

## Chapter 3

# A Cloud Hovered Over the Land

*The agent does not alleviate oppression or mask domination. He displays and demonstrates them with the clear conscience of the law enforcer, and brings violence into the homes and minds of the colonized subject.*

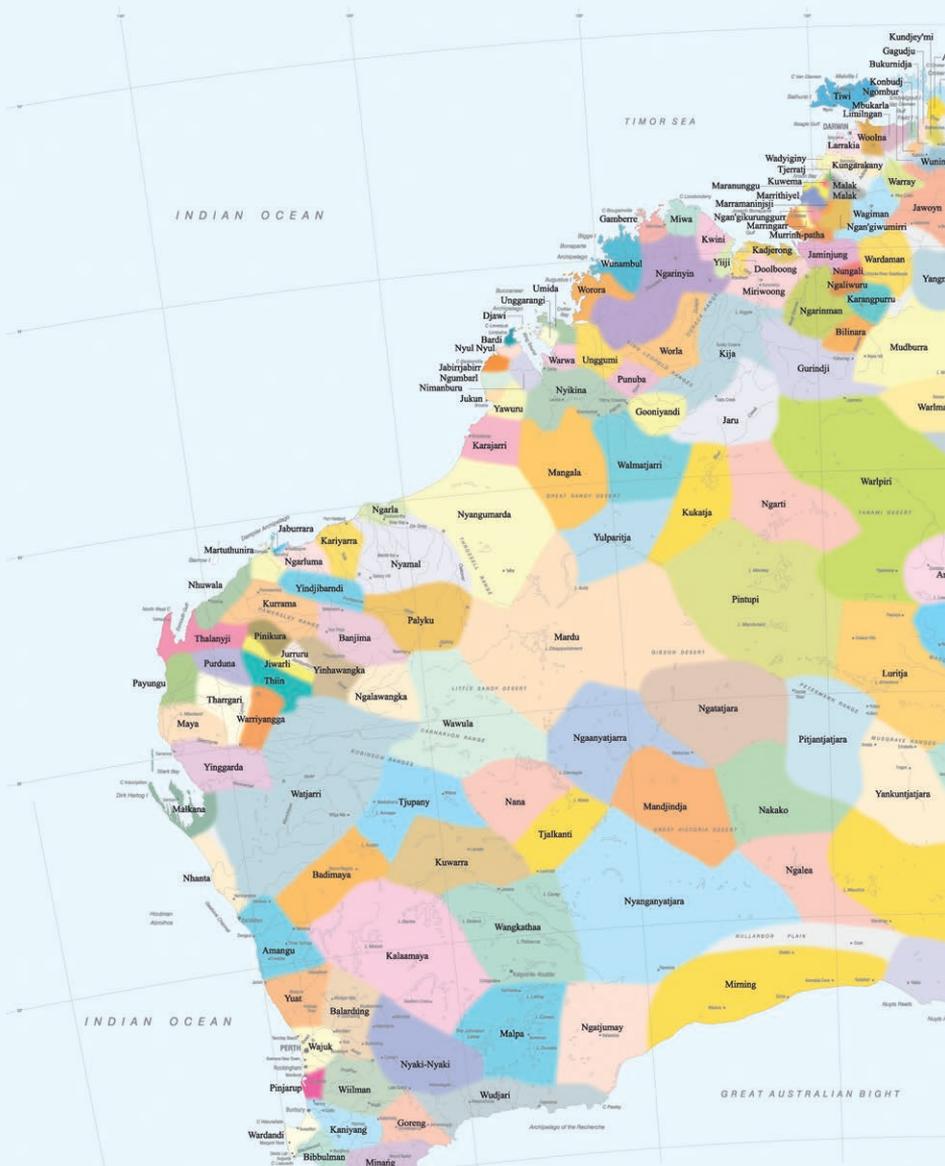
FANON, *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH*

The continent of Australia is a tapestry made up of Aboriginal nations. A current map of the country looks very different from this. There were no straight lines upon this landmass before it was carved up into the current states and territories. Australian Aboriginal nations numbered between 600 and 700; of these, 200 were in the state of Queensland. Each nation occupied a sovereign land. Aboriginal nations are sovereign peoples who have never ceded their sovereignty. All nations occupy a tract of land with territorial boundaries sometimes formed by natural demarcations, such as mountains, rivers and islands, as in the case of the Badtjala people. In Australia, Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes, ‘Indigenous people owned, lived on, were taught to know, and belonged to particular tracts of “country”.’<sup>1</sup> As previously discussed, the definition of ‘country’ in the use of Aboriginal language is much broader than in standard English.

The European gaze took in the untouched landform, a race of people and their ‘Garden of Eden’. As the new arrivals stood on the banks of the Brisbane River they noted, ‘the site of the future Brisbane, primeval forests of gums, bloodwood and ironbark clothed the ridges, and the flats nurtured patches of thick pine and fig tree. Fish, reptiles, birdlife and mammals abounded.’<sup>2</sup> To the European eye, Brisbane or Moreton Bay as it was known then, was virgin land. Like the rest of Queensland they assumed it was available for the taking.

Art critic and historian Abigail Solomon-Godeau reminds us that colonial power over land is also power over bodies:

In this expeditionary literature generated by Captain Cook, Wallis, Bougainville and the countless successive voyagers to the South Seas, the colonial encounter is first and foremost the



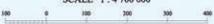
## THE AIATSIS MAP OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

This map attempts to represent the language, social or nation groups of Indigenous Australia. It shows only the general locations of larger groupings of people which may include clans, dialects or individual languages in a group. It used published resources from 1988-1994 and is not intended to be exact, nor the boundaries fixed.

It is not suitable for native title or other land claims.  
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 Tibbal:Language group name  

 No published information available

SCALE 1 : 4 700 000  




encounter with the body of the Other. How that alien body is to be perceived, known, mastered or possessed is played out within a dynamic of knowledge/power relations which admits of no reciprocity. On one level, what is enacted is a violent history of colonial possession and cultural dispossession – real power over real bodies. On another level, this encounter will be endlessly elaborated within a shadow world of representations – a question of imaginary power over imaginary bodies.<sup>3</sup>

To give a general overview of what was here when the British arrived means to also consider the physique of Aboriginal men and women. A comparison to the English and largely Irish convict stock was noted down in the early days of their exploration along the Brisbane River: “The “ordinary stature” of these “very athletic people”, botanist and explorer Allan Cunningham wrote, was “about six feet [182 centimetres]. The average height of the Britishers, by contrast, was around 5 feet 4 inches [162 centimetres].”<sup>4</sup> This was also true of Badtjala men, who were six feet tall. This sight of an impressive race of people would have been part of the information taken in by the British arrivals. Similarly, the way they traversed the country would have also been a discovery.

The mode of transport used by Aboriginal people, crossing vast distances of country, was walking. Extensive paths crisscrossed the continent, allowing them to trade and hunt and for ceremonial purposes. As Raymond Evans explains, “Territories were connected by networks of “walking pads” or “roads” that served as thoroughfares for people on the move, bearing trading

items or new songs, dances, information and ideas.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, meant that European men used these paths to travel upon. It was no accident that they were used by the new arrivals in search of land and prosperity.

Aboriginal philosophy is equally tied to country. A symbiotic relationship is and was ever-present between plant, animal, human, climatic seasons and cultural practices of reciprocity. In times of abundance Aboriginal reciprocity was practised. Bruce Pascoe states, 'If we are to understand Indigenous philosophy it has to begin with the profound obligation to land.'<sup>6</sup> This obligation was inherent to Indigenous custodians through coming together for the feasting on the Bunya nuts in the Blackall Ranges and Bunya Mountains of South East Queensland.

Unlike colonial squatters, Aboriginal people see country as holding responsibilities, rights and obligations relating to ceremony, feasting, travelling, trade, relatedness, sharing resources, marriage betrothals and kinship protocols. 'The great Bunya Bunya nut harvests enabled huge gatherings of people to enjoy trade and cultural relationships with sufficient food to sustain all participants for long periods.'<sup>7</sup> Through these mass triennial Aboriginal gatherings, the complexity of race relations in the state of Queensland can be viewed through this microcosm of exchanges at the Bunya grounds. Intertribal gatherings were organised to coincide with the ripening nut of the Bunya tree. Successive generations of Aboriginal people had harvested Bunya nuts for thousands of years. It was incumbent on Aboriginal societies to share their resources in times of abundance. The large Bunya Bunya nut harvest brought nations together for such feasting and cultural exchanges.

Standing as sentinels, enormous Bunya trees would have been a magnificent sight for the newcomers to these hinterlands. Unbeknown to most Australians, even today, is the fact that clans and Aboriginal patriarchal lineages were responsible for certain trees, handed down from father to son, through the ages. This was a cultural custodianship that was practised and reinforced. The nuts were a rich source of carbohydrate and, every three years, a bumper crop was had. It was a time for huge gatherings, nation-to-nation cultural exchanges, strengthening ties, diplomacy and renewed kinship relationships. 'In the south-east, elaborate triennial festivals were organised around the harvesting and roasting of nutritious *bonyi* (or bunya) nuts, attracting thousands of participants to the Blackall Ranges and Bunya Mountains from populations extending over 85,000 square kilometres.'<sup>8</sup> This territory was associated with hosting numerous nations travelling to feast on *bonyi*.

As the colonial man travelled further north from Moreton Bay he was conjointly surveying the landscape with its natural resources, since an opportunity for wealth lay in the milling of the timber from the bunya trees. This industry did eventuate but before then, as Henry Reynolds explains, 'Queensland had two beginnings – as a government penal settlement on Moreton Bay in the 1820s and in the hinterland as a private rush of squatters and their animals up onto the lush pastures of the Darling Downs in the late 1830s and early 1840s.'<sup>9</sup> Access to hinterland areas was made easier by the already established Aboriginal pathways, which also enabled squatters to travel over these long distances, either on foot or with horse and cart. In some cases, Aboriginal pathways directed the European instead of his choosing to go in a certain way.

Aboriginal nations would traverse vast terrain to reach the locations of the Blackall Ranges or the Bunya Mountains. At its height, as many as 6,000 people were in these two locales. People travelled from as far as ‘the Burnett Range in the north to the Richmond River in the south; from Fraser and Stradbroke Islands in the east to the Balonne, Maranoa and Barcoo Rivers in the West’.<sup>10</sup> Aboriginal nations could not comprehend that stands of timber would become a valuable commodity to the invader. Flora and fauna were about to experience the onslaught of the consequences of colonialism along with Aboriginal nations.

Impending and irreparable change lay ahead for the host nations of the Wakka Wakka, Gubbi Gubbi and Jinibara, whose country hosted the vast cultivations of Bunya trees. It was also a time when information was traded about the coming of the white man. ‘Aboriginal trade routes and ceremonial tracks carried reports of the brutality of the white invaders.’<sup>11</sup> Vital information would have come from southern neighbours about them and their strange creature, called *yarraman*.<sup>12</sup> Horses offered an advantage to the squatter in attacking and escaping. Aboriginal societies knew of this animal long before seeing it. The use of the word *yarraman* nationally by Indigenous nations is testament to that.

These Bunya assemblies enabled Aboriginal men to discuss active resistance against the coming of the white colonialists through targeting and defeating this enemy.<sup>13</sup> Colonial warfare was planned and orchestrated on many fronts. The gatherings were important for Indigenous peoples to strategise combat and analyse the opponent and their potential force. Aboriginal societies still practising their traditions in South East Queensland and northern New South Wales, however, were not prepared to encounter

attacks from other Aboriginal men dressed in uniforms, wielding guns and riding on horseback. Historian Jonathan Richards identifies, 'one particular form of brutality, sometimes associated with Native Police operations, was the practice of "nigger-hunting"'.<sup>14</sup> No crimes had been committed by Aboriginal parties travelling to the Bunya grounds, therefore, 'nigger-hunting' is the only way in which the engagement of the Native Police in this terrain would have been deployed.

A foreign military force employing Aboriginal knowledge through the Native Police Force was hostile and aggressive. The bush skills employed by the Native Police were instrumental in quickening the demise of the Bunya gatherings. However, in the early years, a frontal attack upon the Bunya gatherings by the Native Police was not employed as the amassed warriors were too great in number. A campaign of divide and rule through targeting parties arriving and leaving the grounds was implemented. The Native Police 'exploited the opportunity which the festivals presented to assault individual parties of Aborigines *en route* to or [departure] from such gatherings'.<sup>15</sup> This tactic of ambush was opportunistic and effective through the clear advantage of firearms and horses, making speed another unsuspecting assault and escape technique.

Shooting at 'blacks' was a common occurrence. Sometimes these shooting sprees were jointly organised exercises. At other times, a two-pronged approach or military manoeuvre like the 'pincer movement' in infantry warfare unfolded. Punitive attacks were carried out by both the Native Police and pastoralists, comprising of vigilante groups. The interface of intertribal gatherings and squatter axiological violence can also be extrapolated to surrounding districts and future race relations, such as in the Wide Bay region.

Frederick Wheeler, a notorious member of the Native Police, ‘openly killed Indigenous people for almost twenty years.’<sup>16</sup> When questioned by the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly established in 1861, Lieutenant Fred Wheeler was asked, ‘Do you think there is any other way of dealing with them, except by shooting them?’ He responded by saying, ‘No, I don’t think they can understand anything else except shooting them; at least, that is the case, as far as my experience goes.’<sup>17</sup>

Also carrying out reprisals were the squatters, pastoralists and farmhands. ‘As squatters sought to “clear” their holdings by leading punitive expeditions against local Aboriginal tribes, a state of almost open warfare existed.’<sup>18</sup> Shrouded in the frontier wars was a deliberate code of secrecy employed by state and squattocracy: ‘Frontier communities were notorious for keeping secret their exploits in the war.’<sup>19</sup>

A few accounts were recorded, however, as some individuals did put pen to paper. One such account read, ‘George Serecold wrote to his brother in England, December 1857 telling him, that his party of twelve squatters and their servants had patrolled over 100 miles of territory for three weeks, “sparing none of the grownup blacks we could find”.’<sup>20</sup>

This policy of murder effectively crippled the coming together of Aboriginal nations at the Bunya grounds until it was no longer a cultural practice. Aboriginal nations participating in the gatherings at the Blackall Ranges and Bunya Mountains saw mass killings firsthand, and bore the effects of the destruction of their natural food resources. The impact was calamitous on the traditional landowners and their visitors alike.

Within a period of 45 years, the gathering of Aboriginal nations from as far afield as the Clarence River in New South Wales was over, clans

and custodial trees decimated. Evans suggests that ‘debilitative “survival” conditions following land deprivation and the imposition of patterns of “racial feeding” are directly contributive’.<sup>21</sup> This once great food source was then out of reach due to colonial possession of vast tracts of land and heralded the demise of these once robust trees in a short period of time. A rich cultural practice was relegated to history with scant trace. The last recorded bunya ceremony was in 1875 at Mount Mowbullin in the Bunya Mountains. After that, Aboriginal gatherings were smashed forever and the pristine forests of bunya trees suffered at the hands of colonial exploitation and greed. The trees were milled into non-existence with the path of conquest resolute in its environmental and cultural destruction.

The targeting of the bunya species impacted enormously on the environment and Indigenous cultural practices. It took just a little under a decade for this ‘god given’ natural resource to be depleted. ‘In 1892 the Great Bunya Sawmills closed down.’<sup>22</sup> Under the impact of Europeans another species had been over-exploited for profit.

Opening up the country had seen plant plundering, causing decimation to individual species. Aboriginal staple foods such as yam daisy and native grasses had all but gone, stands of red cedar in New South Wales cut down and now the over-milling of Bunya trees had been achieved. Imperial expansion has caused catastrophic damage on Australian mega-diversity, previously one of the richest geographies in the world. The modus operandi of Europeans was to loot, plunder and squander natural resources.

British colonisation on other continents had occurred prior to the colonisation of Australia. ‘The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis

of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.’<sup>23</sup> The British were adept at control and instituting racism. Years of invasion and occupation elsewhere stood them in good stead for the pursuit of Australian lands and the domination of its Indigenous people. Between 1788 and 1838, British soldiers were an active force across Australia in the conflict with Aboriginal people. The objective was to crush Aboriginal populations. There were no rules of engagement, just sheer brutality from beginning to end. Aboriginal men, women and children were all targeted.

Upon the arrival of the British there were no accurate figures of Aboriginal populations recorded. Records of Aboriginal deaths due to attacks and resistance during warfare do not exist either, as Jonathan Richards confirms: ‘We don’t know actual numbers of death.’<sup>24</sup> Although battles were numerous and bloody, with the invading British and subsequent ‘settler’ occupation there is no comprehensive data. As noted by Robert Ørsted-Jensen in his *Frontier History Revisited*, ‘Queensland certainly had by far the greatest loss of European lives in frontier skirmishes and accounts for the singularly largest frontier massacres on whites on Australian record.’<sup>25</sup>

The removal of Indigenous peoples off their country involved open warfare. Lawlessness was common when a township was trying to establish itself. As Reynolds says, ‘Maryborough in Queensland’s Wide Bay district experienced prolonged insecurity. Travel outside the settlement was considered dangerous for years.’<sup>26</sup> Colonial anxiety was high due to the level of retaliation carried out by Badtjala people who, at various stages of the campaign, had been highly successful. They possessed inherent advantages due to their knowledge of country and its terrain.

In Queensland, the mid 1800s was a time of rapid change. Judy Atkinson outlines in *Trauma Trails* how ‘colonisation brought violence in forms inconceivable to a people who had lived removed from the incursions of colonisers that had been occurring in European countries for centuries’.<sup>27</sup> This would be a time of sheer psychological terror for both sides. Ørsted-Jensen makes the point that ‘attitudes towards Aboriginal people and frontier violence were clearly hardening during the period from 1850 and into the 1880s’.<sup>28</sup>

Badtjala people waged a 20-year guerrilla war from the natural fortress of Fraser Island as the advance of white settlement moved north to the Wide Bay area. At one point, the Badtjala nation had the upper hand and raids were a daily occurrence on Maryborough town dwellers. In the *Original Maryborough Site*, Thom Blake and Richard Allom write that ‘the prospect of the town being abandoned was real. During the crisis of 1855 at least ten percent of the population left’.<sup>29</sup>

Parts of K’gari would have been impenetrable either on foot or horseback. Without a combatant who was of the same race, the township of Maryborough may never have taken hold. This was a turning point in the guerrilla war so far. The scales tipped in favour when the state government deployed the Native Police. Aboriginal warriors had to be strategic in their methods of warfare. Different Aboriginal nations used different guerrilla tactics. Smoke was used in the frontier wars around Sydney and another stratagem was night raids on farmers’ crops. Other means of attack and counter-defence were also employed, as highlighted in *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, which cites a letter by John Taylor who writes, ‘between 1841 and 1855, at least

45 Europeans were killed by Aborigines in Wide Bay and Burnett'. In December 1853, the citizens of Maryborough called for greater police protection as 'the blacks have openly threatened to kill the white people ...'<sup>30</sup> Badtjala warriors used stealth on the township of Maryborough and retreated to the sanctuary of Fraser Island when needed.

Killing machines in the form of Native Police were co-opted and administered by the state. Sheer violence rained down upon nation after nation as the frontier kept advancing north. 'The black police and their officers were quite as inhuman, if not more so. These guardians of the law seemed to have full licence to kidnap and ravish the women of the first tribe they came across after a depredation had taken place.'<sup>31</sup> There were no Aboriginal prisoners – only death, mutilation, maiming or rape. The frontier was open slather for the mowing down of Aboriginal populations. Many were hunted, ambushed at dawn and hounded into exhaustion from being 'on the run'. The Queensland government employed and sanctioned units of Native Police, who were shooting Aborigines in large numbers. Staying one step ahead was a repeated daily exercise in survival for Aboriginal men, women and children.

Officially there was no declaration of war by the state government. Records were kept but heavily doctored to mask the truth and scale of the violence. The most common euphemism used for massacres was the word 'dispersal'. Academic Christine Halse writes in her biography of Ernest Gribble, 'On the frontier beyond the towns, lawlessness prevailed. Aboriginal groups were "dispersed" – the euphemism for organised, quasi-martial sorties and the nineteenth-century synonym for "ethnic cleansing" a century later – by settlers avaricious for land and dominance.'<sup>32</sup>



*Dispersed*, installation at Andrew Baker Art Dealer, 2008.

In 2008 I singled out and highlighted the word dispersed in a sculpture. The text begins with a capital D, its facade sporting a number of .303-inch calibre bullets.

The reports of massacres, couched in euphemistic language, are consistent and make for heavy reading. Any analysis of Queensland's laws is repetitive with injustice and continued hypocrisy. The state played a dubious role in both its denial and evasion of the truth. A campaign of governmental cover-ups required a code of conduct. This took the form of silence. Perpetrators

maintained their silence with their deeds at the centre of systemic violence. Aboriginal losses were large.

Early in its reign, the Queensland government seconded the Native Police, a semi-military force, into its ranks. Aboriginal men from New South Wales were used largely to combat Aboriginal nations and their sovereignty in the state of Queensland up until 1870.<sup>33</sup> These encounters were bloody, brutal and took no prisoners. Often locals wrote and requested assistance, as Raymond Evans and his colleagues note:

After white inhabitants scouring Fraser Island failed to meet and combat the Aborigines there, A.H. Halloran concurred:

It requires people of their own class who can make their way through dense scrubs and creeks and places where a white man encumbered with clothing cannot travel.<sup>34</sup>

From 1850 to 1859, serious attention was being focused on Badtjala resistance and other episodes of retaliation. Evans writes that state control was established through the use of Native Mounted Police and ‘was adopted by the Queensland Government from the outset in 1859 as a counter-insurgency force to ascertain the ultimate supremacy of white settlement’.<sup>35</sup> The operational veil of institutionalised violence was sanctioned by the state through the use of these squads of Native Police.

In 1884, the police commissioner acknowledged the Native Police Force as separate from the ordinary Queensland police force. At other times, specific raids were carried out and any form of Badtjala resistance was set upon. The Native Police, in punitive action controlled by the state and tag-along ‘squatter vigilante parties’, were amassed to exact revenge.<sup>36</sup> On

4 August 1851, Commandant Walker made the comment that he wanted to ‘proceed against the “charcoals” of Fraser Island’.<sup>37</sup> It was not until December that they made their move across to the island.

In *Written in Sand*, Fred Williams states:

The native police invaded Fraser Island on Christmas Eve, 1851. The force comprised some twenty-four troopers under Commandant Walker, Lieutenant Marshall and Sergeant-Major Dolan, along with four local squatters and the captain and crew of the schooner *Margret and Mary* ... All were armed and sworn in as special constables. The activities of this punitive expedition over the next eleven days remain shrouded in secrecy.<sup>38</sup>

The boundaries between the law, mounted police and Aboriginal massacres were ambiguous. The cover-up and denials came through the use of language and, in particular, that word ‘dispersal’ in official report writing. Using deceptive language, falsifying documented records and staying silent were common practice. On the other side of the equation was an additional masking of brutal deeds carried out. How do you hide the evidence when Aboriginal bodies needed to be disposed of? Hiding physical evidence took ingenuity and cunning. The outcome of mass killings was a labour of sorts. Burning the remains or dumping them in watercourses, it seems, were the solutions.

Wave after wave of frontier violence impacted. The effects of dispossession on a race and their sovereign lands were a people subdued into submission. A new co-dependent relationship formed between the colonised and the coloniser. As Atkinson explains, ‘Having been

dispossessed, those invaded were dependent on the invaders. This dependency was then reinforced by institutional controls ... which increased the dependent conditions of the oppressed. The institutions and systems of the colonisers were imposed on people already traumatised by physical violence.<sup>39</sup> New colonial systems were put in place to oversee the remnant populations of Queensland such as *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*.

The British brought with them systems of control learned through years of slave trading from the African continent and elsewhere. It was an exacting measure, well practised, much like the introduction and control of the Native Police Force in Queensland, where the recruits had no loyalties to the Aboriginal nations they targeted, only to their commanding white officers. It was a well-established move in British combat known as 'divide and rule'. A selection of Aboriginal men, usually from New South Wales or Victoria, were recruited up until the year 1870. They could not speak the languages of the South East Queensland nations, signalling another decisive element in their lack of intertribal allegiances.

Aboriginal men not ensconced in the Native Police Force used a method of 'hit and disband', which was an effective tool in their guerrilla warfare. 'The warriors ... secretly watched the settlers, learnt how they spent their days, attacked when least expected and retreated immediately.'<sup>40</sup> In the districts, these Aboriginal men waited and watched their opponents. As squatter after squatter sought to clear his patch of land of local Aboriginal tribes, they led expeditions exhorting 'shoot to kill'. A period of open warfare was entered into. This weighed heavily on both sides; to be ingenious through stealth and to outmanoeuvre your opponent was a matter of life and death.

In 1854, the land commissioner wrote:

Fraser Island's Blacks ... have mustered in large numbers round the township with the expressed determination of rescuing the prisoner and destroying the Town. On Sunday last, they appeared in such formidable numbers well armed with spears and nulla-nullas that I was obliged to send in my own men to disperse them ... If they knew their own strength, the place would very soon be abandoned.<sup>41</sup>

This was the determination and strength of the Badtjala, a proud people, defiant in every way.

Battle made for strange bedfellows. 'A militant expression of white "mateship" ... cut across class lines simply because it reinforced racial ones.'<sup>42</sup> The commonality of war focused attention on one enemy – the 'dark skinned race' – as whites, outnumbered and fearful, banded together. Conflict in the Wide Bay region used all sorts of methods to get rid of the 'blacks'. Not all settler violence was avenged by using a gun. There are many accounts of poisons used, with flour or milk laced with either arsenic or strychnine being left out for curious or hungry Aboriginal clans, causing an agonising death, 'the so-called "death pudding"'.<sup>43</sup> Poisoning or being shot at by a Martini-Henry or Snider rifle both resulted in the same outcome: death.

Prior to the British encounter, Aboriginal populations were not affected by venereal disease. It was brought to these shores by the colonisers from the outset. Evans writes, 'More than half of the *Endeavour's* population were carriers of syphilis and gonorrhoea.'<sup>44</sup> Although sexual relations were not entered into during the encounters of the first Europeans from the *Endeavour*

with Aboriginal nations, sexual treachery lay ahead on the returning vessels of 1788 and thereafter.

There were many accounts of sexual exploitation and the duplicitous governing of Aboriginal women's bodies for sexual gratification that came with colonial lust, desire and hard-core malevolence. As Christine Halse identified, it was not before long that 'Aboriginal women were coveted sexual spoils of conquest'.<sup>45</sup>

There was no gentle demeanour about the invaders. Life was harsh and those who came into contact with it were subjected to their brutality. 'Ex-convict shepherds and station hands, brutalised by years of penal suffering, frequently rapacious sex assaults and often driven to panic reactions by the pressures of frontier confrontations, added a lethal ingredient to the intensity of conflict.'<sup>46</sup> Brutalised men would in turn brutalise Indigenous captives. European men often kidnapped Aboriginal children for their sexual gratification. Crimes of this nature went unpunished in the lawlessness of frontier society.

Attacks from all sides came upon Aboriginal women. The Native Police were notorious for taking and molesting women after battle. This was another war crime in the long list of charges that went on during the frontier reprisals. According to Richards, there was never disciplinary action or litigation against the troopers for sexual misconduct. However, the ramifications of unwanted sex were many.

A by-product of this war was the lethal spread of venereal disease. One could consider this a type of deliberate germ warfare. As Christine Halse writes, 'The Indigenous people of Queensland were being decimated by the bloody violence of colonisation, epidemics of smallpox and influenza, and the rampant spread

of venereal disease.<sup>47</sup> More and more Aboriginal women and girls became carriers of sexually transmitted infections. A consequence of sexual assaults on women and children was that syphilis went untreated. No medical attention was administered to Aboriginals for these infections. Untreated syphilis can affect the heart, brain, eyes, liver, blood vessels, bones and joints. Failing health meant lethargy and being left in a state of economic dependence and goodwill from their oppressors. 'Hospital treatment for paupers was dependent upon authorisation by a police magistrate,' Rosalind Kidd writes.<sup>48</sup>

Another indicator of colonial thought processes was the phrases coined and their meaning. An indication of what was taking place in Queensland is conveyed through the use of the English language. Research shows that:

... a whole language evolved in Australia around the sexual violations of Aboriginal women: 'gin' busts, 'gin' sprees, 'gin' jockeys, 'gin' shepherds, and so on. Such terminology places sexual violence against women in the context of sport and contextualises Aboriginal women as animals to be used for sporting pleasure.<sup>49</sup>

A constant niggle on the colonial man's mind was the licentious chase for Aboriginal women and children. Importantly, Jonathan Richards states, 'the violent sexual abuse of Indigenous Australian children began with colonisation'.<sup>50</sup> During the nineteenth century Aboriginal women were spoken of as 'black velvet' or 'stud-gins'. Aboriginal sexual encounters with marauding white males were debased, rough, and notably by force.

The irony of white libidinal hate tied to the rampant pursuit of Aboriginal women was an outright rejection from society. Aboriginal women were placed on the lowest of the hierarchies and never accepted above their

subjugated station in life. In particular, historical attitudes held towards Aboriginal women have carried through the generations and are deeply ingrained into white patriarchal society.

To highlight this, I conceptualise the words 'Black Velvet' to create an installation for an Australian viewing audience. Front and centre, I set out to do this by ensuring the work demands its own space and attention. Historically, Aboriginal women's sexuality has been tainted through white Australian men's actions and attitudes. This is one of the burdens of history we carry. Acting as both construct and stereotype, note that these words were reclaimed in the twenty-first century by an Aboriginal artist. One could argue that such reclamation is what cultures do to repossess the initiative, like the 'N' word (Nigger) adopted by African American hip-hop artists.



*Black Velvet*, installation at Northern Centre for Contemporary Art, Darwin, 2014.



A number of factors guided the fledgling state of Queensland. Aboriginal ‘walking pads’, economics, attempted ‘ethnic cleansing’ and libidinal lust are the ties that bind us. The rivers, pristine mountain ranges forested with Bunya trees, and the topographies managed by Aboriginal nations through firestick burning techniques were seen by the British as a ‘Garden of Eden’. With a keen eye, the invaders staked a claim on land, plundering resources and unleashing numerous violent deeds, the likes of which had not been seen before on this continent. But a physically imposing race of people, tall in stature, holding custodial responsibilities and sovereign rights to country, did remain determined to fight back.

The complexity of warfare and its contradictions were present through the disruption to traditional Aboriginal societies in South East Queensland with the recruitment of the Native Police Force, whose job it was to inflict harm on other Aboriginal nations. Different timelines in the process of unfolding colonisation made this possible. Co-opted and disenfranchised Aboriginal men, who had already gone through this war elsewhere, were prepared to put on a blue uniform, use a gun and take orders from white commanding officers. It must also be noted that a large percentage of Aboriginal recruits absconded.

Running concurrently to the open violence was an ‘economic warfare’,<sup>51</sup> for the acquisition of land meant wealth to the colonial settler occupiers. Standing in their way were Aboriginal nations. The undeclared frontier wars created psychological trauma for all involved.

If the European man didn’t have his arsenal, horses and the Native Mounted Police then a very different scenario could have been likely.

Similarly, 'If the white man had kept his hands off Aboriginal women', then an alternative history may have unfolded.<sup>52</sup> By the time the state government realised the losses of Queensland's Aboriginal populations, they began to act out of a sense of urgency, guilt and with an eye to the future. It was an indelible stain they did not want on their conscience; nor did they want to go down in history as wiping a race of people off the face of the earth.

During Queensland's imperialistic expansion, attitudes towards Aboriginal people were hardened and large numbers massacred. Dwindling populations signalled to the government that other measures needed to be put in place. The state's politicians did not want to be known for carrying out wholesale murder and tried to remedy the situation through devising new policy for the humane management of Indigenous survivors. The policy that eventuated saw the rise of *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, 1897.