

## ***Sweet Country*'s powerful depiction of racial dynamics and tensions of the 1920s**

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Warwick Thornton's outback western, *Sweet Country* (2017) is a powerful depiction of the racial dynamic and tensions of the 1920's. The plot follows the story of Sam Kelly, an Indigenous man, who shoots and kills a white man Harry March in self-defence. The themes of colonialism, law and power cultivate in the experiences of the Aboriginal and white characters alike. The stories of Aboriginal people from this era are still largely untold, and even a fictional representation of this history, such as *Sweet Country*, helps the histories of black Australia penetrate the mainstream.

The film features a non-linear narrative style, with flashbacks and flash-forwards throughout. This is an interesting stylistic choice by Thornton. Whilst the style works to create cinematic effect, it can be argued that Thornton was expressing an Aboriginal concept of understanding time. Janca & Bullen (2003) discuss that Aboriginal people have perceived time as a more 'circular' pattern, rather than as a strictly linear concept of past-present-future. They state that there is an emphasis on the importance of events, rather than in the sequence in which they occur. Evidently, Thornton aims to pay homage to Indigenous conceptions of time.

The film draws out tensions between Western and Aboriginal conceptions of land ownership (Dudgeon et al. 2010, Rigsby 1999). Dudgeon et al. state that historically for Aboriginal people 'land was not owned; one belonged to the land' (2010, p. 26). In *Sweet Country*, one of the white settlers, Sergeant Fletcher, asks 'who owns this land' when encountering uncolonized land, that is still inhabited by Indigenous Australians. To this, Archie an Indigenous worker, replies 'it's tribal land, boss. No whitefellas here'. Archie's response suggests that no one owns the land because there has been no white settlement, and that instead, Indigenous people belong to that country. Thus, Thornton was highlighting the differing viewpoints on land ownership. Although ownership of land may appear superficial, it is one of the fundamental differences between organisation of Indigenous and Western



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economies. This is in the sense that one of the defining features of capitalism is the presence of private ownership of property which shapes Western values of individualism. This is in stark contrast with the organisation of Indigenous economies which do not aspire to private ownership and place more value in community (Paterson 2011).

Later in the film upon returning to his partner in the town, Sergeant Fletcher states 'some sweet country out there. Cattle country'. The reference to cattle alludes to one of the main forces of settler colonialism, primitive accumulation, which is a drive to make profits through dispossession and subsequent exploitation (Wolfe 2006). This is emphasised by Archie in the film, who describes being forced off his home country, with his only opportunity for subsistence being to work for rations. The spread of the industry throughout Central Australia was facilitated by the forced removal of the Indigenous population from the land, in order to use the land exclusively for agriculture. Paterson states that 'pastoral stations were sometimes the primary setting for the shift from Aboriginal to farming country' (2011, p. 244). This is the setting of Sweet Country, in which the Indigenous population had been removed from their land and were forced, in near-slave-like conditions, to work at these stations. The flipside of this coin is that dispossessed Indigenous Australians provided the low-cost labour that was essential to developing the infrastructure and wealth that defines Australia today (Paterson 2011). Thornton's use of enthralling cinematography helps to capture the landscapes of outback Australia, illustrating a strong connection to country for the Aboriginal characters. Aboriginal people's connection to country is not alike to that of the white settlers, such as Sergeant Fletcher in the film. For Aboriginal people see country as much more than a place (Kwaymullina 2005).

Equality and power were key themes of the film. Whilst there were varying relationships between the landowners and the Indigenous people, it was evident that regardless of how 'equal' the landowner viewed his Aboriginal workers in relation to himself, there was still a stark imbalance of power and lack equality. This is evident in comparison of two white station owners, Harry Marsh and Fred Smith. Harry Marsh degradingly dehumanises the Aboriginal workers when he refers to them as 'black stock'. Whereas Fred Smith is presented as an ally to the Aboriginal characters, he states in response to Marsh that 'we're all equal in the eyes of the Lord'. However, when Smith 'loans' Kelly to Marsh, it becomes evident that regardless of the relationship between the white man and the Aboriginal man, the Aboriginal workers are still a tradeable commodity. It is clear that Thornton was depicting a picture of the reality of the 1920s, as at this time Aboriginal workers were severely exploited at the hands of White Australia. Aboriginal people did not have basic rights in Australia, their lives were entirely controlled by the government (Kidd 2012).

This lack of racial equality underlies the entire plot of the film. During Kelly's trial, the Judge asks him why he ran, Kelly replies 'shot a whitefella'. This line is telling enough, it implies the double-standards of this time in Australian history. If a white man had shot a black man, it would be a very different story, and they would be unlikely to be on trial for the act. This lack of equality culminates in the final scene of the film. Kelly is on his way back to the station, a free man after the judge determines he acted in self-defence. However, the trial

doesn't change the fact that he is unequal in the eyes of the public, and that the public and law enforcement will fight for their own perceived justice. Sam Kelly is shot dead. Thus, further working to emulate the unjust experiences of Aboriginal people across Australia, past and present.

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