

Elite Indigenous Masculinity in Textual Representations of Aboriginal Service in the Vietnam War

Acknowledgements: The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of colleagues who commented on previous drafts: Dr Maggie Nolan, Dr Dolores Herrero, Dr Melissa Bellanta, Dr Cath Bishop and Dr Martin Renes. This work was supported by the Australian Research Council under Grant LP120200327.

Indigenous people were well represented among the ranks of Australian, New Zealand and United States servicemen in the Vietnam War.¹ From the United States, approximately 42,000 American Indians served—the highest proportion of any racial or ethnic group. From Australia, approximately 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men served. From New Zealand, it is not known how many Māori served, though it is acknowledged that they were disproportionately represented.²

Across all three countries, historical fiction has represented the experiences of Indigenous soldiers/veterans of the Vietnam War to varying degrees. Historical fiction as a medium can present individualised tales, unfettered by the conventions of academic history-writing. As historian Sarah Pinto argues, historical fiction is important for understanding *how* the past is told, and it can portray emotional histories more effectively than nonfiction can.³

¹ In this article, I use the term “Indigenous” to refer to global First Peoples. The terms “Australian Indigenous” or “Indigenous Australian” refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while “Aboriginal” refers solely to those Indigenous Australians from the mainland and Tasmania.

² Tom Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996); Noah Riseman, “Equality in the Ranks: The Lives of Aboriginal Vietnam Veterans,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 36.4 (2012): 411–26; C. MacDonald, K. Chamberlain, and N. Long, “Race, Combat, and PTSD in a Community Sample of New Zealand Vietnam War Veterans,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 10.1 (1997): 119.

³ Sarah Winifred Pinto, “Emotional Histories: Contemporary Australian Historical Fictions” (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2007), 8.

Unlike the United States, though, Australia and New Zealand do not have significant literary traditions concerning the Vietnam War or its legacies.⁴ Most Australian Vietnam texts tend to position soldiers within Australia's Anzac legend: the valiant soldiers, forming the bonds of brotherhood, confronting an exotic and powerful enemy, and being led into a senseless war by an inept foreign power.⁵ The few Australian texts that focus on Vietnam veterans depict the veterans' interconnected layers of trauma: war memories, rejected homecomings and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁶

In addition to the extensive body of American Vietnam War literature, the war features prominently in Native American literature; several American Indian veterans have published fictionalised autobiographical accounts.⁷ American Indian Vietnam veterans suffering PTSD are frequent characters in other bestselling novels and poetry, including from prominent Native American authors such as Louise Erdrich, Michael Dorris and Sherman Alexie. Such novels, as well as films including *Smoke Signals* (1998) and *The Business of Fancydancing* (2002), depict the impact of the war and PTSD on both veterans and their families. As Stefanie Hundt argues, these texts relate American Indian service to Native warrior traditions and also stress the importance of traditional healing.⁸ Though Hundt does not specifically discuss masculinity, her analysis about traditional healing suggests that PTSD is not necessarily a threat to the veterans' manhood. Warriors have grappled with the mental

⁴ Nor is there a literary tradition of representing Indigenous Australians in the armed forces. See Noah Riseman, "Rectifying 'the Great Australian Silence'? Creative Representations of Australian Indigenous Second World War Service," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 30.1 (2012): 35–48.

⁵ Peter Pierce, "Australian and American Literature of the Vietnam War," in *Australia's Vietnam War*, ed., Jeff Doyle, Jeffrey Grey, and Peter Pierce (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 110–35.

⁶ Donna Coates, "Coming Home: The Return of the (Australian Vietnam War) Soldier," *Southerly* 65.2 (2005): 105–17.

⁷ Mark St. Pierre, *Of Uncommon Birth: Dakota Sons in Vietnam* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Delano Cummings, *Moon Dash Warrior: The Story of an American Indian in Vietnam, a Marine from the Land of the Lumbee* (Livermore, ME and Rockbridge Baths, VA: Signal Tree Publications, 1998); Philip Red Eagle, *Red Earth: A Vietnam Warrior's Journey* (Duluth, MN: Holy Cow! Press, 1997); Jim Northrup, *Walking the Rez Road* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1993).

⁸ Stefanie Hundt, "The Warrior in the Memoirs and Fiction of Native American Vietnam War Literature" (PhD thesis, Lehigh University, 2006).

and emotional scars from war for generations, and traditional healing forms part of the warrior experience. The analysis by Scott Andrews of the novella *Red Earth* similarly highlights the role of tradition, in the form of Sioux women's strength, to help American Indian veterans overcome war trauma.⁹

The only New Zealand text to depict Māori in the Vietnam War, Witi Ihimera's novel *The Uncle's Story* (2000), also situates contemporary military service within Indigenous warrior traditions. The importance of military service to Māori manhood pervades the novel, as veterans such as the protagonist's father hold prominent leadership positions within the Māori community. What makes *The Uncle's Story* unique in its depiction of masculinity, though, is that the Māori protagonist is not only a soldier in Vietnam but is also gay, and develops a romance with a white American Air Force pilot. Almost all literary analyses of *The Uncle's Story*, which as a Māori text is outside the scope of this article, focus on it as a queer novel.¹⁰ Only Michelle Keown has examined it as a war novel that reconceptualises the Māori warrior in modern New Zealand.¹¹

Australian Aboriginal literature about the Vietnam War represents a small and hitherto overlooked subgenre. Aboriginal Vietnam War texts are important for their portrayals of not only soldier/veteran experiences but also for their depictions of the military, race relations and Indigenous masculinity. In these texts, the military represents a fraternal institution that creates a culture of conformity or sameness.¹² On one hand, that sameness represents a site of equality for Indigenous servicemen regardless of race. The conformist culture also produces a common acceptable masculinity, which reflects white hegemonic

⁹ Scott Andrews, "Race, Feminine Power, and the Vietnam War in Philip Red Eagle's *Red Earth*," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 28.4 (2004): 93–105.

¹⁰ Yanwei Tan, "Recognition, Political and Interpersonal: Gay Tribalism in Witi Ihimera's *The Uncle's Story*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 60.2 (2014): 366–86; Sandra Tawake, "Cultural Rhetoric in Coming-out Narratives: Witi Ihimera's *The Uncle's Story*," *World Englishes* 25.3–4 (2006): 373–80; Margaret Meklin, "A Maori Writer in Two Worlds," *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 10.1 (2003).

¹¹ Michelle Keown, *Pacific Islands Writing: The Postcolonial Literatures of Aotearoa/New Zealand and Oceania* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 103–5.

¹² Ben Wadham, "Brotherhood," *Australian Feminist Studies* 28.76 (2013): 212–35.

ideals of heroism, individualism and serving as protector. Yet civilian society did not accept Australian Indigenous equality. After Vietnam, Australian Indigenous servicemen faced the challenge of either continuing to mimic the white hegemonic male or embracing alternative Indigenous masculinities.

Only a few texts address Aboriginal people and the Vietnam War. The play and movie *The Sapphires* feature the Vietnam War, though not Aboriginal military service, through the story of four female Aboriginal singers performing for American troops.¹³ The novels *Day of the Dog* and *Sweet One* make minor references to Aboriginal service in Vietnam,¹⁴ hinting at the war's impact on Aboriginal families. This article focuses on the only three texts in which Aboriginal soldiers or veterans of the Vietnam War are the protagonists: the autobiographical novel *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys* (1999), the autobiographical play *Seems Like Yesterday* (2001), and one episode of the television series *Redfern Now* (2013). Whereas the Native American literature and the Māori literature equate masculinity with warrior traditions (while at the same time complicating these relationships), in Aboriginal communities manhood and initiation rites have not centred on proving oneself in battle. Instead of constructing Aboriginal soldiers' masculinity around being warriors, the three Aboriginal texts portray the Vietnam War as inculcating what Brendan Hokowhitu refers to as elite Indigenous masculinity—an Indigenous attempt to appropriate white hegemonic masculinity.¹⁵ The soldiers/veterans differentiate themselves from colonial constructs of Aboriginal males, instead mimicking and embracing the hegemonic white ideal male: a hero, an individualist or a protector. The Vietnam War represents a site where Aboriginal males

¹³ Tony Briggs, *The Sapphires*, directed by Wesley Enoch (Melbourne: Melbourne Theatre Company, 2004).

¹⁴ Archie Weller, *The Day of the Dog* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 22–23; Peter Docker, *Sweet One* (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2014), 12, 194.

¹⁵ See Brendan Hokowhitu, "Producing Elite Indigenous Masculinities," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2.2 (2012): 23–48.

can demonstrate their “proper” masculinity,¹⁶ and they believe this will lead to acceptance as the white man’s equal. Yet this elite Indigenous masculinity is a myth, because colonisers in civilian society continue to construct the Aboriginal soldiers/veterans as being “not quite white”.¹⁷ Over the course of the narratives, the Indigenous servicemen/veterans are forced to re-think this construction of their masculine identities after coming into contact with competing Aboriginal masculinities. They come to realise the myth of elite Indigenous masculinity, and, instead, the legitimacy of multiple Aboriginal masculinities.

Elite Indigenous Masculinity

Masculinity is a fitting lens through which to analyse war texts, given the extensive Australian discourse linking manhood with military service across the twentieth century, starting with the Anzac legend.¹⁸ As different masculinities operate simultaneously, individuals construct masculinities in relation to one another, creating a complex web of interactions.¹⁹ Colonisers measure Indigenous men against (white) hegemonic masculinity, which they construct as “normal”. Raewyn Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”.²⁰ As historian Shino Konishi argues, “British colonists had largely portrayed Aboriginal masculinity as the antithesis of white civilized manliness: primitive, irrational, childlike, treacherous and barbaric towards

¹⁶ Raewyn Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 29.

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (1984): 125–33.

¹⁸ Stephen Garton, “War and Masculinity in Twentieth Century Australia,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 22.56 (1998): 86–95.

¹⁹ Gregory Wayne Walker, “Disciplining Protest Masculinity,” *Men and Masculinities* 9.1 (2006): 6.

²⁰ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 77.

women”.²¹ The white male is represented as a protector of (white) women and children; the Aboriginal male therefore is dysfunctional and sexually violent. Historian Martin Crotty argues that in twentieth-century Australia, notwithstanding the country’s convict origins, the middle-class, white, heterosexual, athletic male who served his country constituted the hegemonic ideal.²² Of course, as gender theorists have argued, the constructs of the white male are also a false ideal.²³ Even so, this myth of the white male as a protector came to represent Australian (white) hegemonic masculinity formulated by those in power.

Hegemonic masculinity functions such that it is taken for granted as “normal” or as the way men should behave; in addition to subordinating the “others” who sit outside it, hegemonic masculinity is often used by those “others” to measure themselves (against it).²⁴ Scholars refer to the way in which “others” accentuate their masculinity as protest masculinity: a form of compensation, derived from an individual sense of powerlessness within an oppressive system, often manifested as an exaggerated masculinity.²⁵ Elite Indigenous masculinity appears among those Indigenous men who measure themselves to be above the colonial constructs of the brutal Indigenous male; instead of overcompensating through acts of violence, such Indigenous men mimic the hegemonic ideal. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues that Indigenous people seeking liberation from repression may mimic the coloniser as a strategy, which is “like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance that differs/defends presence by

²¹ Shino Konishi, “Representing Aboriginal Masculinity in Howard’s Australia,” in *Global Masculinities and Manhood*, ed., Ronald Jackson II and Murali Balaji (Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 163.

²² Martin Crotty, *Making the Australian Male: Middle-Class Masculinity 1870–1920* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2001); see also Leigh Boucher, “Unsettled Men: Settler Colonialism, Whiteness and Masculinity in Victoria 1851–1886” (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2005).

²³ Konishi, “Representing Aboriginal Masculinity in Howard’s Australia,” 172–73.

²⁴ Brendan Hokowhitu, “Indigenous and First Nations Masculinities,” in *International Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*, ed., Michael Flood, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 331.

²⁵ Walker, “Disciplining Protest Masculinity,” 6–7; Connell, *Masculinities*, 111.

displaying it in part, metonymically”.²⁶ Bhabha argues that such a strategy of mimicry is meant to destabilise the coloniser. The coloniser cannot accept the indigene mimicking him as an equal because, rather than being the same, the mimicking indigene represents a menace challenging the coloniser’s authority.

Rather than seeking to destabilise the coloniser-colonised relationship as Bhabha suggests, elite Indigenous masculinity appropriates white hegemonic masculinity as its own. As elite Indigenous masculinity is a response to colonial constructs of Indigenous males, it is both constructed by, as well as a reaction to, the coloniser. Elite Indigenous masculinity is a way that Indigenous males may position themselves as apart from the “normative” Indigenous population. Hokowhitu argues that elite Indigenous masculinity originally emerged among Indigenous men educated in white institutions. As colonialism disrupted Indigenous epistemologies, these Indigenous elites sought “to interweave with colonial beliefs about indigenous [sic] men ... the patriarchy and hetero-normativity of dominant forms of invader/settler masculinity”.²⁷ What emerged was a masculinity that constructed Indigenous male leadership along the lines of the hegemonic white male, but also constructed as traditional to Indigenous societies. In other words, elite Indigenous males apply the same constructs of hegemonic white masculinity to their own societies: the elite Indigenous male, too, embraces individualism and is a protector/defender of his family, kin and country. In some Indigenous societies, such as Native Americans or Māori, elite Indigenous masculinity became embodied in the idea of the warrior. As Hokowhitu argues, elite Indigenous masculinity operated as another form of hegemonic masculinity over Indigenous men (and women), denigrating as “other” those Indigenous men who were violent, alcoholic or gay.

²⁶ Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 131.

²⁷ Hokowhitu, “Producing Elite Indigenous Masculinities,” 34.

Elite Indigenous masculinity ascribes authority, thus “exclud[ing] alternative forms of indigenous [sic] masculinity and indigenous [sic] women from leadership roles”.²⁸

This article examines the three Aboriginal Vietnam texts through the lens of Hokowhitu’s concept of elite Indigenous masculinity but with one significant caveat. In the Māori or American Indian contexts, military service fits with the notion of warrior traditions. In Aboriginal Australia, though, servicemen’s sense of elite Indigenous masculinity did not derive from or formulate “tradition”, as in Hokowhitu’s framework. Even so, the literary characters measure themselves against both hegemonic masculine ideals and the denigrated Indigenous masculinity, positioning themselves as apart from Indigenous males who have not served in the armed forces. The Vietnam soldier/veteran is a hero or protector; “normal” Aboriginal males are incapable of standing up for themselves or their families. The soldiers/veterans in the texts embrace these constructs until encounters with other Aboriginal men challenge their mimicry of hegemonic masculinity. Only then do they realise the myth of elite Indigenous masculinity and accept that there are multiple legitimate Indigenous masculinities.

Autobiographical Fiction: *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*

Kenny Laughton’s novel *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys* is a fictionalised account of his experience in the Vietnam War, published by the small Indigenous publisher IAD Press (suggesting a small print run). Autobiographical fiction is a common form of Aboriginal literature because it combines the traditions of oral history and storytelling.²⁹ Such texts do

²⁸ Hokowhitu, “Producing Elite Indigenous Masculinities,” 24.

²⁹ Colin Johnson, “White Forms, Aboriginal Content,” in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed., Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 21–33; Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (South Yarra, Vic.: Hyland House Publishing Pty Limited, 1990), 165–78; Oliver Haag, “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Towards a History of Published Indigenous Australian Autobiographies and Biographies,” in *Indigenous Biography and Autobiography*, ed., Peter Read, Frances Peter-Little, and Anna Haebich (Canberra: ANU E-Press and Aboriginal History Incorporated, 2008),

not dwell on notions of “tradition”, but rather ground the characters’ Aboriginality in common historical processes of dispossession, discrimination and assimilation. Through these common experiences, authors, including Laughton, espouse political messages in support of Indigenous rights.³⁰

Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys follows the protagonist Kenny from when he decides to enlist until the end of his tour of duty in Vietnam. Kenny is a nineteen-year-old Arrernte boy from Alice Springs. His mother was a member of the Stolen Generations, thus positioning Kenny within a history common to many Aboriginal families. Kenny finds basic training difficult and even deserts at one stage, but he returns and persists. The Australian Army then assigns Kenny to work as a clerk at the Allied Headquarters in Saigon. This sets Kenny’s time in Vietnam apart from most soldiers, who are assigned to the Australian base at Nui Dat. Kenny finds the work in Saigon to be mundane, lacking in adventure. Kenny requests a transfer and serves the rest of his tour with the Royal Australian Engineers based at Nui Dat. This new role sends Kenny to the frontlines, including searching Viet Cong tunnels, engaging in firefights and losing mates. The narrative follows Kenny through these experiences as well as sexual encounters, excessive boozing in Vung Tau, bar brawls and bonding with other soldiers. The novel ends as Kenny’s tour is ending and he ponders what life will be like for him back in Australia.

Kenny originally decides to join the army, while drinking with his Aboriginal mate Chooky; they are both described in that moment as “full of self-conscious schoolboy

5–28; Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, 2nd ed. (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2004).

³⁰ Bruce McGuinness and Denis Walker, “The Politics of Aboriginal Literature,” in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed., Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 43–54; Robert Ariss, “Writing Black: The Construction of an Aboriginal Discourse,” in *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, ed., Jeremy R. Beckett (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), 141; Jack Davis et al., “Introduction,” in *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings*, ed., Jack Davis, et al. (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 2.

macho”.³¹ Kenny and Chooky call the draft cowardly: brave men would enlist. They then decide to enlist together. The need to perform his masculinity to his mate tips Kenny’s “half-hearted” interest into a decision to join up. Moreover, Kenny’s vision of war as heroic is based on white constructs of hegemonic masculinity, derived primarily from “watching too many old war pictures. Wars were full of heroes, and Kenny wanted desperately to be a hero. There was something important he wanted to prove”.³² Kenny’s father enthusiastically endorses Kenny’s enlistment (he had served in the Second World War, and his ancestors had fought in the First World War and the Boer War), saying to Kenny, “Yeah, mate, it’ll make a man of you”.³³ Thus Kenny lives within a social environment that equates being a soldier with masculinity; serving in Vietnam will demonstrate his manliness in practice.³⁴

Old white diggers praise Kenny and even welcome him into the Hotel Alice to drink. These moments fill Kenny with a sense of excitement because they constitute a break from what is otherwise a segregated town. Kenny has not even left for Vietnam, yet his new status as a soldier-to-be reconstitutes him as an elite Indigenous male, different from other Aboriginal males and now apparently accepted by the white community. Kenny gets caught drink driving, but the police officer lets Kenny off with a warning because Kenny is about to join the army.³⁵ Kenny is now a digger rather than just another drunk Aboriginal man, and the police officer sends Kenny a signal that he is in a position above other Aboriginal males.

The only racial discrimination that Kenny experiences in the army is during basic training, when an officer targets Kenny for harsh treatment. When Kenny finally confronts the officer, the officer refers to Kenny as “a little black bastard nobody”.³⁶ The experience of targeting Aboriginal soldiers with racial abuse was common practice in the Australian Army

³¹ K. C. Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys* (Alice Springs: Jukurrpa books, IAD Press, 1999), 10.

³² Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 12.

³³ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 17.

³⁴ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, 29.

³⁵ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 20–21.

³⁶ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 44.

until the 1990s.³⁷ Yet, like most Aboriginal soldiers in Vietnam, Kenny encounters no further racism in the army. There are references to his race as an Aboriginal man, but they are all affectionate. Such references include other soldiers, or even Kenny describing himself as a “spear thrower”, “blackfella” or performing “blackfella magic”. The text includes self-effacing comments such as “Kenny tried like hell but he was buggered if he could get the hang of it [surfing] and decided desert dwellers weren’t cut out to be surfies. He might have had the tan but he lacked the technique and, more importantly, the blonde hair”.³⁸ Thus in the armed forces, though Kenny is still different from his non-Indigenous comrades, he is not denigrated for being Aboriginal. Instead, the text states that “He [Kenny] had been brought up in an era when Aboriginal people were still stereotyped as no-hopers by many in the white community and this was one of the few times in his short life that he felt like he was an equal”.³⁹

Yet Kenny also comes to realise that while white men may welcome him on the battlefield, in Australia he will still be another blackfella “no-hoper”. In February 1968 on the radio, Kenny listens to Aboriginal boxer Lionel Rose’s world bantamweight title match. He then reflects on his own identity as an Aboriginal male: “Kenny felt an affinity with Lionel. He knew that he, too, was only accepted by others when he excelled at something or behaved like a ‘good’ blackfella”.⁴⁰ The “good blackfella” represents the elite Indigenous male mimicking hegemonic masculine ideals. Yet, as Kenny realises when identifying with Lionel Rose, such a status is tenuous and subject to the will of the coloniser.

These sentiments resurface at the novel’s end as Kenny is preparing to return to Australia:

³⁷ Noah Riseman, “Racism, Indigenous People, and the Australian Armed Forces in the Post-Second World War Era,” *History Australia* 10.2 (2013): 167–68.

³⁸ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 259.

³⁹ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 296.

⁴⁰ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 116.

for some reason, he was becoming more conscious of the colour of his skin again. His fellow Australians had accepted him over here, but what would it be like back in his own country? Would all his service and achievements mean anything, or would he go back to being just another blackfella?⁴¹

Being treated as an equal within the army has heightened Kenny's awareness of the discrimination he faced in Australia. Before signing up, Kenny "didn't know what the word racism meant, let alone when they were being exposed to it".⁴² Though originally Kenny joined the army to prove himself on the same level as the white male, he now realises that the elite Indigenous male is a myth. The reader is left to wonder what will become of Kenny when he returns to Australia, but knows that the Vietnam War has been a transformative experience for Kenny's understandings of race relations and masculinity.

Autobiographical Drama: *Seems Like Yesterday*

George Bostock's *Seems Like Yesterday* is an autobiographical play that dramatises the author's tour of duty in Vietnam. It too reached a small audience, for it was performed only in a two-week run by the Kooemba Jdarra Theatre Company in Brisbane in 2001. Bostock's brother and fellow playwright, Gerry Bostock, describes the purpose of Aboriginal theatre:

[It is to] remember the attitudes of Australian people when considering Aborigines. And, when we do plays about today's society and talk from our own personal experience, we're emulating our own motivations and ideas, not white society or white theatre, but what's happening in black theatre and in the black community.⁴³

⁴¹ Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 349.

⁴² Laughton, *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, 8.

⁴³ Gerry Bostock, "Black Theatre," in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, ed., Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 67.

Seems Like Yesterday is littered with remembrances of Australian attitudes towards Aboriginal people, drawing on George Bostock's personal experience. He also uses the negative treatment he received as a Vietnam veteran to condemn the anti-war movement.

Seems Like Yesterday approaches masculinity by including two Aboriginal characters: Steve, who manifests elite Indigenous masculinity, and Stewie, who already recognises it as a myth. The play episodically portrays life for five company members, beginning with the arrival of Aboriginal soldier Stewie. Four of the men, including Stewie, are national servicemen, while their Aboriginal section commander Steve is Regular Army. The white soldiers make cracks about Stewie's race until, as big brother figure Steve suggests, he proves that "they can trust you with their lives".⁴⁴ Stewie saves another section member's life and subsequently forms close bonds with the men. Conversations throughout the play expose the white men's ignorance of Aboriginal Australians, the difficult paths all five trod before Vietnam and their emotional vulnerabilities. Stewie eventually dies in combat, and the play ends as the other four reunite years later on Anzac Day.

The incorporation of two Aboriginal characters reflects Bostock's real Vietnam experience. Stewie is based on Noel Stuary "Stewie" Harald, who served with Bostock and was killed in action.⁴⁵ Having two Aboriginal characters also juxtaposes two different Aboriginal masculinities and approaches to relating to white men. Stewie is more timid at first and does not confront racial taunts. Steve, on the other hand, is an authority figure who commands the white soldiers' respect and does not appear fazed by racial comments. Steve explains that when soldier John previously made cracks about him, he hit John and the taunts stopped. Steve witnesses others making similar offensive remarks to Stewie, but he does not intervene except when it nearly comes to a brawl. Then Steve authoritatively declares the

⁴⁴ George Bostock, *Seems Like Yesterday*, directed by Nadine McDonald (Brisbane: Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts in association with Queensland Performing Arts Centre, 2001), 24.

⁴⁵ George Bostock, interview with author, 18 June 2010, Brisbane.

following: “Now let’s get one thing straight. There’s no blackfellas, or whitefellas over here. Over here we’re all tarred with the same brush. Our colour is green”.⁴⁶ Steve’s hands-off approach and his discussion with Stewie about how he handled the taunts suggest that he considers racial discrimination to be something that Aboriginal individuals can and should rise above. He overcame racial discrimination by proving himself to the white man in combat, and Stewie must do the same. Moreover, by constructing all of the men as just soldiers with no racial difference, Steve sets himself (and the others) as having moved beyond the racial divisions of civilian Australia. He considers his soldier status as something different from that of other black men (and the white soldiers from other white men), imbuing him with the privilege constitutive of the elite Indigenous male.

Steve also indicates a sense of being apart from “other” Aboriginal men when he explains to Stewie why he joined the army:

I was working as a labourer, and I was hanging out with what you might call petty criminals. One day my grandfather, he’s a veteran from World War One. He pulled me aside and said I have a choice to make with my life. Either do time in jail or do time in the army. So here I am.⁴⁷

Steve’s comment is telling because it suggests that the army set him on a different path from that followed by most Aboriginal men. This is not to say that Steve is completely disconnected from his Aboriginality. In another scene, Stewie is trying to prove the white soldiers’ ignorance of their country’s history. They can all name five Native American nations, but none can name three Aboriginal mobs. When Stewie turns to Steve, Steve answers without pause: “Bundjalung, Wiradjuri, and Eora. Is that the end of the history

⁴⁶ Bostock, *Seems Like Yesterday*, 17.

⁴⁷ Bostock, *Seems Like Yesterday*, 24. For similar comments from veterans, see Bostock, “Black Theatre,” 66; Oodgeroo Noonaccul, in Ann Howard, *You’ll Be Sorry!* (Sydney and Melbourne: TARKA Publishing, 1990), 154.

lesson teacher?”⁴⁸ In this short line, Steve demonstrates his knowledge of Aboriginal history, but also his desire to end the conversation. While Stewie is trying to educate his white comrades about his Aboriginality, Steve prefers not to accentuate their differences and instead wants to bond at the boozier. Stressing their unity, and himself as one of the boys, constitutes Steve’s attempt to mimic the hegemonic masculine ideal,⁴⁹ whereas Stewie wants to deconstruct the white men’s false understandings of Aboriginal people.

Stewie does not subscribe to the hegemonic ideal, nor does he fit the colonial construct of the Aboriginal male. He does not drink, prefers nonviolence and is educated. He did not even want to enlist but was conscripted even though Aboriginal people were exempt from national service.⁵⁰ Stewie was raised by his grandmother to value education and even worked in the local bank. At first glance, such an upbringing suggests mimicry of the white man and could thus constitute an elite Indigenous masculinity. Yet he also talks about learning from Elders around the campfire. He relates the story of his grandmother, who was forcibly removed as a child but escaped; her sister did not escape and the family never saw her again.⁵¹ Stewie understands that white men will never accept what Bhabha describes as “almost the same, but not quite”,⁵² and he therefore does not construct himself as different from “other” Aboriginal people.

Stewie also recognises that military service will not alter civilian white attitudes. When talking about Anzac Day, Stewie states the following: “And I don’t even know if I’ll be allowed into the club. The unofficial motto of the Kaloo RSL [Returned Servicemen’s League] is ‘If you’re black. You’re barred’”. Steve suggests that all of the men go to Stewie’s

⁴⁸ Bostock, *Seems Like Yesterday*, 20.

⁴⁹ Hokowhitu, “Producing Elite Indigenous Masculinities,” 38–39.

⁵⁰ On the complexities of Aboriginality and the *National Service Act*, see Noah Riseman, “The Curious Case of Mervyn Eades: National Service, Discrimination and Aboriginal People,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 59.1 (2013): 63–79.

⁵¹ Bostock, *Seems Like Yesterday*, 24–25.

⁵² Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 125–33.

RSL and claim to be relatives who fought in a “real” war.⁵³ Though supportive, Steve constructs the racial bar as Stewie’s problem; he does not see it as something that may affect him as well. Thus again Steve sets himself apart from the discrimination affecting many Aboriginal men, seeing himself as one “enjoy[ing] a dividend through association with dominant forms of colonising subjectivities”.⁵⁴

By the end of the play, the audience knows that the three white men had varying degrees of PTSD, alcoholism, broken families and success as businessmen. Yet Steve does not discuss his postwar life, and the audience never knows whether he experienced racial discrimination. The audience also never knows whether or not Steve continued to mimic the white hegemonic ideal, but by carrying Stewie’s flag on their Anzac Day march, it is clear that Stewie had a profound impact on him.

Television: *Redfern Now*

The Aboriginal veteran and notion of the elite Indigenous male is most obvious in the 2013 *Redfern Now* episode “Dogs of War”. *Redfern Now* was aired by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in 2012 and 2013, reaching a much broader audience than the aforementioned texts. “Dogs of War” had approximately 483,000 viewers, in addition to those who watched online through ABC’s iView app and who purchased DVDs. *Redfern Now* received significant praise for being the first television series written, directed and produced by Indigenous Australians. The Indigenous authorship/ownership of *Redfern Now* provided Aboriginal people with the opportunity to create characters themselves, breaking from previous films, which reflected how white writers and audiences perceived Aboriginal

⁵³ Bostock, *Seems Like Yesterday*, 35. The reference to a “real” war is a political statement. Many Vietnam veterans were not welcomed at RSLs because the First and Second World War veterans said that the Vietnam War was not a real war.

⁵⁴ Hokowhitu, “Producing Elite Indigenous Masculinities,” 33.

people.⁵⁵ Throughout its two seasons, *Redfern Now* portrayed multiple intersecting Aboriginal masculinities, including those portrayed in “Dogs of War”.

Vietnam veteran Ernie Johnson comes to stay with his single, pregnant daughter after her house is burgled. Every night Ernie wakes up screaming from flashback nightmares. The screams set off the pit bull across the street, leading to regular clashes between Ernie and the dog’s owner, Aboriginal single father Derek. Meanwhile, white neighbour Jimmy becomes fed up with the barking dog. Aiming to please his domineering wife, Jimmy leaves poison out for the dog, accidentally poisoning Derek’s daughter as well. Many suspect that Ernie, who clearly suffers PTSD and has even come to blows with Derek, is responsible for the poisoning. Ernie figures out that it was Jimmy, and in the end Ernie and Derek develop a newfound respect for one another.

Throughout the episode, Ernie continuously references his time in the Vietnam War. He also uses his war service to differentiate himself from other Aboriginal men, whom he looks down upon. In one scene, an Aboriginal bum passes Ernie on the street and asks if he has any shrapnel, meaning money. Ernie angrily scolds the man: “Shrapnel!? You wouldn’t know what shrapnel was until it kicked you in the arse!”⁵⁶ In another scene, Ernie sees the same homeless man drinking with another on a bench, wearing a hat with an Aboriginal flag. Unprompted, Ernie yells at them:

Bloody Aboriginal colours! Viet Cong fought the frogs! They fought the Yanks! And they fought the Aussies! And we couldn’t even beat a bunch of dirty useless convicts! When I die, don’t you put them colours on my casket. I want the one I bled for: the flag with the Union Jack on the corner.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Pau Varela Rodriguez, “Shooting the Other: Representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Masculinities in 21st Century Australian Cinema” (MA thesis, University of Barcelona, 2012), 19.

⁵⁶ Wayne Blair, “Dogs of War,” in *Redfern Now* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2013).

⁵⁷ Blair, “Dogs of War”.

In this dramatic moment, Ernie positions himself as superior to stereotypical Aboriginal men and aligns himself with white males. He fought for his country, meaning Australia. He proved himself in war. The men on the bench are merely alcoholics descended from a race who could not defend themselves. It does not matter that Ernie is also suffering physical and mental ill health, or even that he is carrying a bag with a bottle of alcohol. He is functional; “normal” Aboriginal males are dysfunctional.

Ernie’s PTSD and ill health feature prominently, as do his attempts to downplay his ailments because illness does not conform to his construct of the male protector. When his daughter asks how a medical appointment went, he lies about the diagnosis to hide his vulnerability. His daughter says, “Dad, stop protecting me”.⁵⁸ This notion of protection is apparent both in the way Ernie relates to his daughter, and in his conceptualisation of his masculinity. The role of a father is to protect his children. This construct aligns with hegemonic masculinity, in contrast to the (false) white constructs of Aboriginal men being violent towards their families.⁵⁹ Ernie’s construct of masculinity signifying protector separates himself from other Aboriginal men, such as Derek. In Derek, whose house was also broken into, Ernie sees a weak male unable to protect his family. Even worse, Derek is now relying on a dog for protection instead of defending the family himself.

Derek and Ernie first clash on the second night that Ernie’s screams set off the dog. The next morning they have another encounter on the street. When Derek tells his son to go inside and the son protests, Ernie responds, “You can’t control your dog. Can’t control your boy”.⁶⁰ Derek recognises such language as an attack on his manhood. The confrontation between the two men comes to a head on the third night that Ernie’s screams trigger the dog’s barking. Derek yells across the street for Ernie to shut up, and Ernie goes outside to face him.

⁵⁸ Blair, “Dogs of War”.

⁵⁹ Konishi, “Representing Aboriginal Masculinity in Howard’s Australia,” 172.

⁶⁰ Blair, “Dogs of War.”

Derek is about to walk away when Ernie says, “Show me your face you uneducated-string-bean-short-dick-Elvis-Presley-dick-like stand. I eat cocks like you for morning smoke-o”. He threatens to hit Derek and calls him an “ungrateful bludging Black bastard”.⁶¹ Derek responds to the attack on his manhood by striking Ernie. The subsequent fight shows the men engaging “in a display of male performance” to affirm their manliness.⁶² Ernie is much older and in ill health, yet his sense of his own superior masculinity clouds his judgement. Ernie sees himself as a real man who fought in war, while Derek represents what is wrong with Aboriginal men today. Though Ernie puts up a good fight, ultimately Derek knocks Ernie out. Meanwhile, the white male present, Jimmy, watches helplessly, cradling his baby, too afraid to intervene. The two Aboriginal men, who are overcompensating to prove their masculinity, reinforce the white man’s perception of the violent Aboriginal male. Yet, at the same time the white male fails to live up to the white hegemonic ideal of masculinity, being too cowardly to break up the fight.

Losing the fight shatters Ernie’s myth of being an elite Indigenous male, but it also allows him to reconceptualise the existence of multiple, legitimate Aboriginal masculinities.⁶³ While his daughter tends to his bruises, he calmly confesses the truth that he has throat cancer and admits to being scared. At last he realises that he does not always need to be a protector. The next day, as Derek is screaming for help for his unconscious daughter, Ernie watches stoically. He sees Derek’s vulnerability as well as Derek’s urge to protect his family. Ernie later realises that Jimmy was the one who poisoned the dog, and he understands that Jimmy is really the weak male because, as Ernie says when interviewed by the cops, “Poison is for

⁶¹ Blair, “Dogs of War”.

⁶² Rodriguez, “Shooting the Other: Representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Masculinities in 21st Century Australian Cinema,” 8.

⁶³ Rodriguez, “Shooting the Other: Representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Masculinities in 21st Century Australian Cinema,” 11.

pussies”.⁶⁴ Ernie sees that Jimmy’s wife is the dominant one in the family. When Derek learns the truth, Jimmy cowardly runs inside his house and locks the door, refusing to “man up” to Derek. Ernie’s myth of the elite Indigenous male is shattered, as is the myth of the hegemonic white male. At the conclusion, Ernie and Derek recognise each other’s legitimacy as masculine protectors, with “Uncle” Ernie taking Derek’s son to the park to train the dog.

Conclusion

Aboriginal literature featuring the Vietnam soldier/veteran may not be as extensive as the volume of American Indian texts, but it is still significant for how it constructs Indigenous soldiers/veterans, their masculinity and Aboriginal perspectives of the Vietnam War. Whereas the American Indian and Māori texts emphasise military service as part of warrior traditions, the Aboriginal texts position the soldiers as breaking from Indigenous traditions. To the protagonists, military service makes them better than other Aboriginal males, reflecting constructs of elite Indigenous masculinity. Through explorations of both the protagonists’ masculinity as well as the wider themes of race relations and the soldier/veteran experiences, the texts integrate the Aboriginal soldier/veteran’s story into the lexicon of Australian Indigenous literature and history. So, too, are the Aboriginal texts valuable as cultural artefacts that help us to expand our understandings of how Indigenous Australians relate their experiences in the military to their lives in civilian Australia.

The ways these protagonists are portrayed showcase the challenges confronting Aboriginal men in contemporary Australia. As Hokowhitu argues, “Indigenous hetero-patriarchal men have willingly enjoyed a dividend through association with dominant forms of colonising subjectivities”.⁶⁵ Military service has, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first

⁶⁴ Blair, “Dogs of War.”

⁶⁵ Hokowhitu, “Producing Elite Indigenous Masculinities,” 33.

centuries, constituted a significant site of association between Indigenous and non-Indigenous men. By exploring both how Aboriginal soldiers/veterans have expected to receive “dividends” for their service as well as the challenges posed when they confront other males, these texts reveal another perspective on crises of masculinity confronting Aboriginal communities. Such portrayals also problematise the relationship between military service and Aboriginal communities. The military has often been praised as a site of opportunity and equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁶⁶ Yet these texts suggest that service in Vietnam was one means through which Aboriginal servicemen/veterans (mis)construed equality as mimicking white hegemonic masculinity. Such constructs dissociated the servicemen from the challenges confronting Aboriginal males in civilian Australia.

In the three texts examined here, the military’s culture of sameness and equality sees Aboriginal soldiers adopt elevated self-perceptions. Their efforts to mimic white hegemonic masculinity lead them to construct themselves as elite Indigenous males, above the otherwise dysfunctional Aboriginal males, who cannot stand up for themselves or their families. Kenny, in *Not Quite Men, No Longer Boys*, initially thinks being a hero in Vietnam is a pass to acceptance; Steve, in *Seems Like Yesterday*, similarly sees military service as a way to rise above segregation and prejudice; Ernie, in *Redfern Now*, protected Australians in Vietnam and now sees the ability to protect one’s family as the measure of a man. In all three tales, the protagonists undergo transformations through their interactions with competing visions of Aboriginal masculinity. Whereas Kenny realises that in civilian Australia he will still be seen as “not quite white”,⁶⁷ Steve and Ernie recognise that one does not have to mimic hegemonic

⁶⁶ Noah Riseman, “Serving Their Country: A Short History of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service in the Australian Army,” *Australian Army Journal* 10.3 (2013): 11–22; “Escaping Assimilation’s Grasp: Aboriginal Women in the Australian Women’s Military Services,” *Women’s History Review* 24.5 (2015): 757–75.

⁶⁷ Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” 125–33.

masculinity to be a protector or to overcome discrimination. They may not be able to change white hegemonic masculinity, but at least they can stop measuring themselves against it.