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'I WILL CIVILIZE THIS LAND': SETTLER VIOLENCE AND INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY IN *THE PROPOSITION*

Stephen Morgan

"On occupying new territory the aboriginal inhabitants are treated in exactly the same way as the wild beasts or birds the settler may find there. [...] The least show of resistance is answered by a rifle bullet; in fact, the first introduction between blacks and whites is often marked by the unprovoked murder of some of the former - in order to make a commencement of the work of 'civilising' them."
- Carl Feilberg (aka 'Queenslander'), *The Way We Civilise*, 1880

Writing in 1880, the Danish-born journalist Carl Feilberg recognised the harsh realities of the Australian frontier, and the brutal treatment of the 'native' population at the hands of settlers. Although a fervent supporter of the settler colonial project, Feilberg garnered controversy in the colony of Queensland when he advocated for gentler measures amidst the brutalities. Feilberg's account was unusual. Pick up an old history book, and you'll learn of an Australia 'discovered' by Captain Cook and settled by the British in the late 18th century, a colony that became a nation via the efforts of valiant men paving the way for civilisation on the wild frontiers. Chances are that it will also frame the Indigenous inhabitants of that land as 'primitive', 'nomadic' or 'savage', and lacking the cultural sophistication and proprietary connection to land that underpins European conceptions of civilisation.

Set squarely in Feilberg's time, *The Proposition* draws on these founding myths, but undercuts them with an intense focus on the brutality of conflict on the

Australian frontier. The possession and mastery of colonial lands constituted the core of the imperial mission of idealistic soldiers like Captain Morris Stanley (Ray Winstone). Early in the film – having already asked “Australia...what fresh hell is this?” – he makes the bold proclamation: “I will civilise this place!” His method of civilisation, however, is to meet violence with violence, issuing an ultimatum to Charlie (Guy Pearce) – a member of the notorious Burns brothers gang – that is neatly summarised in the film’s tagline: “Three brothers: one must live, one must die, one must decide.”

At its core, *The Proposition* is a film about how best to ‘tame’ a harsh land. But it is also a film about the inescapable nature of settler violence, a violence that is intrinsic to cinematic conceptions of the Australian outback. The literal and metaphorical violence of Australian landscapes is an entirely colonial conception, however. The same, harsh environment, so often shown driving white settlers to the brink of insanity, or otherwise posing some form of existential threat, has been home to Aboriginal societies for at least 60,000 years. Theirs is a sovereignty never ceded, but a sovereignty that was nevertheless taken by force.

Set in the fictional town of Banyon, *The Proposition* was shot around Winton in western Queensland, on the traditional lands of the Koa people. Following a familiar pattern replicated across the continent, European settlement in the area during the 1870s occurred entirely at the expense of the Koa and other Aboriginal groups. Right across Australia, the treatment of Indigenous populations was at the whim of landowners and colonial authorities – those who weren’t displaced and driven from their country were often massacred. In depicting regimes of settler violence in the 1880s, *The Proposition* exists as a partial recreation of settler colonialism and the messy business of ‘civilising’ on the frontiers of the British Empire. Predicated on the permanent possession and exploitation of land, and the displacement (and erasure) of Indigenous communities and cultures, settler colonialism is a form of invasion that scholar Patrick Wolfe famously characterised as ‘a structure not an event’.

As a work of settler cinema, landscape plays a key role in *The Proposition*, not least as a visual representation of frontier spectacle. The prominent, flat-topped mesa hills of western Queensland rise out of the flat plains like a Monument Valley of the Antipodes. In making the film, director John Hillcoat was unequivocal in his desire to emulate that great settler genre, aiming squarely for an 'Australian take on the western'. Hollywood's settler cinema made much of Monument Valley as an iconic location, whilst overlooking its importance for the Navajo nation, and similarly layered histories can be found in the landscapes used in *The Proposition*.

Early in the film, Charlie Burns rides alongside a spectacular stratified water hole, now known as Skull Hole and located within Bladensburg National Park. A favoured picnic spot for locals and tourists alike, it is also an important ceremonial site for local Aboriginal groups. In the 1870s, however, it was the scene of a notorious massacre, in which up to 100 Koa were driven into the hole and butchered by native police. Similar massacres are hinted at within the narrative. When local magistrate Eden Fletcher (David Wenham) discovers that the killing of an Aboriginal man has led to a reprisal attack on an outpost, he tells Stanley, with barely contained menace: "If you have to kill one, make sure you bloody well kill them all." In response, Stanley despatches his men with orders to 'disperse' the Aboriginal group, but the massacre itself is largely concealed, relegated to the sound of distant gunshots, bloodied troopers, and fleeting glimpses of the massacre's aftermath.

In an otherwise brutal film, obscured depictions of violence against the local Aboriginal population might reflect the marginal status of settler violence within the wider mythology of the Australian outback. The thin veneer of civility on the frontier is most acutely evident after the massacre, when the (white) troops offer a drunken rendition of *Rule, Britannia!* Partaking in the drinking (but not in the singing) are the Black troopers, representatives of the many Aboriginal men who joined the native police and were significantly involved in frontier violence. Chief among them is Jacko, a featured role for David Gulpilil, fresh from other cinematic entanglements with settler colonial control in *The Tracker* (Rolf de Heer, 2002) and *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002).

Gulpilil's involvement is minimal, however, and other Aboriginal characters are similarly relegated to servants or sidekicks. The dynamics among the troopers is mirrored within the Burns gang, most notably in the figure of Two Bob (Tom E. Lewis). Lewis is best known for an earlier depiction of frontier violence, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi, 1978), but his character here is also reminiscent of Gulpilil's role in *Mad Dog Morgan* (Philippe Mora, 1976). Even more evocative, perhaps, is the marginalisation of Aboriginal women, here represented by Queenie, who uses traditional medicine to treat the wounds of Charlie Burns. Queenie is played by Leah Purcell, whose own recent directorial feature *The Drovers' Wife* (2021), sits alongside Warwick Thornton's *Sweet Country* (2018) as a key marker in a new generation of films – part of the so-called Blak Wave – that tell stories of frontier violence from a First Nations perspective.

Queenie also keeps camp for the Burns gang, who are hiding in the caverns created by the Rangeland Rifts, located north of Winton. The arrangement of these caverns offers a strange parody of western civilisation, with sparsely placed furniture and bookshelves affixed to walls. Indeed, the 'noble savagery' of the Burns gang, exists in a lineage of settler filmmaking – from *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906) to *The Nightingale* (Jennifer Kent, 2018) – that positions Irish immigrants as rebels against, and sometimes equal victims of, British colonial rule.

If the Burns hideout offers a contrast between savagery and civility, it finds its mirror image in the uncomfortable domesticity of Stanley and his wife, Martha (Emily Watson). Indeed, Stanley's civilising mission is most acutely reflected in the domestic setting of their isolated homestead. Its picket fences and country garden, sit in stark contrast to the charred remains of the Hopkins homestead, and the outrage that sparks the narrative. Tensions between savagery and domesticity are a familiar feature of frontier dramas – from John Ford westerns to tales of colonial Australia – but the delineation between order and chaos seems particularly acute here. That the homestead is also the site of the film's final confrontation is apt. If anyone comes out of *The Proposition* smelling of

roses, it's the English couple, the moralistic Stanley and his respectable wife. Their saviour, Charlie, is himself redeemed, but ends up beyond the domestic boundaries of the homestead.

The film's central themes of sovereignty, property and civility are woven throughout the narrative, but are also folded into the broader contexts of the film's production. In the aftermath of the Australian High Court's landmark Mabo ruling in 1992, which offered the first legal recognition of Indigenous land interests prior to colonisation, Australian cinema began to pay closer attention to the harsher realities of the nation's history. As legal relationships across the country were adjusted to fit this new paradigm, *The Proposition* was one of the first major features to be produced under Queensland's Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act (2003). This act legislated a statutory duty of care to respect, value and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, and saw the employment of Pitta Pitta traditional owner Pearl Eatts as a cultural consultant. Eatts oversaw every aspect of shooting and ensured that the production remained respectful in its treatment of cultural heritage and its use of sensitive locations such as Skull Hole.

In its critique of settler colonialism – both as a revisionist Western, and as an attempt to reveal the brutality of the Australian frontier – *The Proposition* cannot help but replicate some of the violence it seeks to depict. Indeed, settler cinemas have always helped to assert (and reassert) those connections between land, violence and power, thus helping to 'indigenize' the settler state. Despite its best efforts, the film still subscribes to what Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson refers to as the 'white possessive logic' of Australian settler culture. Nevertheless, in its on and off screen collaborations, *The Proposition* made an important contribution to the ongoing development of settler-Indigenous relations in western Queensland and beyond.

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