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'Unexpected Effects': *Marked Men* in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction

Since the late 1980s, men's (often damaged) bodies have increasingly been at the centre of novels by Australian women. Moreover, the extent of the focus on damage has grown: while damaged men frequently appear in novels by women published before the late 1990s, it is difficult to overemphasise their centrality to later works: whether burnt, beaten, tortured, ill, disabled, self-mutilating, deformed, pained or murdered, suffering male characters populate recent Australian women's fiction with a remarkable frequency. Such damage functions not only as a central theme, but as the motivation for these novels, in which the plot revolves around male suffering. This trend is not restricted to Australian women's writing, for women artists and authors from many countries are increasingly making men's (damaged) bodies central to their creative practices.¹ With certain exceptions, however, existing analyses tend to approach such texts in isolation, when it seems likely that this is an emerging trend in, and potentially a definitive characteristic of, contemporary Western society.

The authors of Australian narratives of male damage range from established figures in the national literature, such as Thea Astley and Kate Grenville, through to first-time authors like Vivienne Cleven, Jillian Watkinson, Mireille Juchau and Sarah Myles.² This diversity in literary fiction is mirrored in the variety of publishers that have produced these novels, from well-known companies like Penguin to small, independent enterprises like Seaview. The more recent books, however, those in which male damage is prominent, tend to be written by the newer authors, perhaps suggesting that this trope has relevance or currency for emerging Australian women writers. Certainly, it is in these

- 1 For discussions and examples of this phenomenon, see Lee Parpart, Tanis Macdonald, Peter Lehamn ('Realm' 106–08); Catherine Summerhayes, 'Who in Heaven? Tracey Moffatt: Men in Wet-Suits and the Female Gaze,' *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 33.1 (2003): 63–80; Joan Hope, *The Feminist Gaze: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Women's Bodies* (Diss. Indiana U, 1996. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1996/7. AAT 9627032) 5–11; Andrew Campbell and Nathan Griffith, 'The Male Body in Contemporary Art,' *The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures*, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999) 158–61, 170–74; Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau, 'Themes from the Exhibition,' *Women's Images of Men*, ed. Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Morreau (London: Pandora, 1990) 27–43.
- 2 Such novels include Thea Astley's *It's Raining in Mango* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1989), Susan Johnson's *A Big Life* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1993), Kate Grenville's *Dark Places* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1994), Amanda Lohrey's *Camille's Bread* (Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1995), Kirsty Machon's *Immortality* (Sydney: Black Wattle, 1996), Patti Miller's *Child* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1998), Fiona Capp's *Last of the Sane Days* (1999), Jillian Watkinson's *The Architect* (2000), Georgia Blain's *The Blind Eye* (2001), Vivienne Cleven's *Bitin' Back* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2001), Mireille Juchau's *Machines for Feeling* (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2001), Sarah Myles's *Transplanted* (2002) and Wendy Scarfe's *Miranda* (Henley Beach: Seaview, 2002).

more recent novels that the meanings around male damage cohere into a set of recognisable and consistent themes, familiar from popular proclamations of a crisis in masculinity. In particular, two dominant concerns emerge: first, men no longer have access to, or are unable to fulfil, masculine roles; second, men are emotionally disconnected from one another, and male relationships, especially those between fathers and sons, are thus impoverished. Depictions of physical suffering somatize this discourse of male emotional and mental pain. Because physical suffering is often the ostensible cause of internal anguish, a seemingly perpetual cycle of crisis is established, a cycle firmly reinforced by the focus on men's inter-generational estrangement.

In Sally Robinson's reading of a similar, though far more extensive collection of American texts written by men, and published since the late 1960s, she argues that the figure of the wounded white man 'functions as a strategy through which white men negotiate the widespread critique of their power and privilege' (*Marked Men* 6). More specifically, she suggests that because of the 'dominance of ... liberationist rhetoric' (7) in contemporary American society, claims of victimisation and disempowerment have become a recognised strategy for asserting rights. Although white men, in general, lack recourse to social inequalities when claiming victimisation, '[b]odily wounds have a persuasive power that does not depend on the social; and images of men's bodies at risk work to legitimise a discourse that often veers off into the apolitical and asocial' ('Men's' 208). In other words, representations of damaged white men provide evidence of the existence of a crisis in masculinity, at the same time that this focus on individual bodies in pain conceals the political, social and institutional privileges still accorded such subjects. Thus Robinson argues that the cultural prominence and visibility of 'marked men' in American society functions in the interests of white male power.

The consistency of the themes surrounding male damage in contemporary Australian women's fictions indicates the presence and nature of a discourse of masculinity crisis. Certainly, the idea that men are experiencing an inter-generational crisis – affecting fathers as well as their sons – is an increasingly prominent issue in Australian cultural debates.³ Moreover, such claims – and the accompanying assertion and defence of men's rights – increasingly occur in the context of depictions of male bodily harm.⁴ Whereas periods in Australian and

3 In February and March 2004, during the lead-up to the last federal election, literally hundreds of articles appeared on the crisis of masculinity in Australian newspapers. Among these were a prominent series of articles in the national newspaper – the *Australian* – debating the impact of a crisis in masculinity on boys' education: see for example Michael Bachelard and Rebecca DiGirolamo, 'Latham Targets the Boy Crisis' (19 Feb. 2004: 1, 6); Michael Carr-Gregg, 'We Need to Rediscover the Fatherland: Boys are Suffering from a Crisis of Masculinity' (20 Feb. 2004: 13); Editorial, 'Latham Leads in Caring for Boys in Trouble' (20 Feb. 2004: 12); Kate Legge, 'Putting Fathers in the Picture' (20 Feb. 2004: 11); Michael Costello, 'Equal Rights the Big Loser: A Masculinity Crisis?' (27 Feb. 2004: 13).

4 In an article entitled 'Mothers Must Tell the Truth,' Janet Albrechtsen attacks women who commit 'paternity fraud' (which occurs when women conceive children with men other than their partners and these partners consequently support children not biologically their own) (*Australian* 23 March 2005: 15). According to Albrechtsen, this 'dreadful deception' creates 'a

American history – typically those characterised by significant changes in labour, gender and racial relations – have been experienced and understood in terms of a crisis in masculinity, it is a distinctive feature of the current 'crisis' that white men are portrayed as having been deliberately targeted, attacked, and disadvantaged.⁵ In this sense, and as Robinson argues, the figure of the victimised and disempowered white man signals a new conception of gender and racial relations, one that is at least partly common to Australia and the United States. Nevertheless, there is a significant temporal difference in the emergence of this discourse between the two countries: although widespread in the U.S. since the 1960s, it is only since the mid-1990s that the situation of white Australian men has consistently been conceived in this way.

Using some novels by Australian women published since the late 1990s as a case study, I want to open up discussion of this Australian trend and explore its similarities and differences to the American discourse of masculinity crisis, by adapting and asking the question Robinson elsewhere proposes as a model for feminist literary criticism: why men's bodies, and why now? Why, in other words, are Australian women representing men? Why is damage such a prominent characteristic of these men's bodies? What kinds of political, theoretical, social and aesthetic consequences does this trend have? How does the fact that women are the creators of these representations of men's bodies impact on their meaning, and on the critical category of women's writing? And is the discourse of masculinity crisis transformed in its translation and translocation, or does it remain static and absolute? In other words, do the representations of these marked men function to support male power, as Robinson claims they do in her American texts, or do they challenge such recuperative strategies?⁶ Engaging with such questions enables an exploration not only of these fictions and their relationship to conceptions of gender in Australia and in the Western world, but insight into a range of contemporary trends and debates. These include the critical constructions of women's writing

web that entraps more men ... than we care to believe.' Instead of allowing women to 'go about their deceit without penalty', she argues that the 'victims' of such deceit should receive 'recompense for expenses ... incurred and for the pain and suffering ... endured'. These claims of male victimisation are accompanied by a drawing of a naked man being constrained by the thorn-covered stem of a rose as he is consumed, head first, by this flower.

- 5 In America, crises in masculinity have been identified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* [New York: Free Press, 1996] and Melissa Dabakis, 'Douglas Tilden's Mechanics Fountain: Labor and the "Crisis of Masculinity" in the 1890s,' *American Quarterly* 47.2 [1995]: 204–35), in the post-World War Two period (Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* [New York: Routledge, 1992]) and, of course, since the late 1960s (Robinson, 'Emotional', *Marked Men*, 'Men's'). For discussions of historical crises in Australian masculinity see Martin Crotty, *Making the Australian Male: Middle-Class Masculinity 1870–1920* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne UP, 2001) and Richard White, 'Inventing Australia', *Images of Australia*, ed. Gillian Whitlock and David Carter (St Lucia, Qld: U of Queensland P, 1992) 23–53.
- 6 In her 'What's Contemporary about Contemporary Women's Fiction?' Robinson identifies such questions as a way of moving beyond the more typical discussion of themes in contemporary women's fiction to pose 'larger questions of literary production and its specific historical and cultural contexts' (987) by exploring the ways in which 'women's fiction participates in the elaboration of the contemporary' (986).

and feminism, and the increasing prominence of claims of masculinity crisis in Australia. In this essay I focus on *The Architect* by Jillian Watkinson, *Last of the Sane Days* by Fiona Capp, and *Transplanted* by Sarah Myles, because they demonstrate both the similarities and the differences between the treatment and function of male damage in the American novels written by men, and those produced by Australian women.

The Architect begins with a motorcycle accident in which the protagonist Jules is severely burnt; his injuries result in him losing his right arm. The emasculation suggested by the amputation is reinforced by Jules's association of it with the loss of his identity: 'the maiming grows bigger and I grow smaller' (Watkinson 32). The suggestion of a crisis in masculinity is compounded by the novel's focus on difficulties with 'father and son stuff' (270). Jules has two damaged sons: the son he brought up, Che Lai, and his surrogate son, Marc. At first glance, the crisis Jules undergoes seems to offer positive results: through suffering he reconnects with and learns to express his emotions, heals the relationships with his sons, and gains access to an authentic masculine identity. But Jules's suffering and healing, and his emotional growth, frequently echo the recuperative strategies characterising the American texts Robinson explores. As Robinson asserts, the purported victimisation and disempowerment of white men in America is often represented through images of physical pain. In *The Architect*, Watkinson consistently emphasises Jules's suffering through repeated descriptions of the operations he endures, the skin infections that plague him, and most of all, his 'pain and fear' (217). Frequently, his pain is so extreme that it becomes a separate, personified force:

Pain flings me back. Phantom fingers are tangled in the shirt-sleeve under my sweater. The ragged ends of nerves set me alight. Hot agony becomes a throbbing; it spreads in waves of reminiscence across the scars and I am caught in that vortex where nightmares and memories are inseparable. (46)

The affective impact of representations of physical pain encourages sympathy for Jules, as do passages which demonstrate his helplessness and vulnerability. His burns are frequently associated with physical limitation and constraint. As his scars 'shrink and grow tight as they mature,' he admits that soon, 'I will not be able to lift my head to see the sky' (89).

Jules's suffering is further emphasised by passages which allow him to appropriate and exceed the pain of socially and politically marginalised others – even when he is the cause of that suffering. This is so in his relationship with Chloe, a blind woman. Her blindness symbolically disempowers her, and her subjugation is perpetuated by the fact that her love is unreciprocated. Her blindness also allows Jules to deceive her about his body: as she says, 'when one can't see, one just assumes there are two hands.' This deception re-masculinises Jules and helps him to overcome emotional trauma, but it also compounds Chloe's pain, leaving her having 'never felt so fucking blind in all my life!' (69). Regarding the lies he tells Chloe about his body, Jules muses:

Always ... I have hidden inside the layers of myself and the habit has lent such ease to the practice that I fail to recognise now the difference between the

camouflage and the nakedness, between the deception of planned half-truths and the unplanned lies that are self-deception. (70)

In conflating his lies with self-deception – arising from emotional blindness – Jules not only appropriates Chloe's subjugated position and presents his treatment of her as an unintentional response to his own pain, he centralises his own suffering while marginalising hers. By the end of the novel, this appropriation is completed when he constructs his self-deception as far more damaging and hurtful than the lies he told her: 'I used her only to deceive myself' (265).

This reading of *The Architect* – which likens the portrayal of Jules to the depiction of wounded white men in the texts Robinson discusses – is potentially challenged by the fact that Jules is not actually white. Indeed, there are frequent references to his mixed heritage: his Indo-Chinese mother, and his childhood in a Vietnamese village; his Swiss father and education in Europe; and his current habitation in and acculturation to Australia. Accordingly, when Jules first arrives in Australia, he is marked as racially and culturally different:

People stopped to look two times because I was yet very European in my mannerisms. And I think, also, because I am a big man who is too feminine. In this country big men dig ditches and play football. They are not artists. They do not have the eyes of the cat or the accent of a perfume maker. (32)

Jules, however, is able to overcome such racism by performing whiteness, as at the opening of an arts centre he has designed:

He is charming, naturally; boundlessly charismatic, and more – terrifyingly more. He talks politics from arts grants to human rights, and it's all done with the evasive but knowledgeable savoir-fair of the professional diplomat ... He keeps a private yacht ... His charm is that of perfect manners, rote-learned, and polished in greater halls than this; the charisma's a blend of self-control and confidence; and experience. He has everyone feeding from the palm of his hand ... (168)

On the one hand, Jules's performance is so consummate and, indeed, extreme, that it might be seen to bring the performativity of whiteness to the fore: to disrupt, in other words, the privileged construction of whiteness as natural and invisible. Yet such an interpretation is problematised, in turn, by the fact that his performance is so easily accomplished. He learns 'not to be too much one thing or too much the other' (32) and, in so doing, becomes 'the international person' (264), able to 'move between countries as easily as we mortals go to picnics' (74). Indeed, it is because Jules is able to assume the invisible position of the white male so perfectly that he experiences the visibility that comes with the amputation as a profound shock. Thus, the success of his whiteness becomes (merely) the premise on which the crisis of the novel, his emasculation, turns.

I would suggest that, as with his relationship with Chloe, the incongruous ease with which Jules occludes his racial and cultural heritage functions as another strategy through which suffering is insidiously related to and appropriated by his character. As a result of being marked as racially and culturally different, Jules is shown to experience the effects of racism. Thus, he is represented as being able to understand and own this form of suffering at the same time as it does not really touch him – or touches him only momentarily. In turn, and although he

somehow avoids the extreme poverty experienced by the rest of his village, he is nevertheless associated with the sufferings of the 'Montagnard people ... Not Vietnamese, not Chinese. Indigenous ... the ones who get the worst deal all round. The innocent bystanders' (260). Subsequent references to the deaths of women and children in his village as a result of napalming associate his burns with theirs, superimposing and conflating the radically different contexts of their injuries. The attribution of the sufferings of women and racial others to Jules actualises David Savran's description of the strategies of the 'white male victim' (5). According to Savran,

this slippage between sexual and racial differences is one reason why masochistic fantasy has such enormous psychic power and is able to accomplish such an extraordinary amount of cultural work. It allows the white male subject to take up the position of victim, to feminize and/or blacken himself fantasmatically, and to disavow the homosexual cathexes that are crucial to the process of (patriarchal) cultural reproduction. (33)

Whereas an analysis of Jules's suffering exposes the positionings at work in *The Architect*, an exploration of his healing, his re-empowerment and remasculinisation) highlights the homosociality of this text, and of the popular discourse of masculinity crisis which underlies and informs it.

Although the female characters help Jules to recuperate by offering him unconditional love and support, ultimately it is Marc who heals him. Marc does so by teaching Jules 'about getting in touch with his own body' (251), an approach that situates the male body as a site of authenticity, and as the basis of a self-actualised healing enabled through male bonding. Resonating with the idea that contemporary men can overcome crisis by reconnecting with each other and with their authentic or deep masculine selves, such an approach resolutely maintains the focus on individual rather than social or political suffering. The same discourse of male authenticity and bonding is evident in the way that Marc's touch helps Jules heal. Previous to their relationship, Jules restricted contact with his damaged body to functionality – 'To attend wounds ... To remove dead flesh. To roll the pus from under infected graft sites' (217). Even sex with Chloe is undertaken reluctantly – portrayed as a necessary step towards healing rather than a pleasure – and she is strictly instructed as to where she is allowed to touch him (182–83). In part, Marc's touch is able to help Jules because his body, too, is damaged: he has dealt with similar issues of understanding and ownership. Predominantly, however, Jules's healing is enabled by Marc's psychic abilities, which allow him literally to feel and hence to empathise with Jules's emotional and physical suffering. Massaging Jules's back Marc senses 'pain ... strongly coloured by anxiety ... Not sharp pain, but an ache of massive intensity' (243).

As with the attention given to Jules's mixed racial heritage, the inclusion of the mystical in an otherwise realist text is confusing unless it is understood in relation to a homosocial narrative of male pain and healing. Marc's ability to feel and heal Jules's pain represents, in an extremely idealised fantasy form, the idea that only men can connect with and appreciate the difficulties other men

face. These difficulties are once again located on and in the male body, which is constructed as an authentic site of experience and identity. Accordingly, the empathy enabled by Marc's psychic abilities signifies the development of precisely the deep and empathetic connections advocated in men's liberationist accounts of masculinity crisis. Ultimately, although *The Architect* is perhaps intended as a critical and original portrait of masculinity, the similarities between this novel and Robinson's male-authored texts are such that her words suffice to describe the treatment of male pain and healing in this contemporary Australian novel:

The assumption here is that men suffer identical, or at least identically traumatic, hurts from the patriarchal system that channels women and men into narrow forms of personal expression. If all that is threatened by patriarchy is 'self-interest', or fulfillment of individual goals, then a therapeutic solution is adequate and social revolution becomes unnecessary. ('Men's' 209)

The appearance of the trope of male crisis, fully formed, in this and other contemporary Australian novels⁷ suggests that the discourse of masculinity crisis has not greatly transformed, thereby supporting recent arguments that depictions of contemporary masculinity are increasingly globalised and homogenised.⁸ And while there are many possible reasons for this, I would suggest that the underlying appeal of the man in crisis is the same in Australia as in the United States: although suggesting transformation – and thus deflecting, and protecting masculinity from, traditional challenges or attacks – this wounded figure in fact maintains the focus of national identity on images of white men.⁹ This, in turn, allows white men to continue to be normative in understandings of citizenship, justice and truth; indeed, figured as wounded, white men are able explicitly as well as implicitly to justify their cultural pre-eminence.

7 Georgia Blain's *The Blind Eye* follows many of the same strategies as *The Architect*, presenting the damaged male protagonist in ways that privilege male suffering and subjectivity, marginalise women and present a homosocial solution to masculinity crisis. Indeed, the strangest aspect of *The Architect* – the use of psychic powers to demonstrate understanding, connection and empathy between men – finds its echo in the portrayal of homeopathy in Blain's novel, in which the most important relationship occurs between Silas, the protagonist, and his homeopath Daniel. Like Marc with Jules, Daniel is able to heal Silas's terrible, internal burning because he can literally feel Silas's physical and emotional suffering by touching him (47–48; 206).

8 R.W. Connell is one of the foremost proponents of this move towards a globalised understanding of masculinities: see 'Masculinities, Change, and Conflict in Global Society: Thinking About the Future of Men's Studies,' *Journal of Men's Studies* 11.3 (2003): 249–67; *The Men and the Boys* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2000) 45–56; 'Preface – Masculinities: The Global Dimension,' *Manning the Next Millennium*, ed. Sharyn Pearce and Vivienne Muller (Bentley: Black Swan, 2002) vii–xiv. Bob Pease and Keith Pringle discuss this trend and provide a review of recent, influential studies that adopt this approach in their 'Introduction: Studying Men's Practices and Gender Relations in a Global Context,' *A Man's World: Changing Men's Practices in a Globalized World*, ed. Bob Pease and Keith Pringle (London: Zed Books, 2001) 1–17.

9 As Robinson argues, 'Announcements of a crisis in white masculinity, and a widely evident interest in wounded white men, themselves perform the cultural work of recentring white masculinity by decentering it' (*Marked Men* 12).

However, the tropes and strategies of this discourse bring men to a place they have rarely been central before: women's writing. In Australia as elsewhere, women's writing has generally focused on women and women's experiences, a focus with strong ties to feminist politics.¹⁰ In the Australian context, various commentators have noted the desire and tendency of women writers and critics since the mid-1970s to concentrate on women's experiences and bodies in an effort to redress their traditional silencing or disparagement in patriarchal literature and history.¹¹ In turn, discussion of women in women's fiction has been a constitutive element of feminist literary studies. What does it mean, then, to conceptions of women's writing and feminist criticism for women to be writing novels in which male characters and their bodies are not only central but, as in the case of *The Architect*, the pre-eminence of their suffering and subjectivity is asserted and upheld?

Robinson suggests that the 'logic of victimization ... exercises a pull that even the most privileged seem unable to resist' (7). And although the emergence of this discourse in Australian women's fiction affirms the trans-cultural appeal of the notion, her 'even' is rendered problematic – that is to say, it seems far more understandable that 'even the most privileged' do not resist the pull of a discourse that re-asserts their cultural centrality; what does seem strange is the

10 While there are recent exceptions – exceptions that suggest both a change in fiction, and a change in criticism (see Tanis Macdonald, 'Regarding the Male Body: Rhapsodic Contradiction in Lorna Crozier's "Penis Poems"' *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 28 [2002]: 247–67 for the former; John Stout, 'Le Blason Contemporain: On Women Poets Objectifying the Male Body,' *Romance Studies* 21.1 [2003]: 53–69 for the latter) – what little discussion there is of male characters in women's writing predominantly asserts their peripheral nature. See for example Helena Eriksson, *Husbands, Lovers, and Dreamlovers: Masculinity and Female Desire in Women's Novels of the 1970s* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1997); Jane Miller; Melissa Sue Kort, "'Spectacular Spinelessness': The Men in Dorothy Arzner's Films," *Men by Women*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Holmes and Meier, 1981) 189; Mary Poovey, 'Fathers and Daughters: The Trauma of Growing Up Female,' *Men by Women*, ed. Janet Todd, 40; Rogers, 10, 22; Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: St Martin's, 1999) 135; Segal ix; Ursula K. le Guin, Foreword, *She's Fantastical: The First Anthology of Australian Women's Speculative Fiction, Magic Realism and Fantasy*, ed. Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buchrich (Melbourne: Sybylla, 1995) 8; Nainsi Jean Houston, *Ordinary Men: Men and Masculinity in Contemporary Irish Women's Writing* (Diss., U of Tulsa, 2000, Ann Arbor: UMI, 2000. AAT 9975020) 9. These commentators demonstrate that men in women's fiction function not as fully delineated characters, but as nominal figures in the heroine's world (fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, lovers) and as symbols, embodiments of choices or tests she must confront.

11 See Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, *The New Diversity: Australian Fiction, 1970–88* (Melbourne: The Book Printer, 1989) 60; Carole Ferrier, 'Introductory Commentary: Women Writers in Australia,' *Gender, Politics and Fiction: Twentieth Century Australian Women's Novels*, ed. Carole Ferrier (St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1992) 3, 21; Gillian Whitlock, 'Graftworks: Australian Women's Writing 1970–90,' *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, ed. Carole Ferrier, 236–37; Bronwen Levy, 'Constructing the Woman Writer: The Reviewing Reception of Hazzard's *The Transit of Venus*,' *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, ed. Carole Ferrier, 194, or Bruce Bennett, 'Literary Culture since Vietnam: A New Dynamic,' *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, ed. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1998) 259. Sneja Gunew asserts that the notion that 'women writers have privileged access to truth or to the confessional mode is an assumption underlying much of what gets published in recent women's writing, so much of which is cast in the first person', in her 'Migrant Women Writers: Who's on Whose Margins?' *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, ed. Carole Ferrier, 165.

appeal of such recuperative strategies to a woman writer. In *Engendering the Subject*, Robinson argues that analyses of women's texts are important because they disrupt the implicit masculinism of literary standards and production. Yet this argument not only assumes that women will be the focus of women's fictions, it functions according to a binary that at best mimics, and at worst reinforces, essentialist feminist maxims: the conception of women as positive and masculinity as negative. While there are important historical reasons for this feminist construction of gender, such a framework nevertheless functions according to a residual essentialism, one that continues to inform much feminist literary criticism.

While I cannot explain Watkinson's remarkable adherence to the conservative and recuperative discourse of masculinity crisis, it is clear that *The Architect* problematises many of the justifications for the construction of women's writing as a separate and privileged topic in feminist literary criticism. Watkinson's novel likewise undermines the paradigm that has emerged for discussing women's fictions in which male characters are central: such acts of 'cross-writing' (Schoene-Harwood) or literary 'ventriloquism' (Wallace) are seen inevitably to expose masculinity as a construct, and thus to subvert patriarchal discourse. *The Architect* highlights the inadequacy of such generalisations: although written by a woman, the text upholds and, indeed, reproduces the discourse of crisis by constructing masculinity as a site of authenticity and truth. More broadly, the treatment of male damage in *The Architect* problematises feminism's current focus on context in discussions of women's writing. A shift in attention away from the author's sex to constructions of gender and its social effects has made discussion of the influence of gendered subjectivities and embodiments on textual production central to feminist literary criticism. In this approach, women's writing is frequently identified as an important topic for feminist analysis because 'a woman writes in a context that is different from that of a man' (Giuffre 5). However, the similarity between the portrayal of wounded men in Watkinson's novel and in male-authored American texts suggests that the contexts in which these men and Watkinson understand and conceptualise gender are so similar as to be indistinguishable.

Acceptance of the discourse of masculinity crisis is remarkably widespread, and certainly this has troubling implications for the future of a feminist movement already rejected by many women. Yet in regard to the critical category of women's fiction and its relation to the field of feminist literary criticism, the contrast between the notion of a separate context for men and women – and the appearance of this discourse in women's writing – indicates a more subtle problem: it demonstrates the way in which context has been reified; how, in relying on the idea of context in order to justify a differentiation of men's and women's fictions, feminist literary critics can defer or transfer the question of a single, unified gender identity from biology to society. In this sense, the notion of context poses similar problems for discussing the differences among women as does the notion of women as a unified and stable identity. *The Architect* compounds these problems, and highlights the difficulties posed by the

framework of strategic essentialism to analyses of women's writing that criticise as well as critique: such discussions signal a disjunction in the identity of women, at the same time as they employ this construct. This paradox might be another of the reasons why feminist literary criticism focuses so much on women's fictions that are concerned with women's issues – or for that matter, on women's fictions which present men and/or masculinity in a negative light. Such narratives allow positive or affirmative readings which do not continually pose the problem of a breach – or even an absence – at the heart of feminist politics. Novels like *The Architect* foreground the difficulties of strategic essentialism for feminist literary criticism, and necessitate a consideration of what stories we are occluding in assumptions about women's writing.

Robinson argues that white men use the discourse of masculinity crisis to negotiate shifts in conceptions of masculinity to the benefit of men and in the interests of male power, and I have argued that *The Architect* does the same. In contrast, and although depicting male suffering in ways that evoke the discourse of masculinity crisis, women's fictions like *Transplanted* and *Last of the Sane Days* use male damage to imagine shifts in conceptions of gender in ways that open up a space for alternative conceptions of male corporeality, desirability and heterosexuality.

Last of the Sane Days centres on Rafael's intense abdominal pain. Like Jules, Rafael has been forced to abandon a stereotypically masculine career, in this case, as an Air Force pilot. As in *The Architect*, the theme of male suffering is elaborated in the context of father-son distance. When, at the end of the novel, father and son commit suicide – both because they feel abandoned by the women they love – this emphasises their alienation (in general and from each other) while presenting the suffering created by a loss of male roles, and distance between men, as insurmountable and devastating. *Transplanted* has four main male characters and pivots around a burglary, committed by three of these men (Ross, Ian and Kelvin) at the home of the fourth (Peter). All of the men are damaged. Ian is repeatedly brutalised by and subsequently murders his brother, Ross. Kelvin has been in a horrific truck accident in which, among other injuries, his arm was trapped under the sliding truck carriage, his 'scapula cracked and ripped at right angles, his face de-gloved' (180). Peter is suffering from severe end-stage heart failure, and there are many descriptions of his damaged and deteriorating body, as well as of the multiple operations he undergoes before he dies. The associated theme of father-son disconnection connects all these characters and, as in *The Architect*, a complex relationship between male damage and emotional distance is elaborated.¹² In both texts, crisis is evoked in the context of idealised heterosexual relationships. In *Transplanted*,

12 The two pivotal moments of brutality between Ross and Ian use their father's tools. As a child, Ross smashed Ian's thumbs with the head of their father's axe. The resentment Ian feels toward Ross is focused on this memory, and when as adults Ian murders Ross, he uses their father's crowbar. The fact that he subsequently throws this instrument 'over the cliff as if it were somehow responsible for what he'd just done' (112) reinforces this association between male violence, suffering, and the alienation of fathers and sons.

this relationship occurs between Wendy and Kelvin, who flee Ian and Ross. During their journey across the country, Wendy's touching of Kelvin's wounds, and in turn, her relationship to his vulnerable and suffering body, provide the focus of their interactions. On their first night together, 'the desire within her is to reach out and touch his face, his skin like a dry husk' (149). After Kelvin is bashed, this desire is actualised when Wendy 'reaches forward to touch his bleeding face, the cratered skin, cut and already bruised' (153). Later, in an underground pool that Kelvin shows Wendy, '[h]er hand ... moves along his scapula tracing the scar which has not been touched since the hospitalised stitching of silk into anaesthetised skin' (180).

In *Last of the Sane Days*, Rafael's relationship with Hilary is similarly described – indeed, the feminisation of Rafael's body is the condition through which he becomes beautiful and desirable to Hilary, his godmother and doctor. Hilary has long been in love with Rafael's mother Eva, who reciprocates only with friendship. Hilary's displacement of Eva's body onto Rafael's is shown from the moment she catches sight of him. Following him, it is his mother she has in mind (27), and when they talk, Hilary is excited because, if she 'looked at him quickly, there were moments when he might be Eva' (84). When Rafael later comments on the beauty of Hilary's eyes, she can only 'star[e] over his shoulder ... When she forced herself to bring him into focus, all she could see were Eva's green eyes' (132).

The way in which Hilary's gaze obscures the distinction between Rafael's body and his mother's represents a particularly explicit demonstration of fetishism. As Laura Mulvey explains, fetishism involves creating a pleasure object by aligning that thing with a sexually stimulating quality or property it does not actually possess. In Mulvey's analysis, fetishism is the form of scopophilia that allows the male spectator, looking at the woman's body on screen, to substitute the lack of a penis for the phallus (a pleasure object).¹³ Significantly, though, while Rafael's resulting feminisation in relation to Hilary resonates with notions of fetishism, it is enabled and consolidated by the firm association, within the text and in contemporary debates, of male damage and masculinity crisis with male feminisation (and female masculinisation).

However, in contrast to the popular discourse of masculinity crisis, the novels by Myles and Capp do not construct male vulnerability, visibility and feminisation as negative. Rather, these characteristics become the means by which male bodies become desirable to female characters, and through which equitable heterosexual relationships are constructed and privileged. Wendy's touching of Kelvin's damaged body is endorsed in its association with sanctity, healing and equality. Although alluded to throughout the novel, these associations are made explicit on the final night they spend together where, once again, her touch is focused on his wounds:

13 This explicitly theoretical reading is supported by the fact of Capp's interest in surveillance: see her *Writers Defiled: Security Surveillance of Australian Authors and Intellectuals 1920-1960* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1993).

'It's all right,' she says ... and now her hand gently touches his bruised face. She leans forward, her mouth brushing across his lips, and then his cheek all the time careful of his stitched lacerations, his angry skin. Her tongue glides across him, tasting the blood, the same as her own.

With her head bent towards him, Kelvin can think of nothing except this ache within him, exquisite and yet dreadful, for it seems to him that in this way it is possible to heal. To become something else.

In the candlelight their bodies move together ... She senses his body is unaccustomed to touch, wire-sinuous and taut, but silently explores the unfinished vulnerability of him. And each moment takes on the next so there seems to be no line between them, no delineation, as if it were possible to achieve a temporary sanctity. (183)

In this passage, Kelvin's vulnerability becomes a point of connection; this connection, and the healing it allows, are explicitly aligned with Wendy and Kelvin's equality: their blood is the same, their bodies move together and, in the end, there is no division. The connection enabled by his vulnerability is similarly evident when Kelvin unwraps his bandages standing at the motel room mirror. Wendy (who has a black eye from Ian)

... can see the deepening bruises on his back and along his scapula, an old scar. For some time she observes him in this way, until he looks up and she sees again the pulped side of his face. Both of them for a moment looking at each other by way of mirrors and injury. (166)

Watching each other in a mirror – an image of reflection and mutuality – Kelvin and Wendy's gazes are mediated and joined by this reflection, and by the injuries both have sustained. On their final day together, the healing produced by Wendy's touch is emphasised when she 'remove[s] the stitches from his face. Carefully' (228), revealing a healed face on which damage is still inscribed, but on which suffering is no longer pre-eminent.

In *Last of the Sane Days*, characteristic elements of the crisis similarly function not to recuperate male power, but as the premise for the construction of a reciprocal and equitable heterosexuality. As soon as Hilary makes a sexual relationship between them a possibility, Rafael offers his body to her gaze, abandoning various forms of concealment to the point where

... she did not recognise him at first. His unruly shoulder-length hair had been cut sharp around his ears and shaved close to the skull at the back, leaving him nowhere to hide. He wore a crisp, new shirt open at the neck, his Adam's apple visible beneath its taut layer of skin. Eager yet tentative, he stood before her as if offering a gift ... (103)

In this passage, male exposure and vulnerability are clearly evoked. However, instead of provoking fear and anxiety, they are figured anew: the tautness of his eager skin exposes Rafael, but promises pleasure if his gift is accepted.

Following Rafael's offering of his body, his interactions with Hilary are constituted through a series of metaphors that figure their equality and, ultimately, their equal visibility. Immediately after, he and Hilary play a game in a hotel foyer where, as 'they created more outlandish histories for the guests

who passed by, they were at the same time conjuring up a world of their own in which they were agents in enemy territory with no one but the other to trust' (105). In a stark contrast with Hilary's earlier objectification of Rafael's body, this game requires them to see together and with equal authority and agency. Descriptions of their sexual contact during the train journey they take across the French Alps are similarly transformative; lying next to Hilary,

Raf slowly uncoiled, his eyes pursuing her with disbelief ... Lifting his bruised fists to her lips, Hilary kissed every knuckle before uncurling his fingers and sucking them to the back of her throat. She put her hands on his naked chest and moved her lips over his body, tasting every part, even his tears. (113)

In contrast to the general pattern, wherein the woman's body provides the focus of the portrayal of sexual intimacy, Rafael's body is the source of desire.¹⁴ Given the association between male visibility and vulnerability as in the discourse of crisis, it is significant that Rafael's exposure is concurrent with the depiction of his body as bruised, naked and crying. Yet rather than compounding his pain, Hilary's touch, like Wendy's in *Transplanted*, alleviates Rafael's suffering: while their sexual relationship endures, Rafael 'slept so well he felt he had satisfied a terrible thirst and now not even the pain could touch him' (103). As well as alleviating his pain, Hilary's touch encourages Rafael's, which in turn produces her reciprocal exposure.

Then he was crouching on the floor, his head moving toward her open thighs. From that wolfish curve of his lips came the tender pink of his tongue. Hilary lay back clutching his head as he hungrily made up for the time he had lost.

Their world shrank to the size of a cabin, to the size of two bodies in a knotted embrace where nothing else mattered. (113)

Again presented in terms of the creation of another world, this image – and arguably, the non-penetrative nature of their contact – reinforces the emphasis on reciprocity.

At the same time, the treatment of male damage in *Last of the Sane Days* and *Transplanted* signals the presence and influence of another tradition: women's romance narratives. The plot device of male wounding prompting female care and romantic encounters is a frequently noted aspect of this genre, with an oft-cited example being the equality produced between Jane and Rochester (in *Jane Eyre*) by his blinding. Roszika Parker suggests that the emasculating impact of male wounding transcends gender divisions, and thus permits equality between male and female characters.¹⁵ Nevertheless, and in a way that resonates with

14 As Peter Brooks asserts, 'vision is typically a male prerogative, and its object of fascination the woman's body, in a cultural model so persuasive that many women novelists don't reverse its vectors,' in his *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narratives* (Harvard: Harvard UP, 1993) 88.

15 See also Pat Kirkham, 'Me Jane.' *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, ed. Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995) 11–35 and Gledhill. Discussions of Rochester's blinding in particular include those by Jane Miller (80), Robert Kendrick, 'Edward Rochester and the Margins of Masculinity in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*,' *Papers on Language and Literature* 30.3 (1994): paras 26–27; and Gail B. Griffin, 'The Humanization of

Robinson's argument, the romantic trope individualises solutions to social problems: love and care between individual men and women become the means through which liberation is figured and, as a result of which, existing social inequalities are overwritten and ignored.¹⁶

Yet just as *Last of the Sane Days* and *Transplanted* evoke but transform the discourse of masculinity crisis in their depiction of wounded white men, their use of this figure as a way of exploring heterosexual equality employs but alters the traditional romance narrative. The focus on the individual and the conflation of heterosexual relations and male healing occur concurrently with recognisable references to women's oppression in the visual and domestic spheres: *Last of the Sane Days* employs and explores feminist notions of objectification, now common in popular discussions of advertising and film; descriptions of Ian's sexual and physical abuse of Wendy in *Transplanted* evoke a narrative of domestic violence made familiar by feminist discussion and activism. A transformation of the romance plot is also evident in the ultimate failure of heterosexual love: when the journeys of the lovers end, so too do their relationships. Accordingly, the limitations of love are acknowledged in the fact that it is sufficient and sustainable only within the alternative space of the journey. It therefore functions only as an imaginary or temporary solution to a problem acknowledged as insoluble within the current gender order.

Crises in masculinity – and accompanying images of damaged men – have historically functioned as sites at which challenges to male power are negotiated and resolved.¹⁷ Such crises, however, (or at least those that have been analysed) have been proclaimed by men. Ironically, this pattern is perpetuated in most critical discussions of masculinity crisis, for although critics like Robinson have offered valuable insights, representations of masculinity crisis continue to be located in and discussed in relation to male-authored texts. In contrast, the contemporary Australian women's novels discussed here – in conjunction with the work of other women writers, artists, filmmakers and critics – demonstrate the growing entry of women into debates about men and masculinity. Moreover, although I have presented two different versions of the ways in which such discussions are unfolding, the majority of these fictions resemble *Transplanted* and *Last of the Sane Days* rather than *The Architect*. That is to say, contemporary Australian women writers are tending to use the images and

Edward Rochester,' *Men by Women*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Holmes & Meier, 1981) 128. Katharine M. Rogers describes this trope of male wounding in women's fiction of the late eighteenth century (10–11).

16 This criticism has been made by various writers, who argue that the pathos evoked by male disempowerment forestalls women's righteous and politically useful anger by fooling them into believing that men are ultimately as emotionally dependent on women – or, more specifically, on a particular woman – as women are economically, socially and emotionally dependent on men within patriarchal society (see Segal 241; J. Miller 81, 161; Lisa Hopkins, 'Mr Darcy's Body: Privileging the Female Gaze,' *Topic: A Journal of the Liberal Arts* 48 (1997): 9).

17 Abigail Solomon-Godeau's investigation of the ephebic figure in French neo-classical art in *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997) is an excellent example of such an analysis.

vocabulary of male damage to challenge rather than to reinforce white male power and privilege, and to offer new perspectives of male corporeality, subjectivity and desirability.

The emergence of such narratives has implications for exploring and elaborating the contemporary. Christine Gledhill identifies changes in conventional cultural narratives – like the discourse of masculinity crisis and the romance plot – as ‘the material of cultural struggle’ (91). In particular, she argues that, as new gender identities emerge, popular representations – while continuing to employ the traditional forms that give narratives relevance and meaning – adapt plot and character in order to sustain readers’ attention and belief. Accordingly, the way in which contemporary Australian women’s fictions employ but transform conventional discourses and plots indicates changes in conceptions of gender. Certainly, a decade ago, comparable women’s stories about men’s bodies were not – and perhaps could not be – told. This suggests not only that the language for these stories is new, but that the terms being forged for men’s bodies in recent Australian women’s fiction are recognisable by or intelligible to a wide range of readers: what can be imagined and discussed regarding masculinities and male corporeality, as well as male desirability and female desire, is expanding. And given the tendency of these authors to present versions of male damage that disable the recuperative strategies of the discourse of masculinity crisis, these fictions imply that such expansion has positive implications for feminist politics.

Although attributed to various factors, the current crisis in masculinity differs from other historical crises in one important respect: it emerges at a time when women are being enfranchised to look at men’s bodies.¹⁸ Whatever the reasons for this – most commentators suggest commerce is the most important – there are increasing opportunities for women to scrutinise, comment upon, depict and desire men’s bodies in Western society. And perhaps the reason this current crisis is so widely proclaimed and apparently threatening is because the recent visibility of men’s bodies – conterminous with the (f)act of women scrutinising men – directly assails a paradox of patriarchal society: white, heterosexual men must be both highly visible and entirely invisible for gender inequalities to continue. In turn, the emphasis on *both* men’s bodies and women looking in these fictions seems not incidental to the sense of crisis that is portrayed and interrogated. Rather, this dual focus encapsulates a distinctive characteristic of masculinity crisis in contemporary Western society, while simultaneously contributing to that crisis.

Ultimately, while *The Architect* demonstrates that women constructing men’s bodies is not inevitably or intrinsically subversive, it is also possible that,

18 David Savran argues that the contemporary crisis in masculinity is ‘produced in response to five historical events: the reemergence of the feminist movement; the loss of the Vietnam War; the limited success of the civil rights movement in effecting a redress of gross historical inequalities through affirmative action legislation; the rise of the lesbian and gay movements; and, perhaps most important, the end of the post-WWII economic boom and a resultant and steady decline in the income of white working- and lower-middle-class men’ (190–91).

because women are writing, looking and desiring with a potentially different perspective on men's bodies than male authors, masculinity crisis may have different and even positive meanings for them. Accordingly, in contemporary Australian women's fictions, the figure of the wounded man emerges as one of danger, but also of possibility. As Robinson asserts,

Paradoxically, in representing a materialized, wounded white male body as the new norm of white masculinity in the post-liberationist period, the[se] texts ... themselves evidence the impossibility of recuperating the fiction of abstract individualism and unmarkedness. (9)

In this sense, novels like *Last of the Sane Days* and *Transplanted* might in fact represent one of the 'unexpected effects' (20) of the cultural prominence of the wounded white man. This is an effect that Robinson ties to the paradoxical and contradictory consequences of male visibility, but it is one which is actualised in contemporary Australian women's fictions as a result of women writers and characters looking at wounded men.

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