

# Evoking, Excavating and Analysing Landscape in the New Play *Salvation Roses*: Constructions of Identity, Culture and Meaning from a Dramatic Position

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*Salvation Roses*, a new theatrical work, interprets the underlying pull of a landscape that contains undercurrents of both brutality and beauty. *Salvation Roses* poses landscape as an identity - something other than environmental or geographical setting – within the work landscape is nominated as a geographical entity *and* a theatrical protagonist. Consequently, the play suggests, landscape, environment and place informs socio-cultural behaviour and inherent character identity. This Doctoral artistic research explores the creation, development and analysis of the play from the playwright's perspective and excavates historical, inherited, cultural, artistic and personal landscape contexts. These contexts inform the major theme investigated within the artistic work: 'white female inheritance' of landscape. Whilst the play provokes questions about white inheritance, the research investigates themes relating to colonisation, landscape inheritance, place attachment, race and gender through the lenses of the fictive work. The analysis of the play addresses post-colonial debates specific to contemporary cultural discourse relating to land entitlement, custodial heritage and environmental sustainability from the point of view of, a dramatic play script. Utilising landscape and spatial theory and informed by post-colonial theory and cultural geography the theoretical framework applied deconstructs the work for the cultural meaning it offers. As such the research identifies tensions between what is (mis)remembered, what is inherited, what is known, what is perceived and what is actually geographically and culturally specific.

**Keywords:** landscape, identity, playwrighting

**Linda Hassall** is an Associate Lecturer at Griffith University in the Applied Theatre Department. Linda has over 20 years experience as a director, playwright and dramaturge in professional and independent contexts. Her play *Salvation Roses* was the focus of her recently completed PhD at Griffith University and addresses themes of white inheritance of landscape. The research will be extended in the new creative work *The Salvation Project* programmed at the Brisbane Powerhouse in August 2012. Linda has recently been commissioned to write and direct the *Strange-itorium* for Out of the Box 2012 - Australia's largest children's theatre festival. The *Strange-itorium* investigates and applies Gothic elements in children's theatre contexts. Linda's first play *Post Office Rose* (2008) won a Matilda Award for Best New Play (2006) and was published by Playlab Press (2008). Linda's other published play *A Contemporary Hymn* (2012) in *I Will Kiss You in Four Places*, Playlab Press examines the effect of urban landscape on youth culture behaviours. *Salvation Roses* was listed as one of the top ten finalists in the 2011 Qld Premiers Drama Awards. Linda has been commissioned to write the play that will be the final phase of *The Difficult*

*Return* project. This work will explore the impact of combat experiences on returning veterans and their families.

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*Salvation Roses* is a new play that explores themes of white (female) inheritance of landscape and place. Central to the work's creation and development is an analysis of landscape that draws on elements of landscape and spatial theory and cultural geography.<sup>1</sup> The theoretical research scaffolding the play significantly extends the reading of *Salvation Roses* by addressing post-colonial discussions<sup>2</sup> from the position of a contemporary Australian Gothic work. Lehmann<sup>3</sup> discusses post colonial theories in post dramatic performance and claims:

Postcolonial theatre points out that performance has the power to question and destabilise the spectators construction of identity and the 'other' - more so than realist mimetic drama, which remains caught in representation and thus often reproduces prevailing ideologies.

Applying landscape analysis to the first completed draft of *Salvation Roses* revealed how the play may be read outside its dramatic function to explore and question the role landscape/spatial experience may have in generating cultural meaning concerning identity and relationship to place. The conceptual aesthetic landscape evoked in *Salvation Roses* complies with Fuchs and Chaudhuri's<sup>4</sup> discussion that suggests that the landscape contexts in performance texts may be read outside their scenographic function to explore the role spatial experience has in constructing cultural meaning. Landscape analysis effectively relocated the work, moved it out of a creative fictive exploration by extending the reading of the dramatic landscape into a broader cultural context e.g. landscape as interpreted in the play has the potential to generate wider social and cultural meaning in analysis. For example, *Salvation Roses* (from a creative dramatic position) may have the capacity to contribute to broader discussions on socio-cultural, socio-racial, economic and environmental statements in landscape fields.

*Salvation Roses* explores internal and external landscape - psychological space and geographic place - in an attempt to unearth undercurrents of brutality and beauty, possession and dispossession, belonging and 'unbelonging'<sup>5</sup> from a white Australian female perspective. The play personifies an apocalyptic landscape as 'she.' 'She' is menopausal and coming to the end of her life-span/life cycle. 'She' is no longer fertile. 'She' is no longer sustainable. 'She' has been raped of all her essential resources and as a result 'she' is no longer habitable.

Lanie No one left now.

Why were anyone here in the first place I'd like ta know. Why were anyone here anyway?

Eva When?

Lanie Before.

Maggie *Raining on them with shredded news paper.*

Before the weather.

Before the bastard dogs and bleak weather.

*Radio News Broadcast in Japanese.*

*There seems to be panic and chaos before fading to static.*

Before one fuckin' disaster after another.

Before God took the world back and we got buried in Salvation.  
Eva Holocaust initially.  
That was then forgotten, rewritten.  
Then it was the coal or the copper or the cattle. Gas or oil.  
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? S' All fucked now.<sup>6</sup>

Four white women exist in what is depicted throughout as an infertile, inhabitable, inhospitable and unforgiving landscape. The personified landscape exacerbates the women's continuing estrangement to and with space and place as themes of white female inheritance and land ownership are explored through the conflicting relationships between character and environment. Consequently, tension between geographical space as place (real) and geographical space as identity and presence (created) is posed. The tension is explored from the outset of the work as identified in the setting:

*The township of Salvation is floating somewhere in the middle of the great Southern land. There is a service station being swallowed by the external (greedy) landscape. The landscape is creeping in and taking over. Taking herself back. She is discernible as heat haze though barely discernible as geography. She is alive.*

*There is a sun-bleached sign:*

SALVATION OPEN - FUEL - REFRESHMENTS...TAKE A REST BE REFRESHED<sup>7</sup>.

The spatial experience as outlined in the setting impacts significantly on the characters psychology e.g.

*The heat haze reaches in through the doorway. The space crackles, sizzles. A lone dingo howls. Another answers. A pup yelps. The heat moves. The landscape shifts, reaches, moves closer. There is another loud noise like a ships horn whispering through mist.*

Dawn: Hear that? I think the ground is opening up. Out there. The cracks are getting deeper now...will have to, may choose to... step over them now. When I leave, I reckon.<sup>8</sup>

The dramaturgical exploration of new spatial dimensions depicted in the psychological and emotional relationship created between landscape and character may suggest that dramatic explorations of landscape as *presence* may be positioned within the field of cultural studies. For example the adversarial relationship between character and landscape impacts on the women's perception of self and identity in place. Their relationship with the landscape and its embedded history further contributes to their present condition of stagnation.

Dawn If I could only step out... through...

The cracks are getting wider now. You could sail a ship down those cracks. I bet they reach all the way to the ocean now. They are a little daunting, a little terrifying. Don't you think?<sup>9</sup>

The characters in *Salvation Roses* are unable to escape their present circumstances and consequently the landscape binds them to place. Their inability to leave is directly linked to their immediate, social and personal attachment to place. The character (self) is understood as always being located in a specific psychological space. In turn, their identity is embedded in time and place.

Lanie We gotta bear the brunt.

An' ya know why? Cause we can take it. She knows that.

That's why she don't kill the men out here.

Couldn't be fuckin' bothered. She lets the chainsaws and the vehicles and the grog do that for her. Useless bastard's men in this country.

Always have bin'. She got no use for them and their ideas' a mateship and heroes and cheerin' fuckin' dead soldiers paradin' down streets, laying flowers on monuments.

Nah we gotta bear the brunt'a it cause she respects us.

We survive anything she throws at us 'till we're fuckin' dead and then she just throws a few more punches at us. And we keep sayin' fuck you! She respects that.

Penance. Payin' the fuckin' piper. God save the Queen and her Wild Colonial Boys and let this country deal with the women.

That's why we're still here.

That's why it's left up to us to go out there 'an meet em.<sup>10</sup>

Harris<sup>11</sup> suggests that “place attachment and its symptoms of nostalgia, homesickness, patriotism, nationalism” are an example of the role landscapes play in the “psychic investment” in identity. In *Salvation Roses* the characters’ obsessive attachment to place is explored through female perspectives of a shifting reality that layers historical experiences within the present circumstance. *Salvation Roses* attempts to culturally engage with the spatial experience from a (white) modern world perspective, wherein the characters 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. Consequently the concept of time (past, present and future) is manipulated in the dramatic landscape to represent the past as always being present and viewed through the immediate and future circumstance.

*The dingoes are real close now. We can hear their breathing in the sounds of the ancient songs of the landscape. Their shadows flicker across the heat haze. The man struggles to maintain his place in all the distance and turns to the sound of a Tall Ship arriving through the mist of the heat haze. Travelling up the cracks in the landscape to the driveway of the service station.*

Dawn Oh my God. Jesus...Do I look alright?

Lanie Look beautiful love.

Eva Might wanna brush ya hair.

Maggie Don' wanna look like a scrubber when he, it, they arrive.<sup>12</sup>

The function of the landscape in the play moves beyond the onstage environment or the actual scenography to explore the impact landscape has on the characters psychology and behaviours. As an adversarial presence the landscape communicates a complex sociology that

is embedded in the aesthetic world and is manifest in the tension between character, place and space.

The dramatic re-presentation of landscape in this way has specific textual functions. Landscape is acknowledged as an 'other' character e.g.

Landscape Female. Greedy. Menopausal.\*

*\*Landscape is not an actual human character but operates as the antagonist within the circumstances.*

*The other characters defer to her as 'real'.<sup>13</sup>*

'She' is present and prevailing and therefore enacts a sociological complexity entailing both physical and psychological presence. As a cultural form the play alternately explores landscape as the philosophical, geographical and cultural milieu which distinctively exerts control over the characters' destinies. In positioning landscape as presence and recognising 'her' identity in this way, the concept of landscape sociology as a dramatic device is investigated. Landscape sociology (as explored in the play) suggests that landscape enacts a specific interactive role within the socio-cultural milieu. The concept of landscape sociology attributes the actual geography with symbolic functions of status and power.

*Out of the vast distance the heat haze reaches in through the service station's doorway. The space crackles, sizzles as the landscape spits at the women. A lone dingo howls...The heat moves. The landscape shifts, reaches, moves closer.<sup>14</sup>*

The play poses a sophisticated theatricality wherein the Gothic landscape<sup>3/4</sup>the town of Salvation and the service station within is both a dominant symbol and a major theme of the piece. Characters feel displaced, a sense of discord, and dispossessed of a time they are desperately trying to recapture through the re-enactment of their history in this place. Gelder and Jacobs,<sup>15</sup> discuss Freud's theories on the 'uncanny' in relation to Australian literature. Freud's theories, they suggest, align with post-colonial concepts of discord that I believe are inherent in the Australian Gothic genre. Refuting contested theories of Australia as a settler nation, the 'uncanny' infers that a condition of *unsettledness* is the usual experience. Feelings of alienation are expressed through the breaking down and stripping away of social and/or cultural conventions.

Gothic landscape enacts a specific interactive role within the socio-cultural milieu in the town of Salvation. In attributing landscape with aggressive behaviours 'she' is represented as an antagonist within the play. *Salvation Roses* therefore may be aligned with contemporary Australian Gothic works<sup>16</sup> through its exploration of white female characters struggling with their own limitations in an estranged landscape. *Salvation Roses* questions that which defines our interpretation of civilisation (colonisation) through associated themes pertaining to the white woman's responsibility in the civilising experience. Recognisable Australian geographic characteristics including isolation in space and boundless space are reimagined as 'she' becomes an active overwhelming and powerful presence. Sociological meaning is made through the complex interaction between constructs of the actual scenographic geography and the represented aesthetic interpretation of landscape behaviour. Landscape therefore isn't just about geography or the scenographic framework of Salvation's dramatic world but also refers to what Chaudhuri discusses as *culturescape*. Culturescape is identified by all or some of the

“surrounding geography, the immediate place, architecture, environment and social groupings.”<sup>17</sup>

Culturescape in *Salvation Roses* is explored in the tensions between; landscape and cultural space, myth and history, character and legend and importantly, white settlement and experiences of unsettlement.

Lanie She likes her spirits.

That bitch (*talking about the landscape*).

Holds ‘em close alright.

Maggie Lots’a no-one’s here to talk to.

Black ones, white ones, blackened ones.

(she) Won’t let ‘em go.

This place.

(she) Stamps em in the dirt and keeps em there. Ya can feel em when ya move through her distance.

Out there on the hriiizon (horizon).

Somethin’ not right.

(the) No-one’s out there makes ya skin crawl.

Just move past ‘em. Best not ta disturb ‘em. That’s for the best. Move through ‘em and let ‘em rest.

When ya get ta Salvation, keep travellin’ and don’ look back.

Eva Findin’ Salvation. Sayin’ Sorry. Repenten’. Don’t mean ya saved.<sup>18</sup>

Landscape is both the antagonist and the predominant symbol in the narrative and is not a *re*-presentation of a portion of reality but rather an imagined, interpreted and new presentation of the reality within the socio-cultural world of *Salvation*. Actual geography, place and environment are weighted with symbolic functions of status and power and as such ‘landscape’ - actual (geographic) and interpreted (theatrical) - is attributed with its own behavioural signifiers that are specific to the dramatic world.

Landscape themes are explored through the culturescape experience and include; human isolation in boundless space, concepts of distance as a pervasive and often brutal presence and geography and environment as that which impacts directly on authentic socio-cultural behaviour. Conflict occurs between ordinary place and environment and what is enacted by a landscape imaginary, e.g. the remains of a service station in the town of Salvation conflicts with the adversarial landscape presence attempting to take back the country it was built on. There are distinct Gothic modes at play in representing the landscape from this perspective and during this study I found it difficult to separate contexts of landscape as relevant to the Australian Gothic genre, from post-colonial discourses of place, class, gender and race.

*Salvation Roses* does not privilege a white or an Indigenous landscape politics. Yet it is evident that the *subtext* addresses related post-colonial theories by offering conflicting points of view from white and Indigenous historical racial perspectives. I propose that in contemporary Australian landscape discourses socio-racial issues pertinent to historical perspectives are thematically embedded and as Maddison states:

History matters: both recent history and long ago history. If we cannot face some of the uncomfortable truths about our past<sup>3/4</sup>if we cannot break our national silences - we will remain unable to engage in adaptive work in the present and the future.<sup>19</sup>

From the perspective of immediate and popular dramatic culture, historical contexts filter through new Australian Gothic plays, wherein playwrights are trying to come to terms with their place in the bloody landscape of history. The historical Australian landscape is often ignores the uncomfortable truths of history and is revealed through (white) masculine traditions of mateship, courage, endurance and represented by a mythologised imagining of the individual relationship to the real conditions. Consequently landscape is the phenomenon through which ideological perceptions of Australian place, space and cultural identity have been explored and “the idea of the intractability of Australian landscape has been an essential part of the national ethos.”<sup>20</sup> Gibson further states that in artistic exploratory discourse, “the people utilising it [landscape] need to feel in charge of it ... the land has to become an object to their subjective domain, unless it is meant to signify nothing but indomitability.”

Landscape within the play is constructed from a female perspective, is gendered as female and is represented as ‘a parched, greedy bitch’ and ‘an unforgiving cunt.’ ‘She’ is attributed responsibility for the exacerbated social and cultural experiences of the female characters.

As Miles<sup>21</sup> suggests in the introduction to the *Female Gothic Then and Now*, gender is an unwritten law of the traditional Gothic genre wherein female representation has a tendency to oscillate around issues of victimisation, responsibility and autonomy or alternatively focus on the lives of women that have been subject to patriarchal conditioning. The female characters in *Salvation Roses* acknowledge their dissatisfaction with such roles yet they do not necessarily contest them in ordinary ways. They accept their place in the culturescape and their femocentric socio-geographic roles suggest there is a manifestation of violence that works through the nooks and crannies of the gendered landscape. The women are often written as *aggressors* and their exacerbated violent behaviour is posed as being inherent to class, place and environment.

*Lanie Picking up some dirt, letting it run through her fingers. The Man enters from out of the distance. He is drunk. Drinking a can of rum.*

This landscape’s thrown every punch at me she can. She couldn’t kill me, so she used the heat and the dirt and the flies ta drive the blokes mad. Thinkin’ they might do it for her. Took more ‘an a few piss-weak floggin’s to kill me. Didn’t it? Didn’t it?

**TIMESHIFT**

*Man throws Lanie against the wall. She gets up and spits in his face. He knocks her down again and kicks her. Radio static builds.*

**TIMESHIFT**

*She pulls herself up out of the dirt. Passes the rum can to Dawn who puts it in her suitcase and hands her the ice-cream bucket. Radio static fades out.*

Lanie Thought I was dead that one time. Wasn’t though. Not that time anyways. After I pulled meself ta’gether, I fucked ‘is mate out the back a the beer garden. Took me floggin’ and moved on. Lost a kid the next day.

*She hunkers down in the dirt and scoops at it with the ice cream bucket.*

Scooped it up in a ice cream bucket outta the dirt and threw  
it down the lav. Got fuckin' on with it.<sup>22</sup>

The blood spilt on the service station floor, or into the red desert dirt is done in brutal ways which may be considered as overtly violent and even tasteless, but which I prefer to think of as *not usual* - strange or uncanny. Charles in the introduction to my latest published work *A Contemporary Hymn* states: "Hassall's voice is gritty, regional...she dissects notions of femininity against stark settler landscapes."<sup>23</sup> It is these elements that are recognised as fuelling Gothic landscape representations in *Salvation Roses*. Behaviour is considered extreme as the characters' authority over their own lives is often disrupted by the land/culturescape experience. The female character is nominated as *co-aggressor* and equally invested in the aggressive behaviour enacted. Both male and female characters find themselves in untenable positions as the hierarchal role is nominated as belonging to the land/culturescape. White displacement in the landscape is also explored through pervasive symbolic representations.

Dripping outa me, slipping down me thighs. All the little girls. Little clots'a blood.  
Little moist things. Six babies I lost to this land. Six. This country'll suck a womb dry.  
Greedy fuckin' place this. S'what happens when something's so dead. It gets a smell'a  
life... sniffs it out... in the dust storms and the red desert heat. She creeps up ya legs  
and pushes herself inside ya, reaches up and tears it right outta ya. An' you... well  
you're clamping ya legs together and writhing in the dirt, praying the little bastard'll  
Lanie grab hold a something...but it can't. Too fuckin' small and this country's too fucking  
strong. An when it's over, ya look at the dark patch in the dirt and you say "Alright you  
bitch, you fucking cunt, ya got another one." An ya walk away. This country's just as  
much mine as anyone's. That dirt out there... that's my family. I got blood ties to that  
dirt...my bastard kids are out there, soaking up the sun, soaking into the dirt, soft little  
bones drying in the creek. I got just as much claim to this land as any other bastard  
that's got their blood tied to it.<sup>24</sup>

The above example suggests there is a deliberate dislocation of human-geographic relationships from intellectual social constructs of behaviour.

Landscape in *Salvation Roses* becomes malleable and the setting and/or dramatic world often shifts to explore the cross-over between worlds; historical, present, past, future and apocalyptic, by often surreal characters who exist dually in both spiritual and temporal realms. The works of many playwrights associated with the genre<sup>25</sup> tend to focus on coming to terms with socio-cultural violence and the bloody racial history embedded in perceptions of our (white) selves in the landscape. Stephen Carleton suggests that this may be attributed to writers and artists having strong but fraught connections with concepts and perceptions of indignity:

Our history haunts us and the land we live upon. There's a continuing connection with the nations ghosts up here that has managed to survive 220 years of concerted white erasure.<sup>26</sup>

As Melissa Lucashenko states; 'We know that the blood has stained the wattle, Henry, and the bleeding hasn't stopped yet.'<sup>27</sup> As playwright perhaps I feel I have some responsibility in drawing attention to the source of the wound.



Eva She's pale. Ya reckon she's looking pale? Better get her that tea.

Lanie Course she's fucking pale. Her great-great-grandmother was descended from the Irish as I recall. No... English. Got a bitta English in her somewhere way back.

Eva We all got a bitta English in us way back from what I recall. Shoulda left this bitch of a place to the blacks. Weren't meant for white women this place. Serves us fucking right. S'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.<sup>28</sup>

Elinor Fuchs acknowledges that in dramatic writing landscape has the potential to emerge in the awkward conflict “straddling the gritty specificities of the material world and the idealisation of the dramatic and thematic aesthetic.”<sup>29</sup> *Salvation Roses* investigates the power of landscape - the actual, the imagined and the aesthetic and evokes strong visual images that are linked to human *and* landscape psychologies.

Lanie Can be claustrophobic all that distance. Stops up ya lungs. Gives ya a cancer in the lungs, distance does. Ya can feel all that distance pressing down on ya. Squeezin' the life outta ya. Ya realize how fucken' insignificant ya are when ya consider all that distance surroundin' us out here.

Lanie Gets us all 'ventually. The distance.

Eva Didn't get the blacks though.

Maggie Nah. They thrive on the distance.

Eva 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.<sup>30</sup>

Within the play, experiences of estrangement and dispossession sub-textually remind us of Australia's violent history from varying positions of race, class, gender, behaviour and sexuality. Within all these elements, landscape remains a principle motif but a motif that challenges the obsessive (Australian) 'mythopoeist investment in it that has been traditionally definitional of identity and relationship to place. Within the work the *spirits* of time, circumstance, place and people are as tangible as the flesh and blood characters. *Salvation Roses* unapologetically deals with violence, the characters exert violence over each other and the landscape exerts violence over them. Through conflicting themes, images, imaginings and ideas *Salvation Roses* attempts to make what is ordinary and usual in contemporary life, *extraordinary* in ways that are beyond the context of place, gender, race and class; having a cup of coffee in a service station is really about exposing an extraordinary secret. The seemingly innocent exposure of a secret withheld for too long in turn generates what may be considered as extraordinary behaviour though specific to space, place and identity and class.

Landscape and the various theoretical and aesthetic concepts associated with the term provides me with the means to explore the struggle I have in coming to terms with the landscape and my tenuous inheritance of it as a white woman, an artist, a mother and an

academic. The landscape represented in the play was initially generated by my own landscape experiences and my history of growing up in a distinctive place. As such, landscape in the play is dually authentic and inauthentic - it is real and somewhere out there and it is imagined and somewhere within (a created, artistic construction). The play became a means of distilling my curiosity and pre-occupation with landscape and through the creation of it I developed and nurtured skills of 'observation, analysis, empathy and self-reflection' while exploring and transforming elements of 'individual landscape experience as cultural product.'<sup>31</sup> *Salvation Roses* attempts to excavate the ideological and the corresponding landscape analysis provided the framework to explore philosophical tensions associated with my needing to stamp my white footprints on the cultural landscape. The creative research provided me with the opportunity of being able to question my inherent place in this country. Perhaps the analysis of the play is my attempt to understand the purpose of the imprints I strive to leave behind.

## NOTES

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