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Theatres of Dust

Climate Gothic Analysis in Contemporary Australian Drama and Performance Landscapes

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*To the ones who keep me grounded, Stephen Rowan, Isabella Daisy, Indigo
Rose and Thea Lily.*

PREFACE

I have always loved the landscape. The Australian landscape. The stories of it I heard as a child growing up enthralled me. The dry and dusty Central Queensland town of my childhood was the sort of place that embedded such stories, narratives, vignettes, and anecdotes in its working-class socio-cultural milieu. I was mesmerized by the country and the tragedy of those who worked in it or battled to survive it and its ‘bastard’ weather. The heat, the smell, the dust, the distance of that landscape has never left me. That landscape of my childhood calls to me still and I try to capture my response to its call in my writing:

She is always behind me ... the distance. ... she smells red. Her colors blow the guilt winds that whisper history. The winds reach across the distance and coat me in the dust of the landscape of *my* past ... and I almost smell the thin, raggedy girl wearing hand-me-down clothes, barefoot in the dirt. Long blond hair tangled down her back, her eyes always on the horizon...waiting ... That girl is still within me ... she is sometimes ‘woman’ in my work ... She fears that in the centre, green is almost forgotten ... a distant memory layered in dirt. A sky the colour of kerosene ... of day-old bruises, streaked in nicotine glazed cloud turns to bitter memory, as night battles for a place in the scalded desert. At the back of me is always the memory of the land breathing the distant, dry smell of the bones of those who have come before me ... their names never noted in plaques, or scratched into tree stumps, or chiselled on the face of monuments ...

sshhhh ... A scalding national anthem whispers as the land cracks but doesn't bleed. In her menopause, she spreads herself open for the rain that doesn't come ...

My memory reveals a sun-baked landscape of (mis)-remembrances of place, a dusty (ir)-real time wherein a vivid physical and psychological landscape tapestry was, even then, unravelling. Playwrighting and performance making now provides me with the opportunity of being able to grapple with the irresistible pull of these common thematic threads and I attempt to grasp that landscape by focussing my artistic and dramatic imagining on place, geography, distance, space, belonging, salvation, damnation, dust. I am now a long way from my childhood and that (ir)-real landscape, its nostalgic memory, is vanishing. The winds reaching across the distance are more vicious, whispering a different story as the land transforms and the climate ravaged future is becoming more and more visible through the dust.

Like what is buried deep within my own memory, in the Australian nation context, the ancient and ethereal landscape has always narrated a space wherein the country itself plays out like a theatrical production with, dust, erosion and increasing catastrophic weather events the lead protagonists ... *A scalding national anthem whispers as the land cracks but doesn't bleed*. Despite being an arid country that has always suffered extensive drought, devastating cyclones and catastrophic bush fires, Australia can still be described as a country that is largely un-polluted and underpopulated. It is perhaps this paradox that lulls us into a national lethargy wherein we boast—in our self-deprecating Australian tone—it (climate change) is something that might happen ... sometime in the future and when it does ... we'll deal with it, like we've always dealt with weather in this 'mongrel' country – battle it or be beaten down by it. The Australian landscape is, and always has been, a chimerical beast. It is now a site of protest and a subject of politicized debates over voracious resource extraction and ineffective land management practices. Economic stability is at the heart of environmental discourse, even as the mining industry and the farming and export culture are identified as contributing to escalating climate change ... *in the centre, green is almost forgotten ... a distant memory layered in dirt*. It is ironic that while we are all aware of global warming, it may be alleged that many Australians, remain either apathetic, resigned or nonplussed about scientific response to and political rhetoric about, climate change. Indeed, it has been the extreme landscape and

its corresponding weather conditions that have defined and framed the popular Australian identity to the rest of the world, since colonization. Much of the artistic and scholarly work that makes up the Australian cultural and literary canon, mine included, is of and about the country, defined by the Australian landscape—how it affects the psychology of a nation, the psychology of character and corresponding character and social behaviours.

As a playwright and contemporary performance maker, I acknowledge climate science as the basis for the questions I explore through the powerful cultural platform of theatre. I am well aware that the scientific community is the group with the most up to date information on climate change. Scientists have the unenviable role in predicting the escalation of climate change, whereby often the information communicated may be construed as conflicting or confusing for the broader Australian population even as communities reel as lives and livelihoods are being taken by the voracious climate change beast. There is no doubt that the wider scientific community has continued to communicate and debate climate change implications and our careless human impact on environmental degradation for many years. The plays discussed in this book in many ways respond to the important work of climate scientists.

Australian theatre-makers are contributing to the climate discussion from unique cultural and artistic perspectives. Playwrights, performance makers, production and technical teams are using the immediacy of the theatre to engage communities through communal, interactive, or cultural explorations about the vast quantities of opposing evidence and abstract statistics concerning climate change. While scientific data dissemination may in some cases alienate the public and even render some of them frightened or helpless in the face of such overwhelming problems, theatre can uniquely explore the scientific data from personal, emotional, and psychological perspectives. Theatrical engagement is an intimate encounter between spectator and performance or play and reader and can cut through the confusion to make the unfathomable, *relatable*—relatable to individuals, communities and the broader public. In doing so, the dramatic and theatrical platforms can use, select, organize and disseminate critical climate information to: enhance general understanding of climate change, to investigate politicized debates concerning carbon emission and even pose hypotheses about climate crisis mitigation. Significantly, it can explore these concerns through our own unique ways

of storytelling, a form in which the country, like it always has, becomes a central antagonist on the nation stage.

The dramatic form framing the discussion in this book draws significantly on the Australian Gothic ... *At the back of me is always the memory of the land breathing the distant, dry smell of the bones of those who have come before me.* The contemporary emergence of the Gothic style in Australian drama suggests that contemporary playwrights and theatre makers are embracing elements of European and Southern American Gothic traditions and adapting them to their immediate socio-cultural context. The Gothic form enables me and the playwrights included, to pose dramatic and theatrical inquiries though landscape, and environmental and atmospheric investigations that are becoming more and more focussed on how climate change is affecting the uniquely beautiful country that we have projected to the wider world for the last two centuries. The theatrical works discussed throughout all explore (from varying perspectives) how climate change is an abstract, intangible beast, a contemporary monster of our own making. These works narrate how it has reared its ugly head, spewing fire and flood fury while simultaneously ravishing the landscape with extreme drought and erosion. They depict the landscape itself as a Gothic paradox of reversals. The Australian landscape and our place in it are explored through these works, from what I identify in this book as an *Australian Climate Gothic* perspective. The Australian Climate Gothic claims that Australian landscape is transformed, acclimating into what I further describe as climate-scape, a physical and psychological space which claims that our enduring ability to beat the odds and battle everything the landscape throws at us is a heroic memory, a disappearing myth belonging to the popular colonial ethos of the past.

I have always loved this landscape. The Australian landscape ... *She is always behind me ... the distance. ... she smells red. Her colours blow the guilt winds that whisper history.* It is obvious I have a strong sense of place attachment. Therefore, it is important for me to acknowledge that the discussions within concerning white inheritance, legacy and identity, are formulated from my privileged position as a white, middle-class female artist and scholar, and as such I respectfully acknowledge that many First Nations and Torres Strait Islander Peoples do not share a sense of harmony with non-indigenous Australians about the land.¹ Further, it is a simple fact that self-preservation in a politicized climate affected landscape suggests that many Australians are cautious about environmental issues taking up too much time and space, especially in the wake of COVID 19,

where the population does not recognize how environmental consciousness will kick start a flailing economy reliant on mining and agricultural and meat export. The varied dramatic imagination(s) that form the content analysis in this book attempt to provide some insight into how environmental analysis can be shared, how theatre can speak to people in a way that science cannot and further, how the theatrical imagination can offer a platform to situate important climate discourse.

Nathan, Australia

Linda Hassall

NOTE

1. See Sarah Maddison's (2011) book *Beyond White Guilt: The Real Challenge for Black-White Relations in Australia*, which discusses ways modern Australians can right historical wrong and acknowledge collective responsibilities to develop a revitalized version of the nation and national identity.

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own artistic practice and in my promotion of ecological stewardship in emerging theatre makers. Finally, a big thank you to Dr Natalie Lazaroo for all her support in the proofing of the manuscript.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Climate Gothic	Australian Climate Gothic Drama
Climate-Scape	Climate Affected Landscape
Myth-Scape	Mythic Landscape

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

(MIS)-REMEMBRANCE, (IR)-REALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

(Mis)-Remembrance and (ir)-reality are personal terms used to excavate and define my memories of the outback landscape. My memories of the past and what it represents, in many ways defines me as woman, artist and scholar. The landscape I remember is simultaneously real and aesthetically, something other than real—enhanced by my subjective associations to it and by my experiences within it. While not being historically true or indeed accurate to geography, it is true and accurate to me. Consequently, (mis)-remembered and (ir)-real landscape explores the tension between actual geographic landscape and biographical constructs of landscape phenomena, flavoured by my personal experiences of growing up in it (see analysis of my own plays in Chapters [2](#) and [3](#)).

WHITE INHERITANCE

White inheritance is a term used in this study specifically to identify tensions associated with Australian land ownership/acquisition and custodial heritage of land held by white Australians of English and/or European descent.