



Negotiating Masculinities: 'Yolngu Boy'

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Concern with issues about masculinity has not only spread to many countries, but also into many fields.

Health services are noticing the relevance of men's gender to problems ... Educators are discussing ... programs for boys ... Criminologists have begun to explore why boys and men dominate the crime statistics, and violence prevention programs are taking increasing notice of gender issues ... [T]he intellectual debate about masculinity now has practical consequences.

How we understand men and gender, what we believe about masculinity, what we know (or think we know) about the development of boys, may have large effects—for good or ill—in therapy, education, health services, violence prevention, policing and social services. ¹

THIS PAPER QUESTIONS HOW far the kind of textuality found in a feature film might contribute to debates about masculinities and whether films can usefully be co-opted for the project of social change. According to masculinity theorist, Bob Connell, we can identify 'historical moments' that are informed by the possibility of social transformation of gender regimes and

practices. My argument here is that the film *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnston, 2000) should be sited in such a 'moment' and, furthermore, that it should be read in the context of social and institutional discourses concerning Indigenous cultures, health, education and violence.

Substance Abuse and Violent Masculinity

Yolngu Boy was produced at the end of the 1990s, a point in time in which it had become possible to understand that gender regimes constitute an important part of the problems of substance abuse, family violence, incarceration and early death within Indigenous communities. 'Substance abuse has been introduced into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture since European contact.'² This comment by ATSIC (NT), a contribution to one of the many Government inquiries into health, recapitulates a common theoretical position: substance abuse is a 'symptom' of other social and material changes brought about by colonization. The recent apocalyptic call to arms of



Cape York Indigenous leader, Noel Pearson, argues that the 'symptom' has now become the problem:

The safety of our families is the primary responsibility of Indigenous Australians ourselves, and the governments have an overriding responsibility for social order through the Police and other agencies. But neither Indigenous leaders, nor the government agencies are currently able to protect Indigenous women, children and men. This is a national crisis ...

*The disorder in our communities is a symptom in the sense that it is a product of our history and our marginalisation. It is a different question to what extent our history maintains the social chaos. I have argued that our established and dominating social ills (substance abuse epidemics and economic passivity) contribute greatly to perpetuating the current state, rather than being symptoms of discrimination. On an individual level, an established addiction must be dealt with as a problem in its own right, [my emphasis] rather than as a symptom of the causes of the first consumption of the addictive substance.*³

The vision of a crisis-point in history is common to the discourse of many of the Indigenous spokespersons represented at the 2003 round-table called by the Prime Minister, John Howard. Views on how to address the problem of substance abuse and its role in violence and social dysfunction range from the radical prohibitionist stance of Pearson, to the emphasis on the role of education within communities. Prohibition is of course not a new strategy. Legislative changes since the advent of Aboriginal land rights have empowered communities to declare 'dry areas';⁴ Indigenous communities, often at the instigation of their women, have also attempted to control the consumption of alcohol by other measures, such as reducing the times or places of sale. Petrol sniffing has been addressed in some remote communities by replacing petrol with alternate fuel sources such as Avgas.⁵

Nor is education, especially the targeting of adolescents, a new strategy. The metaphor of 'breaking the cycle' by early

intervention programs has long been in use in the discourses of the government agencies and services. The findings of the *Royal Commission Into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1987-1991), impacting on the process of civic debate in the area of social justice, led to pressure for intervention programs designed to work with adolescents to prevent domestic and other violence.

In the discourse of non-Indigenous and Indigenous professionals—in the fields of health and crime prevention—the question of violence and substance abuse is clearly identified as being linked with gender regimes.⁶ Historically, within Indigenous social justice advocacy, racial discrimination has been the focus of analysis. More recently, however, the common interest shared by Indigenous men and women in the protection of children and of the survival of their communities in the face of damage from institutionalized substance abuse has led to a more public discussion of, even pressure for, reform of violent practices associated with masculinity. It is in this discursive context that the film should be located.

Before turning to a discussion of the film, I want to introduce the theoretical frameworks which I use to engage with the text. *Yolngu Boy* dramatizes competing models of Indigenous masculinity. The 'stories' the filmmakers are authorized to show from ceremonial culture are co-opted into a rationale of exemplary masculinity, which seems to offer a solution to the social problems of inequality and violence. The film's narrative, thus, can be seen to complement contemporary discourses of peace education. To evaluate the film's contribution in this sphere I bring to bear the 'social forms' analysis of gender employed by Connell and other researchers. This method takes as its concern the institutions and power relations which shape masculinities under any historical, social and economic regime. Connell's focus on 'changing masculinities' through peace-education programs based on informed research about the connections between the differences and hierarchies among men, and the relations between men and women in any institutional and social regime, would seem to be apt in the light of

the film's concern with the consequences of violent and destructive masculinities.

I shall flesh out this theoretical approach in more detail below. Before I do, however, I need to acknowledge the complexities surrounding the discursive construction of indigeneity and youth. As Stephen Muecke has shown, the representation of aboriginality and Indigenous regimes of knowledge in non-Indigenous 're-framings' poses problems of a political and discursive nature for both 'writers' and 'readers'—in this case the filmmakers, the custodians of Yolngu sacred narratives, and the film's viewers. In its co-option of ceremonial culture to the reformation of troubled youth, *Yolngu Boy* of necessity 're-frames' sacred stories and packages them in versions suitable for non-initiates. Many reading positions are thus possible, depending on the individual viewer's position in relation to the culture and knowledges traced in the film. Post-colonial theory offers the most useful tools to disentangle the differential knowledges inscribed in the film's hybrid address.

Yolngu Boy is an initiative of the Australian Children's Television Foundation with Indigenous co-producers, boasting investment from Aboriginal organizations, most notably the Yothu Yindi Foundation. With this cross-cultural production partnership, it is perhaps inevitable that the film manifests a certain hybridization of cultural forms. The Australian Children's Television Foundation as an institution, as I have argued elsewhere, is informed by a humanist ideology.⁷ Their films foreground the universal nature of youth, based on the discourse of psychology. Characteristically, the Foundation's films feature the individual ego-quest in a moral context. As Clare Bradford argues, while 'critical discourses of children's literature' and culture 'generally mobilise humanist principles' and 'Jungian frameworks' which interpret religious beliefs and practices in a universalizing way, the stories of Australian aboriginals stand outside these formulations of universal and archetypal meanings (such as those privileged in most 'coming-of-age' films) 'because of their connections with country and with particular groups of people'.⁸

Indigenous producers (of various textual forms), characteristically seek to retain a focus on the specificity of knowledges and ways of being particular to individual communities and kinship groups. Some Indigenous organizations have argued that the process of reconciliation can be aided by projects which educate non-Indigenous Australians in awareness of and value for Indigenous stories and cultural practices. Given the film's focus on the social devastation caused by substance abuse, it is also pertinent to register the importance of 'narrative' forms of therapy by Indigenous practitioners within communities:

*In recent years there has been increased focus on the development of forms of intervention which 'heal' communities in a holistic fashion ... The interest shown within Indigenous communities in the work of Indigenous therapists such as Judy Atkinson, which focus on 'narrative' forms of therapy at the cultural and group levels to reclaim lost forms of social solidarity and harmony, shows that such ideas have resonance for Indigenous people.*⁹

An address to violent and alienated young men—on the basis of reclamation of lost cultural knowledges and 'forms of solidarity'—is one of the possible reading positions for the film.

However, any reading of *Yolngu Boy* must acknowledge the 'silences' the film must maintain in its depiction of traditional knowledges, most particularly the relationship of the Yolngu boys to their Dreamings and Dreaming sites. It also acknowledges the tension between forms of textuality produced. As Muecke and Bradford remind us, '[w]ithin Aboriginal cultures, stories are placed', deriving from groups of people inhabiting a defined 'country'; only recently have non-Indigenous Australians come to recognize the 'centrality of relationships between people and country, and the pervasiveness of the sacred'.¹⁰ The film conforms to recognized Western narrative genres—the cautionary tale, the coming-of-age story, the individual ego-quest—and assigns an 'authorial' voice to the reminiscences of Lorrpu, the Yolngu boy of the film's title. Its version

of textuality is therefore primarily Western and humanist. While seeking to evaluate the narrative's contribution to a discourse aimed at offering alternatives to violent masculinities, a post-colonial awareness needs to be trained on the film's 'textual spaces'.

Changing Masculinities: Education for Peace

The 'social forms' analysis used by Connell emphasizes material relations and practices to provide an account of gender 'as historically specific features of social life ... [Masculinity and femininity] arise not from the timeless dichotomy of bodies but from the specific course of development of the large-scale structures of society' (p. 22). This approach offers a necessary counter to the tendency within some strands of theory to privilege 'a psychologization of problems arising from gender relations' over 'a concern with institutions, power relations and social inequalities' (p. 23). For Connell, analysis has to recognize at least four structures of gender: *power relations*, *production relations* (division of labour), *emotional relations* (e.g. consensual or coercive inequalities in the giving and receiving of pleasure), and *symbolism*—by which 'the process of communication is ... recognized as a vital element of social process' (pp.24-25). The symbolic enactment of masculinities and femininities through 'dress, makeup, body culture, tone of voice, etc., is an important part of the everyday experience of gender' (p. 26).

In order to transform violent gender practices, Connell argues that we need to recognize diverse and 'multiple' masculinities—existing not only in different communities but also within groups. Any tensions circulating around social difference, including race, must be identified. The success of narratives such as *Yolngu Boy* in showcasing exemplars of non-violence can be evaluated in this light:

Within the one school, or workplace, or ethnic group, there will be different ways of enacting manhood, different ways of learning to be a man, different conceptions of the self and different ways of using a male body ... (p. 10)

[V]iolent and aggressive masculinity will rarely be the only form present. There is, then, usually some alternative for anti-violence programs to build on ... Peace education programs need concrete examples of more peaceable ways of living and acting. (p. 216)

Other concepts utilized by masculinity research include 'hierarchy' and 'hegemony'.

Different masculinities exist in definite relations with each other, often relations of hierarchy and exclusion. There is generally a hegemonic form of masculinity, the centre of the system of gendered power. The hegemonic form need not be the most common form of masculinity ... The hierarchy of masculinities is itself a source of violence, since force is used in defining and maintaining the hierarchy ... Large numbers of men and boys have a divided, tense or oppositional relationship to hegemonic masculinity ... At the same time, however, the very hierarchy of masculinity may give other groups strong motivation for change. (pp. 216-217)

Outside the literatures of health and criminology (the pre-eminent discourses of what are often referred to as the 'Aboriginal industries') there has been little analysis of the hierarchies of Indigenous masculinity. *Yolngu Boy* is interesting in its positioning of differential masculinities, and in its *silences* on the collective production of gender, particularly in the enactment of practices such as substance abuse and violence. As Connell argues, violent masculinities 'are usually collectively defined and/or institutionally supported ... Most violence is not a matter of individual pathology [therefore] the institutionalization of masculinity is a major problem for peace strategy' (p. 217).

Changing the organizational cultures which support violence within communities and social groups, relies on identifying the 'internal complexity' and contradictions present. 'We cannot speak of "men" as a single bloc with exactly the same interests. Some have interests (e.g. in their relations with women and children) which will support more peaceable gender patterns.' (p. 219) Identifying

internal complexities in the film's construction of masculinity—especially the differential relationships the boys have with the women of their community and their commitments to sacred ways of being—will be one of the major tasks of my analysis.

Dreams and Dreamings

The songs, stories and dances of Yolngu ceremonial culture are constructed as the moral and symbolic centre of the world of the film's narrative. *Yolngu Boy* recognizes the pervasiveness of the sacred. On the other hand, one of the 'textual spaces' in which the film's hybrid address is most clearly demonstrated is in the narrative motif of Dreaming. 'Dreaming' functions in the psychological sense, the aspirational dream which guides the individual masculine ego-quest. The filmic codes of the flashback or dream-sequence invoke this trope. Of special prominence are the recurring flashbacks to the initiation of the three boys who are the central characters of the film—Lorrpu, Milika and Botj. But the traces of the ceremonial meaning of the word Dreaming, involving creation, Law, duty and a timeless and ongoing relationship to people and 'country' remain,¹¹ inscribed in sequences in which Baru, the creative being/ancestor spirit (Dreaming) of the three boys, stalks and dances watchfully into the story as their guide, healer and judge. 'Western and Aboriginal forms of temporality'¹² and textuality are hybridized, though certainly not in any self-reflexive fashion.

The narrator and central character is Lorrpu. On the level of individual ego-quest, the film is the story of his journey to manhood. Lorrpu is the only character dramatized with any complexity, and it is his dream of how to live the 'right' life that the initiation sequence represents. Lorrpu's dream/Dreaming is the primary symbolization of the empowering embrace of ceremonial masculinity. Against a stark, black background, the film's opening credit sequence showcases a vibrant CGI animation, in which the boys appear as the shadowy forms of hunters. Striding away from us into myth, these male forms are surrounded by a flame-like design of pulsing reds,

blues, greens and yellows, revealing the distinctive diamond pattern which is the iconic, ceremonial representation of Baru, the Crocodile.

Lorrpu's vision is of a self-sufficient, heroic masculinity, inscribed in the religious ceremony of his culture. In the first scene—a flashback to the boy's initiation at nine years old—Lorrpu's voice-over narration fills us in: This is the 'dream' they shared as children 'of being great Hunters ... men together ... three Men, one Skin, one Dream'. The term 'skin', as Deborah Bird Rose explains, is one of the many complex social identities which construct relationships in Aboriginal communities.¹³ Aboriginal boys share relationships based both on skin identities and Dreaming, tied in a close set of duties including maintaining the Laws through ceremonies, and fulfilling obligations to 'country'. The film's discourse foregrounds the more heroic and individualized image of the hunter. Hunting is one of the material practices in which masculinity is enacted across cultures; moreover, the archetype of the hunter is one particularly beloved of the neo-primitivist 'men's movements' which have risen to prominence in Western countries in recent years, following on from the popular books by Robert Bly and others.¹⁴ As children, the Yolngu boys' aspirations were to a masculinity centred in the time-honoured, hegemonic tradition of the hunter, and were sustained by a trust in the embrace of their community and a firm belief in the power of their ancestor spirit, Baru.

As I outlined in my introduction, the construction of masculinity is always plural in any social organization. The differences between men and the hierarchies of masculinity in which they participate are central to the choices offered to the young men in *Yolngu Boy*. As the three central characters approach manhood, it is only for Lorrpu that the childhood dream remains an enabling vision. Even as children there were differences between the three. The camera records a difference which Lorrpu's voice-over reminiscence does not always prioritize. As boys, Lorrpu was never without his spear and Milika never without his footy. As men the different ambitions become

self-determining.

Milika's version of heroic masculinity centres on sporting prowess. In an economic regime which lacks many other avenues for success, Aboriginal Australians have historically formed a recruiting pool for exemplars of masculinity in sports, particularly in boxing and football. The film does not reflect on the economic 'injuries' of racism; its narrative trajectory is more clearly focused on the drama of individual choice. In this drama, Milika is something of a humorous stereotype, and more or less peripheral to the psychological enactment of choice and destiny played out between the other two. Milika is the type of footy-mad kid, unselfconsciously arrogant in a boyish, self-obsessed way, characterized by his constant mimicry of sporting commentary in which he celebrates his envisioned sporting conquests, and preening gestures before the local bevy of giggling girls. Milika is one whose dream lies in the outside world, away from the coastal paradise of the small Arnhem Land community. The links between sporting and consumer culture are symbolically represented in the film. Milika is the boy most attracted to the material trappings of the wider youth culture: 'shopping', CDs, youth music, mobile phones, street-smart gear, and of course, his vision of celebrity status with the Essendon Bombers—a goal he seems to have the talent to achieve.

Lorrpu, by comparison, is content with his community and its ways; he is a shy boy, still yearning after the hunt, the old ways, and a girl who seems too far above his claims. Lorrpu is forced to take the initiative in order to save his best friend Botj from substance abuse and a pattern of violent and destructive masculinity. Botj is the one most changed from the destiny prefigured in the vision of the laughing trinity of friends at nine years old. 'And Botj—always out in front—afraid of nothing.' At nine, Botj shared Lorrpu's religious faith, and his dream of being a great hunter, knowing the Songlines, accepted into full knowledge of the Law. Botj is a 'natural' leader—but by fifteen he has channelled that leadership into social confrontation and toughness.

Negotiating Masculinities

As I argued earlier, one of the film's concerns is the quest for models of exemplary masculinity. The key tropes of such exemplars, it seems, are two: knowing the Law, and 'having a place'—a sense of enabling and cultural identity. The return of Botj, the violent outsider, poses a challenge to the hegemony of such exemplary tropes. Immediately after Lorrpu's first initiation flashback, the film cuts to a close-up of Madjala, the community policing officer. In his sunglasses we see a framed reflection of a light aircraft as it taxis to a halt at the local airport. Madjala looks anxious, disapproving, and judgmental. A slim figure in cut-off shorts and shirt, a gold medalion and a 'streetwise' pair of designer sunglasses descends the plane's steps. Botj has returned to Gove village after a three-month stint in jail for theft. Madjala, Botj's uncle, represents 'the law/Law' in more than one aspect. He is there to offer Botj a last chance—both to avoid a serious custodial sentence in the case of re-offending—but also a final chance to prove himself worthy of a role as a man in his own community.

The film's narrative design manifests as a cautionary tale. The choices between combative and more appropriate masculinities are dramatized through the individual choices of the three friends. The notion of personal choice, thus, becomes paramount. What is sacrificed, however, is any exploration of the role of peer culture in the formation of masculinities. Each of the friends functions as a type, but they are presented to us in isolation from the social networks, which construct and support their versions of masculinity. This is particularly problematic in the representation of Botj. In Connell's analysis of what he terms 'protest masculinity', particularly in the institutional setting of the school, he finds that 'where hegemony is secure, boys may learn to wield discipline themselves as part of their learning of masculine hierarchy Where hegemony is lacking, a 'protest masculinity' may be constructed through defiance of authority, all too familiar in working class schools' (p. 159). Peer culture rituals of truancy, smoking and alcohol abuse can form a crucial role in such social defiance. The 'contest with authority can

become a focus for excitement ... and the formation of masculine identities' (p. 159). The institutional setting is clearly different here. Violence in male peer-networks has been associated with both fighting and harm to family members in rural communities, according to Bragg.

*Young Indigenous people in the West Kimberley, as in many other parts of Australia, receive an early induction into the culture of drink and fighting. Entry into the drink culture has become part of the rites of passage to adulthood for Indigenous males.*¹⁵

Botj's preferred form of substance abuse is petrol-sniffing rather than alcohol, however the point is a crucial one: confrontational and anti-social masculinity is traditionally negotiated within social groups. Bravado in the consumption of alcohol, breaking and entering and destructive behaviour, are often crude masculinity tests in peer networks—this is, of course, no less true of non-Indigenous communities.

Yet in the plot of *Yolngu Boy*, Botj is ostracized on his return home. His is a hegemonic form of masculinity that the film attempts to negate through silence. No welcoming committee of brothers awaits Botj. As the 4WD careers up to the village, barely missing a hapless dog, youngsters of the community turn out to witness his homecoming, but their silent stares do not welcome. His mother won't even see him, fearful, we are told, of his corrupting influence on her younger children. The role of fathers in establishing social patterns of masculinity is suggested, but not explored in any dramatic sense. Like his father before him, who burned his family's house down in a drunken rampage, Botj's chosen version of masculinity is untrustworthy. Botj returns as an outsider—literally peering through windows to the home he may not enter. Botj has no 'place'.

Only to Lorrpu is he unconditionally welcome. Even to Milika, Botj is now 'a loser', one who might threaten his chance to succeed as a professional sportsman. A greater chasm is about to separate the three. Botj has always been the 'natural' leader: out in front, exposing his body to the risks ahead of his skin brothers. Now

he is about to be left behind in childhood while his two friends become men. They have been chosen as worthy of full initiation. They will be given full ceremonial knowledge appropriate to taking care of their 'country' and Dreaming sites, maintaining the ceremonies by which the Law is carried through the generations, able to instruct younger boys in their turn.

Ceremonial masculinity grounds any alternative future for Yolngu men in the film's ideological project. In this sense the film can be seen as a kind of narrative therapy, a holistic approach to social transformation. To 'get Ceremony' means more than being chosen to learn the Law and the traditional knowledge of 'country'. It means 'having a place', being centred in a cultural identity which enables an appropriate masculinity, regardless of the individual goals a man pursues. Dawu, the senior elder of the community, is presented as a statesman and arbiter equally at home in political lobbying in the Northern Territory's halls of power as in the ceremonial circle of his own people. Exemplary masculinity clearly also involves an ethics of responsibility which Botj does not understand.

A Cautionary Tale

Given that the film is designed as an exemplary narrative of individual choice, it is clearly operating on different premises from Connell's peace education perspective. Peace education programs acknowledge that changes in violent masculinities are affected by other social, political and economic relationships, including those with women. *Yolngu Boy*, on the other hand, is structured as a stark, exemplary tale, and its focus on masculinity is deliberate. This is very much a boys' picture. Only one woman has a speaking role (she is identified in the film only as Dawu's grand-daughter). The others are silent victims: Botj's mother; the old woman in hospital from whom he tries to steal cigarettes; the downtrodden women in the fringe-dwellers' camp on the outskirts of Darwin. At the Darwin camp, Botj's drunken father smacks around the equally drunken woman who shares his squalid mattress to coerce her to find him 'smokes'. Women here seem to wait in silence for male abuse—or male

protection. On the other hand, the young women in Lorrpu's village seem to wait to be impressed by the young men of the community. They are not, it seems, impressed by Botj's bad-boy behaviour. Bringing about the transformation of masculinities is not envisaged as taking place through relationships *with* women, or by acknowledging what both men and women have at stake in the prevention of violence. What the film does dramatize is a sense of responsibility towards women, or possibly the fear of their silent rejection.

Boys Behaving Badly

In the tradition of classic 'protest masculinity', Botj is a disruptive influence from the moment of his return—turning a fracas on the football field into a more serious 'football-hooligan' investment in violence for its own sake. In a rare group enactment of violent masculinity, Botj eggs his friends on, against their better instincts, to break into the Community Store. This latter is a crucial scene which underlines the differences between the three boys. The soundtrack throughout the film is a vital element, underscoring the energy of a shared youth culture in its hybrid use of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous rock music.¹⁶ The music seamlessly slides from Indigenous rock classics, such as 'Treaty', to a more energetic, rap beat. This quotation forms a link to US black urban culture, with its nuances of rebellion, street-smart lip and a certain consumer style. The discourse of universal youth is invoked, local differences giving way to global cultural references. The break-in scene enacts the chaotic energy of young, masculine excess, at once exuberant and dangerous. Lorrpu characteristically finds expression in dance. Isolated from the others by headphones and his closed eyes, he seems to be in a Dreaming world of his own, separate from the more destructive excesses of the others. In mid-shots, the camera frames his dancing feet and legs.

The behaviour of the others is also typical of each. Milika makes a beeline for the racks of clothes and the trendy icons of urban, male culture: sunglasses, CD players, mobile phones, and toys. Botj's consumption is more visceral and more destructive, stuffing himself with packets

of chips and guzzling drinks, frenetically tossing the discarded remnants on the floor. Botj, it seems, finds as much pleasure in the hooligan impulse as in the consumption. Predictably, excess soon veers from hi-jinx to violence; a fight erupts. Lorrpu and Milika abandon Botj to his own devices—and his own demons.

Missing from the film's presentation of the three friends is any suggestion of cathexis associated with indulgence in hard-drinking masculinity. As a group, they have no class or race injuries to resent, no cause to buck against a system which excludes them. Botj's destructiveness is, it appears, an externalization of a deep, even suicidal, self-loathing. Thus the film suggests that the problem of violence is psychological rather than institutional. When the tentative rapport that links him to his friends is broken, Botj retreats into substance abuse. In the first of two powerful petrol-sniffing scenes, viewers witness Botj's self-destructive impulses. His sense of ostracism from his community's beliefs and shared life becomes a sinister focus in this scene. In a series of point-of-view shots, the camera traces the hybrid icons of faith—the Christian crucifix, with the mural depicting Baru and the other Dreamings which forms the backdrop for the pulpit in the community's outdoor place of worship. The images seem to threaten Botj in his drug-induced psychosis, suggesting his ostracism from the spiritual wholeness of the community.

In a scene of shocking, angry intensity, Botj moves from sniffing to drinking and dousing himself with petrol. In the process he trashes the local Women's Community Centre to a raging refrain of rap music. The Centre is clearly a place where Art is created, possibly a source of economic revenue for the village. In a highly symbolic gesture, Botj slashes a painting with the iconic diamond-pattern of his ancestor spirit, Baru. The image has triggered unwanted memories: Botj's own flashback to the initiation ceremony. In Botj's flashback he is held securely and symbolically in the embrace of his community—Botj is held in the arms of his uncle Madgala, as Lorrpu is in the arms of Dawu. The boys share a glance in their moment of unity and acceptance. Botj's rage, as he vandalizes the painting, is triggered by disgust at his own

betrayal of that unity. The scene pre-figures a death-wish, which will be fulfilled at the film's conclusion. In a deceptively quiet moment after the vengeful mutilation of the picture, Botj lights a cigarette, having temporarily forgotten the fact that he is covered with petrol. His immolation underlines his abject status.

One of the elements which saves this film from sliding into a simple morality play is its balance between boyish humour and 'message'. Botj, in hospital, displays abusive tendencies, which threaten to alienate the viewers' sympathy (such as attempting to coerce smokes from an old lady in a wheelchair). Just like the father we meet later in the Darwin fringe-dwellers' camp, Botj has the potential to tyrannize those who are weaker than himself. The switch to more humorous narrative ploys allows us to see the more attractive side of this troubled character.

In one scene, Lorrpu visits his injured friend in hospital. Sitting by Botj's bedside he begins to sing softly in his own language—perhaps a call to Botj's better, inner self. The pathos of the moment is balanced by a joking interjection from the newly wakeful Botj: 'don't sing—you give me headache!'. Like many young men, the dialogue suggests, they find it difficult to speak together on serious subjects. Their friendship is communicated more naturally in joking banter. But Lorrpu is serious in his intent to 'save' Botj from himself.

Testing Masculinities

The three boys embark on a quest—ostensibly to reach Darwin—but on the spiritual level to find themselves by going back to their 'country' and its knowledges. The quest is a rite of testing for Lorrpu and a pilgrimage of purification for Botj. The boys belong to a coastal people: beach lore and love of the sea figure prominently in their identity. (This identification is represented in the endlessly re-iterated helicopter shots which trace the coastline, sweeping the land- and sea-scapes, constructing vistas of beauty, purity and desire.) So it is inevitable their quest is a sea quest, in a dugout canoe they 'rehabilitate' from a ceremonial burial site. The boys set out on the journey in the normal trappings of Western youth, tee-shirts and caps.

By mid-afternoon we see them, stripped down to the waist, paddling in secure unison. Traced by a series of lyric helicopter shots, they are placed against an endless vista of coast and sea. Classic embodiments of heroic masculinity, they have become at one with the land/sea.

On this journey, the technological gimmickry of modern Western society will be of no use. This is humorously underlined by the packing rituals of Lorrpu and Milika. Lorrpu packs his dilly-bags with the tools of the hunter's trade—harpoons, spear-tips and all-important rope. When Milika turns up with a backpack stuffed with a wad of twenty-dollar notes, Mars bars, mobile phone, CD player (and of course his footy), Lorrpu quips dismissively: 'Bring anything we can use?'

The boys leave behind their history and enter into the realm of Dreaming. Throughout the journey sequence they are stalked by the providential and yet exacting presence of Baru, their crocodile Dreaming spirit. Baru is the real leader on this quest of spiritual and psychic enlightenment. For non-Indigenous viewers, Baru seems to be something like a guardian-angel. The notion of an individual ego-quest for enlightenment is certainly a humanist trope. However, Baru's role in the film could be subject to an Indigenous re-appropriation. As a creative being, a Dreaming is not confined to the past. Indigenous forms of temporality acknowledge that the Dreaming is 'everywhen'.¹⁷ As Botj lies on the beach at night, feverish from infection in his burned arm, Baru emerges from the sea in human form to circle the sleeping boys in a stately, yet somehow ominous, dance. Baru can be interpreted as an instrument for testing masculinities: reasserting his claim to Botj, or perhaps testing the boy's worthiness in a series of refining trials.

The rites of testing follow predictable patterns: masculinity tests of strength and physical endurance. A huge ray snags the boys' fishing line and brings their vessel to grief. They are forced from the beach to avoid surveillance by the police helicopter, which is searching for the escapees. Unfortunately for the boys, the hinterland into which they flee is not a country whose Songlines they know. In a shimmering heat haze, accompanied

by a relentless, driving soundtrack, the camera traces the contact of bare feet on rough terrain, sweat on naked torsos, the strain and pain on the young faces. The young male bodies become sites of punishment. As Lorrpu's voice-over narration comments a little later, they are stripped of the 'things that made them different'. This is epic ground here, as in Lorrpu's initiation dream—'three men, one skin, one dream'.

Lorrpu turns to the traditional regimes of knowledge for meaning. The boys are without medicine, food or shelter, so when Botj collapses from the infected burn, their situation is critical. According to the traditional knowledge Lorrpu has been taught by Dawu—the land provides 'everything we need'. In an epic re-enactment of the ancestors' lore, Lorrpu takes his spear, daubs his skin with white, and makes fire to aid his hunting. He recreates himself as 'the hunter'—responsible for his people. 'If I failed we had nothing' he narrates portentously. 'This was my test.' His own version of heroic masculinity is on trial here.

'Country' has the power to heal, both literally and spiritually. The leaves Lorrpu harvests as a poultice for Botj's arm cleanse the infection from his body. His connection with the land, the confidence that comes from rediscovery of early knowledges and skills, also reinvigorates his mind. Botj begins to be reinscribed into the Dreaming of Baru, who reappears to 'lay hands' on Botj in his guise as a spirit of healing. When Botj surfaces from his fever he is in control once more, ready to take command. The old knowledge is still with him. The quest has succeeded—at least for now.

For the rest of the journey, Botj will be in front, singing the Songlines, leading the way. The boys have been recreated as heroic hunters, like the 'old people', at one with a cyclic tradition of knowledge, identity and self-sufficiency. They merge into a heroic masculinity, which temporarily erases their individual differences. This unity is dramatized in a couple of epic hunting scenes. The first is a light-hearted, almost-parodic chase scene, in which the three pursue a giant sea turtle in a stolen powerboat, a triumph of male delight in the dangerous practices of

speed, and the bonding rituals of mutual conquest. 'We did it together' they exult, now 'Let's eat it'.

The remainder of the journey sequence offers tableaux of possession and consumption. The 'right way' of living has, in Connell's terminology, a 'patriarchal dividend' to offer: plenty, in the form of the feast, in the form of pride in mutual endeavour, in the glory of the land they move in and learn from. The lyric beauty of the land is offered up as another feast to the consumption of the viewer. This is particularly witnessed in the clichéd cinematic trope of sweeping aerial shots along cliff lines, leading the gaze to the summits on which the surmounting human figures stand, lords and sole possessors of all they see. A Westernized trope of masculinity as conquest rather than custodianship of 'country' has pre-eminence here.

A second hunting scene shows the boys 'living the dream again'. The bodies of the boys are now addressed as hunters, daubed with the mud which camouflages them amidst the line of white river-gums. Enacting a timeless set of male practices, they hunt on foot with boomerangs and throwers, stalking a flock of coastal wetlands ducks. They gain strength from their mutual support. This message is symbolized in the recurrent motif of rope making. Without rope, the hunt cannot be successful. To twine it to the requisite strength needed for a major test requires a rope made by the strength and commitment of three men together.

Problematically for the film's educative project, the narrative demonstrates the crisis faced by ceremonial masculinity when it encounters mainstream urban and commercial culture. The dream of self-sufficiency for the boys lasts only as long as they remain in the bush. Once they reach Darwin, after cadging a lift with a chance-met expedition of Japanese tourists, the individual differences return. For Milika it's time to 'go shopping'; for Botj the fear and self-doubts return. Botj is 'clean now' as he tells Dawu, but he can't find the courage to maintain the dream: this courage would involve another 'test'—having to go back to prison *before* he could commence his new, renewed life.

A clear-cut identification of a hegemonic form of masculinity is lacking in the film's exploration of Indigenous youth culture. There are, however, versions of exemplary masculinity offered as alternatives to the violent masculinity of Botj. Dawu is the model of what Botj and Lorrpu might become: statesmen for their people. Dawu is characterized as equally formidable in the circle of 'old men', and in the lobby of a western-style hotel, in crisp white shirt and Rolex, negotiating with governments on Land Council business. In the simple manner of the cautionary tale, the film implies that the choice between masculinities is up to the individual.

The future for violent and addictive personalities is exemplified in the fate of Botj. Fleeing Dawu and his friends, Botj seeks out his father in the squalor and fly-blown misery of the fringe dwellers' camp. Here the men are demeaned and demeaning, victims of substance abuse, while inflicting worse violence on their women. Botj's father doesn't even recognize his son, begging cigarettes, swilling beer, bullying the woman who shares his filthy mattress. Ironically, this is the only scene in which we see men and women interacting in the same social space.

It is also a vision of his own future the boy cannot face. Skewed angles of framing reinforce Botj's horror and disorientation as he rushes to get his habitual panacea. The self-destructive impulse foreshadowed in the earlier petrol-sniffing riot is realized in the film's closure. This time Botj chooses a metal tightrope for his 'high'. As he sits on the edge of a railway bridge, the water below reflects a superimposed image of three laughing, nine-year-olds—Botj's memory of integration and a more innocent life. By the time Lorrpu and Milika find their friend, his body lies in the tidal mud. Embracing his body, Lorrpu gives expression to powerful grief for the irrevocable loss of one who was intertwined with his own sense of identity.

This is the classic ending to a cautionary narrative, especially tales of protest masculinity. Botj is excised rather than redeemed. As an anti-social element he has no place in his community's vision of its future. He becomes something of a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat figure, for social problems of male substance abuse

within Indigenous communities. As in the scene of Botj's grave, Madgala, Milika and Lorrpu share grief at the passing of one they have each loved. Lorrpu places on the mound the symbols of their shared childhood: a tracery of shells, a twisted coil of rope. In the sand Lorrpu draws the diamond-shaped glyph that represents their spiritual link: the sign of Baru. Finally, Lorrpu finds his identity as a Yolngu *Man*—but that identity includes rather than excludes the presence of Botj. The final sequence shows a Men's dance: Dawu, Madgala, Milika are all present. The concluding voice-over narration reiterates Lorrpu's identification with his friend and the continuity of cultural meaning. 'Time is a circle, not a line.'

Yolngu Boy falls into the category of enabling vision and cautionary tale, rather than being easily recruited into a peace education project. While it represents crises within masculinities, it doesn't attempt to offer exemplary models for urban or non-traditional communities. Milika's future is one of the stories not told. While not without its own political constraints, the life of the professional sportsman in an urban environment is an alternative masculine trajectory, which differs from the ceremonial and the violent. Nor does the film choose to engage with the structure of economic and gender regimes which leads to the fringe-dwellers' camp. However, while the film functions primarily as a cautionary tale played out on a heroic stage, among the plurality of masculine identities dramatized in the characters of the three boys, the examples of 'more peaceable ways of living', to use Connell's phrase, are offered as alternative choices to the trajectory of substance-abuse and violence which are a common experience for young men within peer culture.

This article has been refereed.

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Endnotes

¹ Bob Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp.4-5. All further references to this work will be given in parentheses in the body of the essay.

- ² ATSIIC (NT). *Submission to the Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the Community*, Northern Territory State Policy Office, March 2002, p. 2.
- ³ Noel Pearson, 'Underlying Principles of a New Policy for the Restoration of Indigenous Social Order', Discussion Paper prepared for the Prime Minister's Round Table, 23 July 2003, pp.2-3; accessed from www.capeyork-partnerships.com, 2 October 2003.
- ⁴ Elliot Johnson QC, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody—National Report Volume IV—Chapter 32, 'Coping with Alcohol and Other Dugs: Strategies for Change'*, <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadc/national/vol4/139.html>, cited 23 October 2003.
- ⁵ ATSIIC (NT), op. cit., pp. 2-3.
- ⁶ Harry Blagg, *Working with Adolescents to Prevent Domestic Violence—Indigenous Rural Model*, National Crime Prevention Program, Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, p. 20.
- ⁷ Leonie Rutherford, 'The Australian Children's Television Foundation Drama Genre', *Papers: Explorations in Children's Literature*, 11:1, 2001, pp. 5-13.
- ⁸ Clare Bradford, "'Oh How Different!": Regimes of Knowledge in Aboriginal Texts for Children', *The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 27, 2003, pp. 200-201.
- ⁹ See Blagg, op. cit.
- ¹⁰ Bradford, op. cit., p. 202.
- ¹¹ See Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and Melbourne, 1992.
- ¹² Bradford, op. cit., p. 203.
- ¹³ Rose, op. cit., pp. 74-89
- ¹⁴ See Connell, op. cit., pp. 5-6.
- ¹⁵ Bragg, op. cit., p. 17.
- ¹⁶ Carmen Daniels (2001). 'Nok-TurNL- The Deadliest Band in Australia', <http://www.ayn.ca/news/0112/nokturnl.htm>, cited 2 June 2002; Andrew Urban, et al. (2001). 'Yolngu Boy'. *Urban Cinefile*. <http://www.urbancinefile.com.au/home/view.asp?a=4629&s=Reviews>, cited 6 June 2002.
- ¹⁷ W.E.H. Stanner, cited in Bradford, op. cit., p. 203.