of the protagonists and thereby avoids the victimisation of the Aboriginal young women. According to the playwright’s intention, their Aboriginal past is neither ignored nor “belittled”, although this treatment eludes the complexity of the protagonist’s unpleasant experiences.

14 Moreover, in film musicals, dance scenes are used to unfold the metaphorical connection between dance and sex.

> When a couple dance well, often ‘spontaneously’ […] their bodies move in graceful harmony, their synchronization a sign of their spiritual and physical union. This state is, of course, also the ideal experience not only of being in love but of making love, and so this metaphorical meaning of dance has been common in popular culture since the 1920s. (Grant 47)

Cynthia is surely presented as the most sensual and sexually liberated member of the group. As her confidence grows during her time in Vietnam, she closely interacts with the soldiers during performance and backstage. She develops her sexy dance moves and refuses to listen to Gail’s warnings concerning men. Set in 1968, the film makes recourse to the sexual revolution of the time that unleashed the fight against gender discrimination and heteronormativity. Cynthia’s behaviour promotes a sexual liberation and acceptance of sex outside of traditional heterosexual, monogamous relationships. Her behaviour, however, is presented as a ‘phase’, a delightful excursion into independence and sensuality (“Hey sis, if you want something, you gotta go get it” 46:11) without having a long-lasting effect after their return to their home mission in Australia. Both Kay and Cynthia have affairs with men during their time in Vietnam, but according to the genre’s romance convention, only those couples who are promised to get married, end up happily. Gail and Dave’s mixed-race relationship seems the most unconventional at first, but their engagement is the most foreseeable in the course of the genre-compliant narrative. Gail is dismissive of Cynthia’s passion for men. When Cynthia engages too candidly with the soldiers during a gig, she is even unanimously suspended from the group. Therefore, the band only then unites in the utopian mode of a harmonious, ideal community when all members behave appropriately and within the assigned gender roles. It seems inevitable that all girls opt for marriage as soon as they return to Australia. Even Cynthia, although being left at the altar before the trip to Vietnam, returns with the promise to give her ex-fiancé Jimmy a second chance, who is

already waiting for her remorsefully. The free-spirited younger members of the group experience the time of their lives, yet without any consequences for their gender roles. However, the girls do not seem to be upset or to be the victim of this regression. In keeping with the constraints and conventions of the musical genre, the positive final song of the film emphasizes the importance of bonding and family reunification.

15 The Sapphire's musical numbers, along with the rehearsal scenes, present the message of group unity. In each song they join together in harmonious and mostly cheerful melodies, which contrast their familial disharmony. The three sisters have not seen their paler-skinned cousin Kay in ten years as she grew up in the city with a white foster family. It is Kay's journey from denial of her roots to identifying with her Aboriginal identity that provides the most powerful scenes of the film. In one of the last scenes of the film, Kay reunites with her Indigenous grandmother and celebrates a tribal ceremony to become reincorporated with the land and spirits of her ancestors.[5] In the background, the song 'Ngarra Burra Ferra', which the young girls had performed in 1958 before Kay's disappearance, is played. This reconciling scene appeals emotionally, through the use of a children's song and the grandmother's words, to an international audience, although spoken and sung in an Indigenous language. Across the boundaries of a specific Indigenous Australian context, the process of Kay's musical and personal coming of age and search for identity adds depth to the predominantly comic narrative.

16 Nonetheless, *The Sapphires* has been extensively criticized for its perfunctory attempts to deal with delicate and complex racial and political issues. At the end, all conflicts and open questions are alleviated through the power of song, which hardly does justice to the hardship of Aboriginal Australian life in the times of the Stolen Generations. For Dyer, this is precisely the ideological function of musical entertainment, the escapist capacity to present complex and unpleasant feelings in a way that makes them seem "uncomplicated, direct and vivid, not 'qualified' or 'ambiguous' as day-to-day life makes them" (Dyer 182). Seemingly uncritical of the film musical's escapist conventions, the film's mix of comedy and social commentary has in its recall value led to the accessibility and international success of the film. However, at times *The Sapphires* contrasts the escapist take on issues of racism with the subsequent, genuinely shocking depiction of racism, such as when a dying white US soldier refuses treatment by the African American soldier Robbie.

[5] In subtitles we get to know the grandmother's words during the ceremony: "With your country/I cleanse you/ and return you home/ and make you one/ with your land once more./ No one can ever remove your spirit from here again/ This is where you belong/ This is where you will always return/ Where your spirits will remain" (86:40-87:39)

17 *The Sapphires'* ambiguous approach on racism expands on the genre's constraints, also by the use of subversive Aboriginal humour. The way in which Aboriginal humour works cross-racially is what makes *The Sapphires* a genuinely entertaining work. Anne Brewster, in her article on the impact of humour in the work of Nyungar writer Alf Taylor, argues that in literature, humour has been a highly effective strategy by which Aboriginal authors and performers have intervened in white public spheres (235). Especially in the use of gallows humour, "Aboriginal humour challenges the distance established by racialized stereotyping and the authority that this distance shores up" (250). This subversive use of stereotypes also can be found in *The Sapphires*. When Gail and Cynthia try to hitchhike to the talent show and Cynthia wonders why a car passes them without stopping Gail replies, "It's because we are black, stupid." Cynthia then remarks: "No, it's cause you're ugly" (07:05). These comic moments enable the director to address issues of racism that otherwise are difficult to be raised overtly, because "in circumstances where a direct critique of coloniality might be rebuffed, humour can be efficacious in gaining a white public's attention" (243). Gallows humour, according to Brewster, skates for a white audience along the borderline of pleasure and discomfort, as they may consciously notice the foregrounding of white people's investment and stake in the stereotyping of Aboriginal people (243/250). Also in filmic representations, Rose Capp notices a small but significant number of filmic works that have harnessed comic conventions to engage in a substantive way with the events and consequences of Australia's past. She is hereby referring to Richard Frankland and his explanation for directing the "first Aboriginal comedy ever in Australia", *Stone Bros.* (2009), and his belief in the crucial role humour can play in this cultural context: "I think that reconciliation is a great way to laugh, and laughing is a great way to reconciliate. This film is about saying to the world, 'Ok, so you've seen and heard sad stories, and it's important to keep telling those stories, but Aboriginal people laugh too. And it's ok for you guys to laugh with us'" (Frankland in Wotzke). Capp acclaims *The Sapphires* as a "surprisingly sharp-edged contribution to the Indigenous comedy genre" ("Seriously Funny").

18 Blair's use of archival black-and-white footage as historical reference, effectively intercut with the storyline, gives the impression that *The Sapphires* deliberately refers to the past and true events. This is also emphasized by the incorporation of photographs of the real Sapphires, Lois Peeler, Naomi Mayers, Laurel Robinson and Beverley Briggs. Since the early 2000, many films based on historical events have aroused debates about national identity, the status of Aboriginal people, and the continuing effects of European settlement through child

removal and frontier violence.[6] The filmic versions of the past serve as springboard for present political struggles between Aboriginal and white Australians. Lydon claims that the visual discourse constituted by film is an immediate, emotionally compelling and accessible way to understand the past (137f). This may, however, also enforce distancing strategies because the violence portrayed in these historical films stand for the injustices of the colonial past, and can ultimately, release the modern Australian viewer from responsibility to acknowledge the larger and continuing effects of colonization (cf. Lydon 141).

19 Rachel Perkins' film musical *One Night the Moon* (2001) also deals with a 'true story' of the Australian past. It is based on the life of the Aboriginal tracker Riley who had received considerable recognition for his contribution to the New South Wales Police Force during the 1930s. The film deals with the events of an incident in 1932, the true story of a young white girl who went missing in the Australian outback. The parents turn to the local police for assistance with the search, yet the father Jim rejects the help of Aboriginal tracker and police officer Albert because he insists on having "no blacks on my land" (12:45). Much later, the mother finally overrides the husband's commands and allows Albert to lead her to her daughter, who by this time has perished. The father, unmasked as the stubborn white settler, walks off and takes his own life. In the last scene we see the daughter's funeral, conducted by her mother with the help of Aboriginal women.

20 The duration of the film is a brief 57 minutes of which the musical elements make up a significant proportion. Director Perkins herself has asserted that the film operates in a space between the genre of Hollywood film musicals and contemporary music video clips (cf. Millard).[7] The film relies strongly, in accordance with Hollywood film musicals, on lyrics and musical numbers to produce its narrative and all characters also engage in musical soliloquies. Unlike other film musical's overly-glamorous, colourful and bright general tone (e.g. *The Sapphires*), *One Night the Moon* emphasizes a very bleak, melancholic atmosphere. Through the process of bleach-bypassing, pink tones have been drained out in postproduction to create a visually gloomy and rugged mood that supports the dark content matter. Time-lapse photography, close ups and lingering landscape shots also add to the stylised cinematography. The visuals, together with the inclusion of musical numbers (but no dance),

[6] Examples include *Rabbit-Proof-Fence* (Noyce, 2002), *The Tracker* (de Heer, 2002), *Black and White* (Lahiff, 2002), and *Australia* (Luhrmann, 2008)

[7] For Sue Gillet it is precisely this tension between the historical subject matter and the contemporary music video style that is fruitful, for "it retrieves history from the completed past and immerses it in the contemporary and ongoing movement for reconciliation" (86)

create a surreal effect, an in-between twilight zone or metaphorical landscape, a melancholic setting to represent the mother's point of view and inner state (Perkins in Millard).

21 Also unlike the genre's conventions, the sense of communal unity is challenged. In *One Night the Moon*, the musical pieces do not relieve the spectator with harmonious, happy moments. The disharmonies in the music, the sadness in the lyrics and the polyphonous form rather create an awareness of the 'unfinished business' between Indigenous and white Australia and signal "the effectiveness of harmonies which both acknowledge and celebrate differences of viewpoint, producing what might be called *reconciling harmonies* that rely on a sympathetic discordance of voices and sound" (Probyn; "'This Land Is Mine/This Land Is Me': Reconciling Harmonies in *One Night the Moon*"; emphasis added).

22 The narrative is situated within debates about land and belonging, the trope of the lost child, gender relations and the relations between settlers and Indigenous people. The father's character is portrayed as an angry racist who has nothing but hostility towards the Aboriginal population. His rejection of the black tracker is underscored by the general settler's fear that Aboriginal people's knowledge of the land casts doubt over his rightful ownership of it (cf. Probyn). The unease of displacement of the 'unsettled settler' is in particular visualized in the figure of the black tracker, "as a haunting figure of colonial history (in the settler's mind), and as a challenging figure of 'true belonging' who looms over the settler's derangement" (ibid.). The paradox of the settler's anxiety is verbalized by the white police officer who cannot understand the father's refusal to make use of Albert's expertise: "This is Albert's country, he knows this land" (12:39). This remark exactly confirms what it is that unsettles the settler in the first place: Albert's expertise is denied *because* it is 'his land'. The father therefore simultaneously knows and refuses the knowledge of the Indigenous relationship to the land. What follows is the song 'This land is mine/The land is me', a disharmonious duet that juxtaposes the settler's and the Indigenous people's attitudes to land ownership. Their discordant beliefs are expressed both lyrically, and musically. The instrumentation of the song highlights the racial and cultural differences between father and tracker. Strings and flutes are employed alongside the father's vocals, the didgeridoo is used to introduce Albert's vocal signifying the spiritual presence of an 'other' turning into "a sonic metaphor for Aboriginality as a whole" (Winchester 182).[8]

[8] Winchester further explains that despite the fact that the didgeridoo was traditionally used only in a relatively small area of northern Australia it has become the dominant symbol of Aboriginality and it is associated with representations of Aboriginality in general (182)

23 The music in *One Night the Moon* emphasizes difference in culture and perspective by drawing on instruments as cultural signifiers. Winchester believes that this use of cultural stereotypes caters specifically to a white audience, and that this is why "however stylistically imaginative, the film has not attempted to 'push the boundaries' of the representation of cultural identity" (185f). Thus the tracker Albert can be read as a stereotypical representation of the noble native (Palmer and Gillard 132). Rekhari stresses the underlying link that exists between racist and romantic representations of Aboriginality. Filmic Aboriginal representation "often reinforce romanticised, if not racist, clichés of Aboriginal identity" (7). Hence, the representation of the hostile and sad settler father on the one hand, and the heroic wise black tracker on the other hand, hover between the critical redefinition of the settler's failed beliefs and the reinforcing of well-known cultural stereotypes.

24 The film conveys the possibility of reconciliation once the mother Rose and Albert's wife approach one another. Initially, the mother accepts the racist position of her husband and responds towards the Aboriginal people with hostility. In the prologue of the film, while passing the tracker and his family, the mother turns her daughter's head away to stop her from smiling and waving at the Indigenous family. In the course of the events and her growing despair about the daughter's disappearance, she becomes of increasing importance and potency for the film, as she slowly overcomes her prejudices. Again, shown through musical disharmonies, one of her first encounters with Albert is accompanied by jarring dissonant string tones (20:30) reflecting her inner state of fear and revulsion. Once she collaborates with the black tracker to locate her daughter after the failure of her husband's search, the sounds between them are more harmonious. In the duet 'Unfinished business' they each sing a verse separately and then, while tracking the daughter, reunite in the chorus and sing in unison. The lyrics "represent the unfinished business of locating her daughter's body, the unfinished business of apologies over the exclusion of the black tracker from the search and the 'unfinished business' which the Reconciliation movement continues to draw attention to" (Probyn).

25 It is the role of the white mother to articulate the personal and domestic fear caused by the loss of the child. Perkins, as director, shifted the script's original focus from that of the historical figure tracker Riley to the mother's journey and the loss of a child (cf. Millard). For much of the film, we see the mother sitting on the veranda of the homestead, wrapped in a shawl, many close ups returning to her grieving face while looking out and awaiting news. Probyn emphasizes the importance of the veranda-bound position of the mother; "it is an ambiguous space neither wholly in nor out of the domestic scene which enables her to

imaginatively wander and stare across the land in search of her daughter while being enclosed and protected by the homestead" ("'This Land Is Mine/This Land Is Me'"). Moreover, the woman's liminal position on the veranda also signals the cultural position of cultural mediator. In her equivocal position as the settler woman she makes use of the limited power she has in overcoming the comfortable safety zone of her homestead, goes to the tracker's house and approaches the Indigenous people.

26 It is through the song of another female character that the film presents a case of appropriation of culture and how it connects the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community. In the last scene of the film, Albert's wife sings a Christian hymn at the funeral of the little daughter Emily. This implies the influence of Christian missionaries on Aboriginal beliefs, yet the wife's intense and unusual performance gives also the impression of a revitalisation of the song through its adoption into Aboriginal culture (cf. Winchester 187). The Indigenous women's song consoles the mother as she can understand and relate to the lyrics. Regardless of the words, the women's unique performance conveys grief and sadness which appeals to emotions shared in any culture. Hence, the means to present the receptive and interactive way of sharing cultures is through song.

27 At the end of *One Night the Moon*, the mother sits all alone by the grave, in silence. The musical genre's classic elements of dance, romance and sense of community all remain unfulfilled. The melancholic atmosphere and sad outcome of the story evolve from the role of the mother. In the attempt to rescue her child, the mother takes the courage to approach the Indigenous community for help who in the end mourn the white child just as much. "Perkins at once heightens and represses the power of race symbolism by entwining universal human emotions of distress and concern through the variety of characters, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal" (Langton 2006 63). According to Dyer, one of the major purposes of musicals is the presentation of alternatives, hopes, wishes of 'something better' (177). *One Night the Moon* fulfils and at the same time challenges this convention as it results in the possibility of an utopian reconciled community between the settler woman and the Indigenous family, but on the other hand ends with the image of the lonely mother. The despair of mother and father and the pain of the tracker evoke emotions in greater depth and harshness than *The Sapphires*, as the film addresses the universal 'unfinished business' between black and white, and the remaining issues of racism.

28 These two very different examples of Australian film musicals have shown how to expand the generic frame of the musical and to use the possibilities of the film's power of evoking emotional reactions. Through the focus on female characters as cross-cultural

mediators, we see the difficult birth of new heroines like the Sapphires girls or the white settler woman, which leads to a shift in how Australians perceive Aboriginality (cf. Lydon 148). These films were internationally successful in appropriating historical stories which, albeit set in the past, do not close it off but rather link it to the present by appealing to emotions, shared also by a white audience. *The Sapphires* avoids the victimisation of the female protagonists in their search for identity, by using Aboriginal humour and the notion of romance, but confined in the inherited narratives and common Hollywood genre conventions, the gender roles are hardly challenged. Despite the tendency to replicate cultural stereotypes, in *One Night the Moon* the remaining disharmonies in the music are a strong expression of the continuing political struggles between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. But the musical's culture of optimism has rewardingly introduced new reconciling tones in the self-confidence of Australian Indigenous filmmaking.

Works Cited

The Sapphires. Dir. Wayne Blair. Goalpost Pictures, 2012.

One Night the Moon. Dir. Rachel Perkins. Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2001.

Brewster, Anne. "Gallows Humour and Stereotyping in the Nyungar Writer. Alf Taylor's Short Fiction: A White Cross-Racial Reading." *Decolonizing the Landscape. Indigenous Cultures in Australia*. Eds. Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2014. 232-253.

Capp, Rose. "Seriously Funny: History and Humour in The Sapphires and Other Indigenous Comedies." *Senses of Cinema* 63 (2012). Retrieved 13th November 2013. http://sensesofcinema.com/2012/63/seriously-funny-history-and-humour-in-the-sapphires-and-other-indigenous-comedies/#7.

Coyle, Rebecca, ed. *Reel Tracks. Australian Feature Film Music and Cultural Identities*. Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2005.

Dyer, Richard. "Entertainment and Utopia." *Genre: The Musical*. Ed. Rick Altman. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. 175-189.

Gillet, Sue. "Through Song to Belonging: Music Finds its Place in Rachel Perkins' Radiance and One Night the Moon." *Metro Magazine* 159 (2008): 86-92.

Grant, Barry Keith. *The Hollywood Film Musical*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

IMDb. "The Sapphires." *The Internet Movie Database*. Retrieved 12th December 2013. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1673697/.

Karena, Cynthia. “Screening The Sapphires: An Interview with Wayne Blair and Tony Briggs.” *Metro: Media & Education Quaterly* 173 (2012): 83-86.

Langton, Marcia. “Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation.” *Rouge 6* (2005). Retrieved 13th November 2013. http://www.rouge.com.au/6/aboriginal.html
_____. “Out from the Shadows.” *Meanjin* 65.1 (2006): 55-64.

Lydon, Jane. “A Strange Time Machine: The Tracker, Black and White, and Rabbit-Proof Fence.” *Australian Historical Studies* 35.123 (2004): 137-148.

Millard, Kathryn. “One Night the Moon: Interview with Rachel Perkins.” *Senses of Cinema* 17 (2001). Retrieved 13th November 2013. http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/17/moon_interview_perkins/.

Miller, Ross. “The Sapphires Movie Review.” *Thoughts on Film* 30 October 2012. Retrieved 13th November 2013. http://thoughtsonfilm.co.uk/movie-reviews/the-sapphires-movie-review/.

Palmer, David and Garry Gillard. “Aborigines, Ambivalence and Australian Film.” *Metro Film Journal* 134 (2002): 128-135.

Probyn, Fiona. “‘This Land Is Mine/This Land Is Me’: Reconciling Harmonies in One Night the Moon.” *Senses of Cinema* 19 (2002). Retrieved 13th November 2013. http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/19/this_land/.

Rekhari, Suneeti. “Myths and Absent Signifiers in Representations of Aboriginal Identity in Australian Cinema.” *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* 10 4 (2007): 3-13.

Winchester, Kate. “Moon Music: Musical Meanings in One Night the Moon.” *Reel Tracks. Australian Feature Film Music and Cultural Identities*. Ed. Rebecca Coyle. Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2005. 177-188.

Wotzke, Anders. “Aboriginal People Laugh Too. Interview: Stone Bros. Director Richard Frankland”, *Moviedex* 27 September 2009. Retrieved 13th November 2013. http://moviedex.com/interviews/interview-richard-frankland-director-of-stone-bros/.

Yatman, Brian. “Dulcet Delta Blues: The Sweet Soul of The Sapphires.” *Metro: Media & Education Quaterly* 174 (2012): 8-13.