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Opening the Body: Reading *Ten Canoes* with Critical Intimacy

The 2006 Australian film *Ten Canoes*, directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr, opens with a slow aerial shot over the Arafura swamp's watery landscape, underscored by native bird calls, then the sound of rain, followed again by birds. After one full minute, the unnamed narrator's voice joins the bird sounds when he says, '*Once upon a time, in a land far, far away... [Laughs] // No, not like that, I'm only joking*'. These opening words allude to a Western tradition of orality, the fairy tale, as well as to the popular culture phenomenon *Star Wars*, which begins with the words, 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away'.¹ The inherent ambiguity of this laugh may lead viewers to wonder whether the narrator is laughing with or at us, or perhaps both. Critics' analyses of this opening have identified the narrator's laugh as preparation 'for a very different kind of story' (Henderson 54) and as ironic and transformative (Crosbie 144), a laugh that shifts the narrative away from a familiar story to a personal one.

This shift is made evident when the narrator continues, '*But I am going to tell you a story. // It's not your story... // It's my story... // ... a story like you've never seen before. // But you want a proper story, eh? // Then I must tell you some things // of my people, and my land. // Then you can see this story, and know it*'. In this article, we analyse the relationship between the 'I' of the storyteller/narrator and the 'you' of the audience with particular attention to how the narrator encourages an affective response from the viewer by inviting the reader to 'see' the story and therefore 'know' it. This combination of corporeal and mental engagement with the text brings our reading strategy close to what Gayatri Spivak calls 'critical intimacy', a strategy that we argue is an appropriate — and indeed ethical — way for non-Indigenous (and perhaps non-Yolgnu) viewers to respond to this film, which is the first Indigenous language film to be produced in Australia.

Plot

When the narrator simultaneously assumes and asks whether the viewer wants a 'proper story', he insists that he must tell the viewer about his people and his land, which indicates the importance of an entire body of knowledge that informs the narrative. The narrator then summarises the cosmological backdrop of the story, while the viewer travels via aerial shots presumably across the land about which the narrator speaks:

*This land began in the beginning.
Yurlunggur, the Great water Goanna, / he travelled here.*

Opening the Body

*Yurlunggur made all this land then.
He made this water...
... and he made this swamp / that stretches long and gives us life.
I come from a waterhole / in this land Yurlunggur made.
I looked like a little fish / in my waterhole.
Then, my father came near my waterhole.
I asked him for my mother:
I wanted to be born.
My father pointed out one of his wives.
That is your mother, he told me.
I waited until the right time...
... and went just like that, into her vagina.
Then my father had a dream.
That dream let him know she had / a little one inside her.
That little one was me.
When I die, I will go back to my waterhole.
I'll be waiting there, like a little fish...
... waiting to be born again.
You didn't know all that, did you?
But it's a true thing.
It's always like that for my people.*

Important spiritual and cultural information is being shared in this passage of the script. It imparts creation knowledge, expressed through Yurlunggur, as an identified creation Being who shaped the landscape. It discloses cultural information that may be foreign to the Western audience regarding the polygamous marital arrangements that are normal within Yolgnu society. Ideas of spirituality are revealed when the narrator says, '*When I die, I will go back to my waterhole. I'll be waiting there, like a little fish... waiting to be born again*', which indicates the belief of reincarnation within the specific cultural context of this group of people.

This scene also foregrounds the body as an important site of power and knowledge. After Ridjimirari's death, his body is painted with the marks of the waterhole, and the audience follows Ridjimirari's return to his waterhole. In 'Inscriptions and Body-Maps: Representations and the Corporeal', Elizabeth Grosz examines corporeal inscriptions and argues that '[m]essages coded onto the body can be "read" only within a social system of organisation and meaning. They mark the subject by, and as, a series of signs within the collectivity of other signs, signs which bear the marks of a particular social law and organisation' (65). Ridjimirari's body is literally and metaphorically mapped, so his body, the land, the narrator's voice, and the accompanying subtleties may be understood as a series of signs that viewers can access in multiple ways. The viewers' access to the film's ontological and epistemological significance depends upon their own subjectivity and their willingness to open their bodies to the narrator's bodily imperative.

The story itself is a cautionary tale involving the narrator's ancestors, Minyngulu and Dayindi, who are out hunting Magpie Geese eggs in the Arafura swamp. Minyngulu knows that his younger brother, Dayindi, is infatuated with



Birrinbirrin (Richard Birrinbirrin) and Ridjimirari (Cruseo Kurddal). (Photo: Jackson)

his youngest wife and as he shows him how to make the canoe he begins to tell him a story of their ancestors, Ridjimirari and Yeeralparil. These more distant and timeless ancestors' lives are thrown out of equilibrium when a strange man turns up near their camp. They give him food, but his presence disturbs the community. Some time after the stranger's appearance, Ridjimirari's second wife, Nowalingu, disappears. Ridjimirari is certain that she has been kidnapped by the stranger, who may be a sorcerer.

One day Birrinbirrin, the Honey Ant man, tells Ridjimirari that he has seen the stranger not far from the camp at a waterhole, so the two men set off to find him. They think they see the stranger squatting in the bushes. Ridjimirari throws his spear at him, killing the stranger. When they come up to the body lying in the bush they discover that Ridjimirari has killed the wrong man. They hide the body after hearing voices coming through the bush and quickly return home.

Ridjimirari and Birrinbirrin are soon confronted by an angry group of warriors. They have in their hand the spear head that killed their man and they recognise the spear as being made by Birrinbirrin. Ridjimirari confesses to them that it was not Birrinbirrin who killed the man, but him. He knows the law and agrees to meet up with the warriors for the payback ceremony. As part of the law, Ridjimirari can bring one other man with him to participate in the spear throwing ceremony, and as soon as blood is drawn from either man, the payback is complete and justice has been served. Yeeralparil convinces his brother that he should come as his offsider for the ceremony, because he is young and quick on his feet.

Ridjimirari and Yeeralparil dance and dodge the flying spears; for some time it looks like they might avoid serious injury until suddenly Ridjimirari is struck. The wronged warriors leave, feeling that due justice has been enacted. When Ridjimirari and Yeeralparil return to camp Ridjimirari's wound becomes steadily worse. Their own sorcerer cannot help him and his health declines. Late in the night Ridjimirari wobbles up to his feet and begins his dance of death. He dances until his body can move no more and death comes to him.

When all the appropriate ceremonies have been completed and the mourning period is over, the excited Yeeralparil moves to take his place in Ridjimirari's camp. He thinks that now he can finally be with the youngest wife, Muanjarra. But he finds that he is responsible for all three wives, as Nowalingu has returned. His life is much more complicated than he expected.

NARRATION OF THE FILM

The narrator leads the audience as the film moves between the different time frames of the distant past and the more mythical past. The narration is used throughout the film to frame and contextualise the cosmology of the Yolgnu people. In this way the narrator is a guide, taking the audience on a journey, not only through time and space, but also negotiating the cultural context for the non-Yolgnu audience. The narrator is the keystone that connects both pasts of the story, bringing it back to his present by reminding the audience that it is his story. Although the narrator is not a visible character in the film, his aural presence moves across the time periods and connects his individuality, and his story, to the community. The narrator's voice, which directs the audience how to read the embodied story, may be understood through Elizabeth Weiss's notion of a 'bodily imperative' (131). The narrator's bodily/discursive imperative is an oral tool, a discursive apparatus that guides the viewer in the appropriate ways to 'see' Ridjimirari's death dance, which will be the main scene analysed in this essay.

In her article 'Aboriginal Art and Film: The Politics of Representation', Marcia Langton discusses the deep and pervasive ties Australian Indigenous cultures have to oral traditions, both as a means of cultural continuance and as an artistic expression of the individual within the community context. Enormous social value is placed on oral traditions as the artistic and spiritual articulation of a community (Langton 109). These values are evident in the structure of the narrative in *Ten Canoes*. The story clearly illustrates the pedagogical uses of narrative in informing younger members of the Yolgnu community of their laws and moral codes of conduct, such as when Minygululu regales Dayindi with this story of their ancestors as they work together making the canoes. In this realm of purposeful activity, he teaches Dayindi both the practical skills required for hunting and the moral skills needed for cohesive living.

There is circularity to the narrative as it shifts between three time frames. The present is articulated as the narrator speaks directly to the audience as an embodied voice, which can be heard in both the other time-frames. The past is

filmed in black and white, representing the narrator's more immediate ancestors. The mythical past is framed by the re-emergence of colour, and as the scene where the dramatic tension of the story dwells. It is between these three temporal landscapes that the audience comes to understand the story as a coherent whole. This narrative structure alerts the audience to the intricate and complex structures that underlie oral traditions.² By moving backwards and forwards through different time frames, viewers bear witness to the community's cultural continuance and to the connection between individuals and the community both past and present.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: READING INTIMACY AND INTENSITY

This connection between the individual and the community, between the local and the political, is an issue that Diana Brydon analyses by studying a Canadian poet's connection to a global community. In her reading of Dionne Brand's long poem *Inventory*, Diana Brydon analyses the poet's persona as a witness whose body registers an ethical and political 'hereness' that connects local stories to 'the political projects of citizenship and community in contemporary times' (990–91). For Brydon, citizenship extends beyond the nation-state to a global citizenry, which is a concept we find useful for a text such as *Ten Canoes*, given its attention to how a local and personal story collapses time and space in its juxtaposition of several pasts with the present and in a space that exists prior to and within an Australian nation-state. Brydon's essay informs our analysis of *Ten Canoes* in two ways: one, its focus on the poet as narrator and witness parallels the role of the film's narrator/storyteller as witness; and two, its analysis of the role of critical theorists provides a useful model for our own approach to how non-racialised critics might read and analyse racialised narratives in ethical ways that are attentive to both local and global intimacies.

Brydon argues that Brand's persona as reader provides a model for how to read the poetry itself, and we employ this strategy in our analysis. The narrator in *Ten Canoes* tells and reads his story simultaneously, which is apparent when he directs the viewer to 'see' an event. This seeing brings the body to the process of analysis, which Brydon articulates when she expands upon Spivak's notion of critical intimacy: 'Critical intimacy suggests the need to employ both passion and reason while seeking understanding. One must enter the poem with all one's faculties while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance from it' (995). While Brydon discusses this reading strategy in relation to Brand's poem, we employ this process in reading and viewing *Ten Canoes*. The simultaneity of reading subtitles while reading the visual text of the film brings the viewing experience close to that of engaging with a long poem, especially if we accept the storyteller as parallel to Brand's poet's persona. To accentuate this point, we indicate the line breaks (/) and frame breaks (//) in our quotations from the film, in order to draw attention to the poetic and performative aspects of how the film is subtitled. We are especially attentive to the placement of ellipses, the use of repetition, the employment of sight metaphors, and the proliferation of question

marks, all of which invite the 'you' into an intimate relationship with the narrative and the narrator.

Film is a performative text in which the audience both hears or reads the narration and watches the actors embody the story, which in turn allows gestures to express non-verbal communication. Unlike an oral performance, however, the scripted text remains the same each time it is viewed. When watching *Ten Canoes*, an audience that cannot understand the many languages of the Yolgnu people must read the subtitles in order to access the verbal text. As Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks*, embedded in the language of the colonisers are all the ideas that perpetuate hegemony. For Yolgnu audiences, the use of their own languages in *Ten Canoes* highlights the vibrancy of a continuing linguistic heritage. It creates a reflection that affirms their community's culture and offers possibilities of cultural and linguistic resurgence for other Indigenous communities. For non-Indigenous viewers, it not only challenges any notions regarding the vigour of contemporary Indigenous languages, but also challenges the hegemony of language, requiring the story to be mediated by translation via subtitles for non-Yolgnu people.

Bruno Stars analyses the use of subtitles in his article 'The Authentic Aboriginal Voice in Rolf de Heer's *Ten Canoes*'. As a local story with global distribution, the film's narrative represents a source of political and cultural debate in its use of subtitles. For instance, the distribution of the film in Italy became problematic because the distributors wanted the dialogue to be dubbed. The people of Ramingining, however, were very clear about retaining the authenticity and integrity of their language within the context of the film and would not allow the actors' voices to be dubbed. Rolf de Heer mediated with the distributors, resulting in three forms of release: the Yolgnu language version, with no subtitles; the Yolgnu language version with English subtitles; and the cinematic-release version, with the narration in English and the dialogue in local languages subtitled in English (Starrs). Collectively the Yolgnu community of Ramingining and de Heer negotiated these challenges involved in the process of filming and the distribution of *Ten Canoes*. (Ten Canoes Press Kit 20). DVD viewers of the film may choose any of these three versions; our reading of the film is based on the all-Yolgnu version with English subtitles, which we believe brings us the closest to the version preferred by the people of Ramingining, given their reluctance to have the film dubbed.

By analysing the film through this version, we are signalling what non-Indigenous critic Anne Brewster calls 'the particularity of the [White reader's] own racialised intercorporeality (and intersubjectivity)' (56). As White readers of a Black narrative, we find that by drawing upon Brewster's essay 'Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness: The Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romane Moreton' as well as Brydon's article about critical intimacy, we are able to construct a strategy of reading that acknowledges how non-Indigenous critics might be guided by Indigenous texts to read and analyse them in ethical, intimate,

and politically-conscious ways, which includes defamiliarising whiteness as a way of understanding how viewers' bodies are placed in relation to the bodies in the film and of how critics' voices are guided by the words of the film's narrator.

One of the most important aspects of this strategy is the attention given to how non-Indigenous readers are addressed by a persona within the text. In her analysis of Indigenous poet Romaine Moreton's work, Brewster examines, 'how the rhetorics of both social and political critique and personal address... solicit affective and political responses in a non-Indigenous reading', and she discusses how the 'forms of address... interpellate non-Indigenous readers' (56). One of the forms of address that Brewster identifies is particularly relevant here: the 'first-person speaking position and... direct address to a second-person "you"' (65). This use of the second-person address applies to *Ten Canoes* when the narrator interpellates the audience as 'you' who wants a 'proper story', which indicates that the story he is about to tell may not be regarded by non-Indigenous viewers as 'proper'.

As with the 'you' in *Ten Canoes*, the addressee in Moreton's poems is not overtly identified as white and middle-class, but Brewster argues, 'the fact that their racial identity is unmarked, places them, at the very least, in a position homologous to that of a white person' (65), a placement that we, too, can assume, based especially upon the opening allusion to fairytales and *Star Wars* and upon the use of English subtitles. We may then also consider Brewster's argument that this white addressee is positioned in such a way as to 'defamiliarise white privilege and ontology' and to engage 'whiteness affectively' (65). The opening lines of *Ten Canoes* do precisely this work. When the narrator addresses non-Indigenous viewers with the words, 'Once upon a time', he sets up the audience to expect a familiar story. By then laughing and telling viewers that he is joking, the viewers' sense of being is destabilised, and she or he must learn to listen and to see differently, actively, and affectively.

In a turn of phrase that connects Brewster to Brydon and Spivak's arguments, Brewster claims that the 'direct address to the second person "you" is immediate and intimate, dramatising the cross-racial encounter' (69). This intimate encounter contains a similar impulse to Spivak's critical intimacy and to Brydon's version of this argument in relation to Brand's poetry, in which she claims that the 'intimate recognitions' between the 'I' and the 'you' are entangled in such a way that 'no one can any longer claim innocence with any kind of good faith' (992). What we are foregrounding here is the intimacy of the relationship between the narrator and the viewer via the direct address from the 'I' to the 'you'. In watching *Ten Canoes* the viewer is affected by the intimacy and immediacy of an event through the technique employed by the narrator in clearly enunciating the difference between the 'I' and 'you'.

This ability to be affected and to affect draws upon Brian Massumi's definition of *affect*, which he develops through a reading of Spinoza's ethics ('Notes' xvi). In

Parables of the Virtual, Massumi argues that Spinoza's ethics is the 'philosophy of the becoming-active, in parallel, of mind and body, from an origin in passion' (32). This beginning with passion, which Massumi relates to intensity, moves our reading away from the opening scene of the narrator's laughter to the pivotal scene in which Ridjimirari performs his death dance. The death dance scene is the one in which the viewer is most intensively interpellated by the narrator, who repeatedly asks the viewer to see details of Ridjimirari's dance. In the narrator's repeated address to the viewer, he directs them to enter the scene with all their faculties. This moment is a moment of critical intimacy because although the viewer may try to enter the scene with passion and reason, she/he must still acknowledge a critical distance from it, for it is a ritual that she/he sees but sees differently from the audience watching within the film.

Sara Ahmed begins her book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, with an analysis of pain 'in order to show how even feelings that are immediate, and which may involve "damage" on the skin surface, are not simply feelings that one has, but feelings that open bodies to others' (15). In Ridjimirari's death dance, he dances in order to show his people that he is dying, so that his fathers and his ancestors will come for him. Susan Leigh Foster in 'Choreographing History' argues that '[d]ance, perhaps more than any other body-centred endeavour, cultivates a body that initiates as well as responds' (15). In his dance, Ridjimirari opens his body to his people, but in the narration of his death dance, Ridjimirari's body also opens to the viewer, who cannot but be affected by his passion. Ridjimirari responds to the needs of his people and initiates a response in the viewers. These bodies then open to each other, in a movement that may be read as an embodied ethics of becoming-active, for the narrator will not let the viewer be passive.

RIDJIMIRARI'S DEATH DANCE

The narrator's opening words in the film, which are quoted in the opening paragraphs of this article, establish his authority and subvert the white viewer's expectations through the use of the coordinating conjunction 'but'. He says, '*But I am going to tell you a story*' and '*But you want a proper story, eh?*' The third time in the film that the narrator uses this conjunction is to introduce Ridjimirari's death dance, which alerts non-Indigenous viewers to the fact that viewers have something to learn here, that it will defy expectations, and that viewers' bodies should be open to it. After the canoes are completed and after Ridjimirari and Yeeralparil go through the payback ceremony, the narrator says, '*But there is still some of / this story left for me to tell you*'.

The sorcerer continues this scene, this story, by whispering to Ridjimirari that he is going to die and that the spirits are waiting. The narration slows down; it has a quality of breath, of inhalations and exhalations, with pauses between each thought, giving time for the audience to absorb each new piece of information and to wait for the next idea to emerge. Just as many Western fairytales use repeated themes and words in their narrative structures, so storytelling techniques in the

film employ repetition. These repetitions occur both aurally through the narrator and also visually through Ridjimirari's actions. The narrator guides the audience through the events: what Ridjimirari is about to do and how the rituals of his death will unfold. In the darkness of the night, surrounded by the haze of the evening fires, he slowly stands alone and begins to dance his death:

And the people know ... // ... see? They know . // They come out of the bush, from everywhere. // And see how Ridjimirari makes one very big effort ... // ... maybe his last effort. // Slowly he gets up. // Look at him get up while he still has the strength. // Slowly he walks to the middle of the space in the camp. // And there, near the fires / so that everyone can see ... // Ridjimirari begins to dance ... // his own death dance. / Soon the clapssticks will join in, // and the didgeridoo, // and then singing. // Hear the clapssticks start. // And now the didgeridoo ... as Ridjimirari dances / ... his own death dance. // He is becoming weaker. // But see? // See how he keeps dancing // until all his strength is gone. // Now he is getting tired. // Now his strength is finished. // and he lies down on the ground. // And now the warriors / finish the death dance for Ridjimirari.

The narration begins with 'And the people know'; this 'and' excludes the 'you' from the body of knowledge concerning the process of death, as it is implied that it is 'the people' who possess knowledge, not the non-Yolgnu viewer. The people know that Ridjimirari is dying, and the ellipsis signals a pause, a breath, a suspension of time. This pause allows viewers, both inside and outside the film, time to register the affect that this knowledge creates, that is created by the presence of the non-verbal body. The ellipses perform the function of waiting, reflective of the film's opening narration. When the narrator commands and questions 'See?', the White viewer — who is not the people — is not certain what to see. There is bush, and, slowly, there are people emerging from the bush, but there is no certainty that this emergence signifies knowledge of Ridjimirari's death until the narrator confirms in the next frame that the people emerge from the bush from everywhere.

Repetition of the words 'and', 'slowly', 'see', 'dance', 'hear', 'soon' moves the viewer through the scene of Ridjimirari's intensely slow suffering. The poetic performance of his shuffling feet, urged on by his arms opening and closing from the elbows is narrated in such a way as to support him with an imperative that the viewer 'see' and bear witness to his effort. Then the tone shifts, and the word 'now' is repeated, a word that connotes immediacy and further intimacy as Ridjimirari can no longer move. As he lies down, his body opens to others, and the warriors' bodies move onto the screen, finishing his dance. The absence of storytelling during the warriors' dance signals a closure of the relationship between Ridjimirari and the viewer, and demonstrates the limits of language and the material body. Now his body belongs to his people and not to the viewer.

To signal this shift, the pronouns move away from 'I' and 'you' and focus on 'he', 'him', 'them', and 'they':

Ridjimirari is waiting for them / to start singing again. // He wants them to sing his death song for him, // so that all his fathers / will know that he is dying. // and come to

him. // Hear now. // They are starting to sing. // You think he might be dead, // but he's only waiting for this singing.

This is the time for the viewer to acknowledge that space is needed between the body of the viewer and the body of Ridjimirari. If critical intimacy relies on both passion and reason, of engaging faculties and maintaining distance, then now is the time for distance. When the narrator says, '[h]ear now', it is a bodily imperative to listen but also to be in the present, to be here, now, even from a distance. The audience hears the clap sticks, the didgeridoo, and the singing that begin one after the other. All the words that are being sung at this point in the film are not translated for the non-Yolgnu audience. These songs belong only to the community within the film and to select audiences who have been initiated into their sacred significance. For non-Yolgnu audiences, these songs exist in the realm of sound, with the meaning of the songs felt by intuition rather than understood by the intellect. Before Ridjimirari's heart stops beating, the men surround him and continue his dance. Their feet kick up dust, as if it is his last breath emerging from his lips.

After his death, the women weep in mourning and the men prepare his body. The narrator tells the audience that they are painting the design of his waterhole on him, which restates the theme established in the opening of the film, of the narrator's spirit, of his ancestors' spirits always returning to their waterhole. Ridjimirari's dark body is painted with red and then white ochre: two white lines down his sides, a meandering line down the middle, and a large white dot on his



Ridjimirari's death dance. (Photo: Jackson)

side. As the camera rises up into an aerial shot, as if following Ridjimirari's spirit, the audience is returned to the vision of the waterhole. Something disturbs the surface and circular ripples gently flow out, then the surface of the waterhole becomes still. Over the whiteness of the light on the water, a mirrored reflection of Ridjimirari's body painting can be seen: two black lines from the shadows of the trees frame the waterhole on either side, a meandering line of shadow through the middle, and the waterlilies, like large dots, float on the surface. This reflection shows the interconnection between the Yolgnu body and the land, and like the repeating words of the story being told, it reinscribes the ideas being communicated visually rather than orally. This visual recapitulation — the

only one in the film — acts like the physical gestures of a storyteller; it enhances the story through non-verbal communication.

Ten Canoes represents an intimate embodied racialised encounter when it presents some of the intricacies of Yolgnu identity to a non-Yolgnu audience. Post-1788 Aboriginal identity has historically been defined by non-Indigenous people who have placed themselves in a position of dominance through colonisation and the policies and legislation that arise from this process. In contemporary Australia, cultural production is often a facilitator in challenging this stereotyping, enabling many different Indigenous individuals to voice their stories. *Ten Canoes* represents Yolgnu identity and culture expressed through Yolgnu voices and bodies. The film — through the narrator — invites non-Indigenous people to enter the narrative, and to do so with body and intellect, with passion and reason. To approach this film, this story, with critical intimacy is to open non-Indigenous bodies to Indigenous stories, to attend to the narrator's bodily imperative to see and to know, and to emerge from the process uncertain about the extent of that knowledge but certain that viewers have seen, heard, and felt a good story.

NOTES

- 1 See Ian Henderson's article 'Stranger Danger: Approaching Home and *Ten Canoes*' for a further analysis of the intersections between these two films.
- 2 See Crosbie and Henderson for further analysis of the structure of the film.

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