

How Wayne Blair's *The Sapphires* tells a story of collective and individual belonging

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Wayne Blair's 2012, dramatic comedy *The Sapphires* is an Australian film that discusses a number of important issues for Indigenous people, including the concept of belonging. Blair explores how belonging can exist both within community groups and internally through self-identity. The bones of the film are based on the true story of Laurel Robinson and Lois Peeler, two Indigenous women who toured Vietnam as the original 'Sapphires' with a New Zealand Maori band (Herche 2013). Laurel Robinson's son, Tony Briggs wrote the screenplay and the 2004 musical (of the same name) thus being able to add a sense of authenticity. The film opens up a side of Australian history that has previously been underrepresented but has a universal appeal through its representation of belonging.

Belonging to Communities

Finding a sense of belonging within local communities was often unachievable for Indigenous people in the 20th century, due to the discriminatory laws. Australia's own constitution refused to acknowledge Indigenous Australians in the census and would make laws regarding 'people of any race except the Aboriginal race' (Ayres et.al 2016, p. 46). In 1909, the *Aborigines Protection Act* was enacted and instilled patronising regulations that further disassociated Indigenous Australians from their local communities (Ayres et.al 2016). These early attitudes frame how 'white' Australia would come to isolate itself from Aboriginal Australians in the decades to come.

This isolation and distancing are demonstrated in *The Sapphires* when the 'Cummeraganja Songbirds' enter the talent show at their local pub. Gail makes an acknowledgment of country and is scoffed at by the predominantly non-Indigenous audience. As they sing, the camera pans the crowd revealing unimpressed faces, one couple leaving, and others talking



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over the performance. They receive no applause at the end, except from one young boy, who is a motif that racism is taught not inherited.

The audience can be seen as a personification of the attitudes that wider non-Indigenous Australians held at the time. As explored by Stratton (2015 p. 19) the key 'issue' that this scene represents is 'race mixing' and he believes the attitude represented here is that 'Aborigines should stick to their reserve and not get involved in town events; the town is white'. This is not an unusual attitude for non-Indigenous Australians of the time around 1968. The film takes place one year after the 1967 Referendum, which ruled that Indigenous Australians were now on the 'same constitutional footing as settler Australians' (Stratton 2015, p. 20). Despite this legal change, social change did not occur straight away and Indigenous people still experienced racism.

Blair also delves into the issue of belonging within the Aboriginal community. The audience learns the heartbreaking story of Kay's childhood as a victim of the Stolen Generations and discovers that she grew up away from her Indigenous community. In flashbacks Kay is hostile towards her Indigenous family and appears to have fully adopted and embraced the 'white' lifestyle. The journey of re-establishing this familial bond and the group's sense of belonging, is weaved throughout the film's musical choices.

A prime example of song as a metaphor for belonging, is depicted in the repetition of the traditional 'Ngarra Burra Ferra' song, which is sung by the group as children in the opening scene, and later again towards the films close. They sing this to their mother/aunty on the phone demonstrating that the group has come full circle in terms of not only talent but also in their relationship. As stated by Davis, 'the song is staged as an enduring mode of transmission and powerful form of cultural connection' (2014 p. 601). It is sung in the Yorta Yorta language, and at first it is a reminder of Kay being taken away, but later becomes an anthem to the women's ability to find belonging.

Another area of belonging that is explored in the film is being accepted as a survivor of the Stolen Generations. In a flashback, the audience discovers how Kay was stolen. Her mother came to visit Kay at hospital but arrives to find her daughter missing with no warning, explanation or notice. This scene branches out from the archetypal removal story. As explored by Attwood society has come to accept stories of Indigenous children being physically snatched out of the arms of their mothers as 'the paradigmatic story of the forcible removal' (2001 p. 195). Even though Kay and her mother did not experience the forcible removal that has come to be so well represented, it does not mean that their experience was any less traumatic. It is important that Blair's representation varies from this norm, to add to the collective memory of the trauma.

Gail explains Kay's Stolen Generations experience to Dave through an oral history method and this choice by Blair can be interpreted as a metaphor to the different ways of conveying history and the importance of personal accounts. Facts and figures cannot convey the pain and personal impact on an individual's sense of belonging, however hearing from those who were affected by a traumatic event is extremely powerful. Rabbitt explores oral history as a

‘traditional Indigenous way of life’, which can potentially help in ‘furthering the reconciliation process’ (2013, p. 24). It is through acknowledging the truth that one can find their sense of belonging, with traditional communities or amongst survivors.

Belonging to self

Belonging to one’s self or having confidence in their self-identity is another area of life that has been disrupted for Indigenous people. The journey of self-identity is an individual experience, but this romantic comedy uses the narrative trope of ‘finding love’ to enable its characters to find themselves.

The internal conflict Kay experiences in regard to her Indigenous heritage and non-Indigenous upbringing is made evident when Gail questions Kay’s relationship with the African-American marine. Kay laughs the situation off but is offended when Gail insults her and downplays her Aboriginality. As stated by Kennedy, ‘Kay reclaims her Aboriginal identity via a detour through an African-American in Vietnam telling her African-American suitor: ‘I’m black. I’m just pale black’’ (2013, p. 338).

The relationship enables Kay to go through an internal metamorphosis whereby she finds confidence in her Aboriginality and stops using her light skin colour as a way to hide from her heritage. Kay’s experience speaks to the audience about the widespread issue of Indigenous identity and feeling torn between two cultures or as though they don’t belong to either. Kay’s partner being an African-American is also an interesting political/social choice by Blair. As suggested by Herche, ‘the battles for Indigenous rights and battles for black America’s civil rights are paralleled’ in the film and the marine’s acceptance and confidence leads Kay to her own sense of self-belonging (2013, p. 3).

The casting choice could also be interpreted as Blair paying homage to the African-American influences on early Aboriginal resistance. Maynard (2005) suggests that Indigenous resistance and political activism was highly inspired by the activism in America, namely the Coloured Progressive Association and Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, which influenced the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association. Kennedy believes Indigenous creatives should be inspired by the way other nations remember their ‘black histories’ and do the same with Indigenous Australian history (2013, p. 341). Kennedy refers to this as ‘multidirectional memory’ which compels creative’s to ‘bring into the public arena less familiar stories’ (2013, p. 341). Whilst Blair’s inclusion of the African-American marine may or may not be a nod to early international political influences, it enabled Blair to explore how Kay finds a sense of self-belonging.

Conclusion

Blair has told a true story through an entertaining medium and conveyed an important message about the Indigenous Australian experience and belonging. His use of effective and familiar film techniques has enabled Blair to make important commentaries on Australia’s history, influences and treatment of Indigenous Australian’s. The success of the film has set a high standard for Indigenous Australian filmmaking and opened up the conversation not only

to Australia, but to the rest of the world. Belonging can be of the self or different communities and by portraying this in relation to the Indigenous Australian experience, viewers can understand another untold side of Australian history.

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