

Primal Curiosity, Primal Anxiety: The Child Settler in *Vigil* and *The Piano*

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Vincent Ward's *Vigil* (1984) and Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993) can be considered as significant points in the filmic depiction of the settler psyche. These films depict the settler struggling against the land – a desire to tame and cultivate “wildernesses” into a manageable environment. From Alisdair Stewart's tenuously planted fence-posts in *The Piano* to Birdie's archaic derrick in *Vigil*, the (male) settler is positioned living against the land rather than within it. However, *Vigil* and *The Piano* offer another instance of settling in the form of the child-settler, a character negotiating ambivalent feelings encompassing both environmental and familial factors. The child-settler is the settler *par excellence*; the child who is to grow up in the growing settler colony is symbolic of “potential” in the settler polity, the society *to come* (Veracini 23), emphasised in the parallels between settlement and growing up. Both are characterised by an impossibility of return, as settlement implies the intention to stay and the growing child cannot return to an earlier phase of existence. That these child-settler characters are girls rather than boys displaces another archetypal settler character: that of the Man Alone, erasing any assumed inheritance along paternal lines. Rather than the son acquiring the father's struggles against the land, the girl functions as a witness to tensions orchestrated within the bounds of the domestic space linked to the mother, and the external landscape connected with the father. Thus, for Toss in *Vigil* and Flora in *The Piano* settlement is an anxious process, articulated in their ambivalence towards their environments and compounded by their inclusion in a triangulated familial relationship that results in destabilised space being figured domestically, but also externally. The final “place” of settlement is determined to lie “elsewhere,” a site removed from the setting of the bulk of the narrative.

This article takes the child-settler's witnessing of the “primal scene” – an occurrence in both narratives – as a locus of anxiety in which the child is triangulated within the parental couple yet simultaneously wholly outside it.¹ Neither narrative places the primal scene as

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¹ The primal scene (*Urszene* in German) is initially used by Freud to connote traumatic infantile experiences which are organised into episodes in phantasy. In his analysis of the “Wolf Man” (1918), Freud aligns the primal scene with the witnessing of parental intercourse by the child, or inferring its event from sounds and noises. The child interprets the primal scene as “an act of violence on the part of the father,” though Freud gives

witnessed by infants or very young children; rather, Toss and Flora are older (roughly twelve and nine respectively), and within the ‘latency stage’ of Sigmund Freud’s model of the stages of psychosexual development.² For Toss and Flora, their positions as child-settlers are inherently anxious due to the particular emphasis on reality and the denial of phantasy characteristic of the latency stage. This anxiety is augmented by the arrival of a stranger, a thorn that twists the organisation of familial relations and by extension destabilises the settler-family’s grasp on the landscape. Moreover, the very presence of the child-settler rejects the positioning of the mother (and by extension, landscape) as ‘virgin’ soil – a myth that premises settler colonialism as the first “act” of cultivating a foreign landscape. This myth erases indigenous presence and prior inhabitation, which are invisible in *Vigil*, or relegate the indigenous population to the background as fauna, “authenticating” the exotic wilderness, as in *The Piano*.

The witnessing of the primal scene by a child character cast as a settler is significant, particularly in regards to the primacy that Freud afforded it as a protophantasy – that which is universal and originary. As Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Jean Laplanche emphasise, the primal scene is concerned with origins:

Like myths, they claim to provide a representation of, and solution to, the major enigmas which confront the child. Whatever appears to the subject as something needing an explanation or theory is dramatised as a moment of emergence, the beginning of a history.
(19)

The primal scenes in *Vigil* and *The Piano* place the child-settler outside the parental couple and into a new position of anxious subjectivity. While the child grapples with the explanation to the origins of life, this position is compounded by a revelation of place and history. Just as the primal scene operates as an explanation of “where do I come from,” it functions within the context of these films metaphorically, as the origin of settlement itself. Settler colonialism disavows any original, violent encounter and any indigenous presence: for Lorenzo Veracini,

attention to the fact that the child only recognises the event of the primal scene through a deferred action grasped by the child in retrospective, through the “clues” ascertained in reality, such as observing animal coitus (Pontalis and Laplanche, “Primal Scene” 335). In his essay on the Wolf-Man’s analysis, Freud posits the following fragment: “A real occurrence – dating from a very early period – looking – immobility – sexual problems – castration – his father – something terrible.” The fragment highlights the importance of the father, as well as recognising the sexual arousal and castration anxiety on the part of the child, and a more “generalised” anxiety of a catastrophic event (Freud, “History of an Infantile Neurosis [1918]” 34).

² The “latency stage” is the penultimate fourth stage in Freud’s structure of psychosexual development. The latency stage signals a halt in development, from the age of five or six until the onset of puberty (Freud’s “genital stage”) typically between eleven and thirteen. The specific characteristics of the latency stage are discussed in section 2, “The Latency-Aged Child and Anxiety.”

settler colonialism is premised on non-encounter, because the (first) colonising project has already erased the indigenous population's presence and claims to land. Yet the "primal scene" demands the incorporation of violence and an acknowledgement of the Other's presence (Veracini 86–7). The question of the Other is approached obliquely in *Vigil* and *The Piano*. The character of George Baines in *The Piano* can be read as having "gone native," or orchestrating a mutuality between himself as Pākehā and the indigenous Māori. However, Baines, and to a greater extent Ethan in *Vigil*, collapse "otherness" onto themselves, encompassing the self/other binary within the settler colony. The anxiety that the child-settler displays echoes the inherently unstable, asymmetrical dynamic Veracini discerns in the settler colonial non-encounter, whereby the act of "discovery" has already been accomplished (86). The indigenous peoples are thus always already "cleared" from the landscape, as in *Vigil*, or relegated to the background (as depicted in *The Piano*) to cast the landscape as legitimately "exotic."

To illustrate the position of the child as anxious witness of settlement, the article will trace the understanding of the latency-aged child in the work of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, before examining the film texts to foreground the anxiety and ambivalent curiosity arising from the witnessing of the primal scene.

The Latency-Aged Child and Anxiety

In *Vigil* and *The Piano*, the primal scene is experienced and witnessed by the child-characters in the present rather than returning as a residual memory forming the basis of a hallucination or phantasy. Situating Toss and Flora within the structures of the latency stage serves to augment the potency of the primal scene and its affect in the narrative reality of the film.

Freud characterised the latency stage in terms of its halting of psychosexual development: for the latency-aged child (between the ages of five or six and the onset of puberty), the sexual impulses effectively lie dormant. For psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who sought to extend many of Freud's theories in relation to the analysis of children, the latency-stage was not only typified by dormant desires and impulses, but these impulses were also marked by a stronger tendency towards repression. Klein associated this repression with a reining in of imagination, which in turn strengthened the child's ego due to the emphasis placed on a connection with external reality. Klein observed that

The child's ego, which is still much weaker than that of the adult, endeavours to strengthen its position by placing all its energies in the service of the repressive tendencies and by holding fast to reality. ("The Technique of Analysis in the Latency Period" 97)

The influence of the reality principle in the latency period serves to diminish the powerful, continued influence of phantasy that characterises earlier childhood, in favour of a position which maintains the self-preservation of the ego and the perceptual organisation of the external world and its objects. While this position is dependent on a keener connection with external reality, the repressed material of dreams, fantasies, or what is simply unknown and inassimilable, manifests as a transformation of (libidinal) desires and impulses into anxiety. While the latency period is understood by Freud as a developmental stage, Klein suggests that the structural model could be supplemented by an organisation of psychosexual development premised on positions rather than stages. Klein contended that a "position" "facilitates the making of a connection between adult psychosis and infant development – a 'position' is always an available state, not something one passes through" (J. Mitchell 116). Hence, the latency-aged subject can inhabit earlier positions in response to observations in external reality, such as the witnessing of the parents' intercourse.

Prior to the onset of the latency period and the repression it entails, the initial omnipotence of the infant and its unwavering belief in its command and power over its world is ruptured by the ambivalence of its curiosity and anxiety. The urge to acquire new knowledge and new satisfaction is tempered by a growing awareness of the external world, which in turn compels the child to realise the fallacy of her omnipotence. James Fisher acknowledges the "primal" quality of curiosity, positing it as an "an elemental urge parallel to the pleasure/pain urges, attraction and aversion" (1226). As curiosity functions as a mediator between states of unknowing and knowing, similarly to the child-subject navigating between innocence and experience, curiosity also structures a relation between pleasure and unpleasure, where curiosity is posited as an affective emotion rather than an instinctual drive.

Placing the witnessing of the primal scene in the latency stage rather than in early infancy serves to amplify the conflict between curiosity and anxiety, as well as indelibly binding the experience to the "reality" of Toss in *Vigil* and Flora in *The Piano*, meaning that their observations cannot be held within the unconscious as repressed material.³ Situating the

³ In Freud's analysis of the Wolf-Man, an allusion to the child's witnessing of the primal scene was made manifest in a dream the subject had sometime between the ages of three and five. Freud notes that "he received

primal scene in the immediate, lived experiences of Toss and Flora serves to articulate a triangulation between the child characters, their curiosity as to what their parents are doing together, and the anxiety arising from both their unknowing and their literal exclusion by the parental couple. The experience of witnessing the primal scene is bound by curiosity that is at once attractive and anxious, producing feelings of ambivalence which are simultaneously the pleasure and novelty of acquiring new knowledge, and the anxiety surfacing as the subject is unable to “place” the knowledge in lived experience or reality. Thus, the child-settler begins to negotiate and comprehend her place in the world (her “settling”) as a result of the anxiety induced in witnessing the primal scene.

***Vigil*: Curiosity/Anxiety in the Child-Settler**

The narrative of Vincent Ward’s film *Vigil* centres on twelve-year-old Toss Peers, an only child living with her parents and grandfather on a remote farm in the Taranaki region of New Zealand. For Ian Conrich, the landscapes depicted within the film repel any auspices of settlement: “the land itself appears broken, a deforested, torched and creaking enclosure where the remaining trees are crooked, withered and defoliated” (50). Toss’s “real” name is Lisa, though only her mother Elizabeth calls her this – as Mary Wiles notes, Lisa is a name derived from Elizabeth (177). In her two names, Toss is caught between the sheltered hearth of the domestic sphere aligned with her mother, and the wild, barren and unforgiving landscape of the farm that signals the presence of her father Justin. Split between maternal domesticity and the external environment aligned with the paternal, Toss’s position is further destabilised when she witnesses Justin’s death as he falls from a rock face attempting to rescue a wayward sheep. For Mary Wiles, Justin’s fall “becomes a correlative to [Toss’s] own emotional state as she teeters on the threshold between an immobilising fear of utter loss of control and the pleasure of self-possession” (176). Justin’s body is returned by Ethan Ruir, a hunter who soon returns to help on the farm at the insistence of Toss’s grandfather Birdie, and to the chagrin of Elizabeth.⁴ Ethan is introduced to the viewer as a lone figure caught in Toss’s binocular-ed vision. Ethan is the stranger, an interloper whose arrival signals the

the impressions [of intercourse] when he was one and a half; his understanding of them was deferred, but became possible at the time of the dream [approximately four years old] owing to his development, his sexual excitations and his sexual researches” (Freud, “History of an Infantile Neurosis” 37–8). Given Klein’s observation that the ties between the child and reality in the latency stage are stronger, the witnessing of intercourse in reality (rather than dream) serves to amplify the tension and anxiety in the child’s curiosity.

⁴ Ethan’s surname, “Ruir,” can be translated from Portuguese into English as “collapse.” It could be said that his arrival at the farm precipitates its literal “collapse” as a site of familial settlement, and the family unit itself.

dissolution of the “nuclear” settler family and then literally embodies its destruction through his sexual relationship with Elizabeth.

Ethan’s arrival and subsequent “entry” into the sphere of the Peers family piques Toss’s curiosity. Visually, Ethan closely resembles her father Justin: both are dark-featured, gaunt and tall. In the lamb-docking sequence, Ethan’s knife sends a slick of lamb’s blood across Toss’s face, emblematic not only of his apparent violent potential, but a physical sign of the anxiety that is shot through Toss’s curiosity: here, the threat of annihilation is made manifest. The slash of the knife and the lamb’s bleat are audible in this shot, but the camera remains fixed on Toss, intensifying the moment when the blood strikes her face through the use of slow-motion. Toss’s means of investigating Ethan, both satisfying her curiosity and allaying her fear of him, are initially bound to her father’s “instruments” of survey and discovery. Her use of binoculars and the sight from a rifle resonate with an initial exploration of an unfamiliar landscape, which in turn correspond to notions of settlement, aiming to render wilderness as tame. Toss uses the telescopic sight from the rifle resting in the hallway to study Ethan, gaining a proximity to his body that was absent in the earlier scene through the binoculars. The gun-sight allows for close observation of the object from a safe distance. Toss’s fear of Ethan is amplified in their proximity to one another, and the instruments (binoculars, the gun-sight) allow her to approximate an artificial (yet safe) distance between them. The lens of the camera is matched with that of the gun-sight, as Toss (and the viewer in her place) line Ethan up in the cross-hairs.

The uncanny physical similarity between Justin and Ethan and the latter’s disruption of the familial unit, resulting in Toss’s anxiety-ridden subject position, returns doubly to Freud’s essay *The Uncanny*.⁵ At once the un-familiar/familial/family (signalled in the German original *unheimlich*), it is also described by Freud as the etymological opposite of *heimlich* (“homely”) and *heimisch* (“native”); thus anxiety arises in the presence of something un-familiar (un-family) and non-native (a settler, a stranger, a hawk). Anxiety, when incorporated into settlement, suggests that the subject is unable to settle completely; it instead remains oscillating between *heimlich/heimisch* and *unheimlich*. The etymological

⁵ For Freud, the uncanny was an affect marked by strong ambivalence, where the subject is simultaneously repulsed and attracted. More than simply “the familiar made strange”, the uncanny is characterised by the influence of repressed material coming to the fore of the ego. Thus, the uncanny feeling is aroused by an object that is familiar, yet the same object also inspires the return of residual feelings of strangeness (or death/annihilation) from the unconscious.

play between the various German synonyms and antonyms itself suggests an anxiety, an inability to settle on one definition.

Lacan says that “it is this emergence of the *heimlich* in the frame which constitutes the phenomenon of anxiety” (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*). This statement reflects not only on the singular component of projected cinema, the frame, but recalls Ethan’s surveying of the farm from within the confines of the window-frame of the shepherd’s hut. In his analysis of Lacan’s seminar on anxiety, Roberto Harari acknowledges the presence of the family in the Freudian uncanny-anxiety relation:

It is the welcoming, warm nucleus where each person can feel secure and sheltered. Nevertheless, the family is also the place where the subject undergoes amongst the worst experiences (with regard to affects, or the effect of structure) that he or she will suffer. This is, Freud remarks, the experience of the *uncanny in anxiety* (62).

Ethan’s arrival and entrance into the dynamic of the family is for Toss an uncanny and thus anxiety-inducing experience. The uncanny aspects of Ethan’s presence are initially figured through his physical resemblance to Justin, yet the consolidation of his character in relation to “the uncanny in anxiety” are concerned with Ethan’s disruption and infiltration of the familial unit, and particularly for Toss, his overtly masculine presence and his status of the *not-father* function as the return of her repressed libidinal feelings, which have been subsumed in latency.⁶

In the sequence in the shepherd’s hut, Ethan attempts to establish a physical tenderness, running his fingers down Toss’s face, and she snaps her teeth together, as if to bite him. Ethan’s hand then hesitates near Toss’s lips, and she catches his finger between her teeth, holding it. There are elements of role-reversal here; as Toss had previously “investigated” Ethan through her father’s tools (the gun-sight, the binoculars), Ethan reverts to an overtly primitive and sensual investigation through touch. Ethan is placed as the paternal figure, the father-double, but his own curious relation to (or seduction of) Toss functions as a precursor to his own seduction by Elizabeth, who literally has to bare her

⁶ In his seminar on anxiety, Lacan states that it is wrong to consider anxiety as being without an object, as the object is present in the uncanny: anxiety is thus in “the grill of the cut, of the furrow, of the unary trait ... which is operating as one might say closes the lips.” If Justin’s hatred and suspicion of hawks is understood as his unary trait taken by Toss (“A dead hawk’s a good hawk, aye Dad?”), then the doubling effect of Justin in Ethan positions anxiety in the “cut” between them, further accentuated by Ethan’s characterisation as a hawk, and therefore, not-father.

naked body to draw Ethan's attentions. Elizabeth watches from the valley below as Ethan and Toss whoop and cry out, Ethan swinging Toss around in the air, and she later questions Toss on her encounter with the outsider. "He's strange ... he captures spirits and puts them in jars." Toss's off-handed comment, "I sucked his finger," arouses Elizabeth's suspicions and ostensibly her jealousy; it is then she confronts Ethan and offers herself to him.

The sexual encounter between Ethan and Elizabeth occurs in a disused room of the shearing shed, an empty, drab interior devoid of notions of comfort. The witness Toss is positioned outside, glimpsing her mother and the shepherd through a window as she crouches in the snug fork of a tree. Toss is framed in a medium close-up, softly uttering "Oh" and furrowing her brow as she catches sight of her mother's and Ethan's naked forms. The disparity between the tight, extremely close framing of the copulating couple – here focussing primarily on the "exploration" of the other partner's body – and the comparatively loose framing of Toss reinforces her exclusion from this curious, adult activity; yet the close, fragmented framing of the couple is such that Toss (from her safe observer's distance) could not possibly acquire such an intimate perspective. The immediacy of what is Toss's reactive viewpoint in the shot-reverse-shot pattern is amplified as Toss's unpleasure at what she is witnessing increases, and her framing similarly is tightened to centralise her pained and anxious expression. The emphasis here is on what is *seen*. For Toss, her witnessing of the primal scene hinges on the excitement of her visual sense; as Klein notes "an important point is which of the senses is more strongly excited: whether the interest applies to what is to be seen or what is to be heard" ("Early Analysis" 103). The emphasis on the immediacy of the scene witnessed by Toss, its intimacy and novelty, that was at first curious – as she utters "Oh" – is now frightening. The binaries connoted by the pleasure/unpleasure principle are mirrored in the shot-reverse-shot pattern of the sequence to show not only Toss's anxiety and Elizabeth's sexual enjoyment, but to reinstate the primal sensation of touch as integral to the "working through" of curiosity. Toss has witnessed the primal scene as an act of sadistic aggression, a phantasy made real that has transformed the sexual act into a "very threatening danger-situation" ("Klein, "The Effects of Early Anxiety Situations on the Sexual Development of the Girl" 275). In her fright and unknowingness, Toss puts her fingers to her mouth, seemingly in an attempt to stifle her cries, or in an unconscious imitating of her mother, who takes Ethan's hand in her mouth during intercourse.

The qualities of the mouth, particularly its capacity for sucking, biting and tearing – as well as being the organ of linguistic communication – are reinstated in the above sequence, recalling Toss’s own sexualised relation to Ethan. In the sequence following Toss’s witnessing of the primal scene, Ethan and Elizabeth are depicted as the colluding couple, held in tight close-ups, their mouths tearing at and devouring strips of meat at the dinner table. At first slumped on a chair and “outside” the couple, Toss then retreats to bed, the echoes of adult laughter audible. She then has the first of two dreams, an unconscious anxiety response to her witnessing of Elizabeth and Ethan’s intercourse.⁷ The dream takes the form of a midnight joust, where Ethan and Justin, mounted on white horses, charge at each other: Ethan bears a stirrup affixed to a chain, and Justin a lance-like shovel. Though the two “fathers” are engaged in battle over the paternal position left vacant in Justin’s death, they are not simply warring over Toss, but also Elizabeth, as in the intercourse sequence her body is figured as a “landscape” to be investigated and colonised.

The anxiety-dream realises the splitting of the paternal imago, separating the father-figure comprised of “good” and “bad” object-qualities into two, thus positioning Justin as the good paternal object and Ethan conversely as the destroying bad object. Although only one of the two is fully active and “present” in the film’s diegesis at any one time, Toss’s dream serves to pit each partial object against the other and in turn allows Ethan as the “bad” object to triumph over Justin, whose ice-blue eyes flash as he whips his horse around for the final collision with Ethan. In this brief shot Toss (and the viewer) realises Justin’s death; this dreamt “death of the father” collapses Justin’s literal death in the film’s opening into a figurative death as Ethan usurps his position in the family triangle. Klein describes the death of a parent as “assisting in strengthening in her [the girl-child] either the one sexual position or the other” (“The Effects of Early Anxiety Situations on the Sexual Development of the Girl” 303); however, in Toss her position is further destabilised. This is largely through her tomboyish appearance, through her ambivalence towards her mother (and the feminine, maternal position) and through Ethan, whose presence signals the absence of Justin the “good” father.

Toss’s second dream serves to compound her anxiety and ambivalence towards Ethan and functions as a sequel to the first. Ethan is again on a horse, the victor emerging from the

⁷ Vincent Ward stated in an interview that Toss’s nightmares were two of the first “clusters and constellations of images” that commenced the process of scripting *Vigil* (T. Mitchell 38).

first dream, having speared Justin through the chest. The dream depicts Toss alone in the shearing shed, though the treatment of the light – filtered through gaps in the walls and roof – recalls the shepherd’s hut and the “magic” of the sunlight refracted through glass bottles. Elizabeth’s sexual gratification at the hands of Ethan was phantasised by Toss as destructive, as unconsciously “in her jealousy and hatred she wishes it to be a dangerous and evil thing – one which could not gratify her mother either – and the penis thus, in her phantasy, acquires destructive qualities” (Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation” 314). Toss’s relation to Ethan is mediated by her anxious, ambivalent curiosity rather than conscious attraction or desire. Her fear of the penis as a destroying organ is articulated fully in her dreams, particularly in this second dream as the destroying, devouring penis is equated in Toss’s mind with the electric shears, which spontaneously burst to life, caught in a red spotlight. The dancing shears signal the arrival of Ethan, who “drops down from the sky and assails Toss” (Wiles 180), straddling her as if she were to be shorn like a sheep. The dream prefaces the arrival of Toss’s first period, which “revives the girl’s infantile view of copulation according to which it is nearly always a sadistic act involving cruelty and the flow of blood” (Klein, “The Effects of Early Anxiety Situations on the Sexual Development of the Girl” 306). Toss’s menstruation signals the potential validity of her dream, as if Ethan did attack her with electric shears, leaving her “bleeding ... all inside of me,” and reframes the transition from childhood to adolescence as a potentially violent one.

The primal scene in *Vigil* occurs in a shearing shed, a space emblematic of male-dominated labour and distinguished in its utilitarian function from the softer, more comfortable spaces aligned with the domestic sphere. The primal scene in *The Piano* occurs in a site removed from the auspices of domesticity (as in *Vigil*), yet in *The Piano* it is exchanged for a site that actively rebukes the desire to conquer and tame the land. George Baines’ cabin is set within, perhaps even lovingly cradled by, the wilderness of the New Zealand bush. Thus, intercourse occurs (and is witnessed) in spaces beyond those which connote the familial unit. The male partner in each instance is characterised as an interloper or stranger, drawing the mother (and daughter) outside the triad of the settler family.

The Piano: The Child-Settler as Subject and Witness

Set in the 1860s on the West Coast of New Zealand, *The Piano* presents a romantic narrative of Pākehā settler colonialism. As *Vigil* relates the grim realities of post-settlement agriculture (“we can’t stop the hills from caving in on us,” Elizabeth laments), *The Piano*

functions as a foundation myth, following the mute Ada McGrath as she arrives in New Zealand with her daughter Flora to begin a new life, having been married off as a “picture bride” to Alisdair Stewart. Ada’s treasured piano is abandoned on the beach, being too cumbersome to transport to Stewart’s dwelling in the middle of the bush. The piano is Ada’s means of emotional communication, evidenced by her obvious delight at her reunion with the instrument on the beach.

Ada’s daughter (and visual double) Flora functions as her translator, the two sharing a silent language of signs and hand-signals. Fellow settler George Baines removes the piano from the beach to his hut, and exchanges a piece of land with Stewart in return for the piano and lessons from Ada. The narrative centralises the relationship triangulated between Ada, her husband Stewart and Baines, an articulation that, for Gail Jones, fails to account for Flora as “both a subject and a witness ... [as her] role in voicing and translating her mother’s signs has made her riskily precocious” (Jones 61–3). Flora is not only the go-between as her mother’s translator; her actions unknowingly reveal her mother’s affair with Baines, thus positioning her as a conduit between her stepfather Stewart, Baines and her mother. In her role as translator, Flora displays the more overtly affective and polarised responses to her environment. As soon as the long-boat comes ashore, a seasick Flora vomits onto the sand, an action that reads simultaneously as an abject hatred for the new land and as a literal purging of her past in Scotland.

In contrast to Toss, Flora is not on the brink of self-discovery or adolescence – at roughly nine years old, she is placed squarely within the latency period. Flora’s curiosity is motivated initially by her new environment: the dank, murky and often impenetrable bush-scape is positioned as the polar opposite to a brief scene at the film’s beginning, depicting Ada and Flora in a comparably manicured park-scape punctured with ancient oaks. For Lorenzo Veracini, the settler collective “inhabits a third narrative phase, a segment that succeeds both the ‘old world’ and a period of displacement in the wilderness” before the frontier is folded into expanded settlement (Veracini 99).⁸ In New Zealand, Flora actively attempts to stifle her curiosity, particularly towards her stepfather Stewart. When Ada and Flora spend their first night in New Zealand on the beach waiting to be collected by their new

⁸ The pattern of “the old world, then moving to the frontier, then frontier is collapsed into new world,” mirrors, to an extent, the entire narrative arc of *The Piano*. Although the wilderness around Stewart’s cabin is not exactly made part of the burgeoning “civilised” settlement, the “family’s” retreat to Nelson functions as a sign the frontier has been tamed and closed in.

husband and father, Flora says vehemently to her mother: “I have been thinking. I’m not going to call him Papa. I’m not even going to *look* at him.” For Flora, as for Toss, to look denotes knowing: looking implies interest and curiosity, and to know of something or someone through looking alone is to register their existence in reality.

To refuse herself the satisfaction or hatred that could arise from her curiosity towards Stewart, Flora devises an elaborate “foundation myth” of her own, in the attempt to explain the absence of her “real father” to Aunt Morag. Flora’s story depicts her parents as opera singers, the victims of a lightning bolt which struck her father and left her mother mute with shock. The tale, narrated by wide-eyed Flora to the housekeeper Morag, is punctuated by an animated sequence: a wooden toy erupts into flames. The technique of stop-animation for Jones inserts “an entire *other* visual order of meaning ... one childish, vivid and deeply personal” (Jones 63, emphasis in original).⁹ The story satisfies Flora, at least by outward appearances; later in silent, signed conversation with Ada she wants “the story of her father” told to her, comparable to Freud’s observation that “if a child has been told a nice story, [she] will insist on hearing it over and over again rather than a new one; and will correct any alterations of which the narrator may be guilty” (Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 35). Here it is not to say that Flora is not curious; rather, her curiosity is cyclic (or psychic), allowing her to dwell in what she knows – both the story she has invented to tell herself (to others such as Morag) and the one she asks her mother to relate. The two tales form a whole psychic (internal) and external reality for Flora – as Jones notes, the narrative of *The Piano* is undercut by a “sublimated search for an acceptable father” (63) – and the wholeness of the myth Flora perpetuates allows her to consciously deny this search. Flora’s curiosity is in fact marred by her anxiety, and the perpetuated story of her parents is at once a foundational myth and a form of wishing, with anxiety reiterated in its obsessional retelling.

Gail Jones notes the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship to the film’s narrative, reading the intrusion of adult sexuality upon Ada and Flora as a betrayal, ultimately rending apart the film’s “primary lovers” (61). This is an observation that suggests Ada and Flora could be considered sisters rather than mother and child. Construing the mother-daughter couple (or sister couple) as “lovers” presupposes Flora’s omnipotence and

⁹ There are parallels here with Freud’s conception of the “Family Romance,” where the child actively fantasises a “true” set of parents (often of noble birth), who have abandoned it to be bought up by “other” (although in fact the child’s real) parents.

introjection of her mother as a wholly good object, in turn recognising “her petulant and passionate will to be her mother’s sole desire” (ibid.). The intrusion of a male (husband/father/lover) into this dyad marks Flora’s position as the inferior child, yet this position is not reinforced until she witnesses Ada and Baines engaged in intercourse.

The piano lessons Ada is required to give Baines quickly devolve into a bargain based on sexual favours: Ada is able to earn back her piano, one key at a time, if she will allow Baines to “do things” while she plays. Baines embarks on a complex investigation of Ada’s body, a progression that serves to fragment the feminine form into a series of close-ups, negotiated by Baines (and vicariously by the viewer) through touch. The relationship between Ada and Baines can be characterised as perverse, though as Allen notes, “it is certainly possible to view the ‘perversity’ staged in the film as a hyperbolisation of romance, as a way of portraying the frisson, the electricity of romance” (59). During the lessons, Flora is left alone to play outside Baines’ cabin. She plays with Baines’ dog Flynn, swaddling him in a shawl and gently cooing to him, “Aw poor baby ... who put you out in the rain?” Her forlorn pretend-game with the dog subtly reinforces her own exclusion from her mother, who maintains that Flora “must calm down and play outside” rather than watching the “lesson” take place. This can be read as an anxiety-game, whereby Flora’s anxious feelings are displaced onto the dog, allowing her to take a more objective position in “comforting” the creature.

Flora attempts to stifle her curiosity once more in the sequences prior to her witnessing of the primal scene. Imploring her mother to allow her to join the lesson with Baines, Flora pleads that she “won’t look at him” – she simply “wants to watch.” Although Flora attempts to allay her curiosity through the denial of her own perspective (which would have been satisfied had she been in the room), it is the absence of the sound of piano music rather than the sight of Ada and Baines engaged in intercourse that draws Flora towards the cabin door. Playing a game of “pony” where a rope bridle is strung over a tree bough, she abandons her game when she realises that the piano has ceased to be heard. As she ventures to investigate, Flora is framed loosely, the camera tracking alongside as she strides up to the cabin. Placing her face to the door, she is able to look into the room through a crack, thus suturing the viewer’s perspective with her own. The keyhole framing places a vignette of the copulating couple in the centre of the frame before reverting back to a shot of the curious Flora. Here she changes her position – ostensibly to get a better view as to what her mother

and Mr Baines are doing – but unlike Toss in *Vigil*, Flora does not immediately exhibit anxiety as a consequence of what she witnesses.

The knowledge acquired in the witnessing of the primal scene amounts to an answer of sorts: an answer to what adults “do.” Flora’s answer follows James Fisher’s observation that “the conclusion, the *answer*, becomes a hypothesis, or a preconception, an expectation in a new quest” (Fisher 1234, emphasis in original). For Flora, the witnessing of the primal scene does not elicit a manifestly emotional or anxious response as much as it provides her with a hypothesis or a theory of sexual intercourse which she is then able to test. The relatively close shot of Flora crouched and peering through the cabin wall cuts abruptly to a longer shot placing her in the middle of the bush and straddling a tree-trunk. Surrounded by Māori children also wrapped around tree-trunks, Flora calls out “neke atu!” (“next!”), and they all dutifully change trees, proceeding to rub themselves against the bark in an imitation of fornication. It is notable that the children Flora is experimenting with are not the other settler children who have figured earlier in the film in the scene of the theatre play, but Māori children. Although Flora’s use of the Māori language suggests a greater deal of assimilation between herself and the Māori children, it only serves to “authenticate” the scene, engendering the trope of the exotic, overtly sexualised ethnic Other. The camera captures their actions in longer shots allowing the viewer to observe the children’s delicate stroking of the tree-trunks, before cutting in to a tighter shot of Flora and a friend carefully planting kisses on the bark and tenderly caressing the surface as Stewart emerges from behind and wrenches Flora from the trunk. The actions of the children centralise touch. As Freud observes, “we have already discovered in examining the erotogenic zones that these regions of the skin show a special intensification of a kind of susceptibility to stimulus which is possessed to a certain degree across the whole of the cutaneous surface” (“Three Essays on Sexuality” 201). Once the knowledge is gained visually, it is exercised through direct experience, primarily through touch.

If Flora’s game of fornication is understood as forming the “answer” to her curiosity and sexual researches, then Stewart’s disavowal of her actions functions as a “law of the (other) father,” at once chastising her outwardly sexual behaviour by his puritanical moral compass while registering her actions as a possible form of knowledge about her mother other than what he has. Stewart punishes Flora’s “transgression” by making her whitewash the trunks of the trees she has “shamed.” Flora arouses Stewart’s own curiosity when she

purports to “know why Mr. Baines can’t play the piano ... she never gives him a turn! She just plays what she pleases. Sometimes she doesn’t play at all!” Flora now oscillates between the two parties: her mother and Baines on one hand and Stewart on the other. The splitting of the film’s original lovers, Flora and Ada, is manifested in anxious hostility bordering on hatred in Flora; demanding that she be allowed to accompany her mother on her return to Baines, when rebuked she throws herself into a rage. “Bloody, bloody bugger her!” she shouts, her hands balled into fists, and when Stewart asks her where Ada is going, she screams, “To Hell!” Her original curiosity as to what preoccupied Ada, once transformed into knowledge becomes the emotional experience of hating. For Flora, hatred has to an extent contaminated her curiosity and resulted in her turning against Ada and towards Stewart, as like Flora herself, he is alone against the Two of Ada and Baines. As the visual double of Ada and caught between two potential fathers, Flora must remain on the outer; the triangulated relationship that remains salient is the one constructed between Ada, Baines and Stewart.

It is Flora’s role as the go-between, crossing adult and parental alliances that place her as the witness to settlement. Flora incites Stewart’s revenge against Ada and she is also the one to deliver to Baines the evidence of Stewart’s rage, in the form of the severed finger. If Gail Jones’s observation of Ada and Flora as the film’s primary lovers is continued, the splitting of the mother-daughter couple is fully realised in Flora’s witnessing of Ada and Baines together. Flora’s constant references to wanting to “watch” and refusals to “look at him” increasingly allow for a subjectivity that is seen to be outside the web of adult relationships. Thus, the place of the child as witness to the processes of settlement is seen to lie outside the organisation of potential parental couples. The child-settler as witness, observer and go-between is motivated by childish curiosity yet becomes an outlying figure, on which the traumatic processes of settlement are displaced, projected and realised.

Conclusion

The narrative of settlement is like growing up: it is linear, structured on the impossibility of return. Just as “settlement” is premised on the settler’s wish to remain and not return to the old country, the child cannot return to a younger state, whether physically younger or psychically younger (characterised by innocence and ignorance). The mother of each narrative – Elizabeth in *Vigil* and Ada in *The Piano* – make a renewed attempt at settlement in their new relationships with men who function as strangers or interlopers. The figure of the child, symbolic in terms of an acknowledgement of the settler polity *to come*

also registers a remainder: Toss and Flora are the products of relationships that have been ended through death and/or re-settlement, yet their presence within the narrative signals the pervading residue of the “old” (relationship, country) within the “new.”

The witnessing of the primal scene as depicted in *Vigil* and *The Piano* does, however, have a similar function in regards to their eventual outcome and “future” beyond the narrative close. Toss and Flora realise to an extent their own autonomy and subjectivity *outside* the parental couple, articulating for these child-settlers a potential space of settlement. However, this potentiality of settlement is underscored by a sense of doubt, as the close of narrative in *Vigil* and *The Piano* suggests that the activity of settling cannot be commenced or reinvigorated; rather, there is a certain “not here” implicit in the conclusions of both films. In *Vigil* Toss, Elizabeth and Birdie sell the farm to begin a new life in an unstated place, and in *The Piano* the final coda of the film depicts Flora, Ada and Baines in their house in Nelson, having relocated from the wilderness of the bush. That each film ends with abandonment or flight from the site of the bulk of the narrative severs the site of eventual settlement from the traumatic events of each film’s narrative.

The status of the child-settler as witness to the actions of the parents at the moment of the primal scene operates along the self/other binary: as she recognises her own otherness from the parental couple, this is at once an act of constitution and an act of removal. The child, realising her own subjectivity, removes herself from the familial triadic structure. Veracini’s use of the primal scene framework underlines the violence that is at the crux of the encounter and its subsequent interpretation. In mobilising the “primal scene” in comparison to the colonial encounter, Veracini reinstates the violence that is erased from the settler-native encounter, whereby the indigenous Other is seen to intrude violently into settler space (89). In mapping Veracini’s use of the primal scene onto my readings of *Vigil* and *The Piano*, the role of indigenous Other is exchanged for a figure within the tradition of the Man Alone character archetype, while containing sequences that correspond to a more prescriptive re-telling of the primal scene. While the child character registers the potential of the settlement “to come” and her place within each respective narrative destabilises familial organisations, the child as settler remains inherently anxious. The emphasis that the latency stage places on reality, as opposed to the child dwelling in her phantasies, encourages the child to hold fast to reality, yet the reality of the processes and forging of settlement are cast as always already unstable. In turn, the “not here but elsewhere” delayed settlement that each film depicts at the narrative

close retains elements of this instability. The child parallels settlement, a miniature of the larger whole, growing and shifting until a semblance of order can be articulated.

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