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THE PIANO, AND THE TRAGEDY OF POSSESSION:
AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Ecofeminism proposes that the domination of women and the domination of nature are not only intimately connected but mutually reinforcing - Patsy Hallen.

One of the many reasons why *The Piano* appeals to me is that I find it subversive. Jane Campion's main protagonist exhibits female strength and passion in a way that - even today - challenges any left over Victorian vestiges of what is proper and desirable behaviour for women in their relationships with men. Theories regarding the reported backlash to the general acclaim for the film are many. My feeling is that anything that goes against the *status quo*, as Campion's film does, can expect a backlash. Not only does she remind us of the history of violence that is regularly reported in our media - men's violence against women but she also reveals parallel violence against wild nature. It is the *wild*, in women and nature, that patriarchy habitually endeavours to domesticate. It is the *wild* that Campion celebrates.

In the opening sequences of the film, Ada is preparing for a journey. Her father has decided her future by arranging her marriage to Stewart, a New Zealand settler. Ada is to leave Scotland with her child, Flora, to become the possession of a man she has never met. In the 1850's, the period in which the film is set, there would have been few acceptable alternatives for an unmarried mother - particularly for a woman who has been mute since she was six years old. Ada's piano, once her mother's, is to travel with her. She is as passionately attached to the piano as she is to Flora; they, together with her silver notepad locket, are her means of expression.

In an early scene, Ada, Flora, the piano, and their crated possessions, are carried ashore by the boat crew. They seem reduced and vulnerable in the immensity of their surroundings: the massive, pounding sea that sweeps them in, and washes around their long skirts and fragile shoes; the isolated beach, and the huge cliffs, backed by native forest. They have travelled far but it is clear that there will be more difficulties ahead in their psychological and physical journey. No-one is there to meet them.

When Ada makes a decision to stay on the desolate beach, and dismisses the bawdy, tipsy, boat crew rather than to proceed to the town of Nelson, we get our first insight into the strength and wilfulness which belies the fragility of Ada's appearance. Sheltered only by a hooped, petticoat tent, Ada presents resourcefulness, and courage, as she inventively passes the night with Flora. When Stewart eventually arrives with George Baines and the Maoris who are to transport their possessions we are immediately made aware of difference between the two men by their attitudes to Ada. Stewart inspects Ada as if she is an unsatisfactory object. He finds her lacking because she is "stunted" - not very suitable for a man breaking in new lands. In response to Stewart's questioning, Baines simply replies that "they look tired".

Ada's pleas for the piano to be brought with them are disregarded by Stewart. As she, longingly, looks back to the distant piano, down from the cliffhead, it

appears stranded and surreal, on the long beach. Stewart shows little consideration for the blanched and sea-sick mother and daughter as they continue their journey, wading through deep mud, hampered by their long, hooped gowns. The view that greets them when they reach Stewart's hut is dismal: blackened, smoking trees and stumps; a wasteland which contrasts with the wild forest seen as the camera pans high above the travellers' heads.

Throughout the film the camera links characters with their environment as it close focuses on fingers, eyes, skin, textures, wood, fabric, fern; and then widens to views of great forests. Campion's direction displays extreme viewpoints: wild land and seascapes, seen from a high and sympathetic angle, and the muddy tracks and barrenness of the territory taken over by Stewart, and those of his household. They seem to be bogged down in their attempts to reproduce a Europeanised idea of 'home'.

Land is being bought, sold and bartered. The deal made between Ada's father and Stewart is paralleled as Stewart attempts to increase his wealth by purchasing land from the Maoris. Unlike Baines, he has not attempted to understand Maori ways, their language, or their values. They don't do anything with the land. Stewart fails to understand that in Maori custom land is not to be owned, and that some land is sacred. He persists, with an offer of guns, until a Maori spits upon him.

Baines, unlike Stewart, has learnt to integrate with the Maoris, to speak and understand their language, and to share their jokes - even about his virility. His face is decorated in their tradition; he is accepted as part of their family, and protected by them in his sickness. Baines lives in the wild environment as they do. His hut is settled amidst lush trees and ferns, without visible impact on the surroundings. Later in the film we see Ada and Flora relaxing in his environment, backgrounded by a canopy of green leaves, held as if in a nature tableau.

When Baines succumbs to the pleas of Ada and Flora, and takes them back to the piano, he sees the smiles on Ada's face and the exhilaration of her piano playing. He watches Flora's joyful running, her cartwheels and dancing, and sees the wonderful pattern they have created on the sand, a shell jewelled seahorse, reminiscent of a musical clef. Visibly touched by the beauty of scene and sound, Baines becomes entranced. He understands that music is Ada's language, her means of expression and that the piano is the means by which he can know her.

Without Ada's knowledge, Baines barter with Stewart: eighty acres of land for the piano. He makes the mistake of perpetuating the patriarchal treatment Ada has received from her father. The exchange is carried further as, under the pretext of piano lessons, Baines offers to trade the piano for sexual favours: so many keys for so many visits. His attempts to make Ada care for him fail. Baines realises that his actions reduce them both, making him "wretched" and Ada a "whore". He returns the piano to Ada without requiring the return of

the land - to Stewart's relief and amazement. Stewart is slow to understand, but when he does, tragedy results.

Campion foreshadows the tragedy. In the settlers' mini-play, a macabre and crude enactment of *Bluebeard* - a medieval folk-tale of wife murder that dramatically reminds us of the history of serial violence against women. The directing Reverend Father uses animal blood for more realism and gore - and to titillate (religion does not seem to work against violence). An axe is Bluebeard's weapon. Like the guns, it is a masculine tool on which the camera focuses, a symbol of power, used dramatically and repeatedly in the film, to strike a deal for land, to maim, control, and to kill.

Stewart, the more superficially civilised of the two men shows himself to be brutal. He spies on Ada and Baines, but stays hidden, absorbed in their passion (as a dog, suggestively, licks his hand!). Twice he attempts to rape Ada; once in the dark, vine-entangled forest, and, a second time, when she is physically weakened after his attack. Stewart's hypocritical and puritanical attitudes are exposed when he forces Flora to scrub burned and blackened trees. Flora has played a game with the Maori children, using trees to mimic the love-making she has seen. The trees - sex - are dirty.

As John Berger points out, in *Ways of Seeing* 1, in many works of art the director, the artist, or an unseen person in the picture, appears to be a male voyeur gazing at a vulnerable, and often naked, female. Stewart, peering from the outside in, is such a voyeur. The camera however, constantly broadens the perspective so that we see, not a woman objectified, but a couple sharing their passion for each other. In this, and other sexually intimate scenes, the gendered gaze becomes balanced, more feminine.

The piano is a touchstone, by which we measure the quality of characters and their relationships; an ambiguous symbol of the Old World, of culture and harmony, and the weight that the possession of such an object can be. For Ada it is her means of expressing her will and her moods, her passion and her love. When she is without the piano Ada carves notes on a wooden table and taps an accompaniment for Flora's singing. The first words Ada writes to Stewart when she learns of the barter are, "it's mine, it's mine *it's mine*". Ada is connected to the piano as if by an invisible umbilical cord.

Baines' attitude to the piano, and his care for its tuning, makes it impossible for the Viewer to continue seeing him as a crude, illiterate woodsman. Through the piano he becomes changed. The wooden piano key becomes the symbol of love reciprocated, an instrument carved with a loving message from Ada to Baines. It is also the symbol of Ada's betrayal when taken by her "angelic" winged daughter. Flora continues to wear the angel wings used in the *Bluebeard* drama as she takes her fantasy of an angelic self into reality. The puritanical ideas of sin that she has learnt; her possessiveness of Ada; her resentment at her exclusion from her mother's relationship with Baines; her need for a man to call

Papa; all lead Flora to change direction on a branched path, so that she carries the key away from Baines to Stewart, the man to whom her mother 'belongs'. The piano key symbolises love, but also betrayal and danger. Keys open doors to sexual curiosity and, paradoxically, to both life and death. A key in the Bluebeard folk tale is the catalyst of Bluebeard's violence, but only by using the key and facing danger, and the truth, can his wife bring his murderous reign to an end.

Until land is offered for the piano Stewart believes it worthless. He does not understand Ada's need for the piano and believes that tapping on an imaginary piano - on the table - is odd behaviour and might be a symptom of madness (an old, old, anti-woman story); a reason for her lack of affection towards him. This changes when he becomes aware of the role the piano has played between Ada and Baines. He imprisons Ada in his hut, barring and fencing windows and doors - just as the land is also being pegged and fenced by him. Only with the promise that she will stay away from Baines does he remove the barriers. When the engraved piano key makes it clear to Stewart that Ada's love is for Baines he is overcome by jealous rage. He strikes out with his axe: first at the piano, then at Ada's hand.

Stewart's attempts to possess Ada cease when her will penetrates his consciousness, preventing the rape he is attempting. He takes a gun to Baines, but the intensity of Ada's words and the power of her will - telling him to let Baines take her away - have affected him, he has 'heard' her. His aggression is weakened when he watches the sleeping, vulnerable Baines. Stewart sees a fellow man not an enemy.

Baines, Ada and Flora set out to travel from Stewart's settlement to Nelson. The piano is precariously carried by a boat already overloaded with passengers and the Maori crew. When their lives seem endangered by its weight, Ada insists that the piano be pushed overboard. It is 'spoiled'. As the rope holding the piano coils past her, Ada places her foot in a loop. She is dragged with it, down into the womb-like sea. Yet she is calm. This could be a way out for Ada; a release from struggle; an unconscious, unpremeditated escape after years of introversion and the cocoon of silence that she has retained from the age of six.

When it seems that she is to drown, Ada suddenly resists the downward plunge. She levers herself free from her shoe. Her 'mind's voice' speaks: ¡POEM¿What a death! What a chance! What a surprise! My will has chosen life!?

The tragedy of possession ends when Ada wills life and surfaces from sea. She is reborn; freed from Stewart, and from the bond with her mother: the piano. We see Ada playing another piano in her new home. Her hand is healed, strengthened with the metallic finger Baines has crafted for her. Baines, through his love for Ada, brings about her desire to speak. He appears, at times, an oaf, mocked by other settlers, but appearance is deceptive. Baines, with his insights, humility, compassion; and ability to love beyond the self, learns the vital lessons

of relationship, and survival in a new land.

The film's ending - whiteness, purity, a floating, flimsy curtain, Ada learning to speak, the embrace - is romantic, but acceptable in the mythological context of a great and difficult heroic journey, through darkness to the light; immersion in water; and a rebirth, with hope in a new world. A mystery is, however, left unsolved. What was it that made Ada speechless at the age of six? Was it because of a patriarchal act that historically has rendered women silent? Stewart's attack extended Ada's silence, she stopped playing the piano. Shock concentrated her will, but did not break her silence. Is it the loving, magic kiss of the prince that brings Ada fully to life?

The silence, and the silencing, of women has deep roots, one of which is biblical:

Let a woman learn in quietness with all subjection...I permit not a woman to teach, nor to have authority over the man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was first formed, then Eve and Adam was not beguiled but the woman being beguiled hath fallen into transgression.

(1 Timothy 2:11-15)

Campion subverts the tradition of a sinful Eve, woman as victim, and the suppression and silencing of women. Both Stewart and Baines succumb to Ada's will as they give up their attempts to possess her. With Baine's love, Ada breaks her silence. She 'usurps' biblical authority and becomes a music teacher. The hopefulness of an equitable, loving relationship evolves from passion - a requirement for the flourishing of any new beginning.

The possibility of new settlers to live in a harmonious relationship with the wild natural environment (as shown by Baines and the Maoris) is not a possibility further explored by Jane Campion. In what seems to be a second ending to the film, renewal and happiness become associated with urban ideas of home in the town of Nelson. The film's happy ending does detract from the power of wildness. Ada came from the sea and it seems as if, cyclically, and wilfully, to the womb of the sea she is to return. Such an ending is not, however, psychologically satisfying - for maturity the umbilical cord must be broken.

What Jane Campion does firmly establish, is not only the link between the treatment of women and nature, but also the tragedy that can occur when humans exercise the belief that they are empowered to possess - and then to dominate - other beings or the land.

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting and Penguin Books, London, 1972.

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