

# Sexual violence and colonial anxieties in Australian literature: A comparison of John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart*

ZOE A SMITH

## Abstract

The perpetration of sexual violence against both European and Indigenous women by white settlers has remained an unspeakable yet looming presence in recollections of the Australian frontier, and in representations of the frontier in Australian literature and art. Indeed, sexual violence throughout Australian history has often been intertwined with race relations and solidifying racial and gender distinctions, and consequently has reflected colonial anxieties over both masculinity and power. John Hillcoat's 2005 film *The Proposition* and Kim Scott's 1999 novel *Benang: From the Heart* both serve as works of historical fiction that draw attention to the relationship between the frontier, frontier violence, and sexual violence. Both texts investigate how the success of the fledgling Australian nation—via the achievement of a culturally and racially pure nation that served as an embodiment of British ideals and values—was heavily intertwined with colonial masculinity, hence sexual violence both endorsed and threatened said idealised success. These works depict sexual violence as an expression of colonial anxieties regarding hegemonic masculinity, with female bodies represented as a means through which to exert said masculinity via the subjugation of the female 'Other', with race subsequently playing a vital role in whether said violence is criminalised or endorsed. By engaging with contrasting notions of race and the female body, both texts render sexual violence in Australian history speakable, as it should be.

\* \* \*

Like most settler colonies and frontier environments, sexual violence has been a constant unspoken presence in Australian history. From the establishment of European presence in Australia, forced sexual relations perpetrated by white settlers have remained relatively unspeakable in recollections of the experience of the Australian frontier, regardless of the race of the subject the violence is committed against. However, scholarship has evolved over the past two decades, particularly following the history wars originating in the 1990s<sup>1</sup> and questions regarding the 'Great Australian Silence', a silence which undeniably excludes or minimises the prevalence of sexual violence perpetrated by white settlers, predominantly against Aboriginal women.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, there have been efforts by both historians and creatives—including authors and filmmakers—to reflect such a progression within their contemporary depictions of the historical experience of the frontier. This includes the work of John Hillcoat and Kim Scott, whose works *The Proposition* and *Benang: From the Heart* will be examined

---

<sup>1</sup> One seminal publication on the history wars—written by Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark and published in 2003—charts the development of the debate over the decades and how it has shaped perceptions of Australian history. Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'the Great Australian Silence' was first coined in a 1968 lecture delivered by anthropologist WEH Stanner. Stanner utilised the term to address the manner in which certain critical areas of Indigenous and non-Indigenous history—including invasion, dispossession, and massacres—had generally been ignored by Australian historians as part of a long-term structural trend, otherwise known as the 'cult of forgetfulness'. Stanner did not explicitly mention sexual violence, but it also remains an ignored critical area of Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous history. For more information on Stanner and the 'Great Australian Silence', see Andrew Gunstone, 'Reconciliation and "The Great Australian Silence"', in *The Refereed Proceedings of the 2012 Australian Political Studies Association Conference*, ed. Richard Eccleston, Nicholas Sageman and Felicity Gray (Melbourne: Australian Political Studies Association, 2012).

in this essay, as well as the works of other contemporaries such as Kate Grenville and Phillip Noyce.<sup>3</sup> This progression is also highlighted in the research of Bruce Pascoe, Henry Reynolds, and Patricia Grimshaw and Marilyn Lake: historians who have offered insights into previously unexplored aspects of Australian history or have challenged pre-existing ideals held in the historiography of the Australian frontier, such as the relationship between Indigenous people and the land they inhabit, the interactions between settlers and the Indigenous population, and the relationship between gender and Australian history.<sup>4</sup>

Sexual violence in Australian history is often intertwined with race relations and solidifying racial and gender distinctions. Consequently, sexual violence in Australian history reflects colonial anxieties over both masculinity and power. John Hillcoat's 2005 film *The Proposition* and Kim Scott's 1999 novel *Benang: From the Heart* serve as historically-set texts that draw attention to the relationship between the frontier, frontier violence, and sexual violence. Moreover, both texts explore similar ideals regarding gender, sexual violence, and colonial masculinity. Although the texts investigate these ideas in slightly different contexts—namely sexual violence towards white women in nineteenth-century frontier Queensland in *The Proposition*, and sexual violence towards Aboriginal women in Western Australia from European arrival through to the twentieth century in *Benang*—both engage with similar concerns regarding sexual violence as a reflection of colonial anxieties, yet they differ in regards to the relationship between sexual violence and ideals of white nationhood. This occurs through the different bodies upon which they conduct their study: Hillcoat, depicting the raped white colonial woman, presents sexual violence as a threat to the ideal of white nationhood, whereas Scott, utilising interracial colonial sexual violence between settlers and Indigenous women, presents sexual violence as necessary for the preservation of the white Australian nation.

The texts' varying representations of sexual violence are influenced by their differing contexts of production and reception, including their authorship. *The Proposition* is directed and written by white men, looking at sexual violence perpetrated by white settlers against white women, and therefore examines the colonial frontier experience from this perspective. The film serves to challenge received versions of Australian history by highlighting the place of sexual violence within colonial history, and thus addresses the 'Great Australian Silence' and questions of speakability within Australian history: as Catriona Elder argues, the film 'explores what has become speakable (and remains unspeakable) in the public sphere about the history of the frontier encounter'.<sup>5</sup> This was par for the course in early 2000s Australian cinema—with Rolf de Heer's 2002 film *The Tracker* and Phillip Noyce's 2002 film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as other noteworthy examples of this trend—however, by contrast, *The Proposition* is arguably limited in its depictions of the colonial frontier by primarily focusing on and prioritising the agendas and experiences of white settlers, both male and female. Thus, although the film is successful in challenging the speakability of the incidence of sexual violence on the Australian frontier, it does so through an intense interrogation of the place of whiteness within the frontier experience, which perhaps is all Hillcoat as director and Nick Cave as screenwriter felt prepared to consider, given their own ancestry and experiences as white men. Indeed, as Tanya Dalziell argues in her writings on *The Proposition*, the film chooses to respond to recent historical research—namely that of Henry Reynolds and Ann McGrath—by displacing the colonial violence between the settlers and the Indigenous populations and instead playing out said violence on white women's bodies, in order to offer an insight into white colonial anxieties and masculinities.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005) and Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) are other examples of historically-set texts that serve to illuminate unspoken or minimised aspects of the frontier experience, namely early violent and brutal interactions between settlers and the Indigenous population—which include aspects of sexual violence—and the forcible removal of Indigenous children as part of the Stolen Generations.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (Broome: Magabala Books, 2014); Henry Reynolds, *With the White People* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Books, 1990); Patricia Grimshaw et al., *Creating a Nation: 1788-1900*, (Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Catriona Elder, 'The Proposition: Imaging Race, Family and Violence on the Nineteenth-Century Australian Frontier', *Ilha do Desterro* 69, no. 2 (June 2016): 165, doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2016v69n2p165.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Dalziell, 'Gunpowder and Gardens: Reading Women in *The Proposition*', *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2009): 127, doi.org/10.1386/sac.3.1.121\_1.

Certainly, sexual violence against white women is a major aspect driving the plot of *The Proposition*. The film, serving as an Australian ‘Western’, follows the efforts of Captain Stanley, a British settler desperate to tame the Australian outback he was forced to reside upon, as he attempts to seek justice for the murder of the Hopkins family and the horrific rape of Eliza Hopkins prior to her death. The narrative also includes Stanley’s complex relationship with his wife, Martha, who longs for the comfort and safety of England—and thus attempts to replicate her homeland in the untamed frontier landscape—and who was friends with Eliza.

The titular proposition refers to the deal offered to outlaw Charlie Burns by Stanley: he must kill his older brother Arthur, who committed the crimes against the Hopkins family, to save the life of his younger brother. The violent actions taken by Arthur and his accomplice Samuel are revealed to have no overwhelming motivation regarding the violation of white women’s bodies, other than the establishment of power and dominance, adding to the horror of the crime. Yet sexual violence is a vital and indivisible aspect of the film; indeed, as highlighted by Dalziell, ‘women’s bodies, or the violation of white women’s bodies to be exact, are called upon as both the motivation and means of resolving the proposition propelling the film’.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the film could not fulfil its agenda as a historically-based text attempting to address previously unspeakable aspects of Australian history without presenting the violation of white women’s bodies.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, the sexual violence in *Benang* does not serve to drive the plot of the novel; instead, it supplements and further highlights the violence faced by the Nyoongar people under white settlement, and the notions of colonial masculinity and anxiety that are reinforced through such violence. *Benang* follows Harley, a young Indigenous man who has undergone the process of ‘breeding out the colour’ at the hands of his European grandfather, Ernest (Ern) Solomon Scat, who attempts to create the ‘first white man born’. Indeed, the focus on the ‘breeding out the colour’ process of assimilation is a major aspect of the novel, as it serves to legitimise Ern’s and other settlers’ treatment and rape of Indigenous Nyoongar women, particularly Ern’s two wives, Kathleen and Topsy. Harley recounts the history of his family of Nyoongar people throughout the period of European settlement, uncovering the various injustices and violence they suffered and detailing the specific histories of members of his family, starting with Sandy One and Fanny, his respectively white and Nyoongar great-great-grandparents, and continuing through his deliberately confusing bloodline to brother and sister Jack and Kathleen, and then himself. Kim Scott is a Nyoongar man himself, and has stated in the preface how the novel was inspired by research into his own family’s history. In this regard, Scott’s status as an Indigenous man—and his perspective in recounting and adding to previously unspeakable areas of Australian history—is certainly to be considered when analysing *Benang*, particularly when investigating the relationship in the text between race and sexual violence. Thus, the differing authorship of *The Proposition* and *Benang* result in two contrasting commentaries on colonial anxieties, with the authors’ backgrounds allowing them to highlight how the motivations and degree of criminalisation of sexual violence against women differ based on the race of the women raped.

Whether these racial differences are deliberate, especially when the differing heritage of the creators is considered, is questionable, but it is undeniable that both creators identify separate aspects of the colonial frontier experience to be foregrounded when sexual violence is considered as an expression of colonial anxieties. Indeed, the fact that the sexual violence is perpetrated against white women in *The Proposition* and Indigenous women in *Benang* reveals contrasting motivations for the perpetrators, who in both texts are white males. Hillcoat, through his depiction of the raped white colonial woman, presents sexual violence as a threat to the ideal of white nationhood, whereas Scott, by detailing the rape of Indigenous women at the hands of white settlers, presents sexual violence as necessary for the preservation of the white Australian nation.

However, the two texts—when compared, contrasted, and paired together—provide a relatively holistic and thorough understanding and depiction of the relationship between sexual violence and colonial anxieties in their reimaginings of Australian history. In particular, they address the motivations and

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 122.

consequences of frontier sexual violence and consider how race is vital to understanding how the 'crime' of sexual violence is framed in regards to the consequences for the victim, the perpetrator, and the nation. Indeed, *The Proposition* reveals how sexual violence is framed in terms of a violation of the white British ideal of Australia, which is embodied in the white female, and hence the violence is undeniably considered a crime that challenges the very values and ideals of the new white nation. In contrast, *Benang* details how sexual violence against Indigenous women is framed in terms of colonial domination, and is presented as *necessary* for the survival of the white ideal of the Australian nation. Thus, the texts offer narrative-based insights into the growing academic and cultural conversations regarding the speakable and visible place of sexual violence within Australian frontier and colonial history.

The process of colonisation has always been gendered, thus leading to the expression of colonial anxieties regarding masculinity via the violation or forced submission of the inferior and threatening 'Other' (be they a woman or Indigenous), often through sexual violence. From the outset, the realms of colonisation, imperialism, and the establishment of new societies was deemed a man's world, a conception which 'guaranteed that masculinity was always important'.<sup>9</sup> The assertion of this masculinity through sexual domination of the 'Other' thus became a 'critical feature of the experience of the colonised', in order to assert a masculinity constantly under threat.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, through sexually expressing their dominance over the submissive female, the male settler endorses the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which John Tosh describes as 'expressions of masculinity ... which serve most effectively to sustain men's power over women in society as a whole', legitimising men's dominant position in society through the subordination of women.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the success of the fledging Australian nation, namely via the achievement of culturally and racially pure nationhood that served as an embodiment of British ideals and values, was heavily intertwined with colonial masculinity. Subsequently, any threat to this success, such as the rape of the white woman who embodied this future due to her reproductive capabilities, therefore meant that sexual violence in frontier Australia both sustained and challenged colonial hegemonic masculinity.

Within this context, race relations were heavily intertwined with sexual violence on the Australian frontier, and influenced the manner in which settlers viewed the Indigenous population, particularly Aboriginal women. Certainly, as eminent historian Henry Reynolds contends, 'Aboriginal women were preyed on by any and every white man whose whim it was to have a piece of "black velvet" wherever and whenever they pleased'.<sup>12</sup> As historically-based texts, both *The Proposition* and *Benang* draw attention to what was arguably a critically influential part of the Australian colonial and frontier experience, one that has subsequently been overlooked in the popular consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

The intertwining of race with sexual violence is particularly notable in *The Proposition*, for the crime of sexual violence is considered actually criminal when inflicted upon the bodies of women deemed citizens, namely white women. Moreover, *The Proposition* explores the manner in which sexual violence and colonial masculine anxieties are interlaced. Marise Williams argues that these colonial anxieties are not only centred around masculinity but also femininity:

moments of female disturbance such as [the rapes] allow for the exposure of the racial truth of the colonial project as a gendered narrative of whiteness: white male identity and superiority founded on sacred white womanhood.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 162, doi.org/10.4324/9781315833101.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>11</sup> John Tosh, 'What Should Historians do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, no. 38 (1994): 192, doi.org/10.1093/hwj/38.1.179.

<sup>12</sup> Reynolds, *With the White People*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Whether this overlooking is deliberate or not is a pressing question which, unfortunately, this essay does not have the scope to explore.

<sup>14</sup> Marise Williams, 'The White Woman's Burden: Whiteness and the Neo-Colonialist Historical Imagination in *The Proposition*', *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 3, no. 3 (2009): 271, doi.org/10.1386/sac.3.3.265\_1.

Certainly, women in the frontier society of *The Proposition* serve as embodiments of the future of the nation; a culturally and racially pure Australia that will be ‘civilised’, as Arthur Stanley puts it, and tamed into replicating England.

This subsequently lends greater importance and horror to the fate of Eliza Hopkins, who was raped and murdered ‘with a baby in her belly’. As Duncanson details, ‘the threat posed to the settler community is [therefore] configured as jeopardizing the nation’s future through the specificity of the sexual violence against a woman bearing an unborn child’.<sup>15</sup> This is apparent in the scene in which Charlie is roaming the desecrated and silent Hopkins homestead, and reveals the untouched nursery, which poses a stark comparison to the destruction and nature of the crimes committed on the property. Although the preservation of the nursery may argue that the dream of a culturally and racially pure Australia (as noted by the sheer whiteness of the crib) is able to survive such brutality, the opposite is also plausible. The crib is empty, surrounded by silence, and is the only thing left unscathed after not only a brutal crime, but a crime against both the mother and the child. As such, Eliza’s rape and murder—and the preservation of the nursery juxtaposed against the surrounding destruction—reflect the failure of the idealised perception of the Australian future. In this regard, sexual violence towards white women in *The Proposition* serves as a means to convey colonial anxieties regarding the survival and success of the Australian nation, and thus colonial masculinity.

The Stanleys embody this colonial anxiety regarding the attempts to establish an English-centred nationhood in Australia: as Elder notes, ‘their house is a “little England” ... [that] has potential to be the (national) future’.<sup>16</sup> Yet there are suggestions throughout the film that this Australian future may not be achieved, despite Morris Stanley’s persistent and increasingly exasperated declarations that he will ‘civilise this country’. Martha is unable to have children, as revealed through her dreams of being handed a baby by the deceased Eliza, and her wistful perusal of children’s clothing catalogues. Furthermore, Eliza, who in comparison to the barren Martha serves as the poster child for the reproductive capabilities of the fledgling nation, has been brutalised and murdered.

These suggestions are actualised in the final scenes of the film, whereupon the ransacking of the Stanley homestead, the destruction of Martha’s garden, and Martha’s close encounter with sexual violence reveal how the envisioned national future may not be achieved. As Williams argues:

the mise-en-scène of the Stanley homestead reveals what is really at stake ... the sanctity of a cultural and racial logic of whiteness embodied and reproduced by good white womanhood.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the penultimate scene in the Stanley homestead reveals how the envisioned national future is threatened, in part, by a similar act of sexual violence that mirrors the violence that catalysed the action of the film. The visual that Charlie walks into, and that is presented to the audience through a point-of-view camera shot, shows Morris lying on the ground, castrated, with the bloodied and destroyed Union Jack flag next to him, with Martha’s plaintive wailing as Samuel attempts to rape her the only sound audible. Within this, the failure of the envisioned national future is apparent; Morris’s castration, in conjunction with Martha’s already apparent infertility and her abused body, ensures that reproduction is no longer viable, hence the attempts to successfully civilise and colonise the frontier have failed. This is further emphasised by the tattered Union Jack and the destroyed garden, which convey the futile and failed attempts to assert an English-centred nationhood. The Stanley homestead, much like the Hopkins homestead, is transformed from a hopeful representation of a potential future for the nation to a site whereupon the very future of the nation is threatened by the brutal invasion of a white woman’s body.

The prevalence and utilisation of sexual violence in *The Proposition* reveals how the Australia frontier ultimately cannot be civilised in attempts to create an English-centred nationhood, particularly via the undermining of the reproductive capacities of white women. This has wide-reaching consequences for colonial masculinity, for which sexual violence was usually utilised to endorse masculinity, rather than undermine its colonial goals and anxieties. Ultimately, sexual violence is utilised through in *The*

---

<sup>15</sup> Kirsty Duncanson, “‘Native’ Landscapes, “Cultivated” Gardens and the Erasure of Indigenous Sovereignty in Two Recent Instances of Australian Cinematic Jurisprudence’, *Law Culture and the Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2012): 11, doi.org/10.1177/1743872111432426.

<sup>16</sup> Elder, ‘*The Proposition*: Imaging Race, Family and Violence’, 170.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, ‘The white woman’s burden’, 265.

*Proposition* to both embody and challenge colonial masculinity; by asserting dominance over the female 'Other', hegemonic masculinity is endorsed. However, with rape threatening the white woman and her reproductive capabilities, colonial masculinity via the establishment of the nation is challenged.

In contrast, colonial masculinity is constantly endorsed via sexual violence in *Benang*. Indeed, the main difference between representations of sexual violence in *The Proposition* and *Benang* reveals the manner in which race shapes attitudes towards sexual violence. The majority of the sexual violence committed in *Benang* is committed against Aboriginal Nyoongar women, which subsequently leads to markedly different responses and attitudes due to their race.<sup>18</sup> If either Eliza Hopkins or Martha Stanley had been Aboriginal, the reactions to and motivations for their rape would have been substantially different. Rape is deemed a crime in *The Proposition*, arguably the worst crime that can be committed in such a society, whereas in *Benang*, it is either an unacknowledged, un-criminalised consequence of the wider, also unacknowledged crime of mass murder, or merely taken as a granted aspect of colonisation. Certainly, the position of Aboriginal women in frontier Australia renders them the lesser and subjugated 'Other', upon whom hegemonic and colonial masculinity can be bolstered via sexual domination and violence.

Sexual violence against Aboriginal women lies at the heart of *Benang*. Not only are their bodies utilised as a vessel in which white males assert their colonial power, but their bodies and wombs become laboratories for AO Neville and Ernest Scat's social experiments. Sexual violence and Australian history have always been intertwined, with rape comprising a predominant aspect of relations and contact between the Indigenous population and the settlers. Certainly, as noted by Grimshaw, Lake et al., upon arrival in Australia 'British men immediately wanted land and resources and Aboriginal women',<sup>19</sup> therefore 'consent was rarely an issue; if Aborigines resisted sexual demands, white men still raped the women anyway'.<sup>20</sup> This manner of thinking is utilised by Scat in *Benang* to justify the sexual violence perpetrated towards Aboriginal women; indeed, he—alongside other white males in the novel—engages with the 'colonial ideology [that] tarnished Aboriginal women as universal whores' and stereotyped them as prostitutes, thereby rendering them readily available to said males.<sup>21</sup>

These ideals are revealed in passages such as the arrest of Ah Ling, an 'idle Chinaman' who is arrested for camping among the Aboriginal women at Sandy's homestead, and the subsequent ambiguous sexual relations between Sandy's employers and the Aboriginal women at the camp: 'the policemen felt it would be wrong to deny the women their primitive, but nonetheless gratifying, expressions of gratitude'.<sup>22</sup> As Nadine Attewell sufficiently describes, this sentence shifts into 'free indirect discourse that conceals at best sexual exploitation, at worst rape'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, these attitudes are depicted as prevalent throughout Australian history, something which *Benang*, as a historically-based novel, attempts to reinsert back into the history of the nation. With a focus that shifts between Sandy One's mother being the product of rape, to the entanglement of rape after the massacre of Indigenous groups, through to Ern's exploits, *Benang* details how sexual violence towards Aboriginal women—as a means to obtain power and bolster masculinity—is a continual and substantial feature of Australian history.

The attitude Ern reflects towards women and colonial masculinity is apparent even before he arrives in Australia: in South Africa, he 'discover[s] young and coloured women'.<sup>24</sup> Another settler outpost of the British Empire, it is in South Africa that Ern's masculinity is linked to his sexual exploitation of women to serve in place of the masculine colonisation of land. If he cannot make his mark as a pioneer in the

---

<sup>18</sup> Not all of the sexual violence committed in *Benang* is committed against Aboriginal women. Indeed, Ern's sexual assault of his grandson is an important part of the novel. Although this assault is also committed under the guise of Ern's eugenicist policies, this essay is concerned with how women's bodies in particular, due to their reproductive and childbearing capacities, are utilised to express colonial anxieties regarding hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, Harley's sexual assault—although it is certainly significant—remains outside the scope and discussion of this essay.

<sup>19</sup> Grimshaw et al., *Creating a Nation*, 131.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>22</sup> Kim Scott, *Benang: From the Heart* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 1999), 233.

<sup>23</sup> Nadine Attewell, 'Reading Closely: Writing (and) Family History in Kim Scott's *Benang*', *Postcolonial Text* 7, no. 2 (2012): 14.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 44.

colony, then women's bodies become the next best option for him to conquer and possess. Indeed, like the land they inhabit, Aboriginal women were 'considered there for the taking, they were the property of all white men, undeserving of protection or respect'.<sup>25</sup> This is particularly true for Ern, who arrives 'a little too late to be a pioneer'<sup>26</sup> but, via his eugenicist ideals and exploitation of Nyoongar women for such purposes, 'could still play a role in taming a people into submission',<sup>27</sup> thereby asserting his masculinity. Consequently, sexual violence and the expression of colonial hegemonic masculinity are depicted as a necessary part of colonisation, via the likening of the bodies of Aboriginal women to the land they are dispossessed from.

Indeed, Ern's first experience with the Aboriginal camps is a memory overwhelmed by sexual violence. As he remembers 'the first night. The dirt on his bare knees, and how she turned her head away as her body took his thrusts', he cannot reminisce without becoming aroused or blushing.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it is made increasingly obvious throughout the novel that the sexual violence perpetrated by Ern and other settlers is about colonial masculinity and the manner in which said masculinity is reinforced by the establishment of power dynamics and control of the subjugated 'Other', who is represented by the Nyoongar women. This is expressed by Harley when he questions Ern's motives regarding marrying Kathleen, which he establishes are determined 'because of the power it would give him over her ... [and] because his brief experiences in *native camps* had excited him, and Kathleen promised similar excitement—with the added attraction of greater control of personal hygiene'.<sup>29</sup> Ern's attitude towards and treatment of his Nyoongar wives reveal how sexual violence and domination play key roles in his eugenicist policy which drives the novel.

Certainly, under Ern's eugenicist ideals, both Kathleen and Topsy serve one function: to act as 'body machines, to serve as incubators and storehouses of the foetus',<sup>30</sup> as Lisa Slater aptly describes. As a result, both are raped by their husband until pregnant, as part of his eugenicist experiments in 'breeding out the colour'; indeed, in the case of Topsy, she is described not as a human, but a '*species*'.<sup>31</sup> Thus, they truly serve one function, to act as a laboratory upon which Scat's experiments in bolstering his colonial masculinity are enacted. His treatment of them after they 'fail'—in either not being white enough, or not birthing children who are legally white—reveals their status as a laboratory; in the case of Kathleen, she is discarded in favour of Topsy, who is considered more suitable, whereas Topsy is forcibly whitened, a process which ultimately kills her. Ern attempts the extreme experiment of bleaching Topsy in order to render her more suitable as his white wife. As Slater argues, 'she is no longer useful to him as a resource to bear him a "white" son; instead, now, the only thing she means to him is that he has a black wife, when a white wife signifies respectability'.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Scott's *Benang* explores the relationship between colonial hegemonic masculinity—bolstered not only by the acquisition of land, but the possession of women's bodies—and sexual violence as the act of colonising the Aboriginal female body.

Overall, both John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* serve as historically-set texts that attempt to reinsert sexual violence back into accounts and dramatisations of the Australian colonial and frontier experience. These works depict sexual violence as an expression of colonial anxieties regarding hegemonic masculinity, with female bodies represented as vessels through which to exert said masculinity via the subjugation of the female 'Other'. However, the criminalisation and consequences of said violence differ drastically between the texts due to the influence of race relations, and these race relations subsequently shape the manner in which sexual violence is or is not justified in these texts. White women's bodies in *The Proposition* are highly valued, due to their capacity to carry the nation's future, whereas the bodies of the Nyoongar women in *Benang* are merely

---

<sup>25</sup> Grimshaw et al., *Creating a Nation*, 148.

<sup>26</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 98. Italics author's own.

<sup>30</sup> Lisa Slater, 'Kim Scott's *Benang*: Monstrous (Textual) Bodies', in *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature* 65, no. 1 (2005): 64.

<sup>31</sup> Scott, *Benang*, 133. Italics author's own.

<sup>32</sup> Slater, 'Monstrous Bodies', 65.

reduced to serving as laboratories for the social experiments of white men. It is worth noting that this examination of women's bodies is one from the perspective of male creatives, and although they are successful in addressing the 'Great Australian Silence' regarding sexual violence and its place in the history of Australia and the frontier experience, texts by women—particularly Indigenous women—can offer further insights and perspectives into the relationship between sexual violence and Australian history. Yet Hillcoat and Scott both succeed in challenging the silence regarding historical sexual violence in Australia, and thus offer a foundation for further discussion and research from a myriad of different perspectives. Ultimately, both texts do work to explore the intertwining of masculinity, colonial anxieties, and sexual violence on the Australian frontier, and render sexual violence in Australian history speakable, as it should be.

## Bibliography

### Source texts and other historically-set works

- de Heer, Rolf, dir. *The Tracker*. Umbrella Entertainment, 2002. Film.
- Grenville, Kate. *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2005.
- Hillcoat, John, dir. *The Proposition*. First Look Pictures, 2005. Film.
- Noyce, Phillip, dir. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Rumbalara Films and Showtime Australia, 2002. Film.
- Scott, Kim. *Benang: From the Heart*. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 1999.

### Secondary scholarship

- Attewell, Nadine. 'Reading Closely: Writing (and) Family History in Kim Scott's *Benang*'. *Postcolonial Text* 7, no. 2 (2012): 1–25.
- Dalziell, Tanya. 'Gunpowder and Gardens: Reading Women in *The Proposition*'. *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2009): 121–131. doi.org/10.1386/sac.3.1.121\_1.
- Duncanson, Kirsty. "'Native" Landscapes, "Cultivated" Gardens and the Erasure of Indigenous Sovereignty in Two Recent Instances of Australian Cinematic Jurisprudence'. *Law Culture and the Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2012): 237–256. doi.org/10.1177/1743872111432426.
- Elder, Catriona. '*The Proposition*: Imaging Race, Family and Violence on the Nineteenth-Century Australian Frontier'. *Ilha do Desterro* 69, no. 2 (June 2016): 165–176. doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2016v69n2p165.
- Grimshaw, Patricia, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, and Marian Quartly. *Creating a Nation: 1788–1900*. Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble, 1994.
- Gunstone, Andrew. 'Reconciliation and "The Great Australian Silence"'. In *The Refereed Proceedings of the 2012 Australian Political Studies Association Conference*, edited by Richard Eccleston, Nicholas Sageman and Felicity Gray, 1–17. Melbourne: Australian Political Studies Association, 2012.
- Levine, Phillipa. *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset*. New York: Routledge, 2013. doi.org/10.4324/9781315833101.
- MacIntyre, Stuart and Anna Clark. *The History Wars*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003.
- Pascoe, Bruce. *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* Broome: Magabala Books, 2014.
- Reynolds, Henry. *With the White People*. Ringwood, Vic: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Slater, Lisa. 'Kim Scott's *Benang*: Monstrous (Textual) Bodies'. *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature* 65, no. 1 (2005): 63–73.
- Tosh, John. 'What Should Historians do with Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain'. *History Workshop Journal* 38, no. 1 (1994): 179–202. doi.org/10.1093/hwj/38.1.179.
- Williams, Marise. 'The White Woman's Burden: Whiteness and the Neo-Colonialist Historical Imagination in *The Proposition*'. *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 3, no. 3 (2009): 265–278. doi.org/10.1386/sac.3.3.265\_1.