Te Kapa o Taika: A Commentary on *Boy*

Brendan Hokowhitu

I didn't really understand why at the time of watching *Boy* I had feelings of dissociation with Taika Waititi, but I have come to comprehend this reaction more fully as I have read the articles of this special issue and thought about it less intuitively. "Alamein's Encore", the feature-length audio commentary track that Ocean Mercier discusses in her article in this issue further unearths my discord. The commentary provides a monologue between Taika the director and Alamein the jocular rustic fool. The film, thus, reminding me, in a visceral way, of a ponce from *The City* rolling into town for the summer holidays (whom my mates and I would have called a 'big-head' or a 'dick-head'), who sums up the rustic ghetto in one foul swoop and proceeds to tell the Natives how cool his flash *ku-mara* is.

Yet, I have preached in other places the constructed nature of Māori masculinities in terms of 'humility' as a conditioned residue of British stoicism (2007). When Māori men do become assertive the assumption of gentleman-like British qualities (i.e., stoicism), associated with the Māori gentry's version of humility has led to a degree of submissiveness to neo-colonial desires. In essence, the subversive, constructive, creative, feminine voice of Māori men has been largely silenced. And so, I must constantly remind myself to think good things about this big-head whom, incidentally, I also had to pretend to like back in the day because his Air Jordan's were way cooler than what I could get from Ōpōtiki's *Foy's Footwear* on Church Street.

I was 14 years old for most of 1984, and lived in Ōpōtiki, a town of about 3,000 people, the majority Māori, on the coastline close-ish to Waihau Bay and possibly urbane in comparison. My mates and I certainly did not listen to Michael Jackson though, not in public at least. Indeed, driven by a general dislike for what the world was offering *us* up, I (heavily influenced by my then 16 year old brother, Jason) listened to 'weirdo' music by bands such as Devo, Stiff Little Fingers, U2 (solitarily *Sunday Bloody Sunday*), The Clash, The Dead Kennedys, The Sex Pistols, The Angelic Upstarts, The Cure, The Beat… you get the picture. It seems strange

now that this was the music fodder we grew up with in the rural Eastern Bay of Plenty in 1984, but at the time there was nothing odd about it; the music's underlying message of anti-conformity (such as "God save the Queen. A fascist regime. They made you a moron. A potential H-bomb", *Sex Pistols*) resonating with our Māori and Pākehā mates alike.

EMBODIED SOVEREIGNTY: MAORIS OF MODERNITY[1]

I began this commentary of Waititi's film, *Boy*, with auto-ethnomusic moments because these moments prime the ambivalence I have for the film. In many ways I identify with Waititi's project or desire to represent 'Māoris of modernity'; to invest Māori with the immediacy of modern culture, an immediacy that, as Jo Smith points out in her analysis (this issue), confounds those ideas of Peter Debruge's review, which dismisses a 'Māori *Thriller*' based on a more obtrusive carnal desire for traditional Indigenous filmic authenticity. Bolstering Debruge's anthropological will is the current preoccupation of many Indigenous theorists with a schizophrenic envisioning of an authentic Indigenous self located in a pre-colonial past and, thus, divorced from the materiality of the present. That is, a craving for a 'classical' form of Indigenous culture that never universally existed, which permits the ontological blunder of divorcing what it means to be Indigenous from modernity and the *present*.

Even the analyses of 'postcolonial cinema' by pre-eminent scholars have tended to conceive the most important work as temporally divorced from the present; as oriented towards the past. Discussing Australian postcolonial cinema, for instance, Faye Ginsburg argues:

> These works 'backtrack' through the nation's history not in triumphalist terms, but in ways that address the legacies of grief and violence wrought by settler colonialism, a significant transformation in the country's sense of its own legacies, and a recognition that it matters whose stories are told and by whom. (82)

The growing postcolonial angst arising through revisionist filmic notions such as 'backtracking' still tend to reflect an Enlightenment rationalism, where the central project remains the deliverance of Western subjectivities. The (historical) Indigenous subject remains the sounding board for the more enlightened postcolonial identity, and thus remains in the margins.

[1] Editor's note: this is a deliberate mispelling of the term "Māori".

Waititi's film aligns with an alternative definition of Fourth Cinema. That is, film that contains strategies to unravel and disrupt the way colonial and postcolonial structures function to disavow the temporal and cultural realities of Indigenous peoples; in this case, the right to be 'modern Māoris'. The right, for instance, to think the Confederate flag (vis-à-vis *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979-85) car 'General Lee', that Alamein references in *Boy*) was a symbol of cool. Fourth media here is both an accomplice with colonial technologies, yet resistant to colonial definitions of 'nation' and, indeed, underscored by a desire to unravel the anthropological project of colonial and neo-colonial media.

Ginsburg, to be fair, goes on to note that, "more recent forms of cultural production [that] have offered a different kind of intervention, creating new sites for the recognition of the cultural citizenship of a range of Indigenous Australians, from remote settlements to urban neighbourhoods" (83). Ginsburg makes the distinction between those films "that have focused on land rights, ritual, oral histories, language maintenance, and local sports events" (ibid). In this 'third space' of filmic production:

> These newer films speak to other, multiple legacies of settler colonialism that have shaped Aboriginal lives, but that are less clearly marked in public discourse. These works reject an easy division between remote, traditional people and deracinated urban Aboriginals . . . [offering a filmic space] for a sector whose experience has been rendered largely invisible in the Australian imaginary: mixed race, urban and rural Indigenous subjects, historically removed from contact with their traditional forebears, those for whom history--until quite recently--and the reflective screens of public media have been, so to speak, black. (ibid)

Effectively, Ginsburg is referring to an Indigenous media that moves beyond the identity production at the interstitial space of the politics of recognition, to signify the importance of shifting the camera away from those subjectivities that are recognisable, and towards Indigenous subjects 'less clearly marked'.

In this re-figuring that is crucial to Fourth Media, what is seldom considered is the assertion of the Indigenous body, or what I refer to as 'embodied sovereignty'; a concept that can be applied to Indigenous critical theory more generally but also has its place in Fourth

Media, as Smith articulates in relation to *Boy*: "After the melodrama of the main feature film, this end sequence offers a joyful and ferocious expression of Indigeneity that draws on existing Indigenous frameworks in a renewed fashion" (this issue); reminding me of C.L.R. James analyses of Caribbean cricket:

> For [James], the body in movement was a dynamic sculpture shaped by a dialectical tension individual will and desire, and the forms and constraints of its social environment at a particular historical moment. Whilst the body has always been at the painful centre of colonial and imperial history, it was James who first articulated its capacity for expression and resistance, not through violence necessarily, but through the detailed aesthetics of the body's response to stimuli at a particular moment in history. The political theatre of movement occurs in various and unexpected places by no means limited to traditional definitions of 'art' or rebellion: in a batman's stroke in cricket. (Featherstone, 27)

Indigenous embodied sovereignty, then, refers to a critical bodily practice that brings into question those subjugating forces written upon the Indigenous body, that is, the very materiality of Indigenous existence, whilst affirming the complexity, diversity and multi-dimensional ways of being Indigenous. Moreover, practices of embodied sovereignty must be aware of the way that discourses of Indigenous authenticity and tradition haunt them. As a consequence, part of the study of embodied sovereignty should be an analysis of how the specter of tradition remains written upon the Indigenous body.

Returning to *Boy*, the end sequence Smith refers to is kapa haka inflected by the temporally located phenomenon of Michael Jackson. It should be remembered here that kapa haka*,* in terms of ethnic formalism, is a mainstay of an authentic and traditionalised form of postcolonial Māori culture. In ontological terms, kapa haka signifies a worthy bodily exercise in the pursuit of 'being-Māori'. For instance, financial educational assistance provided for by Māori fiduciary entities often include questions surrounding 'community involvement' that commonly list 'kapa haka' as one such example (when filling these out, I never did find the category 'Punk Band'). Thus, kapa haka is one cultural form that helps construct 'who is the subject of rights'. Stated more positively, kapa haka has been a critical component in the make-

up of a strategically essentialised ontological construction of postcolonial Māori identity; an important contemporary marker of 'being Māori'.

The gendered nature of kapa haka that developed throughout modernity is also pertinent here. When kapa haka was re-invented in the 1930s it came to resemble the colonial physical education practices of the time. That is, physical education or 'drill' was performed in strict and uniform lines marked by a stringent gender division with females lined in rows in the front and males positioned in lines behind them. Furthermore, androgynous components of pre-contact kapa haka became gendered. For example, the androgynous 'poi' ball came under the domain of women because of its aesthetic nature, whilst virulent haka came to be dominated by men. The kapa haka that concludes *Boy* and, indeed, the swirling mercurial nature of many contemporary kapa haka performances, are postmodern performances because they simultaneously resemble and defy the mores of modern kapa haka traditions.

The fact, thus, that Waititi chose to conclude the film with 'Te Kapa o Taika' to the tune of *Poi E* signals an intent to disrupt Māori ethnic formalism. Waititi, himself, draws attention to the ontological problematics of 'being Māori' when he quips, "Let's just say I'm a filmmaker who is Māori . . . Why can't I just be a guy who writes stories and puts them in a film? Why can't I be a tall filmmaker? Or a black-haired filmmaker?" (cited Mercier, 38). Waititi's dis-logic (i.e. his will to frame himself outside 'common-sense' discourse) presents a postmodern Indigeneity that unpacks the naturalness of making the simplistic connection, between a Māori who makes film and 'a Māori filmmaker'. Inherently, Waititi recognises that the label 'Māori filmmaker' is political, and with predecessors such as Merata Mita and Barry Barclay, the association is valid. Waititi thus attempts to move himself beyond the politics of recognition that would like to register him as a 'Māori filmmaker' who makes Māori films.

ALAMEIN, JAKE AND MĀORI MASCULINITIES

> …concepts such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in [Munch's] The Scream) are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern. (Jameson, 63)

Having outlined the potential of Waititi's direction as 'Fourth Media,' I want to return to the point I was making in my auto-ethnomusical reflections. That is, the temporal authenticity

created by Waititi via his creative form of historical pastiche, to my mind, lacks the depth of my own subjective historical record of growing up as a boy pretty close to this time and place. Coincidentally, 1984 was the same year that Fredric Jameson published his seminal work, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". Of particular interest to this commentary (and I have in mind the 'character' of Alamein here, see below) is Jameson's description of the "decentering of the subject," a result of an economic shift from modernism's "imperialistic stage" to "late capitalism". According to Jameson, late capitalism constitutes the purest form of capital yet to have emerged and involves, "a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas. This purer capitalism of our own time thus eliminates the enclaves of pre-capitalist organisation, it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way" (78). The decentering of the subject is key to what Jameson views as the 'hitherto uncommodified areas'. For Jameson, the subject of modernism contained a central core-being that made possible "affect", or a depth of feeling stemming from the distance between a true self and emotion. In contrast, the flat individual of late capitalism has experienced a "waning of affect", where a core-being and depth, "is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject… the 'death' of the subject itself – the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual… the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche" (63).

Jameson uses various examples to highlight his ideas, including Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1886) or 'peasant shoes' as representative of modernism, where Van Gogh illuminates "the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state" (58). Jameson contrasts *A Pair of Boots* with Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) "a random collection of dead objects… the glitter of gold dust, the spangling of gilt sand, which seals the surface of the painting and yet continues to glint at us" (60-1). This, Jameson suggests, confers "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality" (60).

I briefly foreground Jameson's ideas here as the aim of this section is, through the lens of masculinity studies, to juxtapose the character of Alamein (as a postmodern subject) and the

icon of urban Indigenous modernity, Jake Heke of *Once Were Warriors*, both films ostensibly dealing with and centered upon the so-called "crisis of masculinities" (Edwards). 'Masculinity in crisis' refers to the postmodern fracturing of traditional performances of men in work, education, family, sexuality and health as the structures of modernity began to crumble. Although, 'the men's movement' was/is primarily concerned with the eroding privilege of white hetero-patriarchy, those Indigenous forms of masculinity that mimicked the masculine traditions of modernity such as 'the bread winner' were also inevitable casualties. Indeed, *Once Were Warriors* begins with Jake losing his job and, therefore exemplifying key characteristics of modern masculinity.

Both films, therefore, could be criticised for continuing the pathologising of Māori masculinities. Also, as Kavka and Turner (this issue) point out, both films fail to preface this pathology with colonial history. At least in *Boy*, however, Alamein's very name is a signal towards a genealogy of Māori masculine violence as a direct result of the devastating effects that World War II especially had on Māori men and, subsequently, Māori women and children. A descendant of 'pioneer' and 'soldier' masculinities, the dominant images of Māori men include beer swilling and emotionally barren forms of masculinity.

Before I go further, let me briefly define what I mean by 'masculinity'. Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) and Sandra Bem's (1974) famous studies of androgyny, both challenged the biological determinism surrounding sex. These seminal works argued that biological sex had little, if anything, to do with gender and, therefore, in the present context masculinities is simply a set of culturally constructed qualities. Generally then, masculinities do not exist, other than through "historically constructed performance" (Edwards, 109), with the qualification that the discursive construction of masculinities nevertheless produces very real men, who inhabit history, who embody and thus make 'true' the discursive field.

Thus, there is both a constructed and corporeal reality to masculinities. This is an important point in relation to Alamein in particular, because he stood out to me as the only unrealistic character; the only character that could never have existed in this time and place. I grew up with many teenage Māori boys who used an escapism based on bravado to not only

fool those around them, but as a tactic to keep their mana intact, in their own minds at least. Nevertheless, to put it bluntly, complete dickheads did not survive very long in that environment and certainly not in prison.

Indeed, Alamein's presence subverts the historical realism that Waititi otherwise painstakingly tries to re-create through casting and the pastiche of bygone fashion. Boy, for instance, is an intensely realistic character. Even the imaginary worlds of Boy and Rocky only serve to deepen the realism surrounding their characters as their escapism sharpens the hostile world they face. Alamein's over-performance, on the other hand, is a hyperbolic blight on the realist canvas. At best, Alamein represents a 14 year old 'prospect' who, while irreverent with his cronies would have avoided getting 'the bash' (beaten up) at all costs. In contrast, 'being staunch', that is, possessing a certain masculine economy of style, would have been mandatory for an ex-con, tough like Alamein.

Alamein is like a *Turkish Delight* (a chocolate bar) in the hands of *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (circa 1665); a device that serves to ridicule the desire for truthful representation. Interestingly, in 'Te Kapa o Taika' (the *Poi E* end sequence), Alamein's candy-apple red jacket and pants mirror Jackson's attire in the *Thriller* video, yet Waititi replaces Jackson's shiny black shoes, with a pair of unlaced work boots; not, I would say, a 'mistake' given the attention to detail in the rest of Alamein's ensemble. Waititi's substitution of 'diamond dust shoes' with 'peasant shoes' points to an interpretation of Alamein's character as an intentionally inconceivable and mercurial figure who lies beyond the film's governing tenet, historical realism (that is to represent the 'awkward' modernity of Māori) and, hence, is designed to problematise the archetypal urban Māori man, 'Jake-the-Muss' who has come to delimit an economy of style inherent to Māori masculinity in late-modernity.

The mimicry of colonial masculinities by Indigenous men and its subsequent reinterpretation as 'traditional Indigenous masculinities' has meant that 'authentic' forms of Māori masculinities have largely been defeminised. Such polarity has led to ritual displays of physical manliness and hyper-masculinities, along with the traditionalisation of heterosexuality, homophobia, and patriarchy within postcolonial Indigenous masculine cultures. And here

patriarchy is defined as including crude acts of aggression, but more importantly as "men's control of women's bodies and minds… deeply entrenched in rituals, routines and social practices" (Beynon, 85).

It is, thus, difficult not to read Alamein's character through *Once Were Warriors*' central character, Jake Heke; a character who is working-class (under-class), with an inability to find a mature (civilised) voice to deal with the complexities of his home life and, as a consequence, flies into violent rampages. Jake and Alamein, therefore, have much in common. Entirely governed by his passions, Jake is unable to find ways of expressing himself other than through physical violence. Indeed, everything about Jake is physical: his ferocity, his sexuality, his being, even his nickname, 'the-Muss'. From slurping oysters to his brutality in relation to others, Jake emanates an uncivilised physicality, void of mature expression. When Beth (his wife) suggests to Jake that he, "talks with his fists," she provides a succinct analysis of colonised Māori masculinities, devoid of mature communication and over-reliant on physicality.

Although Alamein resembles Jake, he lacks Jake's depth. Jake's guttural scream as he realises the violation of his daughter, Grace, by Uncle Bully, was a haunting visceral articulation of the pain and violence of postcolonial Māori; a stark contrast to the cheap *The Dukes of Hazzard* laughs Alamein gleans. For all the criticism that has been levelled at *Once Were Warriors*, by Māori academics especially, it is a film that squarely and intensely located Māori in modernity and, I suggest, a film that challenged Māoridom to confront the devastating social effects of colonisation. Although a very different film, the original intent of *Boy* was to similarly bring into focus issues such as the physical and emotional abandonment of Māori children by their fathers. I am ambivalent as to whether Alamein (and his alter-ego, Waititi) opens up a different kind of space for interpreting social problems or, alternatively, serves to detract from the film's intent because of his lack of credibility and depth.

CONCLUSION

In 1984 I was in the Ōpōtiki College Under-15 rugby team that travelled to the lands of Te Whānau a Apanui to play a tournament. My punk leanings determined that I had a skinhead with a small ponytail. A popular television program at the time was *Square Pegs* (1982-83),

which included the character Johnny "Slash" Ulasewicz (acted by Merritt R. Butrick) who, like me, had short hair and a ponytail. Kindly, during the tournament the opposition coined the term 'smash Slash'. Again, this re-calling of my own life serves to both applaud and align with Waititi's desire to investigate Indigeneity in modernity, yet to also question the depth and complexity that Waititi's portrayal affords.

Parts of *Boy* were truly funny, aspects of the film were exceedingly creative, the acting by James Rolleston especially transported me to previous pre-adult personas in my life, whilst Waititi's direction approaches a new conceptualisation of Fourth Media. Yet, in the end *Boy* left me feeling discouraged, especially as a theorist of Māori masculinity. The signs of past resistance in the film such as 'no nukes' and 'piss off pigs' were flattened by historical distance; their presence amidst the continued suppression of Māori serving to remind us of the futility of resistance. *Boy* failed to provide that youthful and utopian desire for sovereignty that its name promised. At the centre of this failure was Alamein, another irredeemable representation of Māori masculinity. There is nothing in this film that points towards sovereign possibilities for Māori men.

Brendan Hokowhitu is of Ngāti Pukenga descent. Hokowhitu is currently Dean and Professor of the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. His research interests include Indigenous critical theory, masculinity, media and sport.

WORKS CITED

Bem, Sandra. 'The measurement of psychological androgyny'. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 42 (1974): 155-162. Print.

Beynon, John. *Masculinities and Culture*. Buckingham, London: Open University Press, 2002. Print.

Edwards, Tim. *Cultures of Masculinity*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Featherstone, Simon. *Postcolonial Cultures*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. Print.

Ginsburg, Faye. 'Blak screens and cultural citizenship'. *Visual Anthropology Review* 21.1 & 2 (2005): 81. Web.

Hokowhitu, Brendan. 'The Silencing of Māori Men: Deconstructing a Space for Māori Masculinities'. Special Issue: Working with Male Clients*. New Zealand Journal of Counseling* 27.2 (2007): 63-76. Web.

Jameson, Fredrick. 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism'. *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 59-92. Web.

Mercier, Ocean. 'Close Encounters of the Māori Kind: Talking Interaction in the Films of Taika Waititi'. *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies* 10.2 (2007): 15-21. Web.

Oakley, Ann. *Sex, Gender and Society*. London: Temple Smith, 1972. Print.