

A Commentary on *Boy* and the Indigenous Self

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“Hey, Chardonnay! Wanna see some Michael Jackson dance moves?”

To articulate and constitute an Indigenous point of view, in narrative and ethnography, is a perilous task. On the one hand, there is the baggage of Orientalism not only interpellating Indigenous subjects as holders of exoticism and cultural difference (Said, 1978) but also policing imagined borders between cultural authenticity and cultural assimilation. On the other hand, there is the cultural reification constructed by identity politics as political practice (Brubaker, 2003). As several cultural theorists and anthropologists have noted, the strategic mobilisation of cultural essentialism might be a source of historically contingent empowerment for Indigenous agents (Spivak 1989; Warren and Jackson 2002; Howard 2009). Orientalism is at work in the film *Once Were Warriors* (1994), in which Māori culture is seen as violently anomic. Strategic essentialism is at work in the film *Whale Rider* (2002), in which Māori culture is seen as comprehensively redemptive. I argue that the film *Boy*, by Māori writer/actor/director Taika Waititi, successfully overcomes both Orientalism and strategic essentialism.

Boy is a Māori minor growing up during the 1980s. Like many children at that time, he is a keen admirer of Michael Jackson. He has a wacky father, Alamein, who has wasted his potential for upward social mobility, and a younger brother, Rocky, who believes that he has supernatural powers that can change the course of events. Boy's and Rocky's mother – Alamein's ex-spouse – is dead. Alamein, in prison for robbery, has been mostly absent from his children's lives. Boy fills this absence imagining Alamein as an adventurous hero. Alamein returns home, and Boy wants to be like him, but a series of events demonstrate to Boy that Alamein is a sham. After recalling that Alamein was absent when the children's mother died, Boy confronts his father for being irresponsible and immature. In addition, we learn that his mother died giving birth to Rocky, who grew up subsequently believing that his supernatural powers killed her.

Telling this story, which inevitably represents contemporary Māori lives, *Boy* neither constructs cultural 'others' nor idealises Māori culture. The film does not shy away from the social problems affecting Indigenous peoples in many parts of the world, such as

marginalisation, poverty, and lack of opportunities, but these issues, rather than being the building blocks of the story, are contextual. The film demonstrates that even when poverty is widespread, Indigenous peoples are not, as an academic friend of mine put it, the “wretched of the earth” (Fanon 1965). In *Boy*, children do what most children do, which is to play. Rather than alienation and despair, the characters experience a good deal of plain and simple joy. Notwithstanding their serious problems, they have a living cultural community that provides support. My point here is that, in contrast to dominant representations of Indigenous cultures, *Boy* does not overemphasise wretchedness and disheartenment.

In addition, *Boy* dispels conceptualisations of Indigenous peoples as “internally homogenous, externally bounded groups” (Brubaker 2002) permanently resisting cultural encroachment. The first names of the characters, such as Dynasty, Rocky, and Dallas, point to ways in which most Indigenous peoples today are, as anybody else, avid consumers of mass media. The film takes this naming to extremes for comical effect, but it has a great deal of truth. In my area of research, the Ecuadorian highlands, I have found Indigenous children with first names such as Lady, after Lady Diana, Princess of Wales, and Harry, after Harry Potter. This is not necessarily wrong, inasmuch as they appropriate the names and re-signify them.

At a broader level, *Boy* overcomes what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) has called the “savage slot” the symbolic field upon which ‘nativeness’ is premised. The savage slot refers to the simultaneous construction of the West and its others, without which the former is inconceivable. According to this symbolic order, the western-self is the rational observer whereas the savage-other is the voiceless object of observation. Structuring narrative and ethnographic production since colonial times, the savage slot makes it almost impossible to imagine Indigenous points of views and Indigenous leading characters. As is well known, most accounts of Indigeneity feature the same male protagonist/subject of European extraction and “the same brown, found object” (Taylor 2003).

Refusing to fill the pre-established slot of the ‘savage-other’, *Boy* challenges the western self. The Māori lives represented in *Boy* do not fit dominant, western expectations. On the one hand, they do not fit the expectations of those who value Indigenous cultures

for their exoticism. On the other hand, they do not fit the expectations of those who use discriminatory stereotypes to dismiss Indigenous claims for postcolonial justice. The film criticises Alamein's irresponsibility and self-delusion without explicitly blaming Māori destitution on western colonisation. Interestingly enough, at the early stages of the script, as Waititi recalls, Alamein was conceived as cruel and manipulative, a rather one-dimensional character that reproduced the stereotype that depicts Māori men as violent. Fortunately, Waititi realised that Alamein needed to be charming and funny; a likeable character that is almost impossible to pin down. Ultimately, avoiding the traps of Orientalism and strategic essentialism, *Boy* questions the rigid dichotomy between Indigenous and western peoples, deconstructing the West in the process.

All of these things considered, its success as a film lies in something else. *Boy* has been a box-office hit because of its humour – it is through humour that the film overcomes the limitations of Orientalism and strategic essentialism. Boy's imaginings of Alamein defeating enemies and carrying out adventures, which we see staged on the screen, are not only hilarious but are also wholly integrated into the plot. These sequences do not offer gratuitous slapstick. The same could be said of Rocky's supernatural powers. They are key to the plot. Notwithstanding its fantasy and clumsy humour, *Boy* is faithful, not to the anthropological gaze, which exoticises what it sees, but to the experience of Māori children growing up during the 1980s. Who of them can claim that he or she did not dance some Jackson moves?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work behind this article was supported by the research project: 'Indigeneity in the Contemporary World: Performance, Politics, Belonging' (www.indigeneity.net), hosted by Royal Holloway University of London and funded by the European Research Council. Analysing performance as a vital mode of cultural representation and dynamic social practice, this multinational project studies what kind of cultural, political, ethical and aesthetic issues are negotiated within the concept of Indigeneity.

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