MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities

Shooting the Other: Representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Masculinities in 21st Century Australian Cinema.

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ABSTRACT:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity has been traditionally constructed at several stages in Australian society, forcing particular cultural and gender discourses on Indigenous men. This cultural invasion was based on misconceptions and forced stereotypes crafted by the Western male colonizer. It reinforced an intellectual, ethnic, and physical domination of White male over Aboriginal culture and masculinity. These White male ethnocentric discourses labelled Indigenous Australian people as outcasts in Australian history and excluded them from Australian narratives, including film. This banishing of any Aboriginal presence authorised a colonial view upon the thinking of Aboriginal identity and eventually Aboriginal depiction in cultural production, such as film, where Aborigines have been represented as victims, alcoholics and marginal subjects. However, throughout the first decade of the 21st century cinema has played a major role in the retelling of Australian core narratives. New films being produced by or with the aid of the Indigenous Australian people create national images of cultural fictions in which ideas on Aboriginal masculinity have been subverted. The purpose of this paper is to examine how White male hegemony over Aboriginal masculinity has been defied in recent years through the process of film representation. In order to do so, standard schemes in Australian modern cinema are analysed through examples of films representing Aboriginal male identities, such as *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2006) and *Red Hill* (Patrick Hughes, 2010). A critical study of these three films produced over the last decade provides significant examples of how Western patriarchal power is destabilized through the process of 'decolonizing' the central Indigenous male roles in films, allowing Aborigines to take over the centrality in the narrative. The diversity of themes and genres are also studied to compare and contrast the ways in which the depiction of Indigenous masculinity, coexisting with the gaze of the colonizer (either on screen, behind the camera or in front of the screen), weakens past assumptions about power relations between communities in Australian history.

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1. Preliminaries.

> The media has a responsibility to tell the country what is happening in a way that connects Australians. If you see that people are not listening to the truth, find another way to tell the story. —Jeff McMullen, foreign correspondent and journalist.

1.1. Big things have small beginnings.

This study has its origins in the year I spent as an exchange student at La Trobe University (Melbourne, Australia). During my time abroad, I had the chance to attend several seminars within the Aboriginal studies program, as well as a course on Australian cinema. Having studied Australian culture and literature during my undergraduate courses at the Universitat de Barcelona, I am fascinated by the study of the Indigenous Australian culture and more specifically with its current status in the art produced in Australia. Influenced by the work on gender studies done in many of the courses at the UB, I started to look at this issue from a postcolonial theory point of view of Aboriginal masculinity. While attending my course on cinema at La Trobe, I started wondering how the alien entity that has become the Aboriginal man in contemporary Australia is portrayed in a White male focused medium such as film.

In what ways Indigenous masculinity, as a model, is represented, confronted and challenged in contemporary Australian society? And how does cinema, as a broad reaching cultural device that mirrors the society that produces it, portray Aboriginal gender issues? What can films tell us about the controversial cohabitation between male Aboriginal bodies and the White 'gaze' that surrounds them? In order to find answers to these questions, I researched on the work of the Aboriginal filmmakers I could find, such as Leah Purcell, Tracey Moffatt, Ivan Sen, Wayne Blair and Catriona McKenzie, and spent some of my free time in Melbourne at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) watching films, by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal film-makers, where Aborigines were depicted in multiple ways.

After this experience, and facing the decision on what to do after finishing my undergraduate studies, I decided to enrol the master's programme CRIC (Construcció i Representació d'Identitats Culturals) and devote my dissertation to answering the questions that arose during my time in Australia. In that sense, this work aims to analyse and describe how Aborigines are portrayed in the films produced in Australia in the new century, focusing especially on the issue of Aboriginal masculinity. In order to do so, I will look at how White male hegemony over Aboriginal masculinity is subverted in recent years through the process of film representation. I will focus on three films as examples of new tendencies on the politics of representation of Aboriginality: *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2006) and *Red Hill* (Patrick Hughes, 2010). These three films produced during the first decade of the 21st century offer completely different portraits of Aboriginal male characters. The variety in the roots, themes and genres of these three films will allow us to throw light upon what is still today an obscure entity within the contemporary Australian society: the Aboriginal man.

1.2. Coping with the White male gaze: postcolonial constructions of masculinity

The European colonial endeavour established a relationship of ethnic hegemony between the colonizer and the colonised, not only based on cultural and religious values but also on patriarchal ideas. The suppression of the Indigenous 'Other' by means of cultural and physical violence complemented the spread of the colonial discourses, then securing the imperial ruling of the White Western man (Sharp 2008, 111). In this regard, Derek Stanovsky writes in his article on postcolonial masculinities:

> First World discourses about Third World masculinities often produce and maintain
> representations that serve to create, perpetuate and reinforce First World norms of
> masculinity and heterosexuality by way of the boundaries and contrasts provided by

these "Other" Third World masculinities and sexualities. (Stanovsky 2007, 496)

In my study of film representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander masculinities in modern Australian cinema, I will use a postcolonial approach of what we could label 'alien masculinities'. The Aboriginal man is an alien presence in the national imaginary of Australia because he is a constant reminder of the blood crime that sits at the basis of what is contemporary Australia. Everything about the Indigenous Australian man is alien for the White ethnic centre, from the way they relate to a land and culture they had established 40.000 years before the first European settlers arrived, to their performance of masculinity. Since the decade of the 1970s, thanks to the work of literary critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, more attention has been paid to examining the role of art, literature and more lately media in the process of constructing and spreading racial stereotypes, always created under Western discursive apparatuses (Stanovsky 2007, 495). At the same time, for the last three decades gender studies have increased their research on media production in terms of how it constructs artificial ideas about men and masculinities around the world, which will hopefully "enable us to move toward a vision that incorporates multiculturalism within a context of powerful political resistance to racism, as it is informed by and in turn informs economic exploitation and male dominance" (Davis 1997, 40). As a matter of fact, living in an age where human beings relate to one another and their respective contexts through the mirror of mainstream media, films offer new meanings and new expressions of identity within an entirely modern and massive way of transmission. It also changes the relationship between the social reality and its fictional representations. What is more, films are not created from nothingness but are given birth by pre-existent, external realities. Hence, cinema is a powerful tool for cultural studies in order to examine relationships between different ethnic groups, since it addresses a vast audience and is regarded as both art and commodity.

In literary and film studies, postcolonial theory is extremely useful to understand the

contemporary postcolonial reality of some countries where European settlement has had a huge political and cultural impact (or in some cases like Australia, even a neocolonial reality), by analysing their cultural products. The birth of Australia was marked by war between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and British settlers. This violence lasted until well into the 20th century. One of the main consequences of Colonialism and Imperialism is that the descendants of the European invaders and the Indigenous people that have managed to survive years of physical, political and cultural violence must now cohabit (Sharp 2008, 111). Neither group seems to have any interest in coming to terms with the Other, which leaves us with a country where talking about a national identity is a fallacy. The truth is that half a million of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live among 20 million of British descendants that still bear colonial ideas. The proof that there is still a long way to go before Australia can come to terms with itself is that while Aboriginal culture is the oldest living culture on the planet, Indigenous Australian people are also the most imprisoned people on the planet (Tracy 2006).

In recent years, postcolonial studies have also started to merge with a wide range of theoretical interests, integrating new theories from fields such as gender studies, including the study of masculinities. These interdisciplinary connections are not surprising at all, given that postcolonialism itself is shaped by a mixed assemblage of theories and discourses with the aim of analysing and re-reading literary texts, cultures, and politics produced by, or dealing with, the different cultural identities that are still fighting their way out of colonial dominance. At the centre of all these theories and studies we can find the issue of the construction and representation of cultural, national and individual identities.

If we think of identity as a constructed label, we are going to be able to dispute the concept as something steady or the sum of a solid set of properties such as gender, race and culture. The problem with such a fixed set of analytical tools is that even in accurate research, there will be struggles between those attitudes that are imposed by external forces and the individual experiences

of any subject, denying the endless ways in which male identity can be produced. We need to understand that identity is a fictional model, which needs to be handled carefully, because depending on the way it is used, it can be working in the benefit of a particular wave of thought. In that sense, the field of gender studies and the theories on masculinity have been one of the most recent cultural theories that have been able to transform our view on how identities are constructed and retold, especially in the humanities. Of course, this phenomenon has not happened in a vacuum, rather it is closely related to other social movements. The post-World War II period was a time of crisis of faith in the previous patriarchal order and the figure of the state. This crisis led Western societies to ask themselves questions that where the inception of movements such as feminism and queer theory, that since the second half of the 20th century have altered our perception of the cultural artefacts portraying and creating cultural identities and realities.

I will start this analysis by establishing how the issue of Indigenous masculinity has been approached, if at all, by postcolonial critique in the particular case of Australia. In other words; how do we understand the 'black man'? Indigenous Australian men have been perpetually silenced and rarely appreciated as a subject with multiple potential identities. Then, the first step to neutralize racist discourses is to accept that the Aboriginal male identity must be thought as multidimensional and inconsistent, in connection to their conflicting interaction with racist discourses and ideologies. We must abandon the belief in the existence of a homogeneous and transversal discourse of masculinity that can be universally applied. Men are linked to each other and build their relationships through ideas of power (Connell 1995, 35). Because masculinities are arranged in a hierarchical structure, postcolonial theory will help us analyse and challenge matters of ethnic authority. It is in fact an effective instrument to subvert essentialist discourses of masculine attributes forced upon Indigenous Australian people. Since the issue of identity is seen more and more as a digressive construct that attempts to manufacture archetypes and classify individuals, we need to look at how subject agency is able to raise crucial questions about the mainstream images of

Aboriginality.

Given the wide range of discourses working for the colonial endeavour, it is naive to consider the constructions of race and masculinity as being produced by isolated and non-related power structures. Nevertheless, that does not necessarily mean that they are ruled by the same strategies of thought. Both race and gender studies converge and diverge with each other, which is of great interest for us since both theories reinforce each other and at the same time are critical to each other. To start with, postcolonialism and gender studies use similar conceptions and ways of examining the structure of the dominant narratives;

> El camino para afirmar la supremacía de la raza blanca fue desvalorizar al "otro", conferirle un sentido de inferioridad y crear la mentalidad de esclavo. El "otro" étnico pasó a encarnar algunos de los valores que mostraban paralelismos con los atribuidos a otro ser subordinado: la mujer. Las personas de color – negros, asiáticos, indios,...- fueron convertidos en estereotipos y contemplados como individuos sumisos, pasivos, incultos, femeninos; sus culturas fueron degradadas y su lenguaje y ritos sustituidos por la cultura colonizadora. (Carabí, 2000: 16)

Interestingly enough, the resistance of the oppressed against the imperial and patriarchal authority usually results in a deviation from the aesthetic canon established in art, manifesting a formal subversion as well as a challenging content: "The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that postcolonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place'' (Ashcroft 2002, 39). Therefore, it is the continuous engagement and interaction between race and sex that we have to bear in mind when analysing the creation and characterization of Aboriginal masculinity in contemporary Australia. At the same time, the colonised subject can submit his own identity to the discourses of

the imperialist invader.

> That is, colonised people themselves engage with, reproduce and manipulate colonial representations, diverting them toward more localized struggles for power, accommodation, or resistance, and nuancing and adding to them in ways that owe little (while remaining in certain respects connected) to their original configurations. (Stokes 2000, 215)

If we approach this issue keeping in mind a broad perspective, we will see that Aboriginal identity has been traditionally constructed in several stages in Australian society, forcing particular cultural and gender discourses upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, based on misconceptions and forced stereotypes. These stereotypes have been crafted by the Western male colonizer to reinforce an intellectual, ethnic, and physical domination of the White male over Aboriginal man. The ethnocentric discourses that are part of the colonial process of appropriation have labelled Indigenous Australian people as outcasts in the history of Australia, at the same time being excluded from Australian narratives. When dealing with current representations of Aboriginal masculinities, postcolonial theory also plays a part in understanding how colonial discourse, still working now, have blurred and manipulated the identity of the Indigenous Australian man. Since he cannot escape the control of the hegemonic White masculinity that operates within the colonial endeavour, this sense of hierarchical masculinity and its negotiation is always present in the fictionalised construction of the Aboriginal man (Connell 1987, 208).

It is not surprising to see that the Western patriarchal discourses about colonised Eastern masculinities often create and sustain fictionalised constructions of the 'Other' masculinities as means to produce and strengthen the colonizer's ruling of cultural and male identities, by using the constant opposition against this otherness. In terms of how to define masculinities as an

independent theoretical frame, we could find multiple definitions and approaches to the issue of male identity, manhood and masculine roles: "Because masculinity belongs to no one gender, race, sexuality, or intellectual discipline, it is important to represent multivalent ways of thinking about the conditions, sensibility, and psychological, economic, legal, and medical imperatives that enforce it. for this reason" (Berger, 1995, p6). In my analysis of the cinematic construction of Aboriginal male identities, I will attempt to use more than one of these concepts, for my research to be as rigorous as possible.

Masculinity is not only about everything men think and do, it is more about all that men think and do to be men within the framing of society. It is clear that most cultures consider some men to be more virile than other men, regarded as inferior, either by nature or association. Connell says that being a man means necessary dealing with the 'hegemonic masculinity', either by opposing it or backing up its controlling position. Hence, in a particular cultural context we can find several masculine identities in direct competition (Connell 1987, 183). To date, all these aspects have been extremely successful in examining maleness in literature, and how men in different cultural contexts perform their own masculinity and others'. Masculinity is not made and discussed only in terms of sexuality, but it is perpetually reconstructed in many other social spaces. What is acceptable according to a particular central form of masculinity in a particular period could be unacceptable in another time or place. Thus, conflict is an integral property of experiencing masculinity. Just being a man is not enough to be recognised as such by others, maleness involves the subject's engagement in a display of male performance that regenerates his identity and must be modified according to different social contexts (Connell 2000, 29).

It is not surprising to notice that postcolonial theory has become capital within the literary and film studies in terms of analysing the discourses acting in the texts (both written and filmed) produced in countries with the backdrop of the European invasion. Consequently, late research done on masculinities is also incorporating the issue of ethnic identity. It is important to understand that

gender identities are not separated from the subject of race and its cultural background, since race is a crucial factor in a community's social and political reality. Therefore, if we investigate the depictions of Indigenous men in the modern media, whether it is in texts, films, advertisements or TV, our understanding of their place in relation to the dominant White gaze will improve. The study of these racial and gendered representations of the Other is extremely helpful in a better understanding of their social roots.

Since the arrival of the first European settlers in Australia by the end of the 18th century, the White man started a process of colonizing not only the land, but also the black body (both male and female) and assigned an inferior status to the Aboriginal culture, with the purpose of reassuring his own status and identity in the new land. The colonization and slaughter of the Indigenous population degraded Aboriginal male's existence, turning them into little else than animals in order to protect the White's rights to the land. The Aborigines became the eternal national victims and the objectified embodiment of the fears and fantasies of the new-born Australian subject. From this first moment of contact, two images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men were created in the White narratives. The first and most common one is the Aboriginal man as a child-like and victimized character, an object from an inferior race, both in terms of culture and biology. The second one is the Aboriginal male as the tracker and the mystic black link with the landscape and the magic, which can become a threat to the White man's claim to the land. Both images are the result of projecting the repressed fears of the first White settlers, fear of the strange landscape and the strange black bodies that surrounded them, driven by an inferiority complex in relation the metropolis. This is one of the crucial precepts of the colonial enterprise: "empire then marks a decisive historical change in the social embodiment of masculinities. Under imperialism men's bodies are shifted around the world, trained and controlled in new ways, sorted and symbolized on different principles.'' (Connell 2000, 62). This origin helped to make up the stereotypes of the Aborigines as criminals and pariahs in order to justify the social and political abuse of the

Aboriginal male. Most of the studies published in Australia about Aboriginal masculinities have been made in relation to health, social and anthropology research, but little importance has been given to the cultural and literary representations of the Aboriginal male (Rutherford 2004, 64).

In my research I have dug in the relatively new subject of the study of film representations of masculinity, focusing on Indigenous Australian men depicted in contemporary Australian films and exploring the practical applications of masculinity studies to the film criticism of Australian cinema. The present-day reality of the Aboriginal communities in Australia still evidences the European attempts to wipe them off the land. According to the Australian Bureau Statistics (ABS), the Indigenous population had grown at twice the rate of the overall population of Australia since 1996, though nowadays only 517.200 people (2.5% of the total population) declare themselves to be of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin, when some historians argue that the Aboriginal population before the European arrival could range between 750.000 and one million. Aboriginal life expectancy is 11 years less than for the Australian population as a whole (67 years for Indigenous men, 73 for women). Still, the median age for Aboriginal people at the moment of death is 25 years lower than the rest of the population (ABS). In addition, having lost almost 200 of the languages Aboriginal tribes spoke before the arrival of Europeans and the constant fight to have their rights to the land acknowledged, Aboriginal people find themselves as the victims of an imposed national history. The pressure to adapt to live in the urban areas combined with their marginal position explains why the suicide rates among Aborigines are a lot higher than any other ethnic group in Australia. ABS statistics (2001-2005) show that 44 years or younger Indigenous men are three times more likely to commit suicide than non-Indigenous people.

Men's studies can help us to analyse how this reality is portrayed in art and contest conventional colonialist and patriarchal images of the Aboriginal male body in film. Moreover, we can explore possible and more positive new models of Aboriginal masculinity in the Australian contemporary media. In point of fact, as we will see, the three films this study analyses offer

unconventional Aboriginal characters that challenge not only the colonial discourses still working in Australia, but also the colonizer's patriarchal values. Masculinity is constantly represented in the media and any representation of it is constructed, which is especially significant when analysing the double social construction of Aboriginal masculinity; first as a national racial object, secondly as a gendered object (Rekhari 2008, 126). For years, depictions of Aborigines have been created primarily by White writers and filmmakers using harmful stereotypes, never differentiating among the plurality of the Aboriginal communities (even if we know that before the arrival of British settlers there were hundreds of Aboriginal languages spoken by the almost 250 individual Aboriginal nations), creating a narrow standard of fictional characters who tell us more about the colonizing subject than the colonised object.

I want to stress the use of the plural when writing about Aboriginal masculinities, since one of the biggest issues about colonial discourses forced onto the Indigenous people is the homogenizing process applied to the many representations of the Other's identity. One of the aspects I am going to discuss in each of the films studied is how within the Aboriginal community there is space for multiple forms of maleness. Thus, while Aborigines keep being represented as uncivilised and violent on the screen, their White counterparts naturally fall on the other side of the spectrum, as innocent and comprehensive invaders. The polarization of roles works as a way of reasserting the colonial endeavour and justify the marginalization of the Aboriginal in order to secure the stability and progress of the nation. *Yolngu Boy*, *Ten Canoes* and *Red Hill* prove that a clean-cut polarization between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal men is unrealistic, since neither subject is a uniform entity.

1.3. The secret life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in film: an overview of the Indigenous Australian role in Australian cinema.

Nowadays, film images are a great influence on the process of constructing cultural and gender

identities, because films are closely connected to the social reality they mimic and therefore they are valuable tools to analyse individual and communal experiences. In that sense, throughout the first decade of the 21st century cinema has played a major role in retelling the Australian core narratives. This is a consequence of cinema's ability to take over social and national discourses in its search of creating a manufactured sense of reality on the screen (Campbell, 2006, 57). When it comes to the representation of Aboriginal culture and identity in film, it is important to point out that the range and representational power of the 21st century Australian cinema when dealing with the presence of the Aborigines is determined by the gaze of the White man, either in the figure of filmmakers or the audience.

Film representations of Aboriginal masculinities are strongly influenced by social and historical factors. Cinema, as a mainstream form of art, has always been closely connected to the established dominant ideology and even helped to assure its power over the social subjects. Sometimes, filmmakers are not even aware of the chains they are wearing:

Australia is still a racist society; the problem is to reveal that certain cinematic forms and practices reproduce this racism in an uncritical way. The problem is also one of accepting that there is this ubiquitous racist framework that may entrap even directors and producers who consider themselves radical or 'liberated'. (Moore and Muecke 1984, 37)

Motion pictures tend to communicate images assumed to be authentic by audiences, and that often legitimize the position of those in power. In terms of the cinematic imagining of the Aboriginal, cinema is not immune to the discourses that have been working in Australia since the colonial heyday. Much of these images contributed to create a White colonizer's myth of the Aboriginal as a fading presence in the country, an inferior race that was condemned to disappear,

with or without the actions of the colonizer (Anderson 1997, 5). This myth was built with the visual and narrative contrast between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters, inscribing Indigenous Australian people in the lower strata of the power structure ruling Australia, and always depending on the policies at work at the time a film is produced.

As a White-male-controlled medium, cinema manufactures Aboriginal male characters that are nothing but blurred motion pictures of authentic Indigenous Australian men. These constructs of Aboriginal manhood most of the times tell more about the White man's identity than about the Aborigine's, which builds on contrast:

> The two terms of the 'self' versus the 'Other' cannot be understood without the existence and operation of each. The signified of the 'Other' is always indicated as being secondary to the primary 'self', reducing Aboriginal characters and their representations to the expectations of this binarism. (Rekhari, 2008, p.131)

In that sense, films have historically become manipulated artefacts, a series of images put together to shape the national narrative aimed to a large audience. This audience is not an innocent passive entity in the process of visual representation, but they give meaning to the films they watch and therefore charge every single shot with cultural and social readings: "the subject is not a real person, but a discursive position constructed by the cinematic apparatus" (Campbell, 2006, 26). Contemporary film productions made in Australia seem to be more positive in their portrayals of Aborigines, but even in contemporary 21st century multicultural Australia the old colonial model of representation and its prejudicial stereotypes have managed to survive. Even so, some new films released during the last decade have helped to update earlier asymmetrical power relations and portray Aboriginal characters that are more dynamic and empowered.

As said before, if we look at the way Indigenous Australians have been depicted on the

screen, we must be aware that most films dealing with Aboriginal characters have been produced by non-Aboriginal filmmakers aiming at an all-White audience. Even with films that seemingly try to approach Indigenous reality, Indigenous people are never expected to be part of the audience (O'Regan 1996, 22). Because of that, we could assume that Aborigines have been historically constructed as objects of the White gaze (Merlan 1989, 108). The repetition of negative stereotypes in cinema contributed to the myth of the Aboriginal man as primitive, drunk, violent, criminal strangers in their own land. The counterpart to this image is a supposed more positive representation of Aborigines as wise spiritual guardians of the landscape, which became also a stereotyped objectification of the Aboriginal fictional character. What is really interesting about these two polar film roles available for the Aboriginal man is that Aborigines themselves have had little or nothing to say about their representation. As a matter of fact, instead of assuming that these main discourses are the product of racist believes and attitudes, media representations went on representing Aborigines as responsible for their own marginalization, going as far as suggesting that their genetic flaws make them a danger to themselves. For instance, when trying to discuss the reasons for the high rate of alcoholism among Aboriginal male adults, the common believe is that Aborigines just have no resistance to liquor (Augoustinos 1994, 131).

Aborigines have been basically cast out from any possibility to decide which images of them should be included in the national narratives. That is an example of how successful was the Australian colonial endeavour, since it assured for the colonizer the control upon the view and thinking of Aboriginal identity and eventually Aboriginal depiction in cultural production, such as film. There Aborigines have been represented in accordance to the necessity of the White ethnocentric figure, and their role has been to be the object of the White gaze and the focus of the White myth. Historically speaking, Aborigines have played a very small role in Australian cinema. Before World War II, Aboriginal parts were played only by White actors wearing dark make up. These characters were primary depicted as violent savages and as a threat to the innocent White

settlers. In that sense, during this first period of Australian cinema the clash between Aboriginal communities and White settlers was often approached. However, first film representations were fake images, since blacks "were represented by Whites made up with black faces. Blacks were cast as savages, as ferocious nuisances to the colonial endeavour." (Moore and Muecke 1984, 39)

One of the first sound films shot in Australia, *Heritage* (Charles Chauvel, 1935), portrayed the stereotype of the 'black devil' attacking a White owned farm. In this film, Aborigines kill a White man and his wife using spears and end up being chased by White Australian 'cowboys' shooting at them with rifles. This is quite representative of the race politics in Australia at the time. For instance, with the passing of the Western Australia Aborigines Act amendment in 1936, Aboriginal people could be legally imprisoned without trial and needed to get a permit to enter certain towns. These kinds of policies prove that Indigenous Australian people were legally considered a menace for the White man. Aboriginal people were stigmatized as non-civilized and inferior. Interestingly enough, their roles and appearance in the films produced during the 1930s and the 1940s were not different from the black characters depicted in classic Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer adventure films set in Africa.

During the 1950s the portrays of the Indigenous Australian people started to change a little bit, marked by the policies of assimilation promoted by the government, which included Indigenous child removal laws. Several films were made by the government to promote these policies of assimilation and forced integration. They tried, in a way, to teach the Aborigines which ways of living were considered right for Australians. Most of these films were semi-documentaries about the 'educators' working with the Aboriginal communities, and were a mere propaganda to prove that the government was dealing with the 'problem'. These films helped to create the idea that the main problems preventing the integration of the Aboriginal communities into the contemporary Australian way of life were the Aborigines themselves. They were depicted mostly as nomads who lack a proper culture. The main legacy of these films was creating the idea that Aboriginal identity

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was in fact a national problem (Rehhari 2008, 129).

In 1955 Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* became notable for being the first Australian movie ever filmed in colour and the first to have two Aboriginal actors, Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth, playing the main roles. It tells the story of an orphan Aboriginal girl born in a British station that is adopted by a White family and raised in European values, separated from the Aboriginal community. As a young 'civilised' girl, she is abducted by an Aboriginal man from the desert named Marbuck. From that moment, a tragic ending for both characters is inevitable, since the film seems to accept the belief that there is no possible space for Aboriginal success. At the time the film was produced, the policy in relation to the Aboriginal communities could be described as a policy of assimilation (O'Reagan, 1996, p192). Because of their 'inferior' nature, Aborigines were believed to have two only possible ways of surviving in the civilised Australia; either by being assimilated by the white culture, accepting their role as a national subordinate, or extinguishing.

The myth of the hopelessness Aboriginal is represented in *Jedda* and, even though the film sometimes tries to keep a neutral position about the racial issues depicted, the ending where Jedda is killed because of Marbuck's madness seems to preach the audience again about the impossibility of civilising Aboriginal people; Jedda is a double crossed character, as an Aborigine and as a woman. Marcia Langton criticizes the film as "a colonialist fantasy which rewrites Australian history so that the black rebel against White colonial rule is a rebel against the laws of his own society" (Langton, 1993, 45). This film depicts Aboriginal people as marginal mute subjects that form part of outback nature, or contemplate the deserts from the top of a hill, and it does not aim to challenge the racist ideas that kept Aborigines as outcasts and inferior to the White man. Most Aborigines in these films are either merely a workforce at the service of the stations or are classified as bush people. This imperialist view is never challenged, strengthening the expansion of the British Empire in Australia.

During the 1960s and the 1970s films dealing with the Aboriginal 'problem' kept using racist strategies to address the 'uncivilised' manners of Aboriginal culture, by praising at the same time

Australian White middle-class values. Nevertheless, and thanks to some social movements in the country and the introduction of self-determination policies, there is a visible change. Some films started to represent Aboriginals as subjects in control of their own matters. The best example of this is Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1971), a film that portrays Aborigines as sympathetic and praises their knowledge of the land. Of course, this image is not constructed without using the stereotype of Aboriginal as mysterious and separated from the White urban centres. Moreover, the Aborigine finds here once again a tragic end, killing himself and bringing back the myth of the fading race. Even though he helps the two White characters to survive and befriends them, he is deemed unable to survive himself in White society. In the film, Aboriginality is portrayed through the wild landscape, where Aboriginal characters can survive only because of their primitive nature, a nature that is assumed to be unable to evolve and adapt in the new contemporary Australia; "The distinctive imagery of the 'primitive' is also equated with the outback in the narrative of *Walkabout*. In particular these 'primitive' images of Indigenous identity in an unknown opposition to non-Indigenous 'culture' are glaringly present'' (Rekhari, 2008, p.129). For a White urban spectator, the ability to survive in the bush shown by the Aboriginal character only helps reinforce the distance between him and civilization. It is worth mentioning that in many Australian films produced between the 1950s and the 1970s, there is an explicit refusal of the White culture to integrate and share the land with the Aborigines, going back to the fantasy of the success of the colonial project of racial cleaning and reinforcing the myth of pre-settlement Australia as *terra nullius*. The term, meaning 'land belonging to no one', does not imply emptiness but has to be read as an absence of civilization. The English law of colonial period justified legal settlement of uninhabited or barbarous country (Williams 2008, 44).

Up to the 1980s, there seems to be a clear lack of interest in producing narratives where Indigenous culture can succeed over the colonizer. Aborigines are then forced to occupy roles that tie them to the esoteric and mystic outback, roles that make them easy to oppose with the highly

cultured lives of the urban White communities. Of course, this is another racist reading of the Aborigine, becoming again merely background shadows for the celebration of Western forms of culture in Australia. Thus, most Aboriginal characters tend to embody the antonymic Other. In films such as *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), Aboriginal people were always excluded from the modern urban spaces reserved only for White society and culture. *The Fringe Dwellers* (Bruce Beresford, 1983) is also significant for how the film portrays the conflict between the urban setting and the Aborigines living at the margins of society. The story deals with a hard working woman who dreams of being assimilated by the colonizer and escaping from her fringe place in the Australian society. Her dreams are not only jeopardized, but are destroyed by clown-like Indigenous men.

In 1991, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is established and a year later the land rights of the Aboriginal people were acknowledged in the Mabo trial, which lead in 1993 to the passing of the Native Title Act. This law allowed Indigenous people to reclaim certain sacred lands. During this period, Indigenous people played a more relevant role in Australian films and there were open references to a multicultural collaboration and cohabitation on screen (Collins, 2004, p5). For instance, in *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (Stephan Elliott, 1994), one of the most successful Australian films ever made, we can find an iconic scene where the main characters perform 'I will survive' in front of an Aboriginal camp, suggesting an image of a cultural exchange. Peter Krausz states that "the representation of the underlying cultural differences and attempts at reconciliation are both moving and overly sentimental, yet this was a genuine look at a potentially united Australian society" (2003, 93). However, this attempt to portray a transcultural reality for Australia is little less than a fallacy. The problem here is not that Aboriginal social problems are not foregrounded, but rather the way in which they are approached. This is also significant when dealing with traumas in the Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships, such as the lost child narrative in Philippe Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), which is a film inscribed

within the White guilt fantasy.

Contemporary media representations of Aboriginal manhood need to be put against the stereotypes inherited through time, still living within the new cultural discourses in Australia. Yet, it is impossible even now to claim for some degree of authenticity in the Aboriginal fictional persona. The film representations of Aboriginal identity that can be found in Australian cinema are far from representative of the people and culture they claim to mirror. Their aim is not to get verifiable, anthropological knowledge to understand them, but to create a 'reflecting' subject that when faced with the White man aids a better understanding of himself, legitimizing his presence in the land. By framing the Aboriginal man as irrational, mystic, alcoholic and primitive, the colonizer can celebrate himself and his moral and cultural superiority as logical, civilised and advanced Australian. Hence, the Aboriginal man becomes a manufactured device of self-reflection since, being fictionalised, he becomes easy to manipulate and even better, he never talks back (Rehhari 2008, 132).

In contemporary multicultural world, Australia constructs its first inhabitants as a cultural brand that can be commercialized, and cinema has not missed the chance to use them as a narrative asset. Representations of Aborigines in the last decade have moved from ethnically marked to a genuine exploration of the possibilities of the alien culture. This process, of course, implies the use of a positive make up upon Aboriginal culture. As Langton says:

> The problem of discussing the politics and aesthetics in film and television production
> by or about Aborigines lies in the positioning of us as objects and of the person behind
> the camera as subject. If we are so misplaced, it is not surprising that the political and
> aesthetic critique of these images is so muted. The problem remains one of dominance
> (1994, p97).

Basically, this means that Aboriginal art and language are suddenly praised, which goes along with a sense of manufactured national union on the screen. The new discourses applied in film productions support particular models of acceptance. However, since cinema works largely under the control of ideology, we need to assume that the diversity of films can, up to some extent, be rooted in the same social structure as the outside world. Some elements will be recurrently used, either to refute or to reinforce them, but always with the White man holding the power. Any film dealing with the cohabitation of different cultures regularly triggers racist representations. The possibility of speaking out and freeing an unmediated Aboriginal discourse is problematic, because we need to take for granted the existence of an Aboriginal experience which is universal and suitable to all political positions.

By using studies on masculinities as groundwork and the postcolonial approach as method, my research attempts to analyse the new representations of Aboriginal masculinities in three films produced during the first decade of the 21st century. As I am going to expose, *Yolngu Boy, Ten Canoes* and *Red Hill* exist as a response to many of the established stereotypes that have been forced upon the Aboriginal male body and offer their main characters a level of agency over the narrative without precedence. In subverting such ethnocentric discourses, these films manage to create new valid roles for Aboriginal masculinities within the Australian national narratives. The conflict at the centre of each one of these films can be identified with the colonial want of control over the Other and the struggle to act under the rules of the invader. The films I am going to analyse must be thought about carefully since they are constructed in connection to political discourses. It is highly difficult for any given narrative to depict the multiple origins of Aboriginal fictions. The fight against White oppression can be clearly displayed in all of them, but the working discourses are many and sometimes incompatible with each other. The multiplicity of voices inside any racial group prevents the generalization of the Aboriginal voice into a single discourse. Interestingly enough, while trying to fight colonial oppression, simplification of what it means to be Aboriginal

has almost come through in diminishing the multiplicity of identities within the Aboriginal people.

2. Becoming an Indigenous Australian man: multiple possibilities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young males in Stephen Johnson's *Yolngu Boy* (2001)

The symbolic film representation of Aboriginal masculinities is based both on the context of the dominant ideological discourses and on the visual construction of the characters. As we know, material relations and group practices are strongly defined by the specific social superstructures of the moment (Berger 1995, 269). It is important to take this into account in order to make a more specific critique of the gendered constructions of Aboriginal film characters, influenced by racial politics, power relations between ethnic groups and social tensions. In order to subvert the stereotypes created by the mainstream narratives dominated by the White man's gaze, we must accept the potential multiplicity of the Aboriginal man, hence identifying more than one archetype of masculinity operating within the same group. The possibility of multiple male identities has historically been denied to the Aboriginal subject, whose interpretation by the colonizer has always been perceived as a unified homogeneous entity, and therefore easier to manipulate (Said 1977, 12). Then, within this multiplicity of masculinities, we need to expose the tensions between them and the possible areas of conflict and cooperation.

Of all the film genres and narratives that revolve around the representation of male identity, the coming of age story offers an insight in the problematic process of creating these identities. Most of these films are focused on one or more young characters facing the individual and social conflicts in order to become a man, either the man they want to be, or the man the group expects them to be. This genre is even more relevant in contemporary societies, where teenagers mature in multicultural societies and acquire knowledge about the interaction between different cultures at an early age. Consequently, in Aboriginal communities, the cohabitation of tribal law and ancient rituals and traditions with the Western urban way of life has proved to be a challenge for the young generations. The tension between tradition and modernity has produced fast and culturally unprecedented changes. Activities such as hunting and fishing are now more recreational than

organic. As a matter of fact, Aboriginal children and adolescents now grow up acquiring the new skills required to survive in a very different world than the one their parents and grandparents knew. As a result of external influences, Aboriginal adolescents are no longer an exclusive cultural unity based on tribal heritage, but their values performed in everyday behaviour show both their own and the colonizer's culture. The most significant influences from Western culture are related to individual expression, in contrast to the strong sense of group characteristic of Aboriginal communities. Some of these new values and practices can be easily integrated by the young Aboriginal male, but others are more difficult to reconcile.

As a coming of age film, Stephen Johnson's *Yolngu Boy* (2001) is extremely relevant as it stages three competing constructions of Aboriginal masculinities embodied by the three main characters. This film is an example of filmmaking collaboration between White filmmakers and the Aboriginal communities. Stephen Johnson and the film crew were granted access to some sacred ceremonies by the Aborigines in Arnhem Land, so they could portray them with accuracy on screen. Moreover, almost the totality of the cast is from Aboriginal descent and Aboriginal artists were given roles within the a filmmaking process and the production task, such as the Australian Aboriginal band Yothu Yindi, which composed some parts of the soundtrack, and Mandawuy and Galarrwuy Yunupingu (members of Yothu Yindi), credited as associated producers (*Yolngu Boy* press release). It is important to acknowledge this background, since it provides a sense of inter-cultural dialogue crucial for this kind of productions.

In the film, ceremonial culture is portrayed by means of the realization of ideal masculinity, which offers an answer to the collective struggles of disparity and violence. Connell states that only a minority of men embody the ideal form of masculinity. It is precisely because of that ascendancy of an uncommon prototype that conflict arises among men; challenging one another, men manage to construct themselves as men (Connell 2002, 2). At the same time, it distinguishes different and 'multiple' masculinities operating within the Aboriginal community away from the tribal law, and

develops a space, in the form of a road movie, where these masculinities are forced to clash into each other, surviving in interaction with each other, often by means of hierarchy and segregation. It tells the story of three Aboriginal adolescents, Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui), Botj (Sean Mununggurr) and Milika (Nathan Daniels), who all are part of the Yolngu community in North East Arnhem Land. Even though the three of them share a similar childhood and have the same education within the tribal tradition, it is soon revealed that each one of them has chosen different paths towards manhood. This is problematic when put next to traditional colonial views of Aboriginality. As I pointed out in the preliminary section, the Aboriginal people have been homogenized through centuries of objectification. Hence, new Aboriginal-themed films are tackling this issue by showing the plurality of Aboriginal identities.

So, the value of the film lies in the central role it gives to the so called rites of passage, the practices that allow the young members of any social group to progress from childhood to adulthood through the staging of several rituals or experiences. The idea behind these rites is that they are identifiable group practices that symbolize a transition where a new self is constructed by having the rest of the group (always older men) witness the moment where the boy is challenged, morally and physically, to test his ability to move up in the social hierarchy. As we will see, what makes *Yolngu Boy* relevant is that it acknowledges Western culture's influence in the development of male identities among the Aborigines.

2.1. Dreams of modernity: passing Indigenous masculinities.

Can Aboriginal traditions survive and be useful for Aboriginal male teenagers when facing the challenges of contemporary life? Are traditional archetypes of masculinity assets or handicaps to the projects of development and modernization of the Aboriginal man? *Yolngu Boy* tries to offer some answers to these questions, fuelling a debate in which the film offers two possible paths. On the one hand, in the film some characters assume an idealization of the Aboriginal cultural heritage,

meaning that they internalize the belief that in order to discuss modern-day problems the Indigenous Australian men must recover Indigenous traditions that were degraded and silenced during the colonial heyday. On the other hand, the film also deals with a more critical view of the Aboriginal heritage and opens the possibility for the Aboriginal people to break free from the ancestral past in order to address the most pressing needs of the present.

In order to survive and progress in contemporary Australia, for Aboriginal youth especially, it is necessary to adopt one positioning or the other as they go through the troubles of the present, while trying to regenerate ideas from past realities. The source of this uneasy scenario can be traced back to the fact that we have two different cultures, two different worlds, fighting to survive on the same land, the same space; "Australia is a heterotopic production of country with ongoing historical effects, where multiple and shifting understandings and power relationships exist in the same real space" (Lambert, 2010, p308). The film proposes three ways of Indigenous male development, embodied by the three Yolngu boys: two of them come out successful (Lorrpu and Milika) and the other is proved to be deemed to fail (Botj).

The film opens with Lorrpu's dreaming, where he recalls his childhood with his friends Milika and Botj. We soon learn that the three of them shared ritual activities such as fishing and ceremonies marking their development within the Yolngu society when they were children. Lorrpu's voice-over talks about the dream they shared of becoming great hunters together: "three Men, one Skin, one dream" (Johnson, 1:42). The use of the dream here is unusual. The idea of dreaming is used both in the Western common meaning, as the chase of a dream that fuels the individual male quest for success, and the Aboriginal ancestral notion of dreaming about law, responsibility and the intimate relationship between people and the land (Rutherford 2004, 65). The film's formal strategies of using flash-back or dreamlike sequences work to emphasise the more Western-like meaning of the dream, while the presence of the spirit that accompanies the boys through their journey as their guide, healer and judge introduces the tribal sense of dreaming.

This duality between Aboriginal elements and Western influence is going to have a huge presence in the film, both in terms of content and form. For instance, *Yolngu Boy* uses genres that are familiar to most Western audiences, such as the coming of age and the road movie narratives, to help the White spectator to engage with the story (Collins 2004, 90). It is also a film shot in English, not in the Yolngu language. This is done to help the film reach a broader audience, since a movie filmed in an Aboriginal language could create a sense of alienation for White audiences (*Yolngu Boy* Press Release). Nonetheless, the topics that are going to be explored concern only the Australian Aboriginal youth. Therefore, *Yolngu Boy* can be placed in a position of cultural transference, rethinking the Aboriginal representations within the mainstream media in a state of acknowledged transcultural relation. The film has to deal with the stereotypes that are usually formed when dealing with the Aboriginal film persona.

In *Yolngu Boy,* we find characters with different ambitions and views in terms of masculine success, from the primary embrace of ceremonial masculinity to the material 'Western' way of achieving manhood. Lorrpu is the only one of the three who has committed himself to the learning of the traditional skills. Milika and Botj, on the contrary, have been seduced by Western spaces of masculinity. Even though the three main characters may carry on traditional values, they are also the product of contemporary Australia, as it is made clear by their clothes, their mobile phones and the music they listen to. This film is extremely valuable for its portrait of some of the realities that have an impact on the lives of the Aboriginal adolescents, growing up in the modern world, and it shows why many Aborigines feel divided between two cultures.

The performance of masculinity is always a collective process in any social group (Berger 1995, 12). The differences and hierarchical relationships between masculinities within the community play a central role in the choices made by the young men in the film. *Yolngu Boy* proposes a debate about the variable factors that impact the individual perception of identity, how we understand ourselves and how we belong in the larger social structure. The male quest for

identity is at the core of the narrative in the film. The flashbacks and private backgrounds help us recognize the powers involved in their journey towards manhood. Not only are we dealing with the quest of three Aboriginal boys in a world controlled by Western values, but the search for identity in adolescence is a popular topic among many cultures, since it is a period in the life of any human being when one has to conciliate many factors such as family, culture and private desires before accessing adulthood (Collins 2004, 91). For the three Yolngu boys in the film, this journey is even more arduous by the difficulties raised by their ethnic heritage.

The film is framed by tribal ceremonies, by the initiation of the boys in the group and Lorrpu and Milika's ceremony marking their transition to manhood. There is another ceremony that the three boys undertake by themselves, outside the sight of other men but under the surveillance of the ancestor spirits when they decide to travel to Darwin by canoe. During the journey, they clash into each other making clear that they have accepted values that are opposites. However, faced with the hostile landscape, they learn that they need to sacrifice some of their personal goals in order to protect the unity of the group. This is exemplified by the way they are taught to make ropes. Dawu (Nungki Yunupingu), the spiritual leader of the Yolngu community, teaches them that a strong rope requires three men to be made. At the end of their journey, when they have finally succeeded to overcome their differences, they represent their new found unity as Yolngu men by making a rope. Throughout the film, the sense of group and union among the Yolngu people is exemplified by the three boys. They are as far as one can be from the romantic idea of the Aboriginal as a lonely figure wandering the desert in communion with nature. The three boys in the film need each other to survive in the bush, and they need each other to survive in the city too (Rutherford 2004, 66).

As I said before, Lorrpu is the only one of the three Yolngu boys who still believes in the traditions of his people. When the films opens, he and Milika are about to take part in the ceremony that will confirm them as men and grant them a place within their people. This is a source of conflict with the return from prison of Botj, who has been little less than cast away from the tribe

and is faced with the reality of his two friends becoming men and leaving him in an inferior position (he will remain a boy in the eyes of the other men). Lorrpu, as part of his faith in tradition, believes also in the male bond he shares with his two friends and spends most of the film trying to repair the damage in their friendship. Then, it is not a surprise that his dreams are mostly about the time when they were trained to become part of the tribe, the fishing and hunting as ways of following the tribal traditions and emphasise the strength of the three of them working together.

On the other side of the spectrum, we soon find out that Milika has fallen for the temptation of fame and Botj has for criminality and drug abuse. Even though Milika is still learning the traditional way of life, at the beginning of the film it is established that his dreams and the basis of his male identity are not so related to fishing and hunting as Lorrpu's. His personal male quest is more connected to one of the few spaces where an Aboriginal man can enjoy success in Australia: Australian football. Later I will explore in detail how this can be read also as a modern rite of passage, but what is challenging in Milika as a character is his fascination with capitalist material goods. For him, the world outside the Yolngu community is seductive and something to aim for. Pop music, mobile phones and flirting with girls are signs of his desired male identity. He embodies a kind of masculinity closer to Western values, influenced by capitalism and consumer culture.

Botj has gone even further away than Milika in terms of the way the tribe expects its young men to behave. Botj's existence has fallen into a spiral of violence, crime, drug abuse and self-destructive masculinity that, as in Milika, can also be read in terms of rites of passage from childhood to adulthood. The film tries to prove his deviance from the straight path as a result of having a drunk absent father and a contemptuous mother, because he reminds her of his father. If we analyse Lorrpu's dream of positive male bonding under the tribal law, Botj is the one who has betrayed that dream by becoming one of the most known stereotypes constructed by White Australians; the criminal Aboriginal. Yet, Lorrpu still admires Botj because of his potential as a natural leader. In the dream, he is the one that is always at the front, afraid of nothing. But now, he

has transformed his bravery into tribal disobedience and false toughness. As a result of his last offense, an act that could send him to prison for a long time, Lorrpu is forced to put his own dreams of tribal position in danger in order to save him. He talks Botj and Milika into going to Darwin with the excuse of meeting with Dawu to ask him to intercede in Botj's favor. In order to get there, they must travel through the hostile Northern Territory and rely on their ancient tribal knowledge to survive.

This journey will become a test for the three boys, who are forced to leave aside their differences and work together. Of the three of them, Lorrpu is the one who will embody the Aboriginal myth of masculinity: the hunter. The myth of the solitary hunter is not exclusive of the Aboriginal culture, but is one of the most universal forms of masculinity represented in the world. There is a significant moment in the film when the three boys are lost in the desert and struggle to find their way to Darwin. Milika accuses Lorrpu of having forgotten the Songlines to walk through the different territories. The Songlines are paths through the land captured in traditional songs or oral stories, therefore in order to be able to walk across the outback one has to sing the landmarks and waterholes in the correct order. At the same time, Botj falls unconscious due to a wound on his arm. Being faced with the first true test for his faith on the traditions and costumes of the tribe, Lorrpu is determined to use his knowledge of the ancestors' way of life to save his two friends. He covers himself with white clay like his ancestors did to hunt and decides to "walk like" the old people, "be part of the land. This was my test". He passes the test by killing a Komodo dragon and healing Botj with the natural medicine that the land provides.

Lorrpu's new found identity as a hunter is made extensive to both Botj and Milika in the following sequences, when they first free a group of baby crocodiles (the crocodile believed to be the symbol of the ancestor spirit Baru) from the camp of some furtive hunters, and then working together to hunt a giant turtle. As a result of their success performing the role of hunters, they reassert their identities as Indigenous men, as it is made evident when Botj starts singing a Songline

and the three of them appear wearing the white clay. The Indigenous Peoples have painted their bodies for many centuries as a visual expression of the relationship between the individual and the law. There are three moments in the film when the three boys wear traditional body paint. The first is during Lorrpu's dreams about the first ceremonies he passed with Milika and Botj. In this scene they appear to have the totemic ancestor Baru painted on his body in the form of a crocodile. The second is in the desert. The meaning of the white clay covered body is to become 'invisible' and move around the desert. The third is in the last scene when Milika and Lorrpu take part in the ceremony to confirm their entrance into manhood. These three scenes mark the evolution of their status as men, their success in front of the tribe and the spirits.

However, this success is only temporal, as it is proved when they go back to the urban setting. While they have excelled in terms of surviving together in the bush, the film will remind us in the final act that for the Aboriginal man, there is still a sense of impossibility to subsist in the urban Western centres. The ending, and especially how Lorrpu and Botj deal with the return to society, is evidence of the ongoing search for a conciliating national identity:

> Mapping multiple Australian spaces confuses distinctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous as much as it enlarges and reasserts them. It requires the contradictory exploration of dispossession *and* belonging, resistance *and* consensus, destruction *and* preservation, centre *and* border, past *and* future, space *and* place—all these in the plural. The production of Australian country has always been complicated and coloured by issues of history, context, diversity, perspective, and experience (Lambert, 2010, p311).

Lorrpu is the only one who manages to combine both tradition and modernity. Nevertheless, we could argue that he fails to protect Botj from his self-destructive behaviour. In the end, Milika and Lorrpu complete their rituals to take their places among the Yolngu men; Lorrpu says at the

end, "my name is Lorrpu, I'm a Yolngu man". Milika seems to have a bright path ahead of him. He passes the rites of passage in front of the tribe, and he seems to be ready to enter a space where Aboriginal masculinity can enjoy recognition in White society, becoming a professional athlete, hence entering White law. For both young men, to be allowed to take part in the confirmation ceremony is a way to learn both the heritage of their culture and acquire the tools and skills required to achieve a proper male identity.

Yolngu Boy urges the conclusion that in a culture characterized by a remarkable diversity, the romantic quest for a generic Australian masculinity is not going to offer the basis for strong ethnic and political survival. The film portrays how traditional beliefs need to be adjusted and adapted to the challenges of the present; Lorrpu exemplifies a desirable form of male identity within the community, Milika opens a door for a new Aboriginal identity outside the surveillance of the group, while Botj's fate is a warning of the dangers of modernity for Aboriginal youth. Development for any society takes adjusting and ruling out some traditional strategies and behaviours when they are proved not functional. Also, in the case of Indigenous cultures under colonial influence, adapting involves sometimes appropriating aspects from the invading culture. Even though ritual masculinity is still crucial for young Aborigines, the film stays open to alternative futures for men. In sum, *Yolngu Boy* is a good example of the potential role of cinema when screening social changes.

2.2. Playing by the Rules: Australian football, drugs and the myth of temptation.

As pointed out in the previous part, Lorrpu's masculinity is the only one among the three Yolngu boys that can be inscribed within the traditional Aboriginal form of male identity. That leaves Milika and Botj as the characters freed to explore other ways of constructing their own identities as Yolngu men, in both cases strongly influenced by the White reality outside the tribe. For Milika, his identity is developed almost exclusively around Australian Rules football. This is significant because of the high social status that this sport enjoys in Australia, providing opportunities for the

Aborigines to challenge the repressive White order. As many other subaltern cultures around the world, Aboriginal football players are empowered by sport to defy the supremacy of the White men outside the football fields. Sports, especially team sports that enjoy a wider fan base than individual sports, constitute a space where White supremacy can be contested on a field where the ideological discourses can be silenced, at least temporally. In physical sports such as footy, power is constantly at play. Hence, in societies where racial issues are so present as in Australia, we can see how public demonstrations of competition bear always political and cultural meaning (Tatz 1987, 84).

Football has become extremely popular in Aboriginal communities. One of the reasons for that is because it resembles some of the cultural practices that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have been performing for 40.000 years. Football is an experience of male bonding outdoors, like hunting or fishing, and is based on a set of rules that one must learn to respect and follow inside the football field. The elements involved in the game resemble those of the rites of passage and tribal ceremonies; "gatherings for football, like those at ceremonial time, can involve large groups of men preparing and then travelling long distances to other communities. Both football and the Law are highly valued expressions of male sociality" (McCoy 2004, 160). When men all over the world get together to play a team sport, they display some of the attributes that remind us of our tribal origins. We experience the excitement of anticipation, the pleasure of male company and the competition to prove more virile than the rest of the men taking part in the game by means of strength. These activities constitute today a source of virility for men as well as social experiences of individual and group realization. Sports usually show that some of our primal hunting instincts have survived the civilizing process over the centuries, and remain only veiled behind the cult of reason. So, football provides a contemporary space where the argument Aboriginal/primitive vs. non-Aboriginal/civilized losses its ascendancy (McCoy 2004, 144).

The presence of Aboriginal athletes in Australian football competitions dates from the beginning of the 20th century, when Joe Johnson starred for Fitzroy Football Club in the Victorian

League Association in 1904. Up to the start of the 2011/2012 season of the Australian Football League (AFL), there were 195 players known to be of Aboriginal descent who have played AFL football and in 2011 there were 84 players of Aboriginal descent on AFL lists, which makes up for an astonishing 11% of the total AFL player base. This last number is in fact relevant when we put it next to the 2.3% percentage of Aboriginal people of the whole Australian population. That tells us that the representation of Aboriginal men playing at the AFL is 500% higher than in Australian society. Barry Judd's study on the role of Aborigines in football recounts the success of Aboriginal football players over the last century:

> The achievements of Aboriginal players include; 1 Brownlow Medal (the AFL's highest award for the fairest and the best player over the duration of a season): 5 Norm Smith Medals (best player in a Grand Final) and 2 AFL Rising Star awards (best first year player). Furthermore, 19 Aboriginal players have played in premiership teams. (2005, 224)

In order to understand the importance of sports in claiming a respected status for Indigenous men, the words of Sir Douglas Ralph "Doug" Nicholls can throw some light on the matter. Nicholls was the first Aboriginal player to be selected to play for the Victorian Interstate Team and the first Aboriginal to be named knight. He famously said that "the only way to crack the White world was to do something better than the White man" (quoted in Tatz 1987, 70).

When imagining a possible future path for Milika, one can easily predict that, since the film states that his footy skills are above average, he will follow the footsteps of renowned Aboriginal footballers such as Adam Goodes (holder of two Brownlow Medals, a premiership player and four-time All-Australian), Byron Pickett (holder of two premiership medallions, a Norm Smith Medal and over 200 AFL games) or Danyle Pearce (Best First Year Player for the Power in 2005 and

winner of the 2006 NAB Rising Star with 43 votes out of a possible 45). Football could be considered a rite of passage in Milika's ideal of masculinity. Every footy game he plays is a ceremony where Aboriginal young men get together and play in front of the older men of the tribe. Football is a part of so called men's business. Footy games are also a place where men display social and physical skill and engage in a competition for recognition among the community. At the beginning of the film, Milika takes part in a game where he is shown to be enjoying some degree of celebrity status. The game is witnessed by many members of the community including Dawu, the spiritual leader of the Yolngu people. The strong sense of competition is made clear when one of the players from the other team reacts violently due to Milika's power status. In a way, for Milika sport represents an alternative way to enter the law.

Racist discourses are also found with Australian Aboriginal people involved in football. The sports media is still using stereotypes to justify the success of some players, not far removed from colonial discourses. Aboriginal players are considered to have different skills from those non-Aboriginal players based on biological differences. Aboriginal players are described as being "mesmeric, scintillating, instinctive, naturally talented, magical and having breath-taking flair, exquisite touch and a different sense of space and time" (Hallinan, Bruce and Coram 1999, 372). Some of these misconceptions defend that Aboriginal footballers are examples of successful assimilation. White society still beliefs that for an Aboriginal to succeed in contemporary Australia, he needs to abandon his so-called primitive existence and embrace the Western set of values. This is a way to justify how Aboriginal athletes can became role models and icons. In 1993, Allan McAlister, president of the historic football powerhouse Collingwood Football Club, said on a TV interview that "as long as they (Aborigines) conduct themselves like White people-well, off the field-everyone will admire and respect them" (quoted in Judd 2005, 219). All this suggests that any Aboriginal man that wants to succeed in football needs to conform to White Australian values.

In the film, it is evident that Milika is seduced by the material luxuries of White society.

When he and Lorrpu follow Botj and break into a shop at night, he steals a CD player. Later on, during the journey, he is going to be shown on screen listening to pop music many times, as well as using a mobile phone. Those objects somehow symbolise what he wants from life. Milika knows that his material dreams are not going to be fulfilled by performing traditional practices of masculinity as Lorrpu is doing. While the learning of the law and the ceremonies offers Milika access to a place within the men of the tribe, football offers access to a world outside the law. His choice is reinforced in the last act of the film. Even though he also learns the importance of respecting ancestral knowledge during the journey through the desert with his two friends, the first thing he does when they get to Darwin is buying a new pair of football shoes. This is when we know that he has made his choice in terms of which form of masculinity he is going to perform as a man. At the same time, the fact that he goes through the ceremony to confirm his entry into adulthood also tells us that he respects the traditional practices of masculinity, even if they are of little use in the life he has chosen.

We can argue that Milika's realization of masculinity outside the tribal sphere is a positive way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to grow up in Australia. On the contrary, Botj, as a fictional character, is a reminder of the difficulties that jeopardize the potential integration of Indigenous men in the urban world. Gender identities are also involved in self-destructive activities such as family violence, drug addiction, criminality and early death among the Aboriginal population. Crime and drug abuse are probably two of the most common negative images attached to young Indigenous men living in the city. It has become a huge problem within the Aboriginal communities, proved by the fact that 26% percentage of the prison population in Australia is Indigenous (remember that Aboriginal people make up 2.3% of the Australian population). The number rises in the Northern Territory, where the film was shot, to a scandalous 83% (Ogilvie 2001, 2). Therefore, Botj, as a fictional character, becomes a realistic realization of Aboriginal masculinity in contemporary Australia, a form that needs to be understood in order to be addressed.

From the beginning, he is rejected by everyone around him except for Lorrpu and Milika:

The prevailing attitude in his community seems to be that he will end up a hopeless drunk like his father, living among the 'long grass people', a collection of lost souls in Darwin. And he will have a difficult task proving to the tribal elders that he is ready for 'ceremony', without which he can never truly have respect and a place within his tribe. Botj only has his two childhood friends to rely on, but even that relationship seems to be changing, now that Lorrpu and Milika are preparing for ceremony (Tudball 2000, 6)

Botj, like Lorrpu and Milika, is in between two realities operating in the same country. One is traditional Aboriginal culture, and the other is the White urban world. At the beginning of the film he is described by Lorrpu as a leader and the most skilled hunter of the three. However, he is also in permanent conflict with both realities. He is unable to follow a quiet and positive behavior within the tribe, and he cannot survive under the law of the White man outside. He is labeled as an outcast at many levels. First, as an Aboriginal man by being denied access to the ceremony of passage, second as a family member by being rejected by his mother, and third as an Australian citizen by being labeled as criminal. He is an outsider in his own community, literary forced to look in from the outside (the film makes this evident when he spies on his mum from a window, and then spies on Lorrpu and Milika's ceremonial training). The only space where he retains some agency is within the male bond of friendship. But even that is starting to break down. During the first act of the film, only Lorrpu shows some kind of compassion for him, and tries to rehabilitate him for the community. For Milika, Botj is only a loser, the antithesis of modern masculinity he is starting to discover in himself. If during their childhood together, Botj performed the role of the leader, the strongest one protecting his two friends (it is significant to point out how, at the beginning of the film, when the fight at football game starts, he is the one who runs into the field to protect Milika),

now he has been defeated by the challenges that life has set for him. He is going to be left behind the moment Lorrpu and Milika become men in the eyes of the tribe.

As we have seen with Milika, there are rites of passage that can be realized outside the social space. Some criminal acts committed by adolescents can be understood as a way to prove their own manhood. For those people that have been rejected and marginalized by society, crime becomes a "ceremony" to acquire a specific form of male identity.

> Certain adolescent criminal activities, such as drug use and gang involvement, are also recognized as providing effective rites of passage for at least some children, particularly the disadvantaged or marginalized, despite their ostensible incompatibility with the dominant norms of the day.
>
> (Ogilvie, 2001, p3)

When Botj breaks into the shop at night with Lorrpu and Milika, he is performing his choice of masculinity. He comes from a dysfunctional family, which is one of the stereotypical explanations for violent acts committed by young men. His father is an alcoholic who burnt his house, and his mother kicked him out of home because he reminds her of his father. So, in a way, the audience is told to pity him for his traumatic background and wish for him to find a way back into the tribe. Through the film, Botj is given several opportunities to reintegrate himself in the community by his uncle, his friends and even Dawu. Still, he repeatedly chooses to create his own male identity through violent acts, breaking the law and taking drugs. Botj accepts that a criminal behaviour can provide for him with the ceremonial experience of masculinity that both Lorrpu and Milika are about to enjoy, a self-constructed male identity that is also much respected by others. After arriving back in town, Botj is driven by his uncle to a house to live with other children. While there, he is shown being followed around by a group of kids as if they were taking him as a role

model, a big brother.

Much in the same way, drug abuse also plays a troubling social role among Aboriginal communities. Drug abuse can be considered one of the main damages resulting from the colonial presence, a collateral damage of the cultural and physical actions of the White man. Thanks to the dislocation of individuals, the extermination of groups and the breakdown of culture and family structures, Indigenous men have been looking for ways to deal with the current dominion of colonial ideologies in Australia. Botj is addicted to sniffing petrol, a practice first observed among Aboriginal men in the decade of the 1950 which is believed to have been introduced in Australia by American military men stationed in the north during the World War II. By sniffing petrol Botj is assuming an anti-social form of masculinity, a role many Aborigines are forced to take in the urban Australia.

During the journey to Darwin, the land and the spirits remember him of the role he has to fulfill within the tribe. During the journey, the impersonation of Baru, the ancient spirit, is shown dancing around him while he sleeps and helping him heal. The moment of complete awakening for him is when, after recovering from his injury, he is able to remember the Songlines to walk through the land and guide his two friends. At this point of the film, even Lorrpu recognizes Botj as the leader of the group, but for him more than the others, coming back the urban setting will put him once again in the road of self-destruction, leading to his final death. Unable to overcome his inner demons and accept the consequences of his acts, he makes his final choice by adopting the identity of the tragic Aboriginal man, a man doomed to disappear from the land.

The ending of the film is quite clear about the forms of masculinity that the Aboriginal communities must tolerate and the ones that do not. Botj is somehow ruled out from the tribe as a stereotypical identity that the Aborigines must stay away from. Recognized as an anti-social subject, there is no place for him in the tribe's imaging of the future. At the same time, Botj is the scapegoat in the film so Lorrpu's traditional masculinity and Milika's 'sportsman' identity will be

possible. During Botj's funeral, they are not only burying a friend, but also all the negativity that has been projected on the figure of the Aboriginal man.

3. Indigenous men without the colonial backcloth in Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr's *Ten Canoes* (2006)

The mainstream film representations of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait men have historically helped perpetuate the ascendancy of the White man in the national hierarchy, condemning the Indigenous national object to marginality in a popular medium like film. In this sense, it is important to understand that media play a critical role in contemporary societies to re-create, manipulate and establish the Other's identity, an identity that has little to do with issues of race, culture or ideology. Many times, the Aboriginal man that appears on screen is a fiction created by the White man. Furthermore, most of these narratives focus mostly on the way Aborigines are significant to non-Aborigines, and not how Indigenous men perceive themselves. In this regard, the construction of each one of the traits that combine in the Aboriginal man as a character, including masculinity, is born from the imagination of the colonizing subject and never from the exchange with the Other. In order to challenge this patronising reading of what it means to be Aboriginal, a dialogue is needed to deconstruct racist discourses forced upon the Aborigine and introduce authentic Aboriginal content in mainstream cinema. Allowing the Aborigines to represent themselves on the screen will help translate into films a process that is already going on in literature and plastic arts, empowering them to write back (or film back) to the colonizer, who reminds mostly blind for Aboriginal issues.

One way of escaping the control of White Australia is for Aboriginal people to occupy places of responsibility behind the camera, either in production tasks or in filmmaking positions, so as to produce films that break away from established formal practices and dominant narratives. Still, these productions do not escape some range of colonial command and the influence of racial discourses, since in order to challenge them they must consciously separate themselves from the mainstream industry, to deconstruct the stereotypes operating in the Australian film narrative. According to Marcia Langton, asking for the control over the representation of Aboriginal identity

will imply also the act of some kind of censorship upon the stories produced (1994, 101). So, images produced by Indigenous Australian people are not by default better representations than the ones done by White filmmakers, since this idea would dismiss as well the multiplicity of identities within the Aboriginal people in Australia. Accordingly, even though they battle racially marked representations of Aboriginal masculinity, these films are subjected again to the constant contrast with the prevailing unified ethnocentric subject. Langton proposes an alternative between the imposed identities filmed by White filmmakers and the naive quest for Aboriginal control over the narratives. She says that maybe the most desirable way of film-making is for Aborigines and non-Aborigines to cooperate to formulate a new inter-subjective narrative (Langton 1994, 98).

The same can be said about Aboriginal masculinities in the plural. Not because a male character is written, filmed and played by Indigenous Australian men is it going to give us a universal picture of the Aboriginal man. Consequently, we must assume the impossibility to find an authentic expression of Aboriginality in film, since there is no such thing as a neutral medium of representation. Then, a film in which Aboriginal men talk about Aboriginal men is not in itself a guarantee that we can find a real analysis of the Aboriginal man as man. Nevertheless, understanding, using and discussing the limits of Aboriginal masculinity through the revision of the gendered racial man as a subject, can perfectly create new identities, paying special attention to the differences in terms of race and images of masculinity, relationships between men and violence. In this sense, Rolf de Heer's *Ten Canoes* is an extremely valuable attempt to create a pure Aboriginal film narrative, where we can see some reversal of the stereotypes and roles forced upon Aboriginal men.

Possibly most important for the significance of *Ten Canoes* within Australian cinema is that conventional film representations of Aboriginal subjects within the context of White Australia have had a distancing effect on the audience, literally objectifying them:

Such images contrast with those of natives presented in traditional settings (the noble but exotic savage) or as victims (the vanishing race) that are now problematic for Euro-Australian (and other) consumers who are increasingly aware of and uncomfortable with their own implication in the lives and historical circumstances of these "Others." Conversely, I would argue, there is a pleasure for these consumers in regarding the image of the Indigenous photographer as a kind of bush cosmopolitan, at ease with both tradition and Western technology; such an image evokes a kind of futuristic nostalgia, even as it masks inequality and responsibility. (Battaglia, 1995, 125)

Some non-Aboriginal filmmakers have tried to offer an authentic view of Aboriginal matters, but the mere practice of filmmaking prevents such authenticity from being shown. Although we can always find films using semi-documentary film techniques, this reading is usually influenced by pre-established cultural patterns, preventing any opportunity of presenting themes objectively. The importance of this is that films like *Ten Canoes* are a fairly successful alternative to the White cultural products that come out of the mainstream.

Ten Canoes is the first Australian film shot almost entirely in an Indigenous language and a rare film depiction of traditional Indigenous lives. Moreover, it was created, like *Yolngu Boy,* in collaboration with the Yolngu people of the Northern Territory. It is, then, a relevant instance of the potential of transcultural cooperation between Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous Australian filmmakers. The production team of *Ten Canoes* has a large quota of Indigenous Australian people taking various roles, from the 100% Aboriginal casting, and the presence of Peter Djigirr, who is credited as the co-director and plays one of the canoeists and the stranger in the warrior's tale, who is a renown member of the Arafura community. Still, Rolf de Heer is mostly in charge of the project. Thanks to that, the film succeeds in representing traditional Aboriginal storytelling while using a dramatic film structure. The genesis of the film was apparently a series of black and White

pictures taken by anthropologist Donald Thomson during the decade of the 1930s, many of which portray traditional activities that have been already lost, mostly as a result of the persecution of the Yolngu people by the White invaders. These black and White photos were the inspiration for the background story of the main plot, as seen in the fact that the scenes showing the canoeists were shot in black and White (O'Hara 2008, 96). The influence of Thompson's work can be seen on the anthropological portrait feeling of the film. It is not a documentary, of course, but the images and the stories presented have a claim of authenticity:

> But what is true? De Heer has built a body of fiction based on a skeleton of veracity. The fiction of the story may end up as a mythical truth of the past. For Ramingining people 'Thomson Times' is a historical truth, which the film, in one way of looking at it, sadly elides. Yet, ultimately, the truth status of the film may rest less on the question of whether or not the film is an accurate representation of Thomson Times than in the story of what it has accomplished for all the people involved in the film.(Hamby, 2007, 145)

Given the influence of cinema in the world, a project like *Ten Canoes* can help us analyse the value of film in producing a new space of expression where we, as non-Aboriginal observers, can get access to a rich imaging of plural Aboriginal identities through a colourful scope of representations. Consequently, my aim is to observe and analyse if this unusual film alters the power relationship between the Aboriginal people, who have an active role in the production of this film, and the White audience who is going to complete the meaning of its images, in relation to the representation of Aboriginal masculinities.

3.1. "I'm going to tell you a story from long ago and I want you to listen very carefully": the influence of the White gaze when filming Indigenous masculinities

The film opens with an aerial shot of the Australian outback. It is almost shocking for the audience to see the image of a green exuberant landscape, not the desert images we are used seeing in stories dealing with Aborigines and the outback. The narrator playfully highlights this first sense of strangeness by opening the narration with the line "A long, long time ago in a place far, far away" (de Heer and Djigirr 01:36). It is a sentence that reminds the audience of Western fantasies such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), but soon the narrator breaks into laughter saying that he is "only joking" (de Heer and Djigirr 01:39). However, *Ten Canoes* is in fact not much far from George Lucas' space fantasy. The film actually places us in a reality completely different from contemporary Australia. Our journey is not far into deep space but into a romantic past, inside the 'alien' Aboriginal culture. The very alien nature of the Aboriginal characters and the exotic setting is perhaps what can create for White Australian audiences an innocent space where they can avoid self-reflecting on the national conflicts represented in the screen, thus allowing an unconscious discussion of real-life issues free from social contexts.

In terms of plot, *Ten Canoes* is the first Australian period film not to depict the wipe off of the Aborigines at the hands of the White colonizer or by their own tragic flaws. In fact, this first aerial shot suggests a welfare state previous to the arrival of the White man. The film uses Aboriginal storytelling techniques to make a moral allegory of the present day Australia. Some modern Australian films have attempted to do so by introducing the figure of the White hero who comes in defence of the helpless Aboriginal. The most famous and unfortunate example of this can be found in Baz Luhrman's super-production *Australia* (2008)*,* where the character played by Hugh Jackman embodies the role of the heroic White male and at the same time is depicted as friendly with the Aborigines. These characters are narrative devices that provide the White audience with a surrogate, a character with whom they can identify themselves and purge their own private guilt.

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However, de Heer, who in his previous film *The Tracker* (2002) already elaborated a strong open critique of the racist reality of Australia, decides not to use a White surrogate and force the audience to face with a White free picture, which has contradictory effects on the Australian spectator:

> Rather than relying on guilt over white man's injustice, well-placed humour engages the non-Aboriginal audiences in both the voice-over and the plot; a long running joke about the sweet tooth of one "Honey Man", gags about men's sexual performance and comic depictions of flatulence, all illustrate the universal humanity of the near-naked characters yet fail to detract from their dignity as pre-colonisation, non-industrial, indigenous Australians.(Starrs 2007, 6).

On the one hand, it reminds him of the brutalities Aborigines had to suffer in their interaction with the White settlers, but it also takes the risk of losing the importance of the story itself by constraining it within the role of symbol of modern-day problems.

 Ten Canoes describes how Indigenous Australian men see themselves as male subjects in their own community, their rituals and their relationships before the arrival of European settlers. The film constructs an alternative to the knowledge of Aboriginal masculinity through the hypothesis of an unpolluted Aboriginal space, thanks to strategies such as handing the control over the narrative to the Aboriginal language, enabling the characters to talk about their own identities in ways more natural to them, and a completely Aboriginal cast. Still, the presence of the colonizer as an outside observer is made visible from the beginning. Even though the characters within the two stories that are told in the film speak Aboriginal languages, the narrator talks to the audience in English with a marked Aboriginal accent. Despite the fact that he claims to be in control of the narrative by saying that the story he is going to tell us is 'his story', not ours, the audience is still involved in the process of creating meanings. The context required by the production process is

necessarily determined by the reproduction of the dominant ideology, which is reinforced by the action of the ideological discourses. The potential audience of the film is mostly shaped by White subjects constructed by stereotypic racial discourses, meaning that the spectators that are going to watch the film are not really individual subjects, but a discursive position constructed by the film apparatus (Hamby 2007, 124).

The narrator tells us the story of a young Aboriginal named Dayindi, played by 17 year old Jamie Gulpilil (son of David Gulpilil, the narrator), who has strong desires for his older brother's youngest wife. In order to address the situation before it starts a conflict between them, his brother Minygululu, played by Peter Minygululu, tells him a long and moralizing story about an ancestral warrior. As of the beginning of the film, the significance of the oral tradition in Aboriginal life is expressed in the way men exchange knowledge and experience. Minygululu constructs the Aboriginal past and present worlds within the fictional recreation of the collective historic oral record. As the storytelling progresses, Dayindi becomes more and more impatient to know the outcome of the story, but the issue is precisely the importance of being patient; he will only know the relation between him and the story 'when the story is ready for it, maybe'. This lesson on the importance of patience in order to achieve some knowledge is also made extensive to the White audience. Dayindi, in a way, becomes the audience within the film, he must listen as carefully to his brother, as us, the audience, are listening carefully to the film that is being told to us. The reason for this style of storytelling is for Dayindi and us to learn that knowledge means also duty to protect the traditional law, and neither is Dayindi ready to get a wife or us ready to understand Aboriginal culture. Both Dayindi's learning process and our introduction into the Aboriginal storytelling style require being ready for the obligations that they imply. The use of audience expectations works, in a way, for us to understand that Aboriginal identity is extremely connected to the acceptance of placing one's actions under the tribal law.

The film explores social rituals of initiation within the group that emphasize phallocentric

masculinity, endorsing a form of natural masculinity accessible only to Aboriginal men, ergo differentiated from the Western image of masculinity prevailing in the country. This organised male society is also a response to the stereotype of Aboriginal as primitive, since the film shows how an Aboriginal tribe works by its own law, rules and hierarchies (Walsh 2006, 12). Indigenous Australian communities had a sense of order and morality before the arrival of the European invader, and a culture that has a history of 40.000 years. This makes the White spectator question the basis in which he or she has historically constructed his or her power as a national subject over the national Aboriginal object.

> The conflict of the 'self' versus the 'Other' forms a similar oppositional structure to 'primitive' and 'civilised'. The contrast of a non-Indigenous 'self' is placed in direct opposition to an Indigenous 'Other', substantiated by the belief in the 'primitive' affinity with nature versus the 'civilised' urban way of life. (Rekhari, 2008, p128)

Group constructions of virility are closely linked to the binary relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Any process of colonization involves the emasculation of the Indigenous man, along with the hypermasculation of the Western man as part of the affirmation of racial superiority. In relation to the Aboriginal idea of masculinity, the film offers three imperatives. First, the importance of living under the tribal law; second, the sense of women as property to be claimed, stolen and even inherited after the death of the husband; and third, men establish their identity always in relation to other men, through their daily relationships.

In the film, masculinity as a social phenomenon is repeatedly emphasized by the fact that men move, act and think as a group all the time. If in previous films the White audiences got used seeing the lonely Aboriginal wandering through the outback, in *Ten Canoes* we get a picture of a closed community, where men work together. Thus, individualism is almost erased from the

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Aboriginal community against previous stereotypes. Even the actions of Ridjimiraril, the great warrior, carried out unilaterally when he attacks the stranger he suspects to have abducted his second wife, against the group consensus, are back up by the group when the other men travel with him to the ceremony of restoration. The argument here is that this communion between men is more marked among Indigenous people than in Western cultures. The study of male spaces, the segregation of man and what might be called homosociety, is explored by de Heer and Djigirr through the narration of the two stories that articulate the film (McCoy 2004, 127). The story of the canoeists is the story of a group of men travelling together, building canoes and hunting, talking about women and telling stories about manhood. The recreation of these spaces and the description of truly manly activities like hunting, canoe making and the references to warfare culture, need to be understood as playing a vital role in creating identities.

When discussing the processes of construction of identity and masculinity within a particular group, a major issue we must address is the idea of male bonding. In many cultures around the world, men of a certain group need to create social activities or areas inaccessible to women. This need of male fellowship, with possible biological and universal roots, is closely linked to survival strategies such as protecting the tribe from external threats. The social ascendancy of man is established by the narrator when he describes his own birth:

I came from a waterhole. Looking like a little fish. Then my father came near and I asked him for my mother. I wanted to be born. My father pointed out one of his wives. That's your mother, he told me. I waited till the right time and I went just like that into her vagina. Then my father had a dream. That dream let him know his wife had a little one inside her. That little one was me. (de Heer and Djigirr 03:11)

According to the narrator, Indigenous Australian men, though not directly involved in the

conception, are given some degree of control over the process. This is a symbol of the father's role as the one who gives the new-born access to life, while women merely give birth. A direct consequence of this belief is the fact that every female must be married, hence allowing men to marry more than one woman to secure that there will be a father present at the time a child is born. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, early marriage is a common practice (Hewett 1988). Sometimes, a female child is engaged to her father, which has a sizeable effect on the family practices and relationships within the tribe. Even when a female child is engaged to another man, this man usually is in his twenties at the moment of the girl's birth, which means that the marriage will occur when the man is already in his thirties. This is made visible in the film when one of the canoeists complains saying that "nowadays, old men get all the wives". Given that most young women in the tribe are married to older men, they usually outlive their husbands. When the husband dies, his wives must marry again straight away. Commonly, the dead husband's brothers will inherit the wives of their brother. As the film suggests, another consequence of this family structure is that young men need to be patient and wait to find a wife. Even though every woman must be married, that is not the same case with men. In the film, we see that the single men in the tribe live outside the main camp, which is to avoid dispute among men in the community. In the film, Yeeralparil takes advantage of the moment when the women go outside the camp to gather, a moment when the older wives cannot control the young wives, to meet with his brother's young wife.

Aboriginal law is also prominently shown in the film. One of the main forms of law is the idea of *makaratta* (payback). Ridjimiraril is asked to make up for the accidental killing of a member of another tribe. The ritual of restitution consists in Ridjimiraril standing while the members of the other tribe throw spears at him until he is hit. The intimate relationship between Aboriginal men and law is the basis of the authority that both Ridjimiraril and Yeeralparil enjoy in both stories. This authority impels them to protect their young brothers from the bad behaviours induced by bad spirits. Tribal law, which takes form in many cases of conflict within the Aboriginal community, is

also given a relevant attention in the film when Ridjimiraril kills a member of a near tribe suspecting he has taken away his second wife. To avoid starting a war, tribal law orders that the offending tribe allows the offended tribe member to throw spears at the offender. This will last until blood is shed and justice served. The offender can dodge the spears, but his feet must remain in approximately the same place the whole time. This form of justice is defended as a natural way to address offences and avoid unnecessary violence. Ridjimiraril knows that, and understands that submitting himself to the law and sacrificing his life will prevent his tribe to have to pay for his mistakes.

The fact that both stories are set in the past is not only a way of creating a sense of authenticity for the film, but also empowers the Aborigines as part of the myth of nation:

> The task then for de Heer in making *Ten Canoes* possible, was to bring a Yolngu story into the folds of Western media paradigms whilst retaining its cultural integrity; an endeavour which requires both an acute awareness of the history of dominance and misrepresentation and a reflexive self-awareness which rejects the objectification of Aboriginal peoples. (Shaw, 2009)

Because Aboriginal culture has never been able to shake off colonial oppression completely, filming back a period of time when the Aborigines lived in a state of freedom and social welfare in a romantic way can be considered a useful way to deal with current situations in which White audiences could struggle with their accountability.

3.2. "You young people like that, always the same, nothing changes": authority relationships among Indigenous men.

As the film states, for the young Indigenous Australian men the path from childhood to adulthood is

taken under the guidance of the older men in the community. Dayindi needs his brother's advice in order to be granted access to the tribal knowledge, for which his brother uses an allegorical story about the ancestors. In leading the growth process of the young boys, the older men make sure to keep up the stability of the whole group and the power structure. The process of becoming an adult man plays a vital role in the relations between men in the tribe. Dayindi must learn that coveting the wife of his older brother is not only an offence to his brother, but it also affects the sense of order among the community. As said before, the very same law that rules Aboriginal groups is directly involved in the relationships established among men. In a way, Minygululu uses storytelling to introduce Dayindi into the law, to share men's experiences over time and go through the law. He will use the ancestor's experience only he has access to, so Dayindi understands the natural relationships that are established within the group.

At the same time, by using these stories in the process of bringing up his young brother, he is going to affirm his authority over the young inexperienced man. Dayindi in return will recognise his brother's authority within the group and submit to his values, keeping out of trouble. He understands at the end of the film that he is going to be granted access to the ancestral knowledge through his older more experienced brother. The relationships among men are crucial in the two Aboriginal groups depicted in the film. In both stories, young men are advised to behave according to the law. Dayindi learns to be patient and wait before getting a wife, and Yeeralparil learns through his brother Ridjimiraril's example how important it is to accept and live by the law, and both will become, by the end of the film, initiated men. Therefore, their gendered identity will be constructed and reinforced by the influence of older men.

In this male space, older men are in control of knowledge, both in practical matters, as when it comes to the task of building canoes, and in political matters, as we can see in the conflict between the two communities in regards of the accidental killing. In the scene when the men are discussing what happened to Ridjimiraril's second wife, each man is given the same quota of

attention and they all get to tell their views on the matter. The camera goes around the circle of men, showing us close ups of them as they expose their ideas. The importance of this moment can be seen in Ridjimiraril's tragic ending. He decides to act upon the stranger he suspects has abducted his wife, ignoring the judgement of the other men. The narrator tells us that the bitterness resulting from the loss of his wife let a bad spirit get into him. His death serves as a lesson in the importance of listening to other men's advice. At the same time, young men are shown to be more industrious and impulsive. However, in this communal space created, the communication between both sides is fluent. They joke about women and share stories, even against the background of more serious and physically demanding activities. There is no hostility, bitterness or envy within this male space, providing the film with a sense of a very close homosocial reality. Then, we can assume that an important part of becoming a man implies learning to enjoy this adult men fellowship (McCoy 2004, 127).

In the story about the canoeists travelling through the bush, we get a sense of sharing and closeness among men, creating a restricted male nature. This natural space is significantly set apart from women's sight, revealing the importance of male company in creating a masculine common identity. Here, the men can worship their ancestors, young boys can learn the important skills they will need in their adult life, such as fishing, cooking, canoe building, warriorhood, being a proper husband and parenting, and old men will tell stories to teach them the law. These actions are not just about learning some skills and sharing stories. It is indispensable for young men to learn how to be a proper, reliable and powerful Aboriginal man, assuming their role within the ancient social structure of the tribe. Nonetheless, and having already established the outside presence of the White colonizer as the potential audience of the film, one cannot help but ask how much of this myth of Aboriginal past is influenced by contemporary racist ideologies. Marcia Langton says:

The question we should be asking is: what informs the mythologies and symbols? The

answer has to do with the stance of the participant within the dominant culture, within the colony. For instance, Aboriginal life in modern Australia has been described as 'welfare colonialism', and the encapsulation of Aboriginal society as 'internal colonisation'. (Langton 1994, 102)

Therefore, we cannot dismiss so easily the power of this 'dominant culture' to veil in many different ways the 'black' body. Even filmmakers trying to subvert the established ideas of their contemporary society could involuntarily work for the ideology apparatuses. We need to be extremely careful when analysing films where the racial oppression is not visible.

Even though the film deals with some degree of violence and warfare, the reality is that a non-violent attitude seems to be central within the tribe described in the ancestor's tale. After the accidental killing of the stranger, Ridjimiraril accepts to submit himself to the retribution ritual in order to avoid starting a war. At the same time, after he dies some men start to discuss whether or not they should avenge him, to which Birrinbirrin replies "Forget it. Don't think about it. This is where we stop. We've already lost Ridjimiraril". This message is quite subversive by itself, since Australian Aborigines are often associated with violent behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, crime and imprisonment. Here Indigenous men are shown capable of reasoning and accepting responsibility for their mistakes, at the same time they are proven committed to law, though not to a White law. Showing a functional and positive instance of an Aboriginal tribe without the influence of the colonizer is a way of challenging these stereotypes and staging an alternate possibility of strong and masculine Aboriginal manhood.

A topic that is not much touched in the film is how this assertion of common maleness in a space where men's authority is strengthened affects the way men relate to women. Representations of Aboriginal women in film are rare. They tend to be limited by the hypermasculine Aboriginal male characters. In fact, this unbalanced representation between man and woman can be considered

a characteristic of the medium, regardless the issue of race. Then, by deploying gendered representations of Aboriginal societies, filmmakers can successfully elaborate more identifiable film images of Aboriginal identities. In *Ten Canoes*, the heavy structure of patriarchy is seen by the fact that women are treated more like possessions that can be inherited than as individual beings. As said before, marriage was critical for women's role within the community. The conflict between Minygululu and Dayindi comes from the material fact that the first has three wives and Dayindi wants to have one. Nevertheless, women are given some degree of agency, and they have their own private spaces where they meet and share experiences, probably in a similar way to men.

The Australian Aboriginal male has usually been seen as either the "noble savage" or his alter ego, the "ignoble savage." One challenging aspect of the film is that we get to know a different instance of the 'savage'; an Aboriginal warrior. Ridjimiraril is the prototype of the noble mature respected warrior, an emblematic figure connected to Indigenous cultures around the world. His serious look and silence help create an appealing character, whose self-sacrifice to address his mistakes amplifies his moral ascendancy among the rest of the men in the tribe. Significantly enough, even though he is clearly drawn as a virile strong presence, he is also vulnerable to the sadness resulting from the loss of one of his wives. He is, therefore, connected to the traditional victimization of Aboriginal characters in Australian narratives, forced to suffer and die at the end. Somehow, his tragedy mimics the tragedy of the Aboriginal people.

Ten Canoes not only adopts the mythology of the romantic hero, but also another male Aboriginal type that plays an important role in the story: the wise elder. In the 1970s, coinciding with a new elevation and appreciation of Aboriginal bush men as guardians of ancient wisdom, Aborigines became the characters that were in possession of the knowledge needed to wonder and survive in the middle of hostile territories in the Australian outback. As a result of the sympathetic tendency towards the Aborigines originated in the 1970s, the figure of the wise elder character emerged in cinema, a variant on the noble savage. This archetype incorporates the standard image

of magic earth wisdom attributed to Aboriginals. In the ancestor's story, we can find within the Aboriginal tribe a sorcerer who is consulted every time there is a crisis. For instance, when the stranger first appears near the camp, the rest of the men ask the sorcerer to check the surrounding area, to see if the stranger has left any magic behind. He is not involved in the everyday life of the tribe, the narrator describes him as "old and very powerful, he had good magic and bad magic. He lived by himself to keep his magic secret" (de Heer and Djigirr 05:36).

Even though this image of the wise elder is not new, his importance in the 21st century film narrative is significant as a role for Aborigines accepted by White audiences. This acceptance is not because of what these characters say or do, but because they are assumed to be talking with the ancient wisdom of the people who had inhabited the interior Australian desert for thousands of years before the arrival of the European settlers. In other words, they are an instance of presumed authentic Aboriginality. This mystic Aboriginal man always has the same traits. He is in late middle age, grey haired, mysterious, and wise. He is represented as a lonely dark character, often wandering the desert and he has power over the spirits. He communicates with the spirits and transmits his wisdom. What is new in de Heer and Djigirr's way to depict this character is that if in previous films his role was only important for the use White characters could make of him, here we have an insight of his role within an Indigenous Australian community. Shaw states that "The most obvious critique (and the most popular) of the continual production and re-production of racist representations, formed in lieu of cross-cultural dialogue, is that they naturalise racist assumptions within the symbols and mythology of dominant Australian culture" (Shaw 2009, 2). While the romantic Aboriginal warrior symbolizes the pathos of a doomed culture, the wise elder represents the fantasy of integrating the Aboriginal wisdom into the White world.

Ten Canoes is an important film in terms of re-imagining past and present representations of Aboriginal masculinities. De Heer tries to substitute the innate otherness of the Aboriginal man with a romantic functional form of authentic Aboriginality, free from the alienation and fragmentation of

personal identity in White Australia. It is also a fascinating attempt to establish a sense of Aboriginal heritage outside the influence of the White colonizer. The film proves the potential inter-cultural collaboration to produce art in Australia that allows the Aboriginal communities to pass on the stories about the ancestors and understand them. In the film, male characters are given the agency Aboriginals historically have been denied in cinema, and can share their knowledge through the screen. Films like *Ten Canoes* represent a turn towards cultural understanding. Producing films from a 100% Aboriginal view is going to allow Australian audiences to disrupt established racist stereotypes.

4. The Aboriginal superhero: fashionable heroics and masculine style in Patrick Hughes' *Red Hill* (2010).

America's classic western played a crucial role as film icons of an incipient national mythology. They are adventure narratives about the diligent and violent conquest of the Wild West and the subjugation of the indigenous people by the American White pioneers. These films are traditionally associated with the frontier landscape and form one of the film genres where masculine symbolism is more prominent. From the plots about cowboys and outlaws negotiating their manhood duel after duel, one can recognise and analyse contemporary social duties of a man and the cultural discourses that these implies. These are films where the action is abundant, the heroes are manly, of strong moral values and the audience can clearly identify the fight between good and evil (Foster 2007, 64). The western is undoubtedly a popular genre beyond the U.S. borders. Children around the world have grown up playing at cowboys and Indians, with a preference to play the role of the cowboy. Hence, one can not ignore that much of its popularity is based on the figure of the hero, who has become a universal role model of masculinity. Cowboys are heroes whose identity is based on their lack of words and skilful use of violence to defend most of the times a private understanding of the law.

The myth of the west and the frontier territories support a model of dominant masculinity. This dominance is based on action, as proved by the fact that western heroes use violence to assert their ascendancy over other men and women. Moreover, they are silent characters, the opposite of the verbalization attributed to women. Hence, the form of masculinity that is performed in these films is extremely stereotyped and artificial, never a real tangible identity. The function of the genre is no other than to create a familiar iconography to praise male heroism (Corkin 2004, 73). As a result, in most westerns there is a hypermasculation of the cowboy, who set against the vast landscape becomes the god-like figure able to survive the most dangerous stunts. The western's masculinity comes in two flavours: the first would be the hero who must protect his town from an

exterior enemy, and the second is the avenger seeking revenge from those who wronged him.

Without a doubt, one of the fixed attributes of these virile heroes is that they are always White. In that sense, how does a black man fitting into this narrative? They are precisely the characters that often disrupt the Western order and law with their savage nature. The view of Indigenous people as uncivilized and violent is recurrent in westerns. In fact, it is this stereotyped portrait which helped strengthen the representation of indigenous men as dangerous and a threat to the European desirable way of life, justifying the presence of White colonizers all over the world and the process of civilising foreign land. Often, plots revolve around the colonization of the wilderness and the denying of the indigenous rights to the land. Western films often try to remain uncertain about the legitimacy of the White claim over the land and in many of these films the conflicts that arise from the war with the Indigenous people point at the real motifs of colonization.

As a matter of fact, if there is one place where the symbols of the American western can remain relevant in a contemporary reality is in the Australian outback. Having an analogous colonial past to the one depicted in American westerns, Australian filmmakers have created a distinctive iconography also based on a young country founded upon violent wars with Aboriginal peoples for the control of the land (Limbrick 2007, 74). The western is a genre that works based on the contradiction of heroes using violence as a civilising tool to create a certain sense of national identity. No wonder this mythology was easily exportable to Australia, where we can find many of the visual elements of the genre such as the romantic vast landscapes, the small towns, the farms and cattle ranches and the use of guns and rifles as survival tools (Limbrick 2007, 72). What is more, we can also find a crucial element for the western narrative; the presence of the savage in need to be either killed or civilised. Since the first films about Australian folk hero Ned Kelly, from *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906), the world's first feature length film ever made, to Charles Chauvel's *Heritage* and Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, up to more modern instances of the genre such as *The Proposition* (John Hillcoat, 2005)*,* the myth of the

frontier has managed to flourish in the Austrian film industry. In all these films, the presence of the Aboriginal is restricted to a backdrop, a violent force that needs to be taken or a servile tracker. However, Patrick Hughes' *Red Hill* managed to place the Aboriginal man in a new role, charged with some of the stereotypes of previous representations, but also constructing what is possibly one of the few Aboriginal action heroes ever created. *Red hill* is in many ways a film about Aboriginality. The character of Jimmy Conway, played by Tommy Lewis (star of The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith), starts the film as the 'black devil' who brings destruction to a small peaceful town, but becomes throughout the film an agent of moral order.

4.1. The sentinel role of Indigenous Australian people in the Australian narratives.

Despite the self-determination movements that started in the decade of 1970s and the number of Aborigines accessing the media production world nowadays, the White fantasies of the noble and the ignoble savage are still powerful narrative elements in modern Australian cinema. Throughout history, the idea that native peoples live in harmony with the environment helped construct the Indigenous Australian people as guardians of nature (Borsboom 1988, 421). At the same time, a parallel discourse was constructed where Aborigines were read as animal-like, violent and dangerous beings for the White civilized man. In both cases, the Aboriginal man was attributed primitive treats, based on the racist ideas of Social Darwinism, an ideology that uses evolutionary theory in fields such as anthropology and even in politics. When the European explorers met with the Indigenous people, they saw them through this ambiguous glass. In 1697, British explorer William Dampier wrote in his journal that the Aborigines were ''the miserablest people in the world […] who have no Houses and skin garments, sheep, poultry, and fruits of the earth, ostrich eggs, etc. […] and setting aside their humane shape, they differ but little from brutes'' (quoted in Turner 1986, 175). Yet, in 1771 Captain James Cook refuted some of the ideas exposed in Dampier's discourse of bestiality when he described them as "a timorous and inoffensive race, no ways

inclinable to cruelty" (quoted in Turner 1986, 179). Cook's words are clearly influenced by Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of the noble savage, understood as a state of human development free from the problems and constraints of the civilised European world. Cook further wrote in response to Dampier's descriptions that:

> The Natives of New-Holland may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon Earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life. (quoted in Turner 1986, 180)

These two early views on Aboriginal culture have influenced to a greater or lesser extent the narratives produced by White Australians over the last two centuries. Influenced by Social Darwinism, the primitive representation of the Aboriginal man became the central pole for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal interaction. The prejudice that states that Aborigines are by default unable to survive in a modern world has lasted since the 19th century. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that long before the European settlers set foot on Australia's eastern shores, Aboriginal culture was already inhabiting a country and a land full of meaning and loaded with cultural significance for 40,000 years before European invasion. In cinema, films produced after the decade of the 1970s create and communicate images that, with the excuse of giving a positive view of the Aboriginal man as a spiritual and innocent custodian of nature, inscribed him in the myth of the noble savage. This is a myth that transcends the artistic field and influences the view and prejudices on Aboriginality. This discourse is nothing but an excuse to lock out the Aboriginal man

in a primary state, denying him at the same time any access to the civilized concept of manhood and adulthood. This discourse is still alive nowadays, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men are considered beasts, criminals and drug addicts to many Australians. Therefore, leaving behind this White myth is still hard to achieve, since the colonial subconscious still plays an important role in the images of Aboriginal masculinity that are screened in Australia. Langton says that "these icons of Aboriginality are produced by Anglo-Australians, not in dialogue with Aboriginal people, but from other representations such as the 'Stone Age savage'" (Langton 1994, 104). Still, as *Red Hill* proves, there are ways around the predominant stereotypes that allow filmmakers to reformulate them and subvert established misconceptions of Aboriginal identity.

Red Hill is set in a small town in high-country Victoria. The location plays an important role in the film thanks to the fact that the majority of small rural towns in Australia remain isolated. We start with young deputy Shane Cooper (Ryan Kwanten) waking up for his first day of work after moving in town with his pregnant wife. During the title credits sequence, we walk with Shane through the town, which gives us a chance to discover a Victorian style town that seems to be almost abandoned. It has the look of a frontier town typical of the genre. Red Hill is ruled by strong old-fashioned White masculinity epitomised by the figure of Old Bill (Steve Bisley), the hard-nosed Sheriff who fights to keep the town stuck in the past. Old Bill and his men form the classic bunch of virile cowboys. Unsurprisingly, the men in this town move around riding horses, wearing Stetson cowboy hats and drink beer at The Golden Age Hotel (Harper 2010, 12). The plot kicks off when convicted murderer Jimmy Conway (Tom E. Lewis) escapes from prison and heads to Red Hill seeking for revenge. It was Old Bill who put him behind bars fifteen years ago and Bill and his men get ready to receive him like a bunch of hunters waiting for big game. It is a plot seen many times in westerns: the small town under the threat of a bloodthirsty outlaw and the group of brave cowboys determined to take him down. Nonetheless, the film consciously decides to subvert the genre. As the plot advances, we will discover that the apparently White good heroes have their hands stained

with blood, while Conway will slowly take the role of the agent responsible of restoring the moral order. Much in the way of the Hollywood action flicks of the 1990s, this process of restoration is going to be performed as a violent showdown.

In *Red Hill*, Jimmy Conway's masculinity oscillates between the noble and the ignoble, never fitting completely in either category. In both cases, his link with the environment is ethnically marked since the beginning of the film, even before he actually appears on screen. Shane Cooper's first assignment in his first day as deputy is to investigate the death of some horses owned by a local farmer. The farmer tells Shane that his father once saw a panther roaming the region. It is obvious that the presence of a wild panther, an animal related to the blackness of the animal world, is a symbol of Jimmy's identity as a force of nature. For instance, both Jimmy and the panther perceive Shane as someone who does not belong to the amorality of the White men that rule the town and do not harm him; much like Jimmy, the panther identifies who is to be punished and who is not. Moreover, in the last shot of the film we see the panther at the top of a hill contemplating the landscape, much in the way the Aboriginal men have been portrayed in many films. Hence, we could consider that the panther is Jimmy's spiritual totem, since both perform a similar role in the plot as agents of nature and moral values. There is another analogy between Jimmy and the forces of nature. At the beginning of the film, we are told that a huge storm is coming to town. Before news of Jimmy's prison break hits the Television. As the plot unfolds and the climax of the film approaches, a heavy rainfall stages the moment when Shane is told the truth about Jimmy's past. The image of hostile weather is used here to reinforce the idea of Jimmy belonging to the land. Later, when Jimmy's revenge is about to be fulfilled by killing Old Bill, he is constantly shot against the natural landscape by Hughes, again highlighting the fact that he is the only character in the film who acts upon those who break the natural equilibrium of society.

Of course, as any other stereotype constructed by the colonizer, the myth of the guardian of the land attributed to the Aboriginal man aids to control his identity and construct an artificial image

of Aboriginal masculinity. It is undeniable that behind this myth we can always find White filmmakers interested in using an exotic element in their films. As a film rooted in the western narrative in the both senses of word, *Red Hill* cannot escape completely this desire to control Jimmy's Otherness. In fact, the western genre is identified with the process of civilising the wild. This civilising process is not only achieved by means of colonial violence but also by assimilating the Other within the narrative. However, the way Jimmy is portrayed in the film is problematic because of his active use of violence and action hero aesthetics to subvert the White masculinity that rules the town. He does that without renouncing his identification with the land, since he seems to appear and disappear at will, merging with the landscape. He combines this stereotype with the protection of the social moral codes that define the relationship between individuals and the social superstructure. At the beginning of the film, Jimmy seems to be the clear antagonist of the story. Yet, as the plot unfolds we see that the White cowboys that should occupy the role of the heroes are in fact darker than expected. At the end, Jimmy is revealed to be both the victim and the hero of the film. Jimmy's wife is murdered by Old Bill and his men, and Jimmy is accused of the murder. In terms of moral and natural order, this event creates a fracture that needs to be repaired. Much as White western heroes, Jimmy understands that bullets and violence are essential tools to avenge crimes and restore order. His role as sentinel of the land is expanded and assimilated within the White social structure and the western narrative. Social order, much as the land, needs to be protected.

In a way, Jimmy is an extreme instance of the noble savage. His wife was raped and murdered by Old Bill's men because Jimmy found a sacred burial place in the land next to Red Hill that the government was buying to build a railroad. When Jimmy decided to go public to protect such an important landmark for his people, Old Bill decided to kill him. Up to some extent, this can be considered an analogy of the conflict over rights to the land that has been so present in Australia since the European settlers arrived and took possession of the country under the concept of *terra*

nullius. While Old Bill exemplifies the Western concept of land as something to be owned and exploited, Jimmy's attitude is aligned with the Aboriginal duty to protect the land. Still, since this information is not revealed until the third act of the film, it is not surprising that Jimmy, who the news reports describe as a dangerous criminal of Aboriginal descent, is at first mistaken by Shane and therefore by the audience as the biggest threat for the town. He seems to be just one more instance of the sanguinary Aborigine trying to stop the development of a White community. Like many past examples of this racist figure, he acts like a wild animal killing presumed innocent White police officers without uttering a single word. But it is almost a unique experience to watch him become a figure of redemption by the end of the film (Harper 2011, 15), even though his condition of ferocious killer cannot be denied. His nobility comes from his moral code and his ability to sense those individuals that are corrupting society. At the same time, his way of restoring the moral order is done through savage violence. He is an ambiguous character, much like the perceptions of the Other. Jimmy is a problematic character for the White Australian audience. While Australian policies for the last four decades have been aimed at saving what is perceived as the innate nobility of the Aborigine, the desire of wiping out the savageness of the country is still inherent to the Australian national reading of the Aboriginal. Jimmy is also a challenge to the racist colonizing view that has restricted the native peoples of the world within the simplistic binary pair of good/White and evil/Black.

In relation to this conflict, the film makes a clear reference to the traditional racist White views of the Aboriginal. When Shane goes to meet with Old Bill for the first time, he passes an information office where he sees a 'historical' display of an Aboriginal man. Following Dampier and Cook's thoughts on the Aboriginal people, what is displayed is the image of the Aboriginal man against natural elements and animals, as if he was just part of the natural environment. There are also some visual elements from the myth of the old patron of nature, naked and doomed to extinction, such as the gray hair and beard. Jimmy's reaction to the display is probably the most

unconvincing moment of the film. Instead of rejecting or subverting the stereotypes of his people as he has been doing the whole film, he seems to accept this image. After spending an hour successfully shooting Old Bill's men to death, displaying a talent for the use of guns not seen before in an Aboriginal character in any other film, he consciously decides to use the boomerang and the spears from the display to kill two men. Far from being an instance of Aboriginal rebellion against the White 'short minded' concept of Aboriginality, it seems to reaffirm Jimmy's natural talent to use such items for no other reason than his Aboriginal origin (Harper 2010, 12).

Jimmy's presence challenges the traditional concept of Australian White masculinity as a homogenized archetype, which Old Bill and his men embody. In 21st century Australia, the tough, bold, self-sufficient White man who can easily marginalise and exclude any other masculinity, including the Aboriginal one, has been discarded by a more industrialised, capitalist, multicultural society. Old Bill's violent attitude towards every element of the environment that he understands as a threat to his masculinity highlights his 'Australianess'. As Katherine Biber says, ''violent White men are the backbone of Australian culture'' (Biber 1999, 32). Old Bill's leitmotiv can be summarised in a sentence he says when Shane tells him about the panther roaming the area; "this is Australia, mate, not fucking Africa" (Hughes, 26:38). This kind of masculinity has been historically shaped by purging the land from the traces of the black Other, identifying the blackness of the land as a national problem that needs to be solved. In the film, Old Bill is related to the 'old' Australia and his values are influenced by the obsolete ethics of brutal action and lack of emotions. A subject such as Old Bill is of no use in a contemporary multicultural society. However he can still enjoy some social agency in the small outback community portrayed in *Red Hill*, away from the urban coast. At the beginning of the film, we learn that he is opposing those voices asking for the progress of the town to attract more tourism from the cities, creating a national park nearby. His resistance against anything related to the Australian urban centres is also shown in his attitude towards Shane, who represents a more modern breed of man. Old Bill receives him with open hostility, trying to

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frighten Shane since he understands the young officer to be weak. When Shane tells him about an incident when he got shot by a kid, Old Bill reaction cannot be more clearly disparate:

Old Bill: You couldn't pull the trigger.

Shane Cooper: He was just a kid.

Old Bill: It was a kid with a gun.

Shane Cooper: That's one way of looking at it.

Old Bill: What's the other way, Constable?

Shane Cooper: Maybe he needed help, not a bullet… What, you disagree, Inspector?

Old Bill: We'd be having a different conversation if you were dead.

(Hughes, 15:58)

Shane's and Old Bill moral codes are different. This is made clear when they have to deal with Jimmy's arrival. Old Bill wants to hunt him and kill him, because if "Jimmy Conway rides into this town; he'll be bringing hell with him. Shoot to kill" (Hughes 26:09) Nevertheless, Shane is not eager to engage in a violent shoot-out, which allows him to discover the true motives of Old Bill. Hughes' film seems to praise the representation of the sentinel Aboriginal man and even places him in another role that has been denied to the Aborigine; the father and head of the family. Just before he dies, Jimmy utters the words "We were going to have a boy" (Hughes 01:21:28), in fact his only words in the whole film. In a White patriarchal society such as Australia, these words have a great power. Up until now, we knew that Jimmy had been raised to the role of guardian of nature and protector of social harmony, but what these last words achieve is to complete Jimmy's unique masculinity with the role of the father honoring his family duties. He is avenging the deaths of his wife and his non-born child. This child has a stronger symbolism than it seems at first glance. One can say that it is a metaphor of the Aboriginal nation that was murdered by the White man before it

could be born, a crime that still nowadays need to be avenged.

Even thought the film manages to empower Jimmy by letting him use violence to defend himself and handing him the role of moral guardian, *Red Hill* upholds some of the racial supremacist thoughts about the Aboriginal man. Jimmy is a character doomed from the beginning. There is simply no way that Jimmy can come out of his revenge alive and exonerated from the murder of his wife. Notions of Indigenous men being too primitive to survive in the contemporary world derive from the colonial popular thinking. Since the 19th century, the Australian national narrative has described Aboriginal people as a fading culture. Would it have been so easy to kill him if he were White? To start with, he is not made the point of focalisation in the film, which belongs to Shane, who the camera follows for much of the film even though Shane's agency over the story is minimal. Shane's role in the film seems to be a mere excuse having a clear cut good White character surviving all the brutality of the film, in order to fulfill the audience's expectations.

While films produced in the and 1950s and the 1960s were more interested in representing the savageness of the Aboriginal man, and therefore justify their subordinated position in society, films produced in the last decade have become more bent towards the more sympathetic image of the Noble Aborigine. The problem with this portrayal is that it is also a stereotype, a White artefact unable to provide Aboriginal identity with more depth than its predecessor. Both deny any kind of authenticity for the Aboriginal characters that appear on the screen, that end up being dependent on the White audience's expectations. Hence, positive instances of Aboriginality in film are still nothing else than displays of Otherness in opposition to the more developed White characters. Going back to the end of *Red Hill*, when Jimmy is shot dead by the police, the camera quickly focuses on Shane's reaction. He seems impressed by the events he has witnessed, and feels sorry for what the men he considered his equals did to Jimmy. But again, the White man's reaction to Jimmy's story seems to be more important than Jimmy's actual experience and tragedy.

Shane, who in any other film would be the hero, is in fact nothing else than an outsider

witness of the battle of masculinities that unleashes in the town. He never actually manages to engage in the action, but he is pulled away by both the rest of the policemen and Jimmy. He is, in a way, the link between the White audience and the story that is unfolding. He is the White man who will be allowed to gain a better understanding of the environment thanks to the sacrifice of the Aboriginal man. This kind of story could be considered like a White man's walkabout. Jimmy's voiceless identity is also something to keep in mind. Aborigines have remained silent while White men have been describing them as part of the fauna and flora of the country. Jimmy only speaks once during the whole film, right before dying. Nonetheless, his silence is a constant threat and his actions speak louder than any word about his tragedy and of his kin. His way to break free is not by speaking for himself, not even by having a good White man to do it, but by taking action and avoiding the passiveness forced on Aborigines in other films.

At the same time, language is not able to help Jimmy deal with the weight of his tragedy. His rejection of language is also a rejection of the highly rational civilised White world and its patriarchal hierarchy where Jimmy's masculinity is marginalised. This is probably the biggest achievement of the film. Jimmy's character revisits the issue of Aboriginal representation from a different perspective, asserting that Aboriginal men are also capable of playing the role of the action hero while using the stereotype of the connection to the land to his purpose. This is not a realistic portrayal of Aboriginal masculinity, like the masculinity performed in westerns and action Hollywood flicks. All of them are fantasies subjected to their creators and the personal choices they make. Hence, the transformation that Jimmy undergoes throughout the film is impressive. He starts as the lonely outlaw who unleashes death and destruction within a small White community in the outback and becomes the guardian of the family ideal. His last words in the film place the White characters that have been punished not only as murderers but as a threat to the family unit. Jimmy protects Shane for the same reason he is killing in a cold blood, because it is the right thing to do. Ironically, Jimmy's death reunites him with the stereotypical form of Aboriginal male character, going back to

the land and dying as a victim, after having performed the role of the hero for much of the film. Jimmy does what Shane is unable to, while Shane manages to survive.

4.2. "We were going to have a boy": the super-Aboriginal macho.

As we have seen, Jimmy is a very atypical character in Australian cinema. He is not the first Aboriginal fictional character who uses violence as a response to the oppression of the White Australia, but he is the first whose role is close to the classic action hero. Like this extremely popular archetype of Western masculinity, Jimmy embodies a modern tough individualism while keeping his commitment to the interest of the group moral order. His identity is constructed with many of the action hero attributes, such as the very small range of emotions he shows, his lack of words, innate wisdom and gun-fighting skills. At the same time, his savage skills translate also into the film and bestow him a slightly magical and superhuman ability to accomplish his revenge. In the film, there are not few scenes where Jimmy's identity moves beyond the action hero type and becomes his natural evolution; the superhero. In terms of both the masculinity he performs on the screen and the aesthetics he assumes, one can argue that he is the first modern example of an Aboriginal superhero.

Classic superhero film image of masculinity have created one of the most universal fantasies of manhood. Like many instances of male identity, superhero masculinity falls under the principle of construction by opposition, generally with the supervillain but also with the female subject. What is at issue with the superhero male is that he allows phallocentric cultures to create a hyperbole of what society expects from a man (Brown 1999, 28). A man is not weak, but has super strength and he is not supposed to be emotional but extremely brave. His active role in society is performed with physical violence, a violence linked to the male body in a way that helps strengthen gendered discourses of superiority. The first popular archetype of this kind of masculinity was Superman, created in 1938 by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Superman is a clear example of this breed of hyper-

masculinity if we contrast him with his alter ego, Clark Kent. While his everyday identity is one of softness, weakness, insecurity and even emasculation, Superman is given all the attributes of idealized manhood. In other words, Clark Kent is the man we are, with all our limitations and shortcomings, while Superman is the man we want to be. He is a success in terms of masculinity, he is always in control of the situation and overcomes every single challenge that evil supervillains throw at him, while always acting with a supreme sense of moral and honour (Lendrum 2005, 361). His strength, muscled body and immaculate moral became the model for the superheroes that followed. Of course, this search for perfection left two instances of collateral damages; the feminine was excluded from this narrative and women became only a love interest for the superhero, a love that could never be consummated, preventing the superhero from becoming dangerously emotional; and coloured men, whose ethnic difference was opposed to everything that the superhero embodied (Lendrum 2005, 367).

The portrait of bold masculinity is a crucial construct in mainstream film. Thanks to the new themes that filmmakers all over the world are incorporating to their fictions, the monolithic concept of the hero is giving way to a multiplicity of possibilities for the male hero, both in roles of authority and weakness (Bolt and Thompson 2004, 426). One-dimensional heroes are no longer appealing for contemporary audiences and filmmakers are creating superhuman men who must deal with identity troubles as they fight the bad guys. 21st century superheroes are damaged men, with traumas and flaws that have to reformulate their own masculinities (Mason 2010, 38). Some of these male roles allow the audience to self-project and idealize individual values, some others put the male viewer in a position of conflict and self-punishment by foregrounding the flaws of modern masculinities and highlighting the imperfection of society. At the same time, new superhero films have freed the hero from the control of society, allowing them to operate from a marginal position and fight established authority. Hence, even in a two dimensional universe such as the superhero's, ambiguity is becoming more predominant.

The superhero narrative may be suitable to be analysed in terms of race as well. The coloured man was never included in the origins of the superhero. While this extreme definition of masculinity is characterised by the willpower, Aboriginal men have historically fallen on the other extreme of the spectrum for two hundred years. The hegemonic presence of the White invader in Australia has deprived the Aboriginal man of the rights given to the male subject. Kept in a stage of permanent childhood, Aborigines have been submitted to the will of the colonizer within the hierarchy of Australian society (Connell 2000, 62). In cinema, this has translated in the fact that Aborigines have not had access to any role of parity with the White man. In that sense, the Indigenous Australian masculinities have to be understood as a surrogate identity under White paternalism. National identity politics in Australia are highly uneasy, particularly in films where Aborigines and non-Aborigines clash into each other. This national conflict also affects the cohabitation of both cultures in terms of masculinity. In the new century, traditional film heroic roles are more open to new forms of identity, destabilizing the monolithic Caucasian hero. In these new films, heroes must negotiate their macho-like manliness with issues of victimization that were neglected in traditional representations of masculinity. Thus, Jimmy's trauma is as important as his active manly style to achieve his revenge. The combination of White traditional patriarchal ideologies with Aboriginal traumas challenges the stereotypes attributed to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters.

During the 21st century we have witnessed a change in the superhero man. Perfection and immaculate morals are no longer appealing attributes for contemporary audiences. The superhero blockbusters produced all over the globe over the last decade have abandoned steady and indestructible characters to create damaged and darker supermen. This can be traced back to some of the theories of men's studies of the late 1980s and mid 1990s. Scholars have been arguing that manhood, as it has been historically understood, is in crisis (Kimmel 2005, 92). Consequently, late superhero films have put their protagonists' individual dramas and weaknesses at the centre of the

narrative, even showing the superhero in a state of failure to fulfil his social role. How is this of relevance when approaching *Red Hill*? If we assume that the traditional superhero figure is no longer a fixed White entity, then other marginalised identities and attitudes can have access to the his role and perform the role of the vigilante while bringing to the table ethnic marked forms of male performance. Think about Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), one of the biggest blockbusters, not only of the superhero genre. Nolan's Batman is a man overwhelmed by rage. His motivation to become a mask crusader is nothing else than avenge his parents murder by a sick society. Is that motif far from Jimmy's motivation in *Red Hill*? At a smaller scale, he is putting away those individuals that harm and pollute society. Moreover, like any other superhero, Jimmy employs violence as his main strategy to solve problems, which is again a very manly way to deal with problems. However, Jimmy also does it in a very Aboriginal way. The stereotype of the Aborigine as having affinity with nature also comes along with the idea that Aborigines have access to magic and supernatural powers. In the film, Jimmy is shot many times, but he seems to be 'invulnerable'. His skills to kill Old Bill's men are odd in an otherwise naturalistic setting. There is no doubt that Jimmy is the odd man out in *Red Hill*.

Jimmy's visual representation is also reminiscent of the superhero motif. When he first appears on screen, he is wearing a plain prison uniform. But when he attacks the Sheriff's office he takes with him a long leather coat, a cowboy hat and a belt with ammunition. All these elements together will form Jimmy's superhero costume. Superhero suits are powerful images that ascribe the man inside the tights within the universe of the superhero adventure. Their main function is to hide the real subject's identity and single him out from the rest of men. In *Red Hill*, we can see some shots where Jimmy's long coat resembles the cape of the traditional superhero. The cape is more than a pure aesthetic element for superheroes. It makes them look bigger and scarier in their enemies' eyes, and helps avoid gunfire by hiding the body from the vision of possible attackers. That is clearly the case in a scene where Jimmy is shot several times from short distance by one of

Old Bill's men. He does not move or tries to dodge the bullets, he just stands there and simply lets his terrifying look and his dark figure affect the aim of the shooter. In terms of the representation of masculinity, the cape is also an essential element, since it obscures his form and highlights Jimmy's dramatic frame. The hat is a tribute to the western and a symbol of the cowboy's tough masculinity, which he challenges in the film by showing its dark side. What is more, his face was burned when Old Bill's men burned down his house. His disfigurement is like an imposed mask he can never take off. In fact, unlike many Superheroes, Jimmy does not have a secret identity behind which he can take shelter. He was a married man, a father to be and an Aboriginal man. But there is no way back for him and the only identity available now is the crusader role. The aesthetics of the superhero are important because they are cultural icons. Superheroes are visual symbols of the attitudes and ideals of their social and cultural backgrounds. Fashion is never a passive expression but it is in fact a mechanism to attach certain discourse to the body of the hero. Superheroes have a strong presence, highlighting their hard body type, opposite to the softer cultural other (Lendrum 2005, 365). Hence, Jimmy's outfit communicates the struggle and the tragedy of his identity torn between two worlds; he assumes western iconography to empower his Aboriginal persona.

As said before, Jimmy is also dealing with his private trauma. Jimmy's victimisation in the film is a challenge for the male desire of control, which when unachievable pushes men in a situation of uncertainty. If the traditional superhero was supposed to be an ideal realization of masculinity, *Red Hill* foregrounds the possibility of failure to fulfil prototypical male roles. Jimmy, while succeeding in avenging his pregnant wife's murder, fails to survive and re-enter society; Shane fails in controlling the situation that unleashes around him, hence unable to play the role of the traditional White hero; and Old Bill fails in his role as Sheriff and western man. The relationship established between Shane and Jimmy reveals the racial tensions that construct the discourses on masculinity in the film. Jimmy's trauma and victimization is supposed to upgrade Shane's role in the narrative. As a result of that, the hostilities between Jimmy's and Old Bill's masculinities allow Shane to preserve an ideal form of Australian manhood. Even though Jimmy is a monster at the beginning of the film, he can act the part of the

superhero precisely because of the flaws of his Aboriginal identity. The more he kills and the more we know about his victims, the more human Jimmy becomes in our eyes and the more we, as audience, align with him and hope for his success against the White men. As pointed out before, his superhuman role seems to be aided by the land and natural elements. In fact, if one had to describe what Jimmy's superpower is, the answer would be his Aboriginality. Much like any other superhero in history, Jimmy's private sense of what is right is key to his construction of masculinity. His moral is clearly marked by his ethnicity. He protects the land and fights corrupt White policemen, somehow rebelling against the invader and avenging the wrong done to his people. Old Bill's antagonism only reinforces and raises Jimmy above the morals of the rest of the characters. Moreover, the physical power and skilful manners of Jimmy give the plot a far more complex edge by de-constructing the classic binary pair of good and evil. This is extremely challenging to the White audience, who have grow up learning to identify the White male as the hero. With Jimmy, this process of identification can only be partially achieved, since it is hard for the spectator to identify with him and make Jimmy a surrogate of the White gaze.

Conclusions:

Aboriginal characters portrayed in Australian films are problematic, mostly as a result of the ascendancy of the White man both in the process of inception and reception of the films. In fiction, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men have been historically constructed as artefacts depending on the White characters and as complements of the White ethnocentric subject, few times have been screened as round entities able to exist by themselves. Australian films are wrought in the imaginary of the non-Aboriginal Australian to suit a mainstream audience, and do not seek for authenticity when dealing with the Aboriginal subject. At the same time, these fictional characters, places and situations are correspondent to a specific reality, highly influenced by racist stereotypes that derive from the colonial period. Fiction is an extremely useful tool to analyse the societies that produce it. Even if fiction films do not attempt to be portraits of reality, at the same time they seek to present plausible images and situations, to engage the audience with the plot. The filmmakers' ideologies and intentions are not the only discourses working in the process of filmmaking. The audience brings to the theatre their own set of beliefs. Marcia Langton has stated that the repeated racist representations of Aborigines in film are related to the fantasies of the White spectator. She says that the repetition of racist representations is connected to "viewer's ideological framework" (Langton 1993, 24). Even she acknowledges the impossibility of a film representation completely controlled by Aborigines. For Langton, the better way to improve the situation of Aboriginality in film is to set up an exchange, a transcultural production mode.

That is precisely the merit of some for the films produced in the last decade, such as the three films discussed in my research; *Yolngu Boy, Ten Canoes* and *Red Hill*. These three films prove that it is possible to challenge hegemonic ideologies using the same stereotyped images that have marginalised the Aboriginal man in the past. These and other recent films question White constructions of the Aboriginal, by giving their characters complex identities. This can be seen in the way Aboriginal masculinities are allowed to grow and escape the patriarchal control of the

White colonizer. The colonial stereotypes that are still working today are telling more about the White observer than the Aboriginal object they construct. This is still true in a society where visual media is considered more reliable than any other human expression. In terms of masculinity, Aborigines have access to a broader and growing range of roles in mainstream media, even though these roles remain subordinate and still must fight the White wish for framing them as primitive and peripheral to the Australian society. What is more significant for my research, this dialogue is established at two levels, both in terms of race and gender. Aborigines have been denied their own manhood by images that describe them as childish, animal-like beings. Aboriginal masculinities were not only subordinated to the White man's, but were doomed to disappear. Yet, both *Yolngu Boy* and *Red Hill* manage to support the viability of a modern role for Indigenous Australian men. At the same time, the endings of both films prove that there is a long way to go before we can say that the Aborigines are free of the colonial domination.

This research was established by analysing new forms of Aboriginal masculinities in contemporary Australian films that represent a direct response to the stereotyped discourse that is still operating in Australian society and that dates back to the colonial period. To do so, I have drawn mostly from three different theoretical fields: film studies, postcolonial theory and masculinities. Bearing in mind that I was dealing with a form of art that is heavily present in today's society, I have also used some critical material about the reception of films, such as screen theory. The main conclusion that can be drown from this work is that new film narratives are offering new spaces for Aboriginal representation that subvert racist discourses both in terms of gender and race. Given that cinema plays a huge role in the representation and creation of both personal and national identities, the discourses working at the level of film production have a strong impact within society. The three films that have been studied and analysed in this text deal with the fixed racist stereotypes that are used to describe the Aboriginal man since the colonial heyday. They subvert them by dismantling White patriarchal power both in terms of race and gender. The colonial

enterprise is far from over and still important to understand how the White population relates to the Aborigine in terms of ethnicity but also sexuality. The power relations established on the screen go beyond the cinema theatres. All three films have been produced in the new millennium and are part of a new wave of Australian films that shape a new imaginary. At the same time, some of the stereotypes that these films answer prevail, proving that this process is still in an early stage. Nevertheless, it is important to study how media, in all its forms, represents cultural identities in contemporary societies.

In Stephen Johnson's *Yolngu Boy*, I have described how the challenging aspect comes from the fact the film tries to conciliate the traditional Aboriginal masculinity with the need to deal with a 'westernised' world. By mixing the coming of age film genre with the road movie, the film creates a space where the three kinds of masculinity that the main characters embody can interact and test their ability to survive in the White Australia. staging competing constructions of Indigenous masculinity. In the film, ceremonial culture is portrayed by means of the realization of ideal masculinity, which offers an answer to the collective struggles of disparity and violence. With the purpose of approaching violent gender behaviours, the film claims that we need to distinguish different and multiple masculinities operating within the Aboriginal community. These different masculinities survive in distinct interaction with each other, often with hierarchy and segregation. Each boy in the story has his own ambition in terms of masculine success, from the primary embrace of ceremonial masculinity to the material western way of achieving manhood. The film uses the image of the hunter as a heroic figure. Hunting is one of the practices in which masculinity is globally performed; what is more, the prototype of the hunter is the one most praised. The performance of masculinity is always a communal process in any social group. The differences and hierarchy relationships between masculinities within the community play a central role on the choices made by the young men in the film.

De Heer and Djigirr's *Ten canoes* shows how Aborigines can be empowered by language. In the film, they are depicted outside the common image of victims of colonization. They are placed in a liminal space of certain welfare previous to the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Australia. The plot development is influenced by Aboriginal ways of connection to land through stories and their experiences. Older generations take the responsibility to care for and look after younger people. Men respect their ancestors, and boys progressively become men through the learning of skills and the telling of stories, stories connected to the land (fishing, farming, canoe building, etc.) Through the story-telling, the everyday activities become less and less a process of learning how to do something but becoming a complete and successful man as the community expects them to be. By performing ancient practices of warriorhood, authentic masculinities are reinforced. The film also shows the patriarchal order of the Aboriginal community as it was before the Western intrusion.

Patrick Hughes *Red hill* is a response to some of the most common portrayals of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in Australian cinema as mysterious backtrackers or criminal outcasts. The film uses stereotyped symbols of primal masculine behaviour. The Aboriginal 'hero' in the film is victimized, forced to suffer, lose his culture (and use of language) and even killed. Nevertheless, the film manages to subvert traditional thought on Aboriginality. Conway is presented almost as a superhuman entity, a designed bogeyman that kills those who performed violence upon him in the past. His wrath seems to be aided by Mother Nature, as lightning strikes, torrential rainfall hits, and fires frame Conway's killing. Conway's traumatized past allows us to glance at the outcome of Western invasion and greed. He is not only avenging his individual suffering but also attacking the racist ideology his victims embody. In terms of masculinity, the film subverts the moral and intellectual superiority of White men upon Aborigines, and while Cooper shows a will to address the injustice done in the past, it is Conway who has to perform the last sacrifice. The film also depicts the tension of a man caught between savagery and civilization. From the start of the film we are with against the dominant White masculinity that rules the township and is led by the town's

'Sheriff'. In westerns, this moral code is what defines the relationship of a man and his community: guns and violence are only needed when moral codes are violated and must be avenged. In *Red Hill* it is the Aboriginal man who must set things right and re-establish the order within the community through his merciless brutality. And while he is constructed by old stereotypes, eventually it is the White man who is condemned by his acts.

Even though more and more is being written about how masculinities are constructed in literature and art, applying men's studies to the modern media can give us access to a more immediate instance of the representation of maleness. It is a step that feminism took several decades ago and that helped us gain deeper awareness of how ideologies and social discourses manipulate images of women. Nevertheless, we must accept that the asphyxiating phallocentric politics that have oppressed women through history are similar to those that marginalised and disempowered Indigenous men all over the world. The analysis of the representation of Other masculinities cannot be based on the work done on feminism on the same matter, but must create a new set of tools to analyse the processes behind the construction of fictional archetypes of masculinity, to enable us to ask ourselves what role they have and what ideologies that hold them together in order to subvert the stereotypes created by the dominant monolithic 'I' and feed the search of new ways of representation where those identities and those masculinities that have been silenced can express themselves without the filter of the White man. This research has tried to explore those examples of how a new film language is being created in Australia, a context where Indigenous Australian people in general, and men in particular, can express their plurality and particular way to relate between them and to their environment. Even though these Indigenous male film characters do not manage to go beyond completely the racist narrative that is so common in Australia, there are valuable images of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men can achieve on and off the screen.

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