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Picturing a Golden Age: *September* and *Australian Rules*

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Abstract: *In two Australian coming-of-age feature films,* Australian Rules *and* September*, the central young characters hold idyllic notions about friendship and equality that prove to be the keys to transformative on-screen behaviours. Intimate intersubjectivity, deployed in the close relationships between the indigenous and nonindigenous protagonists, generates multiple questions about the value of normalised adult interculturalism. I suggest that the most pointed significance of these films lies in the compromises that the young adults make. As they reach the inevitable moral crisis that awaits them on the cusp of adulthood, despite pressures to abandon their childhood friendships they instead sustain their utopian (golden) visions of the future.*

It is 1968, rural Western Australia. As we glide along an undulating bitumen road up ahead we see, from a low camera angle, a school bus moving smoothly along the same route. Periodically a smattering of roadside trees filters the sunlight, but for the most part open fields of wheat flank the roadsides and stretch out to the horizon, presenting a grand and golden vista. As we reach the bus, music that has hitherto been a quiet accompaniment swells and in the next moment we are inside the vehicle with a fair-haired teenager. The handsome lad, dressed in a yellow school uniform, is drawing a picture of a boxer in a sketchpad. Another cut takes us back outside again, to an equally magnificent view from the front of the bus. This mesmerising piece of cinema—the opening of *September* (Peter Carstairs, 2007)—affords a viewer an experience of tranquillity and promise, and is homage to the notion of a golden age of youth. As spectators we move through the landscape toward an unknown but inviting future.

September is a coming-of-age film that captures adolescents on the cusp of their awareness of the greater world around them, just before they must take on responsibilities and decide who they will be as adults. Leaving (a generally idyllic) childhood and transitioning to adulthood provides the ideal narrative framework for this teenage drama, as this tumultuous period is characterised by strained friendships, intergenerational conflicts, the clashing of old and new ideologies and competing ethics. The young protagonists inevitably find that their optimistic and romantic ideals about the world conflict with the disillusioned, hardened and cynical opinions of the adults around them.

Australian cinema has a long tradition of the coming-of-age film, particularly since the 1970s (see Caputo; May). John Duigan's *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987) and *Flirting* (1991) perhaps typify the Australian expression of the genre; Duigan's loveable, slightly gawky protagonist, Danny Ember (Noah Taylor), wrestles with his teenage sexual urges and existential angst as he negotiates his life on the periphery of the mainstream. In his comprehensive work on Australian national cinema, Tom O'Regan argues that this subgenre of films concerned with "generational cleavages" has been highly marketable in Australia because they are essentially less confrontational than films that deal with religion or ethnicity

(270–1). However, whilst perhaps not as confrontational, the coming-of-age genre is nonetheless also a means for exploring weightier, "grown-up" issues. Complex social problems associated with immigration and multiculturalism, for example, are central to *Looking for Alibrandi* (Kate Woods, 2000) and *Head On* (Ana Kokkinos, 1998).

In this article, I look closely at two recent films that grapple with particularly complex issues of relations between indigenous and nonindigenous Australians—*September* and *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002). They are part of a significant subgenre of coming-of-age films concerned with the role that crosscultural friendships play in negotiating the transition from child to adult, which includes *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971), *Storm Boy* (Henri Safran, 1976), *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2000), *Beneath Clouds* (Ivan Sen, 2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), *Bran Nue Dae* (Rachel Perkins, 2009) and the confrontational *Samson and Delilah* (Warwick Thornton, 2009). The young black and white protagonists in all of these films who teeter on the precipice of adult life are moulded by their intimate friendships. Crosscultural intimacy, I propose, is the key positive influence on the attitudes and behaviours they choose to constitute their own adult lives.

Felicity Collins and Therese Davis read the teenage behaviours in three Australian films (*Looking for Alibrandi*, *Head On* and *Beneath Clouds*) as expressions of a desire to escape a settler-nation's shameful colonial history (154). To Collins and Davis, the young protagonists are "subjects of shame" who live in an era of "post-Mabo trauma" (168), a reference to the landmark 1992 High Court decision that recognised indigenous native title rights in Australia (*Mabo and Others v Queensland [No 2]*). In contrast, the adolescents in *September* and *Australian Rules* are not so much wrestling with the shame of the past as generating hope for the future. The hope they bring lies in the belief that youth is a golden age. They are, like other young Australian cinematic protagonists before them, representative of the "promise of better things to come for the whole nation" (Caputo 13).

Common to both *September* and *Australian Rules* is a respectful, intimate and collaborative friendship between two indigenous and nonindigenous young characters, each of whom are temporarily isolated from the dysfunction, aggression and racism that concern the adult world. Their idealistic notions about the future are contrary to the persistent messages they hear from those around them. Their idealism, however, is not completely abandoned as the young people reach adulthood. Instead, they compromise: although their childlike behaviours cease, they retain their ethical sensibilities and optimism. Underpinning these films is a utopian vision for personal, and national, reconciliation. The question at the centre of this article is: how can such fairy-tale optimism have relevance to a nation in which inequities between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples frequently have dire and traumatic outcomes?

Leela Gandhi claims that utopianism shows "the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism" through a politics of friendship (19). Explicating Jacques Derrida's criticism that friendship is only ever configured in ways that are intensely and exclusively filial (viii), Ghandi argues for an alternative postmodern model of friendship; that is, one in which the dissimilar and unknown other is sought and embraced (19). Gandhi's concept of friendship is characterised by an openness to a sociality that may, firstly, exacerbate one's own insufficiencies and secondly, comprise the type of community that "was never itself … self-identical" (19–20). This premise of the transformative capacity of friendship between dissimilar subjects frames my reading of *September* and *Australian Rules*. The focus of this paper is not cosmopolitanism, however, but the development of a dynamic reconciliation

process. I argue that the idealistic crosscultural friendships in *September* and *Australian Rules* are innovative, pacifist and hopeful acts of cooperation, and the "key to moving beyond our current dysfunction" (Palmer and Gillard 83). Racism, indigenous disadvantage and a lack of opportunity and self-autonomy are ever-present impediments to the actualisation of reconciliation for the adults in these films; however, youthful optimism signals the possibility of a more promising future.

Golden Youth: Desirable Change Agents

September tells the story of two teenage friends, Ed Anderson (Xavier Samuel) and Paddy Parker (Clarence John Ryan) on the verge of adulthood. Set in the Western Australian wheat belt at the time when the arbitration system of the Federal Pastoral Industry Award was extended to entitle Aboriginal farmhands the same wage as non-Aboriginal farmhands (1968), *September* is a feature film debut by Peter Carstairs, winner of the national short film competition, Tropfest. The film was produced by the Tropfest Feature Fund and the Movie Network Channels, and was chosen for screening at the Melbourne, Berlin, Rome and Toronto International Film Festivals during 2007–2008.

The narrative takes place in the month leading up to the arrival of Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Troupe to their small town, due in September.[1] Nonindigenous Ed is in line to inherit the family farm from his father Rick (Kieran Darcy-Smith), and Paddy is the son of the Aboriginal farm worker Michael (Kelton Pell). Paddy and his family live on Ed's property, in a modest house down the hill from the Andersons' farmhouse. Each day Ed takes the bus to school while Paddy stays and works on the farm with Rick and Michael. However, after school the two boys meet at the bus stop and walk or run the long driveway home. Later they practice boxing, their shared passion, in a homemade ring in the paddock.

Figure 1: Ed and Paddy atop a water tank. *September* (Peter Carstairs, 2007). Hopscotch Films, 2007. Screenshot.

The dialogue in *September* is constrained and the shots are long and lingering. It is also visually striking: the characters are commonly shot in close-up against a vast blue sky with only an occasional white cloud passing by. The soundtrack comprises emotive, orchestral music, peppered with haunting percussion. Stylistically, the film exudes gentleness and beauty, and these are the qualities that also define the boys' relationship. Despite the clear hierarchy of their families on the farm, the two youths are physical, social and intellectual equals. For instance, in the boxing ring, where they are separated from the racial divisions outside of the ropes, Ed and Paddy share the set of gloves and match each other's skills. Visually, the composition augments the equality between them. The boys are often

positioned centrally in the frame, with the linear wheat-belt horizon dissecting the shots into a neat top and bottom, creating a balanced composition. The symmetrical framing combines also with steady camera work, which enhances the balance further.

Released five years before *September*, *Australian Rules*—directed by Paul Goldman and based on Phillip Gwynne's first novel, *Deadly*, *Unna?* (1998)—also received critical acclaim when it screened at the Adelaide Film Festival and at the Melbourne and Sundance Film Festivals in 2002. It was nominated for six Australian Film Institute awards in the same year and the screenplay was also listed for the 2002 Humanitas Prize. Like *September*, the film firstly establishes the strength of the friendship between two young men: non-Aboriginal footballer/poet Gary "Blacky" Black (Nathan Phillips) and Aboriginal football star Dumby Red (Luke Carroll). Both play on the local junior Australian Rules football team, and football is the activity that connects the two central characters. After training they walk leisurely into town together, and during the stroll Blacky, at Dumby's request, constructs fantasies about Dumby's love life with famous women. Blacky tells stories about the "indigenous love machine" and his encounters. The boys' families live in separate parts of town: Dumby lives at the "Mish", an Aboriginal community (and former mission) outside the small town of Prospect Bay, and Blacky in Prospect Bay with his parents and siblings. Nonetheless, the boys' socioeconomic status is similar, as neither is wealthy. When Dumby is shot and killed part way through the film, a second crosscultural friendship, between Blacky and Dumby's sister Clarence (Lisa Flanagan), becomes the focus of the film.

Figure 2: Footballers Dumby and Blacky. *Australian Rules* (Paul Goldman, 2002). Madman Films, 2002. Screenshot.

During the blissful adolescent pause before adulthood the relationships between the young people in both *September* and *Australian Rules*—Ed and Paddy, Dumby, Clarence and Blacky—are effortless. In *September*, the boys are relaxed and at ease with each other, boxing congenially, or throwing a ball against a wall to each other without need for instruction. The film features long, unhurried scenes in which the two boys lie on the top of a water tank as the evening comes, and talk, read and smoke. In *Australian Rules* the camaraderie and emotional connection between Dumby and Blacky is evident in the language they use with each other; as well as constructing verbose poetic fantasies, both speak to each other in blackfella vernacular ("deadly" and "nukkin ya" are part of their everyday conversation), to the frustration of their teammates. For example, at one stage Pickles (Tom Budge) sneers at Blacky: "Nukkin' ya, fuckin' ya! Christ you're even talkin' like one of

them". In the pivotal scene when Blacky and Clarence start their relationship, they too use language to signify affection. This time, it is Clarence's turn to create a fantasy for Blackie:

> Clarence: Gary Black, the supernova of seduction, has the gorgeous
> Clarence under his cosmic spell. "You're gorgeous", he whispers.
> Blacky: You're gorgeous.
> Clarence: "You're my first, my last, and my everything."
> Blacky: You're my first, my last, my everything.
> Clarence: The supernova of soulful seduction kisses gorgeous Clarence.
> A long lingering luscious kiss [they kiss].

The mutual ease between the young characters brings a sense of normality and naturalness to their friendships. As such, the films assure the viewer that these naïve ways of interacting are also ethically correct ways of behaving.

To generate this particular sensibility, both films draw upon established associations between childhood, adolescence and notions of innocence and purity. Since at least the seventeenth century, Western thinking has considered the "innocence of childhood" an "essential concept" (Ariés 108). Philippe Ariés observes this conceptual development in the representation of children in art and literature, noting that young people have been depicted as either angels or similar religious beings, or naked and, as such, are bestowed with holiness or associated with a pristine, natural and uninhibited state of being (33). Much hope is invested in this purity of youth within the Arts; in every period of history, childhood, youth or adolescence has been a "privileged age" and, in European literature since the early 1900s, youth has given "the impression of secretly possessing new values capable of reviving an aged and sclerosed society" (Ariés 28–9). Such a belief—that innocence and purity in young people can restore dysfunction—is a central tenet of *Australian Rules* and *September*. In *September* and *Australian Rules* the young people hold utopian ideals about equality, justice and fairness, which are only called into question when their friendships are threatened.

Reviewers of both films read the moral purity of the cinematic friendships as a message of hope for improving black and white relations on a larger scale. The choices these youths make on-screen speak directly to the processes of personal and political reconciliation. For instance, Francesca Davidson states that *September* "leaves one feeling pleasantly optimistic about the possibilities of human friendships" (13), and Dave Palmer and Garry Gillard observe that the hope in *Australian Rules* "exists in the figures of Blacky and Clarence, young people intertwined in a relationship of love and compassion" (83). They see in this relationship "a hint of how white Australians might overcome their cultural poverty and find comfort and redemption with Indigenous Australians" (83). This is a slight but important shift from what Josephine May identifies in earlier films about young people, in which youth are positioned as "the optimistic symbol of the passage of Australia from colonial dependence to post-colonial independence" (162). In *September* and *Australian Rules* youthful intimacy is the source of hope for an already established postcolonial nation, but one that is in constant state of conflicted reconciliation.

Hierarchical power divisions, crosscultural conflicts and personal and institutional racism constitute, for the most part, the adult world in both these films. There are racist behaviours amongst some of the young characters' peers, but these are peripheral to the protagonists and bear little consequence to the story. For the most part, Ed, Paddy, Blacky, Dumby and Clarence are unaware of the troubles around them. In this way, they echo Marcia

Langton's observation of non-Aboriginal Australian youth who, she states, are practically unaware of the enduring legacy of colonisation (79). In *September,* racial tension amongst the adults is triggered by the establishment of the Federal Pastoral Industry Award. Michael learns that he and Paddy are entitled to a paid wage, which Rick says he cannot afford and, as a result, hitherto silent concerns about inequities begin to be spoken.

The Award resulted in many Aboriginal people relocating to towns and cities, as numerous farm owners were either unable or unwilling to pay (National Museum). In the film, the two farm families are a microcosm of broader social divisions on the issue. The strain reaches breaking point when Michael directly asks Rick about his new entitlements and Rick declares that he has no option other than to "let him go". The legislation is the film's means of alerting viewers to the influence of dispossession and segregation on the construction of Aboriginal poverty, and the inequitable levels of autonomy that existed between black and white at the time. Although initially in *September* these are the concerns of the adults, nevertheless the viewer knows that Ed and Paddy are also unwittingly affected by their external environment. For instance, while Ed plays with sunlight through his fingers at the bus stop, Paddy makes his little brother's breakfast; Ed has an education, but Paddy works on the farm; and they watch a Lionel Rose fight in a segregated cinema. Ed and Paddy, however, remain blissfully unaware, in a state of innocence.

The adult conflicts are more overt in *Australian Rules* than in *September*, and confrontation is an ever-present and powerful force in this film. Palmer and Gillard describe Prospect Bay as "a hotbed of racism where drunken non-Indigenous men demean Aboriginality in one bar while Indigenous men socialise in another" (81). *Australian Rules* references existing situations that reflect racial tension in Australia, which adds credibility to the fictional violence and hatred on-screen. For example, Pickles calls to attention the breadth of problems associated with Aboriginal deaths in custody—as documented in the 1996 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission report, *Indigenous Deaths in Custody 1989–1996*—when he says to Blacky, "That Pretty, he should be locked back up in the big house, he might hang himself with any luck". In another scene, a newspaper clipping of past right-wing federal politician Pauline Hanson is glimpsed under a pile of maggots. Hanson is emblematic of racist politics in Australia, in part a result of her claim that Aborigines enjoyed more privileges than non-Aborigines (Hanson). The majority of non-Aboriginal adults in *Australian Rules* are overtly racist; for example, during the football Grand Final, racist taunts proliferate and after the game Blacky's Dad (Simon Westaway) and his mates refer to Dumby as the "little black prick" and mumble their disapproval of his and Blacky's friendship. At the Premiership award night the guest presenter attempts to make a speech about football being the level playing ground, and starts to say, "it doesn't matter where you come from or who you are …" but is interrupted by Dumby's outspoken and angry cousin Pretty (Tony Briggs) at the back of the hall, who claps slowly and calls out: "More Gunya bullshit". Pretty's cynicism highlights not only the discord between idealistic rhetoric and the reality of the fractured town, but also augments the incongruity of the world of the young people and the adult world where they are heading.

As in *September*, the adults' dysfunction and violence contrasts with the respect and kindness exhibited by the central young characters, or, in Ghandi's terms, their ability to make friends. However, as is inevitable in all coming-of-age narratives, the young characters' immunity to their hostile environs starts to lessen as they transition into adulthood. Coming of age in *September* and *Australian Rules* is a time when the idealism, innocence and romanticism of the golden age of youth comes directly into contact with the adverse realties

of adult life. The youths' relationships start to erode as a result of external events, and by their own increased awareness of their surrounds. In *September* a few small changes in the situation initially damage Ed and Paddy's friendship. First is the arrival of a new girl, and unwitting femme fatale, Amelia (Mia Wasikowska), who moves onto the neighbouring farm, catches the bus to school and is in the same class as Ed, who is immediately captivated. He misses boxing practice with Paddy to be with Amelia, and a long, slow shot of Paddy standing alone, waiting in the ring, his back to the camera as he stares out across the empty paddock, captures the abandonment he feels. Secondly, Paddy starts having to work longer hours on the farm. Instead of meeting Ed when his bus arrives at the gate, Rick keeps him working, which means they spend less time together in the spaces of their idyllic youth: the driveway, the boxing ring and the top of the water tank.

Their friendship is completely ruptured, however, when Ed fails to defend Paddy against a wrongful accusation of loitering around Amelia's house in the middle of the night. When Ed suggests a midnight excursion to Amelia's, Paddy only reluctantly agrees. When they arrive at Amelia's house her father comes out to see what the noise is and Ed flees, leaving Paddy with an outraged, violent man. Ed never owns up to his involvement and neither does Paddy tell. It is a shameless betrayal by Ed, and one would think unforgivable. A series of changes are triggered by this event: Rick tells Ed he has to stop spending time with Paddy; Paddy refuses to keep working on the farm; and the boxing between the two young men becomes angry. Visually, the sky darkens or disappears from shot, and the landscape narrows and loses its aesthetic significance to signal instead impending conflicts.

Blacky, Dumby and Clarence are also unable to remain detached from the conflicts that surround them, and eventually there is a severe and final end to their innocence. In the week preceding the Grand Final, tensions within the football team escalate, before erupting on the Premiership award night. Dumby, who is the favourite to win "Best on Ground", is bypassed and instead the coach's son, a non-Aboriginal boy, takes the trophy. The snub is interpreted as racist and Dumby leaves in a rage with Pretty. Meanwhile Blacky and Clarence are becoming increasingly more physically and emotionally intimate. The three young people then experience the violence of Blacky's father, Bob. He verbally abuses Clarence and beats Blacky when he finds his son in bed with her. At his most aggressive, he kills Dumby during a botched break-in at the football clubrooms. Coinciding as it does with Clarence and Blacky's now sexual relationship, Bob's violence acts as a warning against the dangers of pursuing adult intercultural intimacy. In an earlier conversation, Blacky asks the scruffy but wise old maggot collector, Darcy (Martin Vaughan), if white boys can have a girlfriend from the Mish. Darcy tells him the town's racial philosophy: "whites go with Mish girls when the pub is closed, they've got a belly full of grog and a stiff dick, but you won't see them walking down the jetty the next day holding hands": Bob's extreme reaction is a vindication of this attitude.

These cinematic transitions to adulthood reveal a dilemma embedded in the notion of youth as a golden age. When young, the qualities of innocence and purity are admirable and even desirable, but as an adult they signify immaturity and ignorance. In both films, the adults accept the young peoples' friendships with each other, albeit grudgingly, but they expect, and demand, the behaviours to stop as they become older. The adults tolerate innocence only to a point, but as the youth age innocence is considered to be a problem. This may stem from what Anneke Meyer suggests is an adult need to protect young people from their own vulnerability:

> The discourse of the innocent child, which emerged with Romanticism, constructs children as inherently virtuous, pure, angelic and innocent. This innocence makes children immature, ignorant, weak and vulnerable, and creates a need for protection. (87)

In both films, three fathers step in to protect their children from what they perceive to be their weakness, that is, their crosscultural intimacy. Rick tells Ed not to associate with Paddy; Michael gives silent support for Paddy's attempts to break away from the farm; and Bob demands that Blacky choose to align himself either with him or with his Aboriginal friends after the shooting. This "protection" bespeaks the social rules concerning intercultural relations for adults, which are different to those for children. The message is nonetheless delivered with regret: egalitarian relationships are child's play and hierarchical distinctions and conflicts are adult norms.

Golden Youth: Troubling Outsiders?

In *September* and *Australian Rules* the young characters contest adult intercultural normality by retaining their childhood ability to move back and forth across the physical, social and epistemological borders that exist in the adult worlds around them—playing the role of "troubling outsiders". Stuart Hall contends that there is always someone who does not fit within the boundaries of racial descriptors, someone who sits outside of their racial category and, as such, "trouble[s] the dreams of those who are comfortable inside". In *September*, this is poignantly illustrated in a scene when both families ride into town in the truck together. Ed's family sits in the front of the truck and Paddy's in the back on the tray; Ed and Paddy, however, stand together in between. The same compositional techniques are employed in *Australian Rules.* In the changing room, the football team is divided between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players, but Blacky and Dumby sit with each other, between the two groups.

Figure 3: The culturally demarcated change rooms. *September*. Hopscotch Films, 2007. Screenshot.

Blacky also traverses the segregated areas of the pub, conversing with both black and white drinkers through the hole in the wall between the rooms. Thus these young people occupy not only physical but also metaphorical postcolonial interstitial spaces. Such spaces "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha 1–2); thus, the youths, or more precisely their friendships, destabilise fixed hierarchies and open up the possibilities for new modes of interaction.

Rick and Michael are unsure how to react to Ed and Paddy's passive rebellion against established conditions on the farm. Paddy refuses to keep working, and instead leaves to join the Jimmy Sharman Boxing Troupe when it finally arrives. Although it is left open, the film suggests that Ed too will choose a different path in life to that of his father. Periodically in the film, the extant racial inequities are justified by adults with the line, "It's just the way it is"; however, this passive acquiescence is not for Ed and Paddy. Similarly, in *Australian Rules* the wise maggot-collector's advice to Blacky against marrying a black girl relies on the idea that, "it's not the done thing". Rejecting this shaky logic, Blacky and Clarence instead plan to leave the town so they can continue to be together.

It is not only adult despondency that is being challenged; the youths also take issue with the biological determinism that informs their parents' attitudes. Through the young people, the films explore the impact of the belief that racial characteristics render Aborigines inferior to non-Aborigines in order to repudiate such an idea. The youths, who are depicted as having more social and moral insight than the adults in these films, accept that racial categories are socially constructed and situational, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain: "Racial categories are not natural but constructs, not absolutes but relative, situational, even narrative categories, engendered by historical processes of differentiation" (19). *Australian Rules* sends an overt message that biological determinism is antediluvian and for ignorant thugs alone. It associates this belief with other undesirable characteristics to create intensely unlikable, unredeemable characters, subscribing to the view that: "Racism often travels in gangs, accompanied by its buddies sexism, classism and homophobia" (Shohat and Stam 22). The most extreme example is Bob, the most blatantly racist character in the film who is also an unintelligent, violent, misogynist rapist. Bob is almost a caricature of a working-class Australian male and, as a result, appears too extreme to be plausible; as Brian McFarlane observes of racist characters in Australian cinema in general: "those who behave in deplorably racist ways are sometimes too crudely drawn for dramatic subtlety" (65). Nevertheless, the film takes a strong ideological standpoint. Smart and mobile, Clarence and Blacky traverse the barriers that Bob wants to retain, and their actions render those boundaries arbitrary and collapsible.

Whereas the adults in the films justify the existence of cultural inequities because of unavoidable differences, the youths instead focus on the similarities between themselves. The cultural differences so prominent between the young people in *Walkabout* are absent in these films, and instead they are each alike in temperament, physicality, interests and abilities. In *September*, Ed and Paddy both have easy-going demeanours, are physically healthy and beautiful and, although dialogue is sparse, when they converse they are both equally articulate. Both live in nuclear families, are learning to drive and share a passion for boxing. The three young people in *Australian Rules* are all interested in football and are intelligent, insightful and love words and language.

To augment this further, class and social inequities between the different families are played down. Class divisions between Dumby, Clarence and Blacky in *Australian Rules* are virtually absent. Dumby and Clarence's homes never feature on-screen, nor does much of the Mish which, in effect, conceals their living conditions and any visual evidence of wealth or poverty. However, viewer awareness of the existing conditions of poverty in many Aboriginal communities in Australia inform the spectator experience; poor living conditions are frequently raised in the Australian media, and have also been depicted in earlier popular films, such as *The Fringe Dwellers* (Beresford 1986) and *Dead Heart* (Parsons 1996). So

whilst indigenous poverty is present, it is not the film's most prominent theme. In contrast, Blacky's low socioeconomic status is foregrounded—he lives in a ramshackle cement sheet shack-like dwelling, crowded by his large family. Consequently, Blacky, Dumby and Clarence appear similar to each other in respect to class. Although Ed's family in *September* has property and income and Paddy's are unpaid labourers, the differences are subtle. The Andersons have modest material possessions and they struggle to pay the farm accounts. There are no conventional indicators of poverty among the unpaid family either, such as shabby clothing or the physical signs of an inadequate diet.

Although the emphasis on the protagonists' similarities on the one hand undermines determinist ideas of difference, it nevertheless raises a troubling question. Are the youths similar in the sense that they all represent the dynamism of identity afforded them by virtue of their youth, or is their characterisation an expression of assimilationist ideals, whereby Aborigines passively succumb to hegemonic norms? Or, in other words, in this optimistic, postcolonial, interstitial space of the cinema are the Aboriginal characters simply more like whites than blacks? If the latter is so, then the film makes a problematic suggestion that youth is a golden age because it is a time when young Aboriginal people are able and willing to act like whites. Anna Daly reads *Australian Rules* as an experiment in attempting to depict Aboriginal Australia "without stripping blackfellas of agency", but she is not convinced of its success. Her concerns harbour fears about the subsumption of Aboriginality, of cultural difference, that has roots in Australia's official assimilation period. The Federal Government assimilation policy (introduced informally in the 1930s and formally in the 1950s) anticipated that, over time, "all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do" (Jonas and Langton 31). These concerns are echoed in criticisms of the emphasis by Australia's formal reconciliation process for the quest for a "united nation" (see for example Short; Gunstone) in which difference is all but subsumed in the quest for national unity.

However, if Paddy, Clarence and Dumby are simply acting white, then Blacky and Ed are simply acting black, as indeed the adults in the film suspect; nevertheless, there is much more going on. The two nonindigenous boys struggle against the racism and mediocrity that surrounds them, and neither hold positions of power in white arenas. They resist adult norms, and by challenging the status quo they reject hegemonic values. Importantly also, whilst cultural and class differences between Ed, Paddy, Dumby, Blacky and Clarence are downplayed in the film, they are not completely erased. Ed and Paddy spend their days performing distinctly dissimilar activities, and separate residential areas divide Blacky, Dumby and Clarence. Langton proposes that:

> It is the challenge for settler Australians … of recognising the value in the differences between our cultures and societies in such a way that everyone can own the civil society we share and, if you like, the "national identity" we yearn for with an equal cause and an equal commitment. This challenge goes under the label of "Reconciliation". (81)

The adults in *September* and *Australian Rules* are well aware of the social differences between indigenous and nonindigenous and it is the hierarchical nature of these that the young people resist. Through their friendships, they create new fluid identities for themselves that resist being confined to set cultural boundaries and instead play with sameness and

difference. Crosscultural intersubjectivities allow for new notions of selfhood, and new possibilities for reconciliation.

Reconciliation: A National Coming of Age

The resolutions of *September* and *Australian Rules* provide the key messages of hope that these films offer to a reconciling nation. In *September*, Ed and Paddy wait until the last minute to make up with each other. Paddy leaves the farm on foot, with his bag packed in readiness to join the boxing troupe. At this stage, he and Ed are no longer speaking and as he passes Ed on the road, both remain silent. However, Ed realises what is happening and after a moment of soul searching back at the house he gets in the car, overcomes his inability to drive and leaves to pick up Paddy, after which there is a quiet and gentle reconciliation between the two; Ed offers an awkward teenage apology and Paddy indicates his forgiveness. When they say goodbye outside the car they initially shake hands, performing, it would appear, their new roles of grown men. However, they then hug each other, and it's a heartfelt, emotion-filled moment, reminding the viewer how close they were as children. They then go their separate ways, into their adult lives.

Figure 4: Ed and Paddy embrace and forgive. *September*. Hopscotch Films, 2007. Screenshots.

As Blacky and Dumby's friendship ends in death, resolution remains symbolic and takes place at Dumby's funeral. Blacky attends the funeral, an unusual choice for a non-Aboriginal Prospect-Bay resident. He is initially viewed with suspicion—his father is, after all, Dumby's killer. However, Clarence ignores the animosity toward him and welcomes him to the ceremony, opening the way for others to do the same. In the final scene, Clarence and Blacky vow to continue their relationship, despite the pressures on them to stop seeing each other from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, making their plans while they are entwined in the water under the pier. Reminiscent of a scene in *The Blue Lagoon* (Randal Kleiser, 1980), another film in which young, "natural" love is at odds with the external world and in which the central young characters also spend much time discovering themselves in water, Blacky and Clarence's resolution is far more clichéd than for Ed and Paddy. Nonetheless, their decision to continue their intimacy into their adulthood also allows for the possibility of change.

Figure 5: An intimate rock pool finish. *Australian Rules*. Madman Films, 2002. Screenshot.

The young characters' capacity to challenge adult conventions is in part due to their ability to reconcile their ruptured relations as they come of age. If their arguments were left unresolved, or if they abandoned the peaceful equality they experienced as adolescents to become angry and bitter, then the outcomes would be considerably bleaker. The overall impression, I conclude, is that Ed and Paddy, and Clarence and Blacky, will each be wiser and act more justly than their parents and the other adult characters, and this is a direct result of their friendships. Optimistic intercultural friendships between unlikely companions are the basis of these cinematic renditions of reconciliation. The utopian implication is that if adults were to act likewise, then many of the problems encountered by the nation's reconciliation process might be more readily addressed. These two films invite us to consider reconciliation positively, as a national coming of age.

Notes

[1] Jimmy Sharman's Troupe of Aboriginal boxers toured Australian country towns from 1911 until 1971. People from the local town would pay to "go a round" with the visiting boxers.

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