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Contemporary Theatrical Landscapes: The Legacy of Romanticism in two examples of contemporary Australian Gothic drama

Abstract:

At this time in history, climate change predicts that we are once again dwarfed by nature. Nature is as Massey (2008) suggests, understood as the classic foundations for our contemplation of place and our fascinations with belonging to place. As creative writers, artists and scholars respond to escalating temperatures, rising sea levels and natural disasters, on a daily basis, the threat of climate change events loom large in the contemporary imagination. Humankind's pride in domination over all things natural is being put to the test, as we begin to anticipate the terrifying spectacle of our own damnation. From an ecological and eco-critical perspective, climate change may be considered, as the contemporary 'abomination' as it poses both a moral and a psychological paradox for us all. It is not an hallucinatory fantasy, nor is it a social pathology. Contemporary Australian Gothic drama explores the paradoxical relationship between perceptions of what is absent and what is present, between past and future, between climate, nature and disappearing landscapes and geographies. It is within this paradox of perception that Australian Gothic drama responds to literary legacies of Romanticism as we 'lament the loss of spiritual connections' to nature (Bate 1991: 17). This paper discusses the environmental and eco-critical themes embedded in two of my theatrical works, *Dust* 2016 and *Salvation* 2013, in which notions of *evil* in the Romantic sense are discovered in the ecologies of landscape, place and space from which we as humans are, in turn, becoming alienated.

Biographical Note:

Dr Linda Hassall lectures in Contemporary and Applied Theatre, Griffith University. She has a professional history as a director, playwright and dramaturge and applies her comprehensive knowledge of performance to her teaching and research disciplines. Her research explores Gothic landscape contexts and eco-critical discourses in creative works. Her play *Salvation Roses* which explores themes of white inheritance of landscape was nominated as a top ten finalist in the Queensland Premiers Drama Awards and performed at *The Salvation Project* at the Brisbane Powerhouse in 2012. Linda wrote and directed *The Strange-atorium* (2012) commissioned by The State Library of Qld for 'Out of the Box', Australia's largest children's theatre festival. Her first play *Post Office Rose* (2008) won a Matilda Award for Best New Play (2006). Recent projects include ARC funded *The Return* (BEMAC, 2014). Other dramatic works include *The Ballad of Euchrid Eucrow* (2016, Metro Arts) an adaptation of Nick Cave's novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1986), *Dust* (2015 Metro Arts) and *A Contemporary Hymn* (2011, Metro Arts).

Key Words:

Creative Writing – Australian Gothic – climate change – dramatic writing

Theatre has always been at the forefront of socio-cultural communiqué and as such is a potent cultural tool that can be utilised to shift perceptions around ecological issues. Performance and play scripts can place environmental criticism in a productive relationship with cultural expression, and dramatised social and political landscapes can expose the ideological distance between us as a species, and our habitat. The plays discussed in this article, rearticulate representations of nature, as *landscape.* What eclipses landscape from historical Romantic and/or Gothic traditions of nature is as Guadio (2008) suggests, materiality, the process of how we as human beings have shaped it into what it has become in this time of ecological crisis and environmental instability. Romantic legacy suggests that contemporary landscape discourse expresses the conjoined experience of not belonging with a 'poeticised and aesthetic longing' (Kelsey 2008: 205). The dramatic landscapes discussed are representations – images, ideas, interpretations, conceptualisations or fantasies – of spaces and places I dream, places where we humans struggle to belong and as such are poeticised and aesthetic 'culture-scape[s] rather than empirical reality' (Chaudhuri 2002: 12). This paper specifically analyses two plays through eco-critical, landscape and post-colonial lenses and in doing so suggests that the Contemporary Australian Gothic form provides me with a unique opportunity to tell stories about our undeniable human predicament and fragile ecological situatedness. Using the plays as jumping off points I explore the relationship between historical experience, cultural artefact and 'sensed visual and verbal forms' (Helsinger 2008: 326) and further analyse representational landscapes through politicised and ideological lenses. Responding to the work of the Romantic poets who have come before me, my plays set out to create landscapes that explore humankinds' awe in the face of their loss of unity with nature. Viewing history from apocalyptic imagined futures, the dramatic works attend to the phenomenology of landscape experience to expose the consequences of our present [dis]connectedness to our ecological responsibilities.

Eco-criticism is understood as the interface between nature and culture, a site whereby a critical application of an eco-critical perspective is aligned with cultural representation (May 2007). Contemporary research into eco-criticism has grown from the legacy of Romanticism, specifically in literary studies fields of landscape aesthetics and writing about nature and the natural world. Consequently it is a useful framework within which to view dramatic works such as *Dust* (2015) and *Salvation* (2013) as it exposes what May (2007) suggests are the mythic underpinnings of unsustainable resource extraction and exploitation (104). May (2007) further suggests, that theatre is an encounter between people and place, and as such is a powerful cultural tool that can be utilised to shift perceptions around ecological issues (95). The dramatic encounters in my works are identified by an eco-critical 'landscape imaginary' – specifically the apocalyptic wastelands represented in *Salvation* (2013) and *Dust* (2015). Within these worlds the dramatic surround extends beyond the onstage environment or the actual sceneography to examine the impact nature or the natural environment has on character, specifically on their psychology and behaviour. *Dust* was produced at the Sue Benner Theatre, Metro Arts in Brisbane in September 2015 and *Salvation* was produced at the Visy Theatre, Brisbane Powerhouse in 2012. Prior to being produced the plays went through lengthy creative development and workshopping processes.

Dust was developed as a response to increasing confirmations of global warming that predict a 21st century in which we humans will be forced to come to terms with our relationship to the natural world. Written from the perspective of the future and performed by characters that are the generations who come after us, the work is an intimate conversation between performer and audience. Similar to the musical poem *Adelstrop* (Jacobs &Thomas 1958) as is discussed by Morton (2008), ecological questions as asked in *Dust* are in the repetition of the word 'yes':

> SHAMAN: It was beautiful, yes? When you dustdrinkers could Landspeak to the Earth and you would listen to her warnings? No landdreaming here now. Yes? None.

> Never-more. Landreaming lost now under the dust. But you disbelieve. Yes? We tells you now across time and distance and dust that soon you will turn to look at each other' look at what you did and you will be …gone…Yes 'tis true. (Hassall 2015: Scene 4, *Dust*, September 2015, Metro Arts)

The repetition of the question, 'yes?' suggests the audience is complicit in the circumstances explored in the narrative. A deliberate provocation for environmental and sustainability awareness, the play poses a hypothetical circumstance that is set in the 'days after the day of the final disaster' (Hassall 2015: *Dust*, Scene 1, September 2015, Metro Arts). In doing so the play becomes an invitation to the audience – to the viewers of the sceneographic landscape – to meditate on present and future natural worlds. Switching between questions asked of an audience by future generations, and the sharing of the stories left behind by us in the days 'leading up to this day', the play suggests that in 'these present days, perhaps in these our very last days, in the days leading into the end of days as we know' (Hassall 2015: *Dust*, Scene 1, September 2015, Metro Arts), we could have done more because we had the knowledge and the opportunity to do so.

Rosendale (2002) suggests that a growing number of scholars are interested in expanding the purview of eco-critical practice through an extension of the definition of texts for eco-critical examination. Consequently, drama or theatrical play scripts and performance can place environmental criticism in a productive relationship with cultural expression:

> *Stage direction: The Shaman is the tribal leader of the future generation living in the dust. He has travelled through time and distance and dust to converse with us in the present day.*
>
> SHAMAN: These days are your last days, perhaps? Come Hell or High Water. Hell or High Water is comin'. Yes? Yes it is. So we is gonna give you a taste. A small taste of Hell and tiny sip of High water. Just in case. Just in case you'se might be interested in seeing what it might be like if you'se continue on. In these disaster days - and you surely might agrees with me that these are Disaster Days you is livin' – you is livin 'and breathin' history. Have you thought 'bout that? We's want you'se to ponder for a while on how's you is breathing your last on the edge of the Apocalypse… in these your days…in the days before the dust. It's your legacy we is livin' (Hassall 2015: *Dust*, Scene 1, September 2015, Metro Arts).

Morton (2008) discusses 'dark ecology' and suggests ecological art may focus on a particular place, a particular moment and a particular people or community in the construction of the fictional world. Similar to Romantic and Gothic traditions where the character often addresses or *speaks to* the reader directly, it is the rendering of the inter-personal communication from performer to audience that sets up a relationship between addresser and addressee. The intimate relationship establishes a point of contact between subjective expression and objective perception in a space where performer and audience inhabit the same dimension. *Dust*, in it's inter-relationship between eco-critical theme and dramatic fictive performance negotiates time, space and place with theatre's materiality, the performative body and the community. If, as Cosgrove (2008) suggests, space and time are historically and culturally constituted, the translation of meaning across perceived space and time is central to the rituals of everyday life, and to the exceptional moments of remembrance and history associated with the cause of the condition of the characters. The story presents a hypothetical shared collective history – the historical circumstances related by the characters in the future exposes the cause and effect of our present ecological apathy. Within the play, the human character is at the mercy of nature, as nature becomes a symbolic performer, the protagonist. Civilisation has been beaten and humans are living in untamed and uncivilised environments. Therefore, the play suggests, humans are no longer in 'the biblical role of Master of the Universe' (May 2007: 76). *Dust*

recognises nature's climactic fury as a cultural construction and, in doing so, preserves the Romantic flavours of modern consumerist ideology (Morton 2008: 183) while the weather event predicts a 'fierce inexorable interconnectivity with human culture (May 2007: 95).

Viewing current climate change events from future perspectives, *Dust* uses the ultimate climactic 'event' as the abomination which is the jumping off point for the play – the work explores the tension between now and the future and between the possibilities of inaction and consequence:

> *Stage direction: Two timeframes overlap. Birdman speaks to the audience from a future perspective removed from the event. Birdgirl is in the moment of the story that Birdman is relating.*
>
> BIRDMAN: I saw her. A woman. A very pretty woman. Beautiful even. What struck me was that she was wearing lipstick. Red lipstick.
>
> BIRDGIRL: I found this tube. In the dust. Maybelline. I could just make it out. Maybelline.
>
> BIRDMAN: It was the first colour I'd seen in a very long time… Anyway, I saw her looking over the edge into the…. into the what? What would you call it? Chasm? Emptiness? Hole?
>
> BIRDGIRL: Space. You call it empty…space.
>
> BIRDMAN: What do you call that sort of space? That space that's left behind when the earth starts to tear itself open? When place is gone and there is only space. What do you call that?
>
> BIRDGIRL: Empty.
>
> BIRDMAN: I was sort of concerned that she might fall in. Into the…whatever you call it…So, I yelled out to her.
>
> LADY! HEY LADY! I said. BE CAREFUL!
>
> I didn't go over to her, I just yelled out. Well yes. Yes I was scared that it might open up more and I'd end up falling into the emptiness. So I yelled out to her. I yelled: 'BE CAREFUL'. And she turned and asked…
>
> BIRDGIRL: Did you see that?
>
> BIRDMAN: What I said.
>
> BIRDGIRL: The bird. The bird that fell out of the sky into the into the into the into the/
>
> BIRMAN: And I said I hadn't seen any birds for quite some time.
>
> She said it was a shame that I hadn't seen it. She said…
>
> BIRDGIRL: O Shame…what a shame.
>
> BIRDMAN: She said she thought it must be the last one. The last bird ever. The last bird we'd ever see. She asked me if I thought that was sad?
>
> BIRDGIRL: Don't you think that's sad?
>
> BIRDMAN: I said I supposed I did. Before she asked me that I'd never really thought too much about birds, you know? Then she did it. She blew me a kiss. A great, big, red lip-sticked kiss. I felt that kiss cut through the dust and settle on my lips. Soft like. It had been a long time since anyone had kissed me like that. I was still feeling her kiss when she turned back to the hole and dived… graceful as all get out. Like a bird she was. She spread her arms wide like a bird on the wing and she dived. (Hassall 2015: *Dust*, Scene 5, September 2015, Metro Arts).

Addressing ideological and philosophical tensions associated with rising ecological consciousness and cultural practice, the representation of nature and the natural world investigates the ecological well being of species and spaces. The landscape imaginary of the *Dust* world is represented through the conflicting relationships between the characters and their politicised land/culture-scape. In the contemporary environmental transactions that explore climate change as a phenomenon, *Dust* pays as much attention to the user (or abuser) of nature as nature itself. In doing so, the play is an eco-critical response to post-colonial discourses that address what might be perceived as the 'injustices felt in the body of experience of community of land' (May 2005: 101).

Australian Landscape as Cultural Representation

Carleton (2012) suggests that theatre represents and enacts space and as such reads, politicises and activates the ways in which cultural geographies and landscapes are imagined. In doing so, he claims, theatre brings Australian landscapes to the fore. Further, Carleton discusses how Australian landscapes are theatrically examined in metaphoric or metonymic ways. Landscape, our geographical isolation and our relationship to land and nature have been a focus of the creative energies of traditional and contemporary Australian playwrights. Despite urbanisation our fascination with nature and the natural Australian landscape is the significant over-riding phenomena that continues to define us nationally and culturally. The representations of landscape I discuss as dramatic analysis reflect not so much natural place or encounters but rather implicit landscape encounters that reflect my fears, yearnings and culturally negotiated beliefs. Sceneographic and thematic landscapes become my representational vocabulary for the subjective pursuit of cultural awareness for environmental preservation. The theatrical landscape, therefore is a symbol, enacting my 'individual view detached from the whole' (Johansson 2008: 224), and prompts my artistic exploration of time, memory, ecological inheritance and character representation. Like so many Australian writers who have come before me, landscape is a signifier of my social and cultural heritage in, as Gibson (1992: 75) so clearly claims, the arbitrary system that is Australian history. Actual geography in my plays is represented within the theatrical atmosphere and images, and in the relationship between the land, the culture, the environment and the human inhabitants. The representation is no longer geography or nature, but *landscape* and therefore contains meaning in the cultural environment for which is it realised. However as Gibson posits, within cultural systems, the very notion of landscape in nature is a cultural construct. May (2007) also discusses nature as a cultural construct and states that by our very understanding of it there is a 'fierce inexorable interconnectivity with human culture' and it is within this interface between nature and culture where 'the critical application of an eco-critical perspective' is represented (95).

The performed landscapes as discussed are subjective representations and are foreshadowed in the images, metaphors and symbols triggered by nostalgic connections to a space that is no longer a true representation of a place, if it ever was. Landscape holds the aesthetic poignancy of longing and embraces the Romantic conflict associated with not belonging. While nostalgic connections may suggest a loss of unity with nature, the sensory associations of memory can present images that co-exist with perceptions of sublime nature and, from a theatrical perspective, provide intimate experiences of place (DeLuca and Demno 2009). In *Salvation*, it is within the aesthetics of place where the ecocritical analysis of the work is situated. The nostalgic memories of landscape, place and space, create a Gothic poeticised atmosphere that resonate with a rhythm that is melancholic, sometimes eerie but flavoured with the sounds and smells of memory. In turn, memory is linked to intellectual, social, political and economic histories within the land/culturescape:

> FUTURE: I loved her too cruelly. Too long. She did not forgive me. Her colours have faded. In her sadness her former brightness flickers. Her generous sandy hills are left scarred. Deep pits of emptiness where her beauty used to be. I took from her all she had to give. She rejects me. And my heart breaks. My heart is torn from my chest…The red winds that blow from the West no longer whisper but scream my betrayal. She hurls her drought and fire and flood at me and scorns my fear (Hassall 2013: 16).

De Luca and Demno (2000) suggest that theatre can offer a sustained investigation of political and cultural rhetoric by contributing to developing discourses that treat artistic works as integral to political analysis (241). As a playwright identified as a Contemporary Gothicist, I aim to reinvent my personal relationship with the landscape by re-imaging a politicised future landscape. The plays are set in illusory places; apocalyptic environments that are often located in existential time frames that eulogise the heat, the isolation, the space, the dust and the distance of an exacerbated Australian mythic landscape. The plays evoke a Gothicised landscape that I propose will, in the future, be both out there in nature and within human kinds psychological nature. Inverting the idea of a sublime outback landscape, all 'sense of human time is lost, it is both before time and outside of it' (Goodman & Johnston 1972: 26). The plays layer perceptions of history, time and place through spatial experiences that depict ordinary characters in extraordinary and intensified circumstances. Through a deconstruction of place and space, the plays therefore align with post-colonial explorations of conflicting themes pertaining to humankinds' inheritance of and relationship with actual and psychological place.

The Politicised Landscape

In recent theatrical representations of landscape in the contemporary Australian Gothic genre landscape may be considered as an active participant in the dramatic worlds depicted.[1] *Salvation* explores landscape as a cultural entity; it can be considered an arbitrary document of personal subjectivity, dramatic persuasion and conflict, contained in a specific narrative history. The dramatic narratives give rise to formulated meaning. Landscape as the focus and predominant symbol is not a *re*-presentation of a portion of reality or nature but rather an imagined, interpreted and new presentation of the reality within the frame of the cultural world created, and as such impacts significantly on the psychology and behaviour of the characters. Landscape therefore serves the dual purpose of analysing and interpreting the conceptual aesthetic embedded in the drama and suggests that the plays may be read outside their dramatic function to explore the role spatial experience has in constructing cultural meaning (Chaudhuri 2002; Fuchs 2002). Harris (2008), states:

> By studying landscapes, we can begin to see and understand some fresh perspectives on the mechanisms of specific cultural systems such as racism, oppression, strategically instituted famine, poverty, environmental degradation and its links and flows of capital, social exclusion and class stratification. We can also … gain new insights into the human impulse for sensual and spiritual delight, religious practice … and the great gift that is public space (190).

Salvation attempts to culturally engage with the spatial experience from a (white) modern (and future) world perspective, wherein the characters – who operate as a chorus and are identified as voices from the future/past and/or present – exist in Gothicised layering of present and historical time frames. Their sense of identity is both enabled and disabled through the diegetic flow between themselves and their relationship *to* and *of* the history of themselves in the landscape:

> FUTURE (3):[2] My Dearest Darling Patience It rained today. And the land was cleansed…

FUTURE (2): No one left now.

FUTURE (1): Why were anyone here in the first place I'd like ta know.

FUTURE (2): When?

FUTURE (1): Before the weather.

(A dingo howls in the empty distance).

Before the bastard dogs and bleak weather. Before one fuckin' disaster after another. Before we got buried in Salvation.

FUTURE (2): Holocaust initially. That was then forgotten, rewritten. Then it was the Coal or the Copper or the Cattle. Gas or oil. It's all gone now. Musta been some fucking good reason ta come out here after all that went on. All that violence. All that murderin'. How the fuck would I know? Men came. That's what I know. Men came and attempted to make a mark.

FUTURE (3): She's opening up. Out there. Cracking and splitting/

VOICE (1): Gets us all 'ventually. The distance.

VOICE (2): It's difficult to move through anymore. She's opening up. Out there. Cracking and splitting/

VOICE (3): Didn't get the blacks though.

VOICE (4): Nah. They thrive on distance.

VOICE (5): We just disappear in it. It's like we was never here. It's like this land don't care if we was here or not when she starts throwin' all that distance at ya. It'll get ya 'ventually (Hassall 2013: 17).

Salvation questions the dominant ideological and/or mythological perceptions that have been used by white Australians in promoting the significance of (white) European society in the Australian landscape:

FUTURE (1): This is their fucking country and it's more than fucking obvious it is not a place for pale women descended from the fucking English criminal classes.

FUTURE (2): Don't you go tellin' me this country isn't mine… they took this country. I know that. But I had nothin' to do with that… weren't me. It weren't theirs, but they took it. What the fuck can ya expect… Murderers, rapists, prostitutes, thieves/

FUTURE (1): /original fuckin' boat people.

FUTURE (2): They weren't gonna come here and ask to fucking share, now were they? That's history. It matters to the victors. The tragedy is that the others, the blacks were primitives. Primitives have no history.

FUTURE (1): The blacks were before history – white history it is I'm talkin' about – they were the before history, history had to butcher. Them poor bastards being here brought the white mission into perspective. They brought the hope of our Salvation. (Hassall 2013: 8).[3]

For Future (2) to be without landscape is a state which Harris (2008: 191) posits 'is perhaps, not to be', a state in which there is no sense of belonging or community. In stating that the colonial history was an event she/he had no control over, human claims of their right to the landscape become contentious in a contemporary racial cultural landscape. As such, *Salvation* acknowledge Gibson's (1992: 79) definitive discussion on the problematic in cultural

landscape discourse, specifically that the play may be read as falling into 'classic nationalist orthodoxies that have always run through landscape tradition; indigenous peoples becomes equated with spirit of place and white settlers are alienated from spirit of place'. However, *Salvation* consciously attempts to challenge mythopoeist discourse by locating the narrative in a dramatic framework wherein landscape is independent of the national identity, and pro-active in its own decision-making processes:

> FUTURE (3): The empty vessels of settlement carried our language – never uttered, never heard – yet the sounds of it shattered the silence and shredded the distance.
>
> FUTURE (4): Language. We brought the English language into a landscape that could have easily done without it.
>
> FUTURE (3): We babbled into the distance and told it of buildings we planned to construct.
>
> FUTURE (5): We told it inconsequential things.
>
> FUTURE (1): We complained about its heat.
>
> FUTURE (2): We told it about curtain materials and rugs and crockery and babies yet to be born.
>
> FUTURE (4): We named places in the distance, paddocks and mountains and other things that had no use for our useless names.
>
> FUTURE (5): In building and cursing and debating and naming we aimed to settle our own history and map out a future.
>
> FUTURE (1): The distance remained silent. Her silence echoed her contempt. (Hassall 2013: 8-9).[4]

Salvation assumes neither a white alienated perspective nor a black spiritual position. Rather landscape perspective is performative and therefore prone to alternative dramatic and theatrical representations. Landscape as a dramatic and ideological concept is dominant in positioning conflicting theatrical viewpoints.

Ideological Landscape

Salvation aims to invite discussion on ideological perceptions and representations of cultural landscape from an analysis of the dramatic work. The landscape oscillates between victim and victimiser while sub-textually it wields superiority over the lives of the characters that inhabit her. Landscape is metaphorically the first victim of colonisation; her traditional carers usurped by a white European population who effectively raped her for natural resources that are in the dramatic landscape totally exhausted and almost forgotten.

The previous excerpt explores the cultural meaning of a 'white' inheritance of contemporary Australia. Ideological representations of the Australian landscape often neglect the fact that the Nation grew from a violent and bloody racial history. Maddison (2011: 62) insists that 'a crucial legacy of the history wars [in Australia] is a divisive politicisation of our national history along ideological and partisan lines'. As Gibson (1992: 66) suggests, in the history of Australian literary, filmic and dramatic narrative 'the common denominator is the Australian landscape': it is both the 'leitmotif and a ubiquitous character that has come to represent something other than [an] environmental or geographical setting (63)' as in the new Australian Gothic plays. Gibson (1992) further posits that to analyse the Australian landscape, the questions of habitat and hermeneutics and the constant shift between referent and reference

should be acknowledged. He discusses conflicting viewpoints wherein the continent understood as landscape is both symbolic terrain but also comprehensible as 'extra-systemic, preternaturally unmanageable, or un-cultural' (66). Carter (2010) refers to Sir Thomas Livingstone Mitchell's (*Field Books*: 1838) historical explorations of landscape and recognises how 'chroniclers of Australia could not separate history from geography' when preserving the 'spatiality of events' and as such, 'invented rhetorical viewpoints' (116).

Marshall (2008: 196) states that 'discussion on landscape invites projections of cultural fantasies while never fully capitulating to their ideological imperatives'. Chaudhuri (2002) suggests that by entering the landscape discussion with an analysis of dramatic fiction the plays put forward:

> …ideologically and psychologically revealing statement about our relation to the world around us, to a way of 'not seeing', of masking and occluding the unsavoury truths about our relations to each other and the land we supposedly share (11).

The Australian landscape as a geographical presence has become so prevalent in the national cultural psyche that it inspires and realises numerous fragmentary images and possible worlds for artistic and dramatic stimulus. Carter (2010: 349) acknowledges that traditional artistic discourses symbolised 'not the physical country but the enactment of a historical space'. *Salvation* may therefore be considered as enacting the historical landscape space in fragmentary images. As a creative work it contains and identifies tensions between what I have inherited, what I know, what I perceive and what is actually culturally specific. Gibson (1992) states that inherited cultural knowledge is not something that can easily be dug up, even though it is buried just below the surface of the Australian landscape and claims that:

> if definitions of what it means to work in and on Australian culture must be formulated … then a nationalist representation of the societies living here is currently highly dubious if one is allied to the unorthodox, the venturesome and the different in Australia (195).

The tension as identified by Gibson (1992) is still relevant and incorporates numerous anomalies between white and black, male and female, inhabitant and inheritor, place and space, reality and ideology; and is specific to the understanding of where we are *or believe we are* positioned personally, socially and culturally in the landscape. Both *Salvation* and *Dust* suggest that traditional cultural depictions and images are distorted in a contemporary analysis of cultural representations of nature. Constructions of nature are both historically situated and politically deployed (Glotfelty and Fromm: 1996) and as such raise questions about the 'impact of cultural values and ideologies on the material ecological world in which humans are ultimately embedded' (May 2005: 101).

The Romantic legacy whereby an idealised perception of the Australian landscape is traditionally constructed is, as popular author Tim Winton states (Ben-Messahel 2006: 100-101), due to its 'ideological and mythic function rather than its close relation to historical conditions at any points in Australia's past or present'. Ben-Messahel (2006), discusses how many Australian persons that have had minimal contact with the real outback or bush landscape imagine place through books, films, words and images. Landscape is the phenomenon through which ideological perceptions of Australian place, space and cultural identity are traditionally explored and the idea of the intractability of Australian landscape 'has been an essential part of the national ethos' (Gibson 1992: 66). Historically, as Althusser (1977) suggests, landscape is represented by the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. In the context of this discussion, representational landscape may be understood as both the subject of dramatic device (perceived) and the object of material environment (natural). In offering dual perspectives of place ownership and appropriation, the plays attempt to resist post-colonial discourses where the colonisers (characters) constitute white supremacy over

place by proposing the concept that the symbol of supremacy is the landscape herself. Ashcroft (2000) discusses challenging dominant discourses through symbolic resistance and states:

> The most fascinating feature of post-colonial societies is a resistance that manifests itself as a refusal to be absorbed … which engages that which is resisted in a different way, taking the array of influences exerted by the dominating power, and altering them into tools for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being. (p. 20).

Despite the success of colonisation, the transplanted social organisations that spread throughout the heart of the natural Australian landscape are examined in the gothic genre through conflicting experiences of despair and hope which, as Goodwin (1987: 35) suggests, can be acknowledged as running 'roughly parallel to the contrast between colonialism and nationalism'. The cultural cannon of colonial literature in dealing with 'alienation, disjunction, terror and conflict' examines white protagonists who are uprooted and transplanted, who are estranged and terrified and 'almost always victimised by a powerful oppressor; the landscape, their convict heritage or the indigenous population' (Turcotte 2009: 355). The landscape, with its many phenomena 'unnameable in the English language' impacted on colonial experiences and 'the beginnings of white settlement in Australia [were seen as] brutal and dismal' (Goodwin 1987: 37). Chaudhuri (2005) however, from a more contemporary perspective claims that it is hubris to presume suffering is only a human condition.

Plays such as *Salvation* address socio-political themes relating to Australia's diminishing fossil fuels and natural resources. Until the early 1900s white Australia was a conflicted nation caught between the desire to kill off the entire aboriginal population and the requirements of their pastoral needs to use them as an essential 'slave' labour force (Biskup 1973; McQueen 2004). Consequently, the colonial ideology developed; political and economic power was in the hands of the Europeans, 'while the Aboriginal societies retained traditional characteristics' (McQueen 2004: 63). Lucashenko (2004) discusses the value of the landscape beyond the economic and suggests it is simultaneously myth, history, resource and economy and claims that 'Europeans came and overstocked and overstayed and consequently white Australians run to the coastal edges of the continent from the parched land they created' (18). Such theories initially frame the ideas embedded in the dramatic works. Indigenous sensibility as discussed by Lucashenko (2004) suggests that (prior to forcible removal or massacres) there [was] no inhospitable, barren or dead heart landscape as [Aboriginal] co-existence with the landscape was centred around spiritual meaning, purpose and value. Consequently, this porous relationship, which is based on nurturing, healing, responsibility and sanctity, is far more democratic than it is for an industrial (European) society (18–19). The worlds created in my plays are shaped by the behaviours and the pedagogies of previous generations and who are as a consequence now exiled in a spiritually devoid and perilous nature and environment of their own making.

Chaudhuri when attempting to define landscape states that the 'instability and ubiquity of the term reflects the cultural need for landscape as a concept, making it powerfully generative for many fields including dramatic writing' (2002:12). Fuchs (2002:1) acknowledges that the word embodies an awkward conflict 'straddling the gritty specificities of the material world and the idealisations of aesthetic traditions'. This Romantic philosophical conflict is discussed by Gibson (1992) as the paradox between the half-tamed, yet untameable and is not exclusive to diverse fields including Indigenous, natural or social as it concedes social subsistence while never allowing domination. He suggests this is because:

> it has been presented as so tantalising, so essentially unknowable-yet-loveable, the land has become the structural centre of the nation's myths and belonging … if the land can be presented as 'grand yet unreasonable', the society which has been grafted on to it can also be accepted as

> flawed and marvellous … marvellous because it has subsisted, with all its flaws, in this grand, yet unreasonable habitat (67).

Chaudhuri (2002) acknowledges the paradox through terminology, preferring to discuss 'culture-scape' rather than landscape and suggests that debate encompassing discourse in landscape fields is principally definitional and occurs around issues of 'whether landscape refers to empirical reality, a piece of the world that is actually out there or is always a representation – an image, idea, rendering, conceptualisation, or fantasy about what's out there' (12). When considering Chaudhuri's claim from the position of contemporary dramatic works, I refer to Fuchs (2002) who states that contemporary thinking in all areas of theatre is almost 'exclusively concerned with the subjective, with contested representations of the human subject as the natural environment and the non-human order are restored to appropriate presence in dramatic form and meaning' (4). Re-interpretation of ideological landscape is as Bennett and Royle (2004: 172) posit in their discussion of Althusser (1977), concerned with the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. Newman (2007: 112) claims that there is no way to master or dominate ideological positions on landscape as the notion of ideological supremacy is at best untenable and in reality authentic landscape is concealed. *Dust* and *Salvation* for example refer to the ideological ideas and themes explored as well as to the deceptions the theatrical space and illusions convey in an attempt to seduce the audience into believing or fearing the consequences:

> SHAMAN: It was a time of Magic – a time of miracles -
>
> A time of your magnificence… Yes?
>
> Didn't reckon on them horsemen of your apocalypse ridin' through your lives and takin' away your Godgiven glory over all things. Yes?
>
> You were surprised. Yes? (Hassall 2015: *Dust,* Scene 3, September 2015, Metro Arts**).**

The plays discussed aim to draw attention to our tenuous relationship with contemporary nature and its monstrous bedfellow climate change. As a theatre artist, I am responding to immediate harrowing conditions of water shortage, environmental crisis, oil spillage, species extinction, over population and horrific climactic events. My aesthetic, poetic and dramatic reactions to the ecological conditions I refer to as the contemporary abominations may be considered as deeply romantic responses to the world. As Cosgrove (2008) claims, 'we cannot know nature outside the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves' (90). My ideological concerns about disappearing productive, actual and beautiful nature are embedded in the dramatic culture-scapes created. 'There is no more nature' a statement made by the character Clov in Beckett's *Endgame* (1958: 16), no longer seems as absurd a comment to make as it was in the twentieth century (Rigby: 2006). The existential wastelands as explored in Beckett's landscapes are becoming more real. Theatre as a visual and participatory medium continues to be a unique social and cultural platform through which to pose landscape questions and as such can be considered a critical space for eco-critical analysis and debate.

Endnotes

[1] Refer Ash et al 2004, Surviving Jonah Salt; Betzien 2005, Children of the Black Skirt, and 2011 The Dark Room; Carleton 2006, Constance Drinkwater and the Final Days of Somerset; Hassall 2011: A Contemporary Hymn and 2008: Post Office Rose; McGahan & Charles 2009: The White Earth; Mellor 2008 Madga's Fascination with Wax Cats; Watts 2007, Not Like Beckett.

[2] Numbers not included in published version.

[3] Inspired by Paul Carter's 1987 account of Australia originating in acts of settlement, possession and dispossession: The Road to Botany Bay: an exploration of landscape and history.

[4] Inspired by Paul Carter's 1987 account of Australia originating in acts of settlement, possession and dispossession: The Road to Botany Bay: an exploration of landscape and history.

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