

Gender and *Radiance*

Described by director, Rachel Perkins, as 'the first Aboriginal film to have jokes in it'¹ *Radiance*² was released in both mainstream and art-house cinemas across Australia. Audiences at the 1998 Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra film festivals voted the film the most popular that year. In addition to drawing critical acclaim at Cannes and other international film festivals,³ *Radiance* received six Australian Film Institute (AFI) nominations including for best actress (won by Deborah Mailman for her role as Nona), best director and best film.

Radiance tells the story of Mae, Cressy and Nona, who have come together at the family home for the first time in many years. Gathered to bury their mother, the sisters explore their memories and relationships with each other, including a secret that will change these forever.

Mae (played by Trisha Morton-Thomas), emotionally and sexually repressed, has remained at home to take care of her mother in her old age. Her somewhat bitter sense of humour and general prudishness masks her loneliness, anger and sense of displacement. Aware that the house, rather than being 'theirs'⁴ as Nona (played by Deborah Mailman) believes, is about to be repossessed by Harry Wells, their mother's former lover, Mae fantasises about burning it down before Harry evicts them. When her more mobile sisters Cressy (played by Rachel Maza) and Nona return to bury their mother, the house acts as a 'setting for, and the substance of, domestic theatre'⁵ and the sister's storytelling. Cressy embraces Mae's 'crazy' plan to burn the house down because she, like Mae, has deeply negative associations with it. In contrast, Nona, romantic and gregarious, is pregnant and plans to have her baby in this, her beloved childhood home.

Nona is determined to scatter their mother's ashes on her ancestral 'home,' the nearby island, now a Japanese tourist resort. Nona seeks to bring her sisters with her, but it becomes ultimately her personal journey when Cressy reveals that she, and not what is now ashes in the *Radiance* licorice tin, is Nona's mother. Raped under the house by one of her mother's boyfriends at the age of twelve, Cressy has spent her life as far from the house and her family as possible. A successful international opera singer, she maintains the pretence that she is Nona's sister until she can no longer bear Nona's fantasising about her unknown father, whom Nona refers to as the 'black prince.'

As Nona runs from this revelation, the family home burns to the ground, set on fire by Mae and Cressy. It is the symbolic burning of

their unhappy pasts. Having finally made it to the island, Nona scatters her 'mother's' ashes before returning to the mainland, where she finds her sisters, now on the run, waiting for her in a car. Reconciled by the shared knowledge of the past, the three drive together into the distance. Nona's trip to the island and the sisters' united departure from their childhood home indicate their newfound connection with the mother's ancestral place and the form of home they have found through togetherness.

Radiance's version of home links Aboriginal connectedness and the return to place, with the maternal and the effort to connect past and present Aboriginalities. Like all forms of home and togetherness, however, the home of *Radiance* has an exclusionary dimension. In this article, I suggest that it is Aboriginal masculinity which is most conspicuously left out of togetherness as this is constructed in the film. *Radiance* leaves (the predominantly white)⁶ audiences with one image of Aboriginal men. In what follows, I endeavour to show how, in its gendered depiction of home and togetherness, *Radiance* portrays Aboriginal masculinity as a threat to Aboriginal women's sense of wholeness and belonging. Referring to a series of other exclusions, I explore the film's resistance to the idea that whiteness is the primary destructive force in Aboriginal lives.

The argument that it is whiteness—and not Aboriginal masculinity—which most negatively impacts on Aboriginal women, has recently been advanced from several quarters. Both Dundi Mitchell⁷ and Deborah Bird Rose⁸ for example, have noted how white racism dismembers, erodes and causes sickness in Aboriginal lives. In what has become known as the 'Bell-Huggins debate,' Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins criticises what she sees as the anthropologist Diane Bell's white feminist agenda.⁹ Arguing that Bell privileges sexual inequality over racial discrimination in her writing about intraracial rape, Huggins suggests that race is the primary source of oppression in the lives of Aboriginal women. The Aboriginal theorist, Aileen Moreton-Robinson¹⁰ eloquently supports this claim. While not denying the need for Aboriginal women to discuss intraracial rape, these writers have challenged the role of white embodiment in the production of 'knowledge' about the Aboriginal 'other.' In addition, they have questioned the concomitant privileging of gender over race in (white feminist) analyses of structural oppression.

These arguments inform my own reading of *Radiance* as a film which has intraracial violence at its heart. While arguing that *Radiance* can be figured in a number of ways—many of them positive—I demonstrate that the film diminishes the significance of race, thus reproducing the notion of a 'deracialised but gendered universal subject'¹¹ on one hand, while castigating Aboriginal men on the other. The discussion that follows of the film's authorship and reception highlights the links between those who are involved in the processes