

Romanticizing Colonialism: Power and Pleasure in Jane Campion's The Piano

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When writer-director Jane Campion's film sensation, *The Piano*, won the 1993 Palme d'Or at Cannes, she became the first woman director ever to have won that award for a full-length film. In a movie world sadly bereft of internationally acclaimed female directors, Campion's work has deservedly attracted a committed following of film critics and moviegoers alike. As a major production written and directed by her, and with one of the strongest female protagonists seen in years, *The Piano* occasioned intense excitement among critics and drew sizable audiences across the country when released in the United States.¹ *The Piano* is a remarkable movie—haunting, beautifully photographed, and, as the jacket of the published screenplay noted, “utterly compelling . . . a tale of visionary eroticism filled with imagery you’ll never forget” (Campion 1993). Campion elicited extraordinary performances from her actors. Holly Hunter deservedly won Best Actress at the 1994 Academy Awards for her portrayal of Ada McGrath Stewart, a mute nineteenth-century Scotswoman sent to New Zealand to marry a man she’s never met. Anna Paquin, as Ada’s young daughter, Flora, was the surprise winner of the Academy’s Best Supporting Actress Award. Playing against New Zealand’s spectacular forests and shoreline, the film’s principal male actors also rendered uncommonly strong performances—Sam Neill as Ada’s possessive husband, Alisdair Stewart, and Harvey Keitel as the crude but passionate colonist with whom Ada becomes sexually involved, George Baines.

Campion’s emotionally charged narrative of ruthless desire and violent jealousy is stunning, in part because her story is extraordinary, in even greater measure because of the fascinating emotional power of the film’s striking images. *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby described the

film as “a severely beautiful, mysterious movie that, as if by magic, liberates the romantic imagination” (1993). Film critic Stella Bruzzi celebrated the film as a brilliant depiction of a woman’s “sexual and emotional awakening” (1993, 6). And Jane Campion herself claimed that the film was a way for her to explore “the romantic impulse.” In the epigraph to her screenplay, she wrote, “It’s a heroic path and it generally ends dangerously. . . . I believe it’s a path of great courage. It can also be the path of the foolhardy and the compulsive” (1993). In the notes to the screenplay, she declared the link between romance and “the pure sexual erotic impulse” to be primarily, “a relationship of power,” and admitted, “I’m very very interested in the brutal innocence of that” (Campion 1993, 7, 139).

Yet for all its beauty and power, *The Piano* is much more than just one woman’s vision of a classic nineteenth-century European romance, a potentially tragic love triangle transported to a far outpost of the empire. The film contains graphic, highly eroticized scenes of sexual and physical violence against its main female character, including coerced sex, attempted rape, and brutal dismemberment. More subtly, but for that reason more significantly, the film’s sexual symbolism relies heavily on profoundly racist depictions of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, and on culturally coded, deeply racialized representations of their land. Race and sex are not ideologically separate categories in this film. Along with evocative class-specific social markers, the relationships between them serve to establish relationships between the film’s white characters. They function constantly to reconstruct and represent one another metonymically as well as metaphorically, through the systematic association of female and male desire with categories of racial difference. Campion’s intense, emotionally riveting images employ a specific sexual and racial graphic coding, a multilayered technology of knowledge production that Native American critic Laura Donaldson has in other circumstances termed colonial “graph(t)ology” (Donaldson 1992, 56). Campion’s twentieth-century story of liberating passion both relies on and reproduces nineteenth-century western colonial mythologies of sex and race, the fundamental “relationships of power” from which she has fashioned her spellbinding vision of desire.

This article explores how *The Piano* succeeds in transposing nineteenth-century sex-and-race-bound colonial structures of meaning onto a twentieth-century colonialist narrative of romance, and examines the

underlying political implications of that transposition. I use the word *colonialist* here to distinguish twentieth-century western global hegemony from its nineteenth-century "colonial" predecessor. In arguing that the film is "colonialist," I analyze the ways that, through its processes of creating knowledge, it both emerges from and engages in the earlier system's ideological project of sustaining white, western, male-dominant global economic and political superiority. The operations of the nineteenth century's dominant colonial discourses are strikingly embedded in *The Piano*'s twentieth-century colonialist symbolic system; "embedded" here is meant to suggest qualities both of being hidden and formative of internal structures. Functioning as a precise technology of meaning production, these embedded discourses reconstitute the colonial past the film seeks to symbolically represent in ways that position that past obliquely, to both the film's twentieth-century audiences and their nations' supposedly "postcolonial" dominance.

Sited both in and outside the movie theater, that oblique positionality is instrumental in sustaining ongoing global constructions of white, western political authority, and, as cultural critic Susan Jeffords suggested, is both interactive with and conducive to the larger multinational global remappings of late capitalism (pers comm 1994; 1989). Thus, the film imagines, and creates, a viewing subject positioned directly at the center of its act of constructing history, a viewer who is also constructed by the film as the exclusively white western subject of a colonialist present. Building on the work of feminist film critic Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis has argued that such a viewing subject position also dominantly constructs maleness, because it is both sited at and sights through the cultural conventions by which the camera's cinematic eye produces and reproduces the "male gaze" of voyeuristic patriarchy (de Lauretis 1987, 99).

Like all cultural productions that use strategies of representation to produce knowledge—that is, all cultural productions—*The Piano* is inherently engaged in a politics of the relations of power. Readers familiar with Campion's self-avowed detachment from politics may find my approach unwarranted. After all, she has specifically cautioned that she is "averse to teaching messages." "I think it's quite clear," Campion has claimed, "that my orientation isn't political or doesn't come out of modern politics" (Cantwell 1993, 44). However, despite her avowal that *The Piano* is merely an apolitical romance, through both its "visible" narrative plot and the "invisible" film vocabulary of mise-en-scène, camera

angle, shot, and editing technique, it reproduces some of the oldest patriarchal fantasies about women's sexual desire around. It does so by encoding its sexist ideology in systematically racist and class-specific cinematographic practices that reconstruct nineteenth-century colonized New Zealand as a backdrop for the reproduction of the race, sex, and class hierarchies of the contemporary western system. Campion's attempt to mask her film's underlying significating formalism in a narrative of romantic passion set in an ahistorical fantasy world has barely disguised her covert project of authorizing a gendered, racialized, and distinctly contemporary colonialism. The film could hardly *be* more political.

THE FILM

A brief narrative synopsis of the film is in order here. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ada McGrath, whose will is "strange and strong" (Campion 1993, 115) enough to self-impose life-long muteness, is sent to New Zealand to enter an arranged marriage with a Scots male colonist, Alisdair Stewart. She takes along her apparently illegitimate young daughter, Flora, with whom she shares a language of hand signals, and her piano, through which she vividly expresses her emotions. Not understanding its importance, her husband-to-be refuses to transport the piano to her new home in the interior, leaving it on the deserted beach where Ada has landed. Difficult from this inauspicious start, their relationship remains strained. Stewart's compatriot, George Baines, who has become integrated enough into native Māori society to sport facial *moko* 'tattoos,' becomes interested in Ada. He trades Stewart 80 acres of land for the piano and the promise of lessons from Ada, a bargain with which Stewart forces her to comply. During the earliest of those lessons, however, Baines offers Ada a different trade—she can earn back her piano, one key at a time, in exchange for sexual favors. Soul-sick, desperately lonely, and effectively silenced without her music, Ada agrees. Thus begins a long, tortuous relationship in which Baines becomes increasingly obsessive and demanding while Ada adamantly resists his passionate emotions, if not his lustful and occasionally violent physical demands.

Meanwhile, forced to remain outside during the lessons, Flora becomes alienated from her mother. During a sulky outburst, she tells Stewart that Baines never plays the piano during the lessons. Eventually, believing that Ada does not and never will care for him, Baines gives Ada back her piano. Suspicious, Stewart follows Ada to Baines' cabin, where Baines

declares his love for her and she, through the intensity of look and gesture, reveals her passion for him. They make love while, unbeknown to them, Stewart watches through cracks in the cabin walls and floor. The next day, Stewart again follows Ada, but this time he intercepts her in the bush and attempts to rape her. Interrupted by Flora, he boards up both wife and daughter inside his cabin. In the ensuing days and nights, Ada begins acting strangely. She plays the piano in her sleep and becomes deeply absorbed in her own reflection in a hand mirror. Ultimately, she initiates sensuous, erotic nightly episodes with Stewart which she silently and utterly controls. He finally unboards the cabin, Ada promises not to see Baines again, and Stewart leaves to continue fencing his land.

But Ada cannot keep her promise. She removes a key from her cherished piano and inscribes it with a message of enduring devotion for her illicit (and unfortunately illiterate) lover. She orders Flora to take the key to Baines, but the child, in a fit of willfulness as strong as her mother's, delivers it instead to Stewart. Enraged, he returns and, in front of Flora, chops off one of Ada's fingers. He forces Flora to take the bloody appendage to Baines with the message that he'll cut off another if Baines attempts to see Ada again. As Ada lies feverish and delirious, her mangled hand wrapped in dirty bandages, Stewart caresses her and once again attempts to have sex with her. Ada awakens, and a curious, nonverbal communication occurs between them. Forced by Ada's silent will, Stewart agrees to give Ada and Flora to Baines, and the three of them, along with the piano, are taken away in a Māori canoe.

During the trip, Ada demands that the piano be pushed overboard. As it goes down, she deliberately slips her foot into the ropes that had lashed it to the canoe and is pulled into the ocean, saving herself from drowning only at the last moment by kicking off her boot and struggling to the surface. She and Baines set up house in the town of Nelson, where he makes her a replacement metal fingertip and she begins to learn to speak. In an odd and, for some viewers, uncomfortable twist, the final scene of the movie shows Ada dreaming of herself drowning again, tied to her piano in a "cold grave, under the deep, deep sea."

SILENT MEANINGS, MEANINGS SILENCED

The exact location and specific time period in which the action occurs remain vague. It is unclear, for example, whether the story takes place before or after the 1840 signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, or before, dur-

ing, or after the Anglo-Māori land wars of the 1860s. Most of the film's action takes place in an equally indeterminate location somewhere in the New Zealand bush, which Campion's screenplay variously describes as an "enchanted, complex, even frightening," place and a "dark, inner world" of "almost prehistoric [sic] density" (Campion 1993, 139, 142). Although Campion celebrates the film's "[c]ross cultural collaboration"—exemplified by the large Māori cast, many of whom wear traditional tribal *moko*—the specific tribal identities of the Māori characters they play remain as poorly differentiated as the story's historical and locational contexts. Almost without exception, these characters remain unnamed in the film's predominantly English or infrequently subtitled Māori dialogues. This lack of specificity about the movie's Māori characters gives rise to questions about just how fully involved were the "Māori advisors and writers [who] helped create the story" (Campion 1993, 142).

The film's historical and dialogic silences do not merely signal the absence of cultural meaning. The fact that so little historical information is made explicit in the film forces its targeted international, but largely white western, audience to rely on their own culturally bound preconceptions regarding British colonial history in New Zealand, including assumptions based on dominant centuries-old Euro-American colonial discourses. This reliance on traditional colonial notions organizes the film's own contemporary representational practices to such an extent that it reproduces the earlier era's fundamental, and tenaciously vicious, patterns of hierarchical dualism. Colonial power relations structure meaning in both the film's narrative text and its "facade of impersonal technology" (Brennan 1990, 67), which together constitute its practices of knowledge production. Through its refusal to engage the problematic and multiple narratives of the colonial past, the film implicitly reinscribes that past's dominant mythology of sexual and racial difference in the present.

To a cynical western world grown weary of pitiful tales about down-trodden victims, overt representations of sexual oppression and colonial racism simply are no longer appealing—if they ever really were. Campion is far too gifted a filmmaker to allow her provocative romantic fiction of erotic self-discovery to be overshadowed by the too-crude presence of concrete sexist and racist power politics. They might spoil the audiences' romantic pleasure. Instead, she artfully conceals them in an exquisite pattern of impressionistic motifs. Constructing extraordinarily powerful tensions between sound and silence, sight and blindness, she offers her

audience a fictive world in which sound and sight are ingeniously imbricated with each other, piled up like foliage in the lush New Zealand bush, experienced in sensory rushes of almost staggering power.

From its title to the fetishized object of that title, from the haunting, at times overpowering musical score to the notion of speech suppressed, sound and its absence infuse *The Piano* with a surreal aura of emotional intensity. Holly Hunter's piano solos function as forcefully in the film as does her ability to convey a wide range of emotions in absolute silence. Like her character Ada's self-enforced muteness, the presence of evocative "natural" sounds functions almost as a persona—ocean waves crash on barren shores, incessant rain pounds rooftops, exotic birds call through thick forests in counterpoint to the lack of human conversation. As well, Campion's reliance on the act of seeing as a cinematic device marks both knowing and the refusal to know, what can be seen and what must not be. Perception thus appears to order the film's visual ontology, paralleling its insistently emotive soundtrack. Her obvious familiarity with feminists' criticisms of the "male gaze" permeates her film with a sometimes painful, and occasionally ironic, awareness of the "symbolic eye." Near the story's beginning, for example, the already-jealous husband, Alisdair Stewart, peers possessively at his new bride through the lens of a camera. Ada sits dressed in flimsy wedding lace, easily torn, refusing to look back at him. Later, of course, drawn by the sound of her illicit lovemaking, he will stare at her through a crack in Baines' cabin wall as her clothes are torn from her by her compulsive lover. In visually and musically stunning scenes like these, Campion employs sight and sound as epistemological tools, metaphors within the film's romanticized narrative that seek to contain other, less benign, symbols.

Neither cryptic vision nor dramatic musical expressionism, however, adequately explains the foundational cultural notions on which the film is patterned and through which it makes sense of its visual and aural components. Thinking through how the visual, dialogic, and narrative mechanisms work permits an examination of the contradictory meanings behind what is seen and heard. Such an analysis reveals the director's conspicuous attempt to "see past" the masculine colonial gaze, by ironically foregrounding it, as a failure—at least in part, because of her insistence on grounding her own practices of meaning production in the very colonial hierarchies through which that gaze has traditionally functioned. The film's literal reproduction of the masculine, race-specific colonial gaze

constructs its own and its viewers' positions from directly inside that worldview's center. The film masks but does not disrupt, and ultimately accepts that positionality with its obscurantist attempts to re-encode itself as romance.

Representative of this complicit camouflaging is the film's opening scene. Light and shadow play across indistinct figures on a moving screen. Viewers soon discover they are seeing through Ada's eyes, which she has covered with her fingers, perhaps symbolic in the film's iconography of her later refusal to know her own desire. At the same time, they hear her voice, but immediately discover that they have not really heard her at all. "The voice you hear is not my speaking voice, but my mind's voice," she says in the film's opening line. Thus, they are led to believe they are privileged to hear Ada's inner voice, with which she can tell her "real" story without the mediation of the masculine ownership of *logos*, language. But if her real voice is not her speaking voice, then is the eye, through which viewers supposedly see, her own real inner eye/I? What will Ada's gaze see? And whose story will her not-speaking voice speak?

I argue that, beginning with this very first scene, the film consistently constructs Ada's complex narrative through an "eye/I" whose white, western, and ultimately male gaze is fundamental to Campion's colonialist schematic. For example, in the first of only two speeches the audience hears from this inner voice (the other is the last speech in the film), Ada relates that, having been married by her father to a man she's not yet met, she is to travel with her daughter to their new home in "his own country" (Campion 1993, 9). The rest of her speech concerns her thoughts about her silence, her new husband, and her piano. The curious phrase "his own country" goes unmarked, submerged in a personal narrative of strong will and hidden emotions. But listen to it—"his own country"! If New Zealand (or more properly in its indigenous Māori language, Aotearoa) belongs to Alisdair Stewart or to any other nineteenth-century white man, it does so only as a consequence of the violence of genocidal imperialism. The history of Māori resistance to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European invasion of their homelands reveals one of the bloodiest, and longest, records of defiance in the annals of western colonialism. Yet, through its cinematographic discourse, the film privileges that colonial ownership.

This is a curious choice for a film written by a Pākehā 'white' New Zealander in the mid-1980s and directed by her in the early 1990s.² By

1984, the year in which Campion began writing her screenplay, decades of Māori political protest and confrontation with the mostly Pākehā New Zealand government had resulted in the reempowerment of the Waitangi Tribunal, designed to rectify some of the more gross injustices perpetrated on the indigenous peoples since the signing of the treaty (Ward 1991, 87). As well, that year also saw the publication of Māori activist Donna Awatere-Huata's collection of nationalist essays, *Māori Sovereignty*, which claims that Pākehā dominance in New Zealand is not only racist "cultural imperialism," but also illegally subverts the Māori version of the treaty (see Ihimaera 1993, 108). As Pākehā law professor Andrew Sharp has noted, the 1980s were a decade in which Māori political, legal, and social protests, including protests over the substitution of the English name, New Zealand, for the Māori one, Aotearoa, forced a nationwide reexamination of the country's colonial past and its current institutional power inequities (Sharp 1990, 4). In his introduction to a volume of Māori-authored political essays, writer and activist Witi Ihimaera stated, "There has been no other decade quite like the 1980s, for these were the years in which Māori people once again stood up, spoke out and refused to sit down until they had their say. . . . We found our voice in the 1980s. . . . The 1990s are utterly different as a consequence" (Ihimaera 1993, 16).

The context of the current political struggles of both Māori and Pākehā to come to terms with their shared history breaks through Campion's seemingly subtle reliance on what one reviewer has called her "elliptical way of examining the past" (Bruzzi 1993, 10). Although actress Holly Hunter claimed she was attracted to the script partly because of the "vast dimension of things being unexplained to the audience or even to the characters" (Campion 1993, 149), it is the overwhelming historical evidence of "Pākehā trickery and aggression in early colonization . . . of the general tendency of Pākehā law and policy to ride, booted and spurred, over the Māori people" (Sharp 1990, 3-4) that so jarringly unsettles the film's antihistorical and supposedly apolitical ambiguity. So strongly does acknowledgment of the brutality of the British invasion of the Māori's homelands disrupt the film's romanticizing vision of nineteenth-century sexual politics that feminist critic Sara Halprin felt justified in arguing that the "Māori subplot" must have been *intended* by Campion as a "parallel example of power" to the love story, through which she could depict the "misuse and the resulting violence" of that

power (Halprin 1994, 35). In Halprin's view, therefore, Champion's representation of "Maori frustration that they and the land they hold sacred are treated as objects by the colonist Stewart" should be read as a progressive, even pro-Māori attempt to address the long history of white colonial violence in Aotearoa (Halprin 1994, 35).

It is neither my place nor my purpose to present Māori or Māori-centered narratives of that history here. Māori historians continue to tell the multiple, interweaving stories of their *waka* 'canoe,' *iwi* 'tribe,' and *hapū* 'subtribe,' both through the traditional forms of *haka* 'chant,' *whaikōrero* 'oration,' and *waiata* 'song,' and increasingly within the conventions of the western academic historical profession. What I can and must do, as a western feminist cultural critic, is contest the argument that such "parallel subplotting" within what Champion herself has called a "European story" (1993, 142) constitutes a revisionist, antiracist or anticolonialist perspective. Critiquing another colonial-era film, *Dances with Wolves*, which many viewers also celebrated as pro-native and antiracist, Robert Appleford has argued that such "romanticized" films "can be useful as an empowering tool if [their] attempt to present a humanized native construct fosters attention to native issues and concerns outside of the movie theater. If, however, such films encourage a type of solipsism involving our own non-native obsessions, the creatures that emerge from 'behind the rocks' will inevitably look like grotesque versions of ourselves" (1995, 116). Through its representational practices, both narrative and cinematic, *The Piano* seeks to contain possibly disruptive, unsettling attention to current Māori concerns, and to conceal the operations of its own gender-and-race-bound constructions of historical meaning. It does so by displacing a politics of critical historical analysis onto the intricate, passionately pleasurable structural tensions of western romantic myth.

SI(GH)TED BODIES, EMBODIED LAND

Without question, this is a cinematic masterpiece of potent pleasure. A large portion of that pleasure lies in Champion's richly filmed, visually sensuous images of Māori bodies. Sliding smoothly through deep water, tattooed muscles gleaming as they carry heavy burdens through dense undergrowth, these brown bodies mesmerize the white western gaze. They confound its sense of normalcy through a creative visual mixture of partial nudity and an odd assortment of western clothes. Compounding

their powerful collective visual presence is the intriguing aural texture of their—to most viewers—unfamiliar Māori dialogue.

Quite literally, without these bodies, the film would have difficulty moving forward, for these bodies tangibly carry the burden of the story. Images of Māori carrying the colonizers' cargo—the piano, Ada's heavy boxes and trunks—also labor in the film's ideological project of reproducing modern colonialism. Though the Māori appear to be “really there,” authentic, agentic subjects of their own complex and fascinating lives, the structural context within which those on-screen lives supposedly occur is without content. These Māori have no homes, no villages, no explicit relationships with each other or the colonizers. Their manifestly profuse material presence subsumes autonomous questions about their historical presence in the film, and more important, functions to contain uncomfortable questions about how the film's history came to be sited in their land in the first place.

Earlier, I argued that no nineteenth-century white man could be said to own Māori land except at the price of imperialist expansionism. Now, I want to also argue that through its celebratory but contextless presentation of Māori bodies, the film implacably ignores the contemporary heritage of their relationships to the colonial past, in turn operating to co-create the ongoing consequences of that heritage for both privileged Pākehā and “marginalized” Māori (Vercoe 1990, 83). The land in which these fictitious Māori labor is the same land in which the contemporary Māori actors who play them also labor—a land in which the vast majority of the Māori people are institutionally, economically disadvantaged. Like their dispossessed nineteenth-century ancestors, contemporary Māori continue to be paid poorly for their labor in a capitalist economy imposed on their stolen land by white colonial invaders.

Their land, like their bodies, figures centrally in the film's production of modern colonialist knowledge about the earlier colonial era. Throughout the film, the land of Aotearoa is portrayed as a “natural” (thus naturalized) metaphor for exotic, unnatural desire. It is clearly opposed to the safe, orderly world of white civilization that Ada and the other British colonists have left behind, and which some of them strive to recreate in the muddy, “primitive” Other. Both the “exotic” land and its “savage,” “wild” natives are appropriated by Campion's camera—just as they were physically and discursively appropriated by the nineteenth-century British colonists—and are used as graphically descriptive and metaphorically

symbolic background markers in a cinematographic practice that transcribes “their” attributes onto her “real” (read *white*) characters. Invariably, these white characters and their relationships with each other are represented in terms of their relationships, either noble or ignoble, to the “savage exoticism” of the land and its indigenous inhabitants. Nor is this use of the land and its people particularly subtle. *New York Times* film critic Caryn James candidly noted that Baines’ “affinity with nature is suggested by the Maori tattoos on his face” (James 1993). As a review of the film in a midwest American newspaper explicitly stated, “the raw power of the remote bush serv[es] as backdrop . . . to [Ada’s] anger and passion” (*Current*, Dec 1993, 29).

More than just serving as an evocative natural landscape, however, Champion’s exploitative use of the Māori’s homeland also functions as a highly schematic and inherently conservative political tool. After an awe-inspiring view of massive cliffs rising above a vast wave-swept beach, the first full view of the land to which Ada has been sent is one that western viewers of colonial-era films find extremely familiar. From a high-flying helicopter, the camera sweeps over thick forest as the soundtrack swells with strangely haunting music. A shot-dissolve-shot sequence of the lush, green, almost impenetrable mountain canopy races across the screen. Suddenly, western viewers recognize this place—they have seen it before. It is Africa, India, Vietnam; it is the eternal, exotic Other. Its beauty and strangeness amaze the privileged western eye as did the helicopter-filmed landscapes in *Out of Africa*, *Passage to India*, and *Apocalypse Now*. This is the place that western viewers, through their imperial, superior, possessive gaze, can know without the risk of being known, because they see it with impunity from a position far above it, detached from the implications of their presence there. It promptly becomes “their” country as well as Stewart’s. Champion’s representational strategies thus offer the land to her targeted western audience from the very center of the elite, objective, colonialist gaze, transforming it into mere “setting” for her story of colonial passion.

However, the center of this colonialist gaze is perhaps an embarrassing place for modern (and certainly self-described “postcolonial”) western viewers to find themselves. The meaning of this land-as-landscape, from the tight close-ups of mud squelching around Ada’s boots to the scene of a Māori chief’s refusal to sell traditional burial grounds for guns, is inherently contradictory. As Mary Louise Pratt remarked, such scenes tend to

invoke "that hegemonic reflex that troubles westerners even as it continues to be second nature to them" (1992, 15). Campion explicitly confronts this all-too-familiar feeling of discomfort. Her helicopter wobbles as it rushes over the symbolic landscape, flying just a bit too quickly, upsetting her twentieth-century western viewers' placidity. Unexpectedly, they become awkwardly aware of the scene's mimetic spectacularity. But although this directed recognition of the film's technological transposition of land into scenery perhaps allows some viewers to resist its covert functioning, the visual pleasure of the film's underlying colonial structures and the emotional power of its exoticized images position even those viewers as complicit in that transposition. Caught in the film's ambiguous constructions of meaning and the intensity of its representation of power as pleasure, their intellectual resistance is emotionally effaced by the film's contemporary colonialist fantasy.

Ultimately, the film's cinematographic practice raises the issue of associative colonialist guilt only to resoundingly refute it. While self-awareness of western "postcolonial" ambivalence may be generated by Campion's technique in this early scene, she later provides her viewers (and perhaps herself) with those "strategies of innocence" necessary to defend them from being held responsible for the "older imperial rhetorics of conquest" (Pratt 1992, 7), which their angst, fueled by the film's painfully self-aware notions of colonial culpability, demands. One of those strategies is the effective erasure of that culpability through the film's minimizing spectatorship of conquest as mere uncontextualized event. In such a colonial romance, after all, introspective guilt would be a sentiment far more dangerous than passion.

Clearly, for Campion herself, the self-indulgence of historical ignorance is more useful than honest historical (or political) inquiry. As she wrote in the notes to her screenplay, explaining her reasons for making the film: "I think that it's a strange heritage that I have as a pakeha New Zealander, and I wanted to be in a position to touch or explore that. In contrast to the original people in New Zealand, the Maori people, who have such an attachment to history, we seem to have no history, or at least not the same tradition" (Campion 1993, 135). It is not true that Pākehā have no history in New Zealand, and certainly not true that they have no attachment to it. They simply have the conquerors' luxury of ignoring the ugly parts of it—a luxury the Māori have never had. As victors, they have tried both to re-invent that history and to erase competing memories of it. Cam-

pion's film is part of that colonialist project. Perhaps by filming what she believes should have happened, she has fulfilled what Renato Rosaldo called the urge to create a "nostalgic" colonial past (1993, 68–87), one in which the complex multiple histories of Māori–British relations need never be explored.

In such a project, her own contributions to the production of a mythic history—both through the meanings she has constructed and the ones she has ignored—can remain generally unexamined. But Campion and her crew ruthlessly manipulated the land itself to create a "landscape" suitable for their purpose of revealing both the oppositional character traits and class positions of her two white male antagonists. Alisdair Stewart's European-style, multiroomed cabin, filled with books, delicate teacups, and lace tablecloths, is set amid the wasted, charred remains of the forest he has aggressively burned and chopped into a semblance of civilized order. For the scene of Stewart's attempted rape of Ada, which occurs in a twisted web of supplejack vines, production designer Andrew McAlpine boasted that the crew "devised this huge net, this horrible tentacled nightmare inside which Ada and Stewart struggle" (Campion 1993, 141). On the other hand, George Baines, whom the film's costume designer, Janet Patterson, described as having "gone bush" (Bruzzi 1993, 8), lives in a thatched, proto-Māori-style single-room hut, almost devoid of those markers of British middle-class respectability so prevalent in Stewart's home. It rests gracefully in a "green cathedral" (Campion 1993, 140) of live trees and dappled sunlight, a fantasy world where, in the words of reviewer John Carlos Cantú, "the exotic fauna breeds passion" (1994, 8). In order to achieve these effects, Campion's crew transplanted charred and dead trees to one site and living vine-draped trees to the other. Neither her screenplay nor screen credits note whether her crew killed and burned the trees themselves for use in the film, or whether they found trees already in this state.

In this and other acts of representing her fictional white male colonial subjects' relationships with the land the Māori "hold sacred," Campion has herself engaged in a politics of appropriation, a filmmaking practice that recognizes and uses the land primarily as "resource." That land fulfills three important functions for her. At one level, her painterly cinematic eye looks at, and displays for her audience, its almost hypnotic beauty, enveloping them in an aesthetic dreamland of overwhelming visual intensity. Second, through her plasticizing reconstruction of the

forest as scenery, the land and its natural ecosystem are narratively contained within the codes of traditional western bipolar ideology. They symbolically demonstrate the “nature” of and relationships between the white characters in the narrative. Fixed in the film’s dualistic meaning code, its opposition between crass Rationalism and erotic Romanticism, the land (much less the landscape) can mean little else. Finally, the overdetermined metonymic symbolism of the different forest sites resists references to alternative relationships, such as those between the history of destructive nineteenth-century Pākehā land appropriations and the disparate consequences of that appropriation for the land’s various present inhabitants.

As with the land, so with its indigenous people. Their presence predominantly marks the symbolic site of categorical difference between the white male characters. For example, in one scene, a Māori chief refuses to sell Stewart land, including sacred burial grounds, even for sorely needed guns. But although it purports to present the Māori—or at least these (unnamed, nonspecific) Māori men—as resistant to the incursions of both capitalism and colonialism, I believe the scene’s primary function in the film’s narrative structure is to illustrate the respective characters of the two white men engaged in the transaction. In the scene, Stewart is shown to be foolish, greedy, insensitive; he doesn’t even speak the Māori language but must rely on Baines, the proto-native, to speak for him. Baines is visibly embarrassed by Stewart’s behavior, his lack of knowledge about the people and their land. The audience knows this because the camera focuses closely on the faces of each of the two white men. The Māori characters, however, are presented only in group shots, their actions and reactions collapsed into an undifferentiated “Māori” whole.

Then the scene quickly jump-cuts to a shot of Stewart and Baines walking through an adjoining piece of land dominantly marked by Stewart as his own—the very land that Baines has traded for Ada’s piano, an object, like the land, not rightfully either of theirs. And because the film’s western audience has shared Baines’ acute discomfort with the bald machinations of Stewart’s nineteenth-century colonial arrogance, they can easily forget that Baines’ eyes, like Stewart’s, look possessively at this land. *Campion’s* contemporary colonialist narrative thus offers both Baines and her western audience forgiveness for calculating that land’s worth in terms of his (and their) desire. Critically important to the scene’s function in *Campion’s* symbolic system, this is the only time in the film that Māori

resistance to European land-grabbing is even vaguely referenced. And that resistance is narratively diminished at the very moment it is presented. As African-American feminist critic bell hooks noted, “when the film suggests [the Māori] care about white colonizers digging up the graves of their dead ancestors, it is the sympathetic poor white male who comes to their rescue” (1994, 28).

In scene after scene, the Māori and their land have very little independent meaning outside their metonymic representations of the white characters and their relationships. A scene of several Māori men refusing to be paid for their labor with a few buttons again shows Stewart to be a fool— incompetent, naive, the white racist colonizer of a past era whom a modern western audience can mock as certainly as do the natives. But how are the Māori portrayed in this scene? Shooting in a fairly tight close-up, the camera pans their faces suffused with anger. As it pulls back to a medium-full shot, they menacingly surround Stewart. One of them steals the buttons, and the men turn to leave, muttering in disgust. The scene then cuts to a full long shot of several of the men scampering off into the forest, scattering buttons and leaving behind empty threats. Only slightly less ridiculous than Stewart, they have been reduced by this final memorable shot from angry warriors to petulant children.

When in a later scene some of these same men idly lounge near Stewart while he splits wood for fence posts—an egregious colonial act if ever there was one—any threat to him they might have begun to pose in the burial-ground or button scenes has been effectively defused. Instead, once again these scenes reproduce colonial “knowledge” about the Māori—look, they say, these people really were the lazy, ignorant, ineffectual savages the nineteenth century claimed. Not only are they not the important actors in this story, but their own stories of fierce armed resistance to land confiscations and cultural genocide, to the loss of sovereignty through capitalist exploitation and racist imperialist violence, are conveniently forgotten as soon as their usefulness as background for Campion’s characterizations of Stewart and Baines has been achieved.

So little do the Māori characters themselves count as individuals in the colonizers’ story that in the screenplay, the Māori men in this fence-post scene are named only the “Button Man” and “his friend” (Campion 1993, 95). Consistent with their previous cinematographic infantilization, their action and dialogue here—written by Campion—refuses any consideration of the creative or technological integrity of their own culture.

Instead, befuddled by a broken bit of western technology, the engraved piano key that Stewart has dropped in his rage, the Button Man attempts to play it. When it makes no sound, he ignorantly complains, "It's lost its voice. It can't sing" (Campion 1993, 95). *This* dialogue is subtitled by Campion on the screen for the benefit of her non-Māori-speaking audience, a shrewdly cryptic but distinctly calculated element in the construction of knowledge about the people the dialogue purports to represent. Such choices are not merely gratuitous. They are central to Campion's construction of the irrational, alien landscape in which her white characters dwell.

SAVAGE PASSION, CIVILIZED VIOLENCE

But Campion's use of the Māori is itself not irrational at all. Rather, their presence methodically reflects the power dynamics of her larger patriarchal and colonialist paradigm. One of the few male Māori characters seen often enough in close-up to identify is first encountered mocking Stewart on the beach where he meets Ada. Standing behind the white man, he mimics Stewart's every expression. While the scene may indicate that the Māori have a great sense of humor and that this Māori man, at least, has facile communication skills, its main purpose is to suggest that Stewart is a vainglorious fool. And the always-unnamed Māori man, mimicking him from the classic servile position—behind—is certainly no better.

More important, this same character later performs as a symbolic opposite to Baines' hypermasculinity in a scene calculated to convince western viewers that the Māori-marked white man represents the admirable half of the "noble-ignoble savage" dichotomy by establishing his claim to the "natural" sexual forces of the majestic, untamed wild. Here, Baines is foregrounded while the Māori man sprawls on a low tree limb—again behind the white man. As Baines humbly washes his clothes (how virtuously postfeminist of him to do his own laundry!) a group of nearby Māori women praise his sexual prowess, commenting on the size and stamina of his penis while scorning the Māori man's apparent homosexuality, evidenced by his (rejected) offer to have sex with Baines. Baines' older woman friend, Hira—one of only two Māori characters actually named in the film's English dialogue—sneers at the Māori man. "Balls were wasted on you," she taunts, clearly favoring the white man's exaggerated heterosexual potency.

This is one of several scenes that are substantially different in the published screenplay from the final filmed version. *Campion* originally wrote the following dialogue:

HIRA: "I got the good wife for you, Peini [Baines]. She pray good. Clean. Read Bible. You sleep her, Peini. She chief daughter."

BAINES: "No, no Bible readers."

HIRA: "Why? We need you pakeha clever. You sleep her."

Giving *Campion* the benefit of the doubt, it is perhaps historically possible that some Māori women may have initiated sexual intercourse with white men for the specific purpose of increasing Māori "cleverness"—although neither Māori nor white historians generally suggest that such was the case. However, I read this scene as being constructed from and reconstructing the traditional white colonial attitude that asserts white superiority and attractiveness to indigenous peoples in the face of much historical evidence to the contrary throughout the colonized world. In both the written and filmed versions, the nineteenth century's racialized colonial discourse on masculinity is reproduced in the narrative and cinematic fields of *Campion's* twentieth-century colonialist imagination. Patterned on that bipolar, hierarchical, colonial mythology, the scene constructs its own white, hypermasculine virile colonizer as definitively opposed to the feminized, impotent, childlike male native.

This transparent opposition serves *Campion's* purpose of forcing her female protagonist into a "choice" not likely outside such a romantic fiction. After all, the film seems to ask, how can Ada not fall in love with George Baines, the strong, potent, rugged specimen of almost-native manhood, when her only other choices are the obviously inappropriate "real" Māori men or her silly, awkward, jealous husband. So when Ada "chooses" Baines over Stewart, the audience think they know why—the sex must be great! After all, isn't it every civilized white woman's fantasy to be swept off her feet by a savagely passionate, darkly sensuous, primitively natural wild man? Certainly, within this film's understanding of white female passion, it is—that fantasy naturalized and valorized by *Campion's* representations of Māori sexuality and servility.

However, *Campion* herself doesn't quite seem to know how she really feels about this "native sex." As both her cinematic technique and her narrative invariably ask, insofar as native sexuality carries multiple and ambiguous messages in colonial discourse, what is its final value in her

colonialist film? Surely, George Baines' ritually tattooed face, liberal democratic sympathies, and unfettered smoldering eroticism mark him as representing the salutary aspects of the bifurcated proto-Other. As bell hooks remarked, Baines' facial tattoos are "an act of appropriation that makes him (like the traditional figure of Tarzan) appear both dangerous and romantic" (1994, 28). And because he is, underneath those tattoos, Really White instead of Truly Native, Campion can cleverly negotiate Baines' liminal position to reaffirm the absolute "natural" superiority of white males while simultaneously satisfying what Timothy Brennan has called westerners' "universal fascination with the savage and incomprehensible" (1990, 61).

The relationship of the film's supposedly "real" Māori to white sexuality is harder for Campion to compartmentalize so neatly. Thus, the forest rape scene in which Ada's cuckolded husband captures her on her way to see her lover is ultimately disrupted by a scene of Māori actors symbolically and noisily "raping" Ada's piano, which Campion has carefully metaphorized as Ada's externalized self. As the long tracking sequence alternates between the rushing chase of her struggle to get away from Stewart and the slow, oppressive silence of her failure, the violence of the scene is palpable. It is also highly eroticized. Filmed in the deathly blue light of the nineteenth century's autochrome process, a sudden series of tight close-ups exaggerates her voiceless terror, his brutal strength as he pulls her away from the vines to which she clings. He pins her to the rotting leaves of the forest floor and thrusts his hand into her body just where Baines' mouth had caressed her earlier. The quick jump-cut flashes of her torn underwear and exposed flesh are sickeningly reminiscent of numerous scripts from cheap bondage pornography.

What follows, however, is the pornographic symbolism of classic imperialism. Ada is "saved" from rape in the legal definition of the term, not because a husband cannot rape his wife within the film's meaning codes nor because it is not his penis that forcibly enters her, but because her daughter interrupts the assault with the news that the natives are destroying Ada's other self. Playing the "debased savage" stereotype, a group of unidentified Māori tunelessly pound the piano, disrespectfully cavort about it, and finally tear pieces off it as if from Ada's own flesh. The sensuality of this dismemberment, as a Māori man ignorantly rips away a beautiful piece of the piano's sinuously carved wood top and curiously holds it up to the light, imitates what will later be understood as a dis-

memberment far more shocking but no less ideologically necessary. The use of Māori characters as visible metaphors for white actors in this sequence, with the natives predictably mimicking white actions and desires, is consistent with *Campion's* use of the Māori throughout the film. By raping her piano, the natives signify Ada's real rape—and as her instrument is rent asunder, so will she be by the horrifying power of barbaric violence, seemingly obligatory in this exotic, uncivilized place.

Thus, intent on playing both sides of the hierarchical dichotomy of noble-ignoble savage passion against Ada's middle-class respectability, *Campion* is caught by the mutually exclusive contradictions of her terms. Is savage passion liberating or injurious? Her answer lies in the all-too-familiar colonialist fable that real savages are indeed ignoble and dangerous. Only Baines, who underneath his unfinished tattoos remains safely white, can function as the exotic, erotic "native" Ada craves. Within the ideological structure of this film, he is thus far more acceptable than either Ada's effete, repressed, but eventually brutal all-white husband, or the fully tattooed, truly dark, dangerously unintelligible "savages" of this hostile land.

Just as *Campion's* narrative operates within the contradictions of colonial conceptions about native sexuality, she also constructs her romance in the related and terribly convoluted incongruities of both nineteenth-century colonial and contemporary masculinist understandings about middle-class white women's desire. From its beginning, the film arranges Ada's coming to sexual self-knowledge in ways that re-present rather than deconstruct white male perceptions of white women's sexuality. Like *Campion's* use of the land as metaphor for that desire, these arrangements are neither subtle nor sophisticated. All of the possibilities for Ada's sexual self-expression are the result of traditional patriarchal exchanges of male power worked out on her body, from her arranged marriage to Stewart to his final gift of her to Baines. And her coerced arrangement with Baines to "earn" back her piano, like many such patriarchally directed compromises in which women must sell themselves in order to survive, is articulated by Baines—conveniently for him—not as his manipulation of male-power privilege, but as her descent into prostitution. Ada's agreement to the arrangement makes her, in his words, a "whore" but him only "wretched" (*Campion* 1993, 76), not an extortionist and certainly not a rapist.

By the time Baines can name Ada's crime, it has become immaterial in

the context of the film that his exercise of power to satisfy his lust has forced her into sexual bondage through his control over her only access to meaningful expression. The archaic but still powerful narrative schematic operating here—that of the woman who falls in love with her rapist—masks the ideological function of this fictitious woman's acquiescence in her own repetitive symbolic rape. The film need never ask nor answer the question of why a woman in Ada's position would choose to fall in love with *either* the coercive, manipulative rapist Baines *or* the violent, possessive rapist Stewart at all. I can only speculate that perhaps Ada does so for the same reason that the Māori characters in the film are made to mimic their western invaders without explanation—in a “love story” like this, motivation is the first casualty.

Or perhaps there is a more sinister reason. As pornography critic John Stoltenberg argued, in a patriarchal system like the western one, dominance, subordination, force, and violence *must be made* to feel like love and sex in order to produce gendered inequality (Stoltenberg 1990, 129). Because sexual passion is constructed as both avaricious and aggressive in that system, social behaviors that dominantly express those qualities are excused as being simply “natural.” In the case of this film, they are represented as, and thus become, naturalized, eroticized, and perhaps even heroic.

Campion's cinematography during the scenes of Ada's sexual submission accentuates the powerfully erotic nature of coerced sex in contemporary western culture, as well as in the earlier century's. Her camera quickly zooms into a close-up of Ada's bare neck the first time Baines grabs her. Although his touch clearly horrifies Ada, the film continues to privilege Baines' masculine imagination. The majority of the shots of the slow, repetitive “seduction” of Ada occur from Baines' perspective. She is usually shot from the back, an object of her prowling pursuer's lustful eye. When the camera does note her reactions, her disgust and occasionally frightened resignation seem clear. When viewers share her vision of Baines, he is almost always shot in a physically or psychically dominating position. Ada is the victim here, and Campion's camera seems to delight in her torment. Its eye slides sensuously over her bare neck, arms, and shoulders each time Baines trades her a piano key for his arousal. When he finds a hole in her stocking, the camera's eye slowly tightens to an extreme close-up, visually caressing her bare flesh even more fervently than does his dirty finger. And when he rubs his shirt and then his naked

body against her piano, his explicit intent is irrevocable—Ada will never escape his fascination, his “need” for her. Both camera and narrative are sympathetic to his suffering, the fact that he is “sick with longing” for Ada (Campion 1993, 82). As Campion wrote in her screenplay, she wanted her audience to empathize with Baines as he “experienc[es] an unpracticed sense of appreciation and lust” (Campion 1993, 56). Trapped by the power of his desire, Ada becomes an object of pleasure owned by Campion’s camera and thus by the audience who sees, and desires, her through it. Significantly, Campion wrote nothing about wanting her audience to empathize with Ada’s disempowerment in these scenes, so fully has the perspective shifted from Ada to that of her gloating “lover.”

Prophetically, Ada undresses herself in the final pivotal scene of her “sex-for-voice” trade. Even though this scene occurs before Baines has given back her piano—so that she is still in thrall to his power over her voice—this act of self-exposure suggests to some viewers that the sex must be consensual. Feminist film critic Kathi Maio claimed that “[t]heir ‘bargain’ is, at least, an open one between the parties involved” (1994, 17). But this is no less coerced sex than was the recent case of the woman in Texas who asked her rapist to wear a condom. What women do to survive in a world of violent, powerful men makes what those men do no less rape because women have the common sense to protect themselves (or their clothes). Here in the film, mirroring the rest of western society, the powerful force of patriarchal ideology structurally and narratively masks the film’s depiction of what is happening.

When Ada later “makes love” with Baines after he gives back her piano, when she “chooses” to engage in eroticized sexual foreplay with her husband after he forcibly tries to rape her in the forest, Campion’s narrative suggests that Ada is a woman finally coming into sexual self-knowledge. These are, after all, scenes in which Ada’s control of her own, and the men’s, sexuality seems undeniable. Positive depictions of a woman “using” men as “sexual objects” are so rare in western culture that Campion justifies Ada’s control in these scenes by claiming they represent the film’s “outrageous morality” (Campion 1993, 138). But is Ada experimenting with her own sexual desire, finding in herself the hidden depths of passion that Campion has signified are “natural” to her romantic heroine all along? Or, as women have been forced to do for centuries under patriarchy, is her heroine making the best of a bad situation, taking

what pleasure she can in a system in which power *is* pleasure and sex is intimately tied to control?

Either way, she loses. These sexual "choices" eventually lead to Ada's sadistic dismemberment and expulsion from a treacherous paradise. Constructed in a pattern of male knowledge, reproduced through male language, seen through the male eye, Ada commits sexual "crimes" for which she must be "punished" and from which she can eventually be "saved." That her crimes are those of a woman attempting to survive in a rotten system is not, apparently, any part of the film's romantic message. By the time Baines admits that he is at fault and should have been punished, the damage has already been done—only not to him. It is Ada's body that has been viciously mutilated.

By this point in the narrative, the film's ideological codes have become so convoluted they are almost self-defeating. If Ada and her piano represent the too-civilized female self of western culture that needs to be forcibly saved by the primitive passion of symbolic transgressive rape performed by the native Other, then what is Campion's ultimate vision of appropriate contact between the wild and the domesticated, male and female? In the film's final scenes, her bankrupt vision of colonial salvation relentlessly repudiates the power of savage passion to provide western culture with liberatory sexual self-consciousness. Just as Ada preposterously chooses to fall in love with her lustful perpetrator, she finally chooses to live with him (although without her now-violated piano) away from the dangerous, exotic, impassioned bush. Significantly, Baines takes his conquered—thus saved—love to an (overtly symbolic) white, middle-class house in the colonial town of Nelson, where he fashions a grotesque ornate replacement for her mutilated finger. Both Ada's mutilation and her deliverance are carefully orchestrated reinscriptions of one of western colonialism's most fondly cherished fantasies: only by first immersing herself in the "untamed wilderness" (Maio 1994, 17) and then exchanging it for the safe, civilized world of technology, music, and clean clothes can Ada finally be healed of her injuries, both physical and spiritual.

But how does Campion present her recuperated heroine here? Ada wears a black scarf over her head to hide her shame as she paces the porch, mumbling raspy syllables to herself, trying to regain her lost voice. Baines enters, clutches her by the bizarre artificial body part he has fashioned for her, and, as she tries to move away, presses her up against a wall. There, he once again passionately kisses her through her unrevealing

cloth of silence. When he finally lifts her veil, undressing her as we have seen him do so many times before, Ada leans back against the wall, compliantly submissive, smiling, her eyes closed. Like her child blithely turning somersaults on the lawn, unmarked by the trauma she has witnessed, Ada's deep and obvious pleasure seems to prove that the power of love safely contained in the appropriate heterosexual nuclear family can alleviate the brutality of patriarchy's excesses.

Campion then jump-cuts to a scene of Ada tied to her piano, drowning in a cold, dark sea. Again, we do not see Ada's face. The murky water obscures her, just as she has been masked and silenced throughout this film. Even her voice, in this final speech of her "inner self," doesn't end by speaking her own or any other woman's words. Campion's powerful female protagonist dramatically concludes this story of passion awakened amid the stunning but ravaged beauty of the Māori's ancestral homelands by quoting the lines of a poem written by a British white male, Thomas Hood. Not surprisingly, the Māori themselves and their land are completely absent from these final scenes.

The last Māori voice Campion deigns to translate, that of an unidentified Māori paddler in the rescue canoe, makes an uncannily perceptive comment on this film. "It's a coffin," he says of the piano. "Let the sea bury it." I agree. What promised to be a powerfully rich and evocative exploration of a woman's desire has instead turned out to be just another old, dead replica of a white, masculine, colonialist fantasy I've (unfortunately) seen a thousand times before. Campion's success in romanticizing the rapes and obscuring the racist symbolism of the film is the result of the horrifyingly normative project of contemporary patriarchal capitalist colonialism, which, among other strategies, masks its manipulations of power through the fictive processes of imaginative cultural productions like this film. By complicitly accepting its hidden constructions of meaning, western viewers and critics become as much agentive co-conspirators in Campion's project of exploitation as the character of Ada McGrath Stewart seemingly becomes in her own multiple rapes in the film.

The real-world consequences of accepting such representational practice in current cultural production without critique are more than merely unethical. They are extremely dangerous. We live in a world that is not "postcolonial" but still resoundingly colonialist, where the continued western cultural, political, and economic domination of indigenous First

Peoples and their lands threatens to explode in both civil and ecological destruction. The relationship between patriarchal capitalism's catastrophic global practices and the social and domestic violence of individual women's lives is one of the most powerful critiques available from modern feminism. As the interlocking structures of sexist, racist, and class-bound ideologies in *The Piano* demonstrate, western feminist and anticolonialist cultural critics need to seriously assess the relationships of power and pleasure evident in this film, and in many others like it. Collectively, they need to engage in "the responsible practice of interpreting the images of *today*—how to place them, how to give them perspective, how to discuss the ways they reflect a submerged history while turning it into a contemporary, instantaneous shadow" (Brennan 1990, 67; his emphasis). They cannot afford to blind themselves with the strategies of romantic innocence this film offers to the ways in which their ability to see the movie at all is the result of the very real historical and contemporary violence perpetrated against the Māori and their homelands, and against women throughout western society.

Near the end of the movie, in the final scene on the uninhabited beach where Ada Stewart's and George Baines' narrative destinies originally converged, Baines and his Māori friends prepare to take the injured heroine and her daughter away to their new life. As they push off in the canoe, Baines' friend Hira—clothed in a western-style dress and man's tophat—majestically invokes what I suppose the audience is expected to assume is a traditional native chant. Most viewers in *Campion's* targeted western audience will not know the meaning of this chant, either to the Māori character or in the context of her culture. The vast majority of them will probably never read the translation of Selwyn Muru's poignant verse offered in the published screenplay. Untranslated on the screen, Hira's chant functions as another example of the "natural" music that fills the film's soundtrack, similar to the rain and the waves heard on this beach before. Lulled by the stark beauty and emotional impact of the scene, the sheer visual and aural pleasure it offers, most western viewers will probably believe the woman is chanting for her friends' safe voyage, the Māori equivalent of a cheery British "Farewell! Godspeed!" perhaps.

But they will never know—in the confines of this film at least—what Hira means. Dissociated from their ancient cultural roots, displayed as subaltern metaphors in someone else's story, the chanter and her chant

symbolize *The Piano*'s essential failings. As scholars, whether Islanders or westerners, we need not accept these symbols as our own.

* * *

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Notes

1. Campion won the Palme d'Or for her first short film, *Peel*, in 1986. *The Piano* has been extraordinarily popular, both in New Zealand and abroad. It was chosen as the grand finale presentation for the 1993 New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center, and was a top contender for the American Academy's Best Film Award.

2. The history of the film's creator and her production are, mercifully, more available to critics than its narrative's is to its audience. Campion, self-described as the daughter of an orphaned heiress, and member of a prominent New Zealand theater family (Cantwell 1993, 41), has degrees in both structural anthropology, from Wellington's Victoria University, and fine arts (painting), from Sydney College. After attending the Australian School of Film and Television, she joined the Australian Women's Film Unit, a government-sponsored attempt to rectify the gender imbalance in that nation's film industry. Campion and the film's producer, Australian Jan Chapman, worked together in several Australian television productions before joining forces to film *The Piano*. The Australian Film Commission partly underwrote the development costs of the film in the mid-1980s, but the bulk of the production costs were funded by the French company CIBY 2000. Rather than strictly a product of the New Zealand film industry, then, *The Piano* is an international western film community enterprise.

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Abstract

This article explores how Jane Campion's award-winning 1993 film, *The Piano*, succeeds in transposing nineteenth-century sex-and-race-bound colonial structures of meaning onto a colonialist narrative of twentieth-century romance, and examines the underlying political implications of that transposition. It argues that, through the use of filmic representations that produce both cultural and historical "knowledge," the film is inherently engaged in a politics of the relations of power. Through close textual analysis, the article demonstrates that through its "visible" narrative and dialogue and the "invisible" film vocabulary of mise-en-scène, camera angle, shot, and editing technique, the film both emerges from and continues to engage in the nineteenth-century colonial system's ideological project of sustaining white, western, male-dominant global economic and political superiority. Campion's attempt to mask her film's underlying significating for-

malism in a narrative of romantic passion set in an ahistorical fantasy world inadequately disguises her authorization of a gendered, racialized, and distinctly contemporary colonialist politics. The article ends by calling for cultural critics to more vigorously analyze the interlocking structures of racism and sexism in other recent Euro-American films about the colonial era.

KEYWORDS: Jane Campion, sexism, colonialism, Aotearoa, New Zealand, *The Piano*, racism, feminist film criticism