

Tide Weavers Project

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Declaration

I declare that all material contained within this thesis is my own research and contains as its main content work that has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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Abstract

The *Tide Weavers* Project examines the representation of landscape in motion picture films and explores the ways in which certain filmmakers closely reference the desert landscape to mirror and represent notions of self and consequently, to shape film character portrayal. I argue that these filmmakers use this setting to describe a particular relationship for themselves and their characters. In this relationship the desert becomes a space in which to project and examine aspects of self and it can initiate a transaction or relationship so intimate that at many points, (human) being becomes landscape, and landscape becomes being.

I will draw on the work of a range of Philosophers and Postcolonial theorists to inform my reading of this relationship and to frame my engagement with specific Australian and international films. The inclusion and analysis of my own desert-based motion picture script *Tide Weavers* will add to my understanding of the possibilities of film (as a medium) provides for altering an audiences' reading of landscape. I challenge the notion of estrangement from the land, either through ignorance or where colonialist landscape theory detracts from a sense of connectedness, such as through the superficial or subjective application of cartography, fear arising from monotonous and unfamiliar geography, and the eroticising of land as woman.

I engage with current theory surrounding the idea of fusion with landscape to open new opportunities for exploring landscape/character interaction. I also propose that collaborative working processes between indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers have the potential to alter the ways in which landscape is both represented and interpreted.

I then look at how these ideas are translatable to the themes of the *Tide Weavers* script. Grief and gender are primary themes, with an emphasis on how respite, sacred space and surrender to landscape can lead to healing. I believe this work will contribute to exciting new filmic interpretations of landscape theory.

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Tide Weavers Project Introduction

Lost in exterior space, he is disconcerted to see a whole new prospect open up: the endless space of our interior self.
(Schama 489)¹

The Nullarbor Plain, spanning 720 kilometres (447 miles) of southern coastline from the border of Western Australia into South Australia is *my* subjective landscape – a location of intense memories and journeys spaced periodically throughout my life. When I was eight, my wanderlust parents packed up a Ford station wagon, a caravan and three children for an incredible 11-week, 12,000 kilometre journey from Bunbury, Western Australia to Proserpine, Queensland and back. We crossed the Nullarbor in 1975 on an unsealed and potholed gravel highway that gave rise to the acute medical condition and wry family joke of 'the Nullarbor Shakes'. It was transformative to view that vast, alien landscape for the first time, as a child within the presumptive safety of the family group.



Fig. 1. My mother, sisters and me (left) western end of Nullarbor Plain 1975

¹ Schama describes the fate of the author from Louis Raymond de Carbonnières' novel *Voyages au Mont-Perdu*. Paris, 1802.

I have often reflected on an idea that is familiar and banal to me, yet still manages to surprise: that travelling definitively shaped me. It may be argued that this is a particularly Australian mindset, but I have found evidence to the contrary. Desert landscapes may be provincial, but the triggered sensations can be universal. Exposure to wide, open spaces may alter perceptions, beliefs and habits forever. My landscape, the Nullarbor Plain, one of the flattest, driest areas in the southern hemisphere, has particular power, and my experiences there inspire my writing. It is this intense personal interaction with desert regions that forms the core of my argument.

Whenever I enter a desert landscape, there can be a sensation experienced whereby the landscape seems to enter my being, and I become almost inseparable from landscape. This notion of fusion² of landscape and being is often expressed in theoretical writings and artistic renderings on the subject. Therefore, I believe that artists who engage with this topic often closely reference the desert landscape to mirror and represent notions of self, and consequently express these discoveries in creative works. This transaction, using the desert landscape as a means of displaying and processing past experiences, memories and emotions, is so intimate that at

² I define 'fusion' as a metaphysical (and possibly physical) blending of human with landscape, where particle, idea, memory, expectation – a range of tangible and intangible concepts – may be transferred, and remain combined to create new physical, cultural and artistic possibilities.

many points, the (human) being becomes landscape, and landscape becomes being.



Fig. 2. Gilgerabbie Hut, Nullarbor Plain

The *Tide Weavers* feature film script explores the relationship between Amie, a Mirning Aboriginal woman, and Natch, a non-Aboriginal woman, who meet on the Nullarbor Plain whilst involved in independent personal grieving. Through their interaction with each other and with the landscape, they source the strength to move forward into a new emotional space and begin the process of healing. The drama will be shot in a sparse, poetic style, emphasising the striking natural light and crisp white, tan and blue colours of the region. The story's primary location is the Nullarbor Plain, which is unique for its 25 million-year history and, literally, for its *nullus arbor*, the absence of trees. The surveyor E. A. Delisser called it by this Latin name in 1867, and in the late 1800s William Tietkens unearthed fossil evidence of an ancient seabed. The Mirning people called it *Oondiri* or 'the waterless', and in its centre one may stand circling and not see a variation in the

complete flatness of landscape for 360 degrees. Its cavernous limestone plateau contrasts with the rich red of the Great Victoria Desert to the north, and ends dramatically at the Great Australian Bight, the concave coastline where 60 metre cliffs plunge into wild and treacherous ocean.



Fig. 3. Great Australian Bight cliffs, Nullarbor Plain

From May to October, Southern Right whales complete a long migration from Antarctica to visit the Bight's warmer waters. It is a special place, where visitors may watch whales in their natural habitat, involved in mating displays, giving birth and calf-feeding from a vantage point on the land. The seasonal tourist traffic is managed by the Yalata, a community that was established in 1952 when Anangu people were displaced by the atomic bomb tests at Maralinga. The original inhabitants and custodians of this area, from Eucla (*Yirkala*) on the West Australian border to Penong, South Australia, are the Yirkala Mirning people. They believe the whales are their

brothers and sisters, and after history's attempted decimation of both the Mirning people and the whales, they claim their survival and renaissance of identity are intertwined.³

Tide Weavers was conceived 13 years ago. It began with the production of background material into a short documentary, *Gampa*, based on April Lawrie-Smith's life. April is a Mirning woman based in Adelaide with traditional Nullarbor connections. My introduction to April was for writing purposes: to base a character on her, and more importantly, in collaboration with her. This led to a productive working relationship and strong connections to April's community. Original research, visiting the region, and cultural, historical, geographical and family-based discussions with April began soon after meeting.

More recent research into films⁴ similar to *Tide Weavers* has contributed to my framing of the story within a greater context of Australian and international film. I chose films that told stories about the desert and about women, and explored issues of grief, violence and healing. My academic research focused on Australian identity, colonialism, post-

³ From research for the documentary *Gampa*, with Mirning woman, April Lawrie-Smith. Telephone research notes were documented from March 1996 onwards.

⁴ Key films included Peter Weir's *Fearless*, *The Last Wave* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Igor Auzin's *We of the Never Never*, those of Ivan Sen, Wim Wenders and Terrence Malick.

colonialism and landscape.⁵ After becoming aware of the cultural and academic material available, I am confident that although *Tide Weavers* resonates with contemporary arguments concerning landscape, excitingly, no one film is exactly like it. Its particular focus on strong female leads, indigenous/non-indigenous interaction, grief, healing and redemptive love is unique. *Tide Weavers* will potentially occupy an exciting new filmic space.

⁵ Key texts included Ros Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. United Kingdom: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1998; Graham Huggan, "Maps, Dreams, and the Presentation of Ethnographic Narrative: Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*." *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 22.1 (1991): 58-69 and Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001; Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987; Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; and Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.

Chapter 1

It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves.
There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the
primitive vigor (sic) of Nature is in us, that inspires that dream.
(Thoreau 126-72)

Intrigued by the potential for exchange between desert landscape and body/being, particularly expressed in artistic works, I researched ideas that might support this concept. I began with what seemed an ethereal notion, triggered from sensation and echoed inexpressibly in the naturalistic style of Terrence Malick's and Wim Wenders' films. At first, it appeared unlikely that the argument could be defended. The dispersed, albeit concordant elements did not consolidate until investigation of research material began to uncover links. In reviews, Australian filmmaker Ivan Sen was compared to Malick; Malick was inspired by Heidegger,¹ and so on. I discovered that director Peter Weir hovers dangerously close to a form of storytelling in which characters are mystically 'absorbed' by landscape, and that he expresses his frustration in depicting the density of Australian indigenous culture and a non-indigenous person's inexplicable attachment to the same landscapes.² I recognised many people's desire to reconnect with landscape, to explain this craving and to celebrate it. This way of seeing and engaging with landscape

¹ Hwanhee Lee, "Terrence Malick." *Senses of Cinema*. 2002: Online.

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/malick.html>. 15 August 2007.

² For extensive discussion on Weir's philosophies in his filmmaking, see Stephanie Gauper, "Aboriginal Spirituality as the Grounding Theme in the Films of Peter Weir." *The Midwest Quarterly* 42.2 (Winter 2001): 212.

informs the feature film script, *Tide Weavers*, and in this thesis I am able to support it with historical and contemporary landscape writings and works.

Studying the research material, I have identified ongoing development of filmmakers' and theorists' cultural and philosophical perspectives. These ideas span colonisation, traditional views of landscape and those described as postcolonial. All are problematic, and contain varying levels of political correctness toward women and indigenous people, sometimes swinging to an exaggerated extent that develops its own restrictive and unintentionally racist constructs.³ The aforementioned larger shifts in perspective, from colonialist views of conquest, possession and human alteration of landscape to more recent ideas of interaction, acceptance and surrender to landscape (including a renewed acceptance of indigenous land-based knowledge) continue to emanate and evolve.

Public opinion is, however, changeable. Despite the activism of the 1970s and onwards,⁴ the Australian public has seemingly retreated into a position of mainstream political conservatism. But look deeper and evidence

³ I have found this particularly evident in films where the struggle to define the land/being relationship from an indigenous perspective is often tainted with non-indigenous sensibilities and the lack of a collaborative working methodology between indigenous and non-indigenous people.

⁴ For example, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy set up on the grounds of old Parliament House, Canberra, 1972; the High Court decision on *Mabo v Queensland (No 1)* in 1988; National 'Sorry Day' marches in 2000.

of evolution and quiet achievement survives.⁵ I believe a deeper understanding of people's interaction with the land must occur to better represent both indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives, and particularly in the consequent expression of this relationship in artistic production (eg. film), to avoid stagnation and stereotyping.

This thesis endeavours to explore the shifts in ideas and to place itself at the forefront of views concerning landscape, gender, collaboration, and healing. After reviewing historical perspectives and then situating my argument among recent research and theories, I will argue that the understanding of a physical or metaphysical transaction between being and landscape increases the possibility of profound and potentially transformative expression in the artistic realm.

The *Tide Weavers* project⁶ explores representation, diversity, cross-cultural communication and gender issues, and contributes to theories of media production, landscape and theory. It revises and extends theories of being–landscape interaction, looking at ideas of pure phenomenology through to those of a more physical nature, from atomism, fusion and extension. It shows how this happens through filters of values, experience

⁵ Significant examples include Western Australia's Martu people's successful land rights claim of 136,000 square kilometres of the Western Desert in 2002, and the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council's 2006 land rights victory representing the Noongar people of Western Australia.

⁶ The film script and metathesis.

and memory. These investigations bring intriguing evidence to the argument of a transaction or relationship that theorists and philosophers believe can exist between being and landscape.

The journey begins from a dire position: theorists Deborah Bird Rose, Paul Carter, Anne McClintock and Ros Haynes argue that people are estranged from the land more than ever before, and that they suffer identity crises because of this alienation. Powerful impositions of economic rationalisation over our relationship with landscape alter our values and ignite arguments about what it is to live 'sustainably', or to emotionally, culturally or ideologically invest in landscape. Correcting this imbalance deepens the value of the exchange. The thesis charts the evolution of ideas about this relationship and offers examples of how art and, in particular, films can contribute to discussion about improving our connection with landscape.

In Chapter 2 I argue that many Australians have an uneasy and strained relationship with the landscape, engaging first with colonial ideas where the conquest and possession of landscape is the dominant ideology, second with problematic societal and cultural restrictions layering these writings, third with exceptions to the well-established colonial ideology about land to support my thesis argument. For further relevance, I explore historical literature that is specific to the Nullarbor region, from John Edward

Eyre, Daisy Bates and Ernestine Hill. I draw on theorists Haynes and Gibson to support this focus on Eyre because they recognise him as an exception to the traditional explorer archetype and they examine overriding ideas of the desert as a "terror of emptiness" (Haynes 196), where the media mythologises solitude, profound fear and the threatening wilderness.⁷

This chapter also identifies other ideas imposed upon landscape that are problematic and often fail, beginning with cartography. McClintock, Huggan, Bird Rose and Ryan suggest that with cartography arrives the ability to possess, organise and represent the unknown, and this process can more readily and conveniently "inscribe(s) its civilisation" (Bird Rose 62). Maps are a means to rewrite the *tabula rasa*, literally a "scraped tablet" or a "clean slate" (Chambers 1438) and this assumption of blankness has destructive implications. Maps identify thresholds where fear is intense and violence an accepted coping mechanism (McClintock 24-8). I look at how indigenous concepts of mapping transcend the subjective colonial two-dimensional approach (discussed by Huggan, Brody) and I also more specifically identify skills to negotiate local landscape and histories.

⁷ The death of 2-month-old Azaria Chamberlain in 1980, allegedly taken by a dingo near Uluru, and the consequent conviction and remittance of her mother, Lindy Chamberlain, inspired numerous television and film depictions, most famously Fred Schepisi's *Evil Angels (A Cry in the Dark)*. When 21-year-old Rodney Ansell survived two months lost in the bush west of Darwin, his consequent book *To Fight the Wild* was widely understood to have inspired the 1986 feature film *Crocodile Dundee*, although the filmmakers later denied this in interviews.

In colonial literature fear originated from unfamiliar geography. A perception of monotony and eternity was associated with landscape, whereas an understanding of local skills would have provided an opportunity to read detail. Carter attributes this condition to ignorance (142); and finds that writers who overlay narrative and interpretive subjectivities to embellish and cover perceived absence tend to obscure an opportunity. What is unfamiliar to people in terms of geographical features, horizontals versus verticals, plains and liminal spaces (tidal zones, sea and land comparisons and exchanges) challenges our ability to connect with these spaces. I draw on Gaston Bachelard's theories of "created intimacy" in particular places to provide a context of comparison, and I use Paul Carter's explanation of these somewhat metaphysical concepts to show how they resonate with Mirning beliefs of the region.

One final colonialist interpretation that deters people's engagement with land is the historically popular concept of land as woman or desire (critically engaged with by Haynes, McClintock, Carter, Schaffer). The language used in written documentation of expeditions as penetrations into an eroticised "virgin land" (McClintock) came from an inherent need to control, and often enacted a "repetition of a primordial act: the transformation of chaos into cosmos" (Eliade) through possession and ordering. Having identified historically entrenched and possibly offensive interpretations of

landscape, Chapter 2 concludes that a re-identification of these concepts is necessary to inform the writing of *Tide Weavers* in a way that acknowledges new approaches to a relationship between desert and being.

In Chapter 3 I consider views of contemporary landscape, as framed within postcolonial theory. I recognise that the ideas upon which contemporary theories about landscape are based often have origins further back in history. However, postcolonial theory is useful for this project because it is based on cultural attitudes, which experience cycles of popularity, obscurity and renaissance over time, and it is possible to achieve an evolving perspective on these attitudes. Travelling with April Lawrie-Smith is a different experience to that of the archetypal explorer. Time spent among three generations of women from her family illustrates a kind of feminine wild(er)ness, a different stance from which to view interaction between landscape and being.

Surprisingly, another feminine-influenced reading of the region came directly from colonial culture: Daisy Bates was unusually low-key in her interaction with the aboriginal people and the Nullarbor in the 1900s. There is a sense, according to Haynes, of a model of feminine interaction depicted in Bates' successful survival of some 35 years of spartan desert living. Differences in male and female interpretation of landscape are noted in this

chapter, but the key argument is that adaptation and surrender to landscape ensures survival (Gibson 210). This is evident in two different creative works: fictionally, in Patrick White's novel *Voss*,⁸ and autobiographically in Robyn Davidson's novel *Tracks*.⁹ *Voss* contrasts a fictional male explorer's demise in the wilderness of the Australian Outback against the vicarious landscape—being metamorphosis experienced by his absent female admirer left in Sydney. *Tracks* became an unwitting symbol of 1970s feminism as the author trekked alone across Australia's top end with animal companions. Both books can be read as offering a feminine interpretation of landscape, and touch upon the gendering of spaces to detriment and success; and they inform how a scripted female character may exist in a desert space differently to previously produced films.

With its questions raised about what it is to provide an alternative model of landscape interaction, Chapter 3 investigates the levels of transference between a person and the desert space they occupy, from metaphysical concepts and arguments surrounding the void (Descartes, Casey) and the physical organicity of the atom, to ideas of the cosmological void (Eliade, Casey). Negotiation of this space and establishment of identity in voids is explained in Merleau-Ponty's and earlier, Heidegger's works, which describe habituation and repeated body actions leading to the

⁸ Patrick White. *Voss*. London: Vintage, 1994.

⁹ Robyn Davidson. *Tracks*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.

metamorphosis of *space* to *place*. My focus is directed toward the outcomes of the transformation, when familiarity with a space renames it a place, lessening alienation and increasing the possibilities of transaction (Casey). This provides both a model of the difference between comfort and discomfort in an alien landscape, and a physical template of how a scripted character may demonstrate this in a vital and corporeal way. It also describes a means of mastering the void, a process that indigenous people found unnecessary because the complexity of their constant, daily interactions implied a connection rather than a separation.

Viewing the body or landscape as receptacle (Aristotle, Casey, Irigaray) are another way of supporting the argument that the body may transfer and contain landscape and vice versa. Luce Irigaray's intricate gender specificities are, however, particularly relevant to this work, explaining the feminine model "is never a closed...one" (59), outlining new ideas of fusion and leading to exciting ambiguities and possibilities in film storytelling. The body can also be an emotional receptacle of memories and experience and of "poetic images" (Bachelard). This is translatable to the *Tide Weavers* script, where characters become more emotionally resonant of and invested in the landscape. In their increasing ease in connecting to the landscape comes more opportunities for emotional and physical expression, and consequently for the audience to connect with them. This

general process of *fusion* (qtd. in Casey 169) is discussed by Leibniz and Philoponus. In relation to this, Casey calls into question the concept of spatial extension. Rather than the body as container, it is a way of visualising the body extending parts of itself into the environment and the landscape making way or predicatively opening space to include the body. I explore how this idea can be represented in script form and how it can work to create physical legacies for characters. I also show that blurring boundaries between internal and external defines a new space (Leibniz, Lingis, Mishima).

In Chapter 4, I discuss films that support the thesis, including works by Australian filmmakers such as Weir, Sen and Igor Auzins, and international filmmakers such as Wenders, Malick and Michelangelo Antonioni, who explore landscape with originality and capture an interaction rather than invasion of the space.

I find desert landscape films unique. I explain that for the purpose of the argument, some films are not literally set in the desert, but in landscapes that convey the same elements of vast scope and visual monotony. I discuss the power of this type of landscape in a film when it is framed to represent a mood of power and spaciousness or oppression. There are films that have an original and simpatico style to *Tide Weavers*, including *Zabriskie Point*,

and *Paris, Texas* (with characters willingly submitting to kinds of oblivion in their journeys). Viewers experience a sense of unease for or in response to characters in this perceived dangerous landscape because, as Bachelard might argue, spaces have lost "cosmicity". Universally, people have lost a connection to nature and are drifting. Like the characters in the films, audiences may be empathetic to their need for respite in desert landscape, in order to reconnect. This need is propelled by a desire to feel "infinity in intimacy" (Bachelard, *Poetics* ch. 8, Casey 294). Both theorists argue that in this process inside and outside exchange and become ambiguous and enlightened.

But desert settings initially challenge characters. Bored with their landscape, a character's attention can turn within. Berrah reminds us of symbolism and monotony and its ability to drive us mad. Diolé writes of how the desert is "reflected in the wanderer" (178); but a particular phenomenological argument suggests that the exchange does not necessarily result in "inner emptiness" (Bachelard 205). It is a transformation and surrender, argues Bachelard, that "renews our inner being" (206). Films such as Malick's *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* are special in their sense of vast natural beauty and their portrayal of characters who begin to seamlessly interact with landscape. In wider conceptual examination, Ken Kelso probes the ways in which, unusually,

setting is reflected in character, how setting is changed by character, and how obstacles consequently arise. Berrah speaks of western films where landscape often "mirror(s) characters" (par. 2) and this also occurs in many Australian films.

While our reactions to environment differ, we can all be changed emotionally by this interaction. These spaces, according to Casey and Bachelard, become intimate by identification with and absorption of space, ambiguity and "common intensity" (Casey 295). There is a state of mind created, according to Bachelard, that is like daydreams and "bears the mark of infinity" (183). Excitingly, this process can also happen in pure imagination. Films such as those of Wenders, or works by Australian directors that are heavy with landscape identity, can be read as occupying "poetic space" (Bachelard 201). Because our reactions to the environment differ for each person, cross-cultural representation must be approached with extreme sensitivity. In Australia, political correctness and cultural awareness vary, and relations between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians remain ambivalent and polarised. In many contemporary texts this is perpetrated by confusion about who is speaking on behalf of whom, and by continued stereotypes in portraiture in which Aboriginal people remain misrepresented. Imposed exoticism on indigenous characters and elements of films can result in some very strange scenes of magical realism

or the supernatural. I interpret this as a dangerous form of romanticism that reflects a pathology not unlike that of colonialism. I show how this is driven by nostalgia, and drawing on Huggins, Haynes and McGrath, explain that while dangerous and false, this can be marketable.

Inevitably there are differences in philosophical viewpoints regarding the landscape, spirit and culture, and, on a personal level, there are differences in perspective. I endeavour to provide an account of the resolution of cross-cultural misunderstandings in the construction of this work, *Tide Weavers*. I show how, in the writing of collaborative works, both in the construction of a dramatic storyline, and in writing practise itself, equitable representation and communication can lead to a more satisfying exchange. That is, product and process can satisfy both cultures.

Working collaboratively is one solution Bird Rose would endorse, as "the ethical alternative to monologue is dialogue" (21). But how does this work practically? In Chapter 4's discussion of some pragmatic approaches, I relate my experiences of working with April Lawrie-Smith and the Mirning people. There are complex issues of interpretation and trust; the process is lengthy by default. The *Tide Weavers* project extends ideas of collaborative research and production methodology. I negotiate the boundaries of shared writing and storytelling processes, using this to show innovative resolutions

in the difficult practice of interracial communication. By working collaboratively with April, I intend to explore contemporary Aboriginal identity and non-indigenous people's relationship with that identity and to open ideas and exchanges about landscape interaction. I conclude that what is gained is a sense of immediacy, life and spirit that is immensely rewarding and artistically innovative.

Tacey explains how our use of the word 'landscape' is faulty, meaning different things for indigenous and non-indigenous people. Haynes, Huggan and Tait highlight difficulties to the practices in conception, publication and sale of artistic works that still bear hidden racisms, from storytelling to marketing. I explore particular approaches that work to alter and shape the process to honour indigenous ways and protocols. Slowly, Australian film matures in terms of the portrayal of Other, and I discuss films such as those of Indigenous director Sen or works by Weir, Auzins, Nicholas Roeg and Phillip Noyce such as *The Last Wave*, *We of the Never Never*, *Walkabout*, *Rabbit-proof Fence*, and how *Tide Weavers* might sit amongst these.

Finally, Chapter 5 examines the process and content of the *Tide Weavers* script. The primary themes, as I have outlined, are women, indigenous and non-indigenous interaction, violence, and landscape's connection to grief, retreat, sacred space and healing. I reference a selection

of international and Australian films, including *Paris, Texas*, *Wings of Desire*, *The Searchers* and particularly *Fearless*, in its treatment of grief, to compare their thematic representations, and reference Takacs, Balk, Rohr, Conn and Haynes. I discuss the aims of the script, why particular choices were made and to what effect, and how *Tide Weavers* will make an original contribution to Australian and international film.

To maintain focus in my writing, I try to keep in mind the original sensation that initiated the thesis argument. I try to recall standing on the Nullarbor Plain, feeling that as I enter the landscape, the landscape enters me. I am reminded that all aspects of the writing process have been based in participation, of visiting the area, researching and speaking with people. An urge to participate will also be the saving motivation of my script characters, to allow movement from their grief back into the thoroughfares of life.

Chapter 2

Colonial landscape: the surrender of John Eyre

The exchange between being and landscape is best considered by first examining ideas in Australian history, where there are familiar (non-indigenous) cultural interpretations of landscape that contribute to national identity, including myths of hardship, sacrifice and endurance, economic bounty, the mystical and the ancient. This chapter outlines interpretations of landscape prevalent in colonialist Australian literature and comment, and then introduces recent post-colonial criticisms from Ros Haynes, Paul Carter, Graham Huggan, Simon Ryan and Kay Schaffer. It demonstrates that only a small number of historical figures documented interaction with the land that was not solely concerned with conquest and possession. Those who did, such as Edward John Eyre and Daisy Bates, demonstrated a less invasive and more accessible approach than other explorers, and it is this approach that informs the *Tide Weavers* script. This chapter argues that landscape is subjectively layered with expectation, experience and memory.

From our recent yet richly mythologised history of colonisation Australians are indoctrinated with stories of the European explorers. These stories are heroic and often end tragically; for example, Burke and Wills, and Leichhardt and Baxter are among those who never returned. Although not forsaking the difficulty of these explorers' endeavours, Ros Haynes wryly

surmises, "that they were heroic in defeat and that their endurance was of more lasting importance than the original goals of their expedition" (4). She notes that, ironically, far less attention was given to the written works of Giles, Stuart and Warburton, who actually survived. Most often, narratives reflect the battle between 'man' and land. Our history is one where the inability to survive – or the lack of ability to read, interpret and use landscape in an interactive and sustaining way – is prominent. But there are exceptions. In 1840, Edward John Eyre set out from Streaky Bay on the eastern end of the Great Australian Bight, travelling by foot and camel to Western Australia's King George's Sound. His journals are in the classic storytelling style. Volume I ended with the murder of his overseer Baxter, presumably by two absconding Aborigines. At the commencement of Volume II, despite the loyal presence of his guide Wylie, Eyre considers himself very much alone. He states:

The frightful, the appalling truth now burst upon me, that I was alone in the desert ... At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable wastes of Australia, with the fierce wind raging in unison with the scene of violence before me. (Eyre II: 130)

Haynes notes that Eyre's writing style is unusual for an explorer, "because Eyre is intent on recording not primarily the event but *his feelings* in response to it" (63). Exposure to extremes of geography, monotony and temperature amplified these feelings. But while sensing desolation and terror in the landscape, his journals also include surprises; for example, upon

viewing the dramatic Great Australian Bight cliffs, he laments his lack of sketching skills. There is unusual sensitivity and awareness in his interaction with the landscape, perhaps due to personality or his willing dependence on Aboriginal guides. He details the physical necessities of survival - for himself, and his ability to continue this narration:

Every page is concerned with the water, the heat, the shade, the topography, the scant vegetation which constitute this waste land, and the sand which becomes a motif of constant torment ... Eyre and the reader are compelled to scrutinise the land as an extension of themselves. If Eyre's relationship to the environment deteriorates in the slightest, he dies. (Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise* 132)

Eyre's journey, according to Gibson, is "a chronicle of an Englishman's education in 'Aboriginality'" (127). Eyre learns the skills of well digging and root tapping, and expresses a deep respect for the local Aboriginal people and the environment. In contrast to explorers who failed to understand the landscape, it is Eyre's surrender to it that facilitates his survival. Despite his parallel and inescapable entrapment in English society and culture,

Eyre is prepared to recognise some innate sublimity. ... he begins to accept the country on its own terms rather than according to the aesthetic preconceptions drawn exclusively from his English cultural background. ... mapping out a literary ground where his new Australian experience and his English heritage are being forced to meet. (Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise* 131)

It is the realisation of this option of environmental interaction that provides some distinction to Eyre's profile in Australian history, as he draws on unfamiliar combinations of resources to understand his situation. From

my reading of his story, I gain resources as a writer to inform the evolution of the characters in *Tide Weavers*, both those already comfortable in the Nullarbor landscape, those just arriving, and how the two types will interact.

Landscape and colonialism: fear and possession

It is natural to assume that cultural, gender and societal biases of the mid-1800s imposed limitations that challenged Eyre in his quest. The concept that interaction with landscape must be a struggle has prevailed for over 200 years. Ideas of possession, inadequate representation of Aboriginal culture and knowledge, and the gendering of spaces ensure Australians are heavily burdened by their colonial past. The subjective preconceptions each individual brings to the landscape can lead to a lack of connection or alienation from landscape, and outcomes can be sadly predetermined. These concepts filter through into creative works. Haynes draws reference to two prominent examples:

Russell Drysdale's paintings of emaciated figures in a surreal outback landscape and Sidney Nolan's aerial panoramas of Central Australia ... (suggested) a powerful local metaphor for existential angst and a modernist perception of spiritual poverty in both the individual and the nation. The desert assumed a Gothic role in psychodramas that enacted a mythic journey into the self. (5)

Souls lapsing into instinct and existential fear of the empty desert landscape are a feature of both Drysdale and Nolan's works, but they originate from older interactions: "To the explorers, the desert was a hideous

blank where named features should be: nothing, void" (Haynes 4). The idea of the desert as a void propels the terrified traveller to circumnavigate other useful options. Any traveller's acknowledgement of existing tools, techniques and folklore, common sense, geological fact and details in the landscape provides clues for survival. The image of a fragile being entrapped in this physically threatening space is inescapable in colonialist literature. Locked solidly into its foundations of fear, this representation firmly endorses the power of mighty nature, seemingly poised to assert its superiority and destroy humans in the most horrible and graphic ways imaginable.

Perceived as a place of absences, without distractions from the terror of emptiness, a place that mirrors the worse dread of an interior void, of existential fears of the nineteenth-century writers – thirst, heat, dingoes, Aborigines – have been translated into more vague and hence more potent fears of dislocation, nihilism. (Haynes 196)

But contemporary Australians continue to travel, often recording their personal contributions to this great Australian cultural journal of discovery and heroism. The attraction is sustaining, somehow, the rewards persistent. Although desert travel is not the extreme exercise in endurance and character development it was historically, I believe its appeal is that the physical crossing of the desert stimulates a metaphorical journey into the mind. Acknowledging the discipline, accepting the minimalism of activity that most travelling permits, results in a reflective mental state stimulated by the monotony of movement, or landscape. The act of travelling can induce melancholy. "The crossing of the desert is both a journey into the self and a

universal myth about the progress of the soul, through the wilderness of solitude and despair" (Haynes 236). Travelling may be safer, but deaths in Australian deserts still occur through unfortunate circumstances or lack of preparation, and it is the fear that is focused on and mythologised in media. The desert landscape remains the malevolent siren. Where the environment lacks hills, mountains or forests and perspective is endless, there is a certain seduction of oblivion that potentially draws the traveller to his/her death.

Considering the background of *Tide Weavers'* protagonist Natch, (white, low to middle income, educated), as writer I portray her entering the Nullarbor region influenced by some of these issues. Indeed this influence also extends to many of the other characters (even some indigenous), considering the pervasiveness and longevity of the concepts. Illustrating any shifting of characters' perspectives from one learned mode to another is the challenge. Understanding the details of the problematic ideas that isolate being from landscape will provide a base from which the character can change and grow. I have identified three of these primary ideas: 1) culturally-biased tools of geographical negotiation in cartography; 2) fear and perceptual barriers (including the monotony of unfamiliar landscapes, verticals versus horizontals, and liminal spaces) constructed to reassure the traveller; and 3) the feminising of landscapes to justify invasion and possession.

Cartography: isolating being from landscape

The map is a technology of knowledge that professes to capture the truth about a place in pure, scientific form ... As such, it is also a technology of possession, promising that those with the capacity to make such perfect representations must also have the right of territorial control. (McClintock 27-28)

For Australian pioneers, cartography was one of the most visible tools of possession, enshrining an ownership that assumed an almost dangerous monoculture. The constant remapping of Australia between 1606 and approximately 1896 indicated the physical difficulty of the undertaking. The popular presumption was that the Australian landscape was a '*tabula rasa*': an empty space, an unpossessed land which inferred an unknown and possibly superstitious resource requiring ordering, naming and allocation to perpetrate stability and control. D. H. Lawrence offers a poetic, yet culturally misinformed endorsement:

The soft, blue, humanless sky of Australia, the pale, white unwritten atmosphere of Australia. *Tabula rasa*. The world a new leaf. And on the new leaf, nothing. ... Without a mark, without a record. (365)

Simon Ryan notes that '*tabula rasa*' *invites* possession – a swift action in the elimination or erasure of troublesome counterclaims, blossoming into an act of social stability, benefiting the projection of new, dominant cultural orders. Consequent ownership and commercial assumption of the division of natural resources follow. Abstractly, the land *itself* becomes text to be read or ignored by the dominant culture. There is arrogance in the assumption that land *may* be read according to dominant cultural context, at the expense

and rejection of all other indigenous interpretations, thus the exclusivity of these dominant ideas becomes complete. As Ryan explains,

The exploration journals often favour more specifically linguistic notions of earth as a text ... To posit the land as a text is to claim its readability, and thence to arrogate power over it. (126)

From romantic interpretations of indigenous populations as caretakers, to evidence of violent land-based conflict, contemporary Australians generally acknowledge original indigenous occupation. Colonial practices embracing the notion of 'tabula rasa' intended to obliterate and assimilate Aboriginal culture by the separation of Aborigines and their land, physically and conceptually. The removal of communities, the imposition of legislation, the creation of new cultural mythology were all attempted to this end.

The interesting point here is that the different characters of *Tide Weavers* will exhibit opinions that range from historically-based perspectives (read colonial) of the politics of land and ownership, to alternative ideas that have named and condemned this ownership process and the physical and metaphorical exclusion of indigenous people. When anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose describes the attempted decimation of the Aboriginal people, she likens it to the actions of two hands, the right being a symbol of conquest, representing productivity and growth, and the left being responsible for the literal erasure of the original inhabitants, surmising that

"The left hand creates the *tabula rasa* upon which the right hand will inscribe its civilisation" (Bird Rose 62). This distinction between contrasting areas mapped—civilised, and areas unmapped—savage, charts colonial progress to make the land 'safe'.

The mapping process also attempts to clearly define the edges of country and control, but more ambiguously defines the edges of consciousness. Maps aim to define indefinable edges. McClintock argues that colonial documents show us the "fetish fascination that the blank spaces of maps cast over the lives of explorers and writers" (27). She references writer Graham Greene, who notes the colonial geographers' practise of scribing the word 'cannibals' over unexplored or blank spaces on maps.

With the word cannibal, cartographers attempted to ward off the threat of the unknown by naming it, while at the same time confessing a dread that the unknown might literally rise up and devour the intruder whole. (27)

Cannibals, mermaids, dragons and monsters appear in word or pictorial form at the edges of maps, naming realms of fearful myths, of unknown dangers and adventures to test our masculinity and resourcefulness. McClintock believes these edges illustrate "the failure of European knowledge" (28).

Here, at the edge of everything known, occurs a compelling behaviour that holds enormous interest for me as a writer. I'm intrigued how the map marks people's own edges of humanity and tolerance, and what they are

faced with when they reach the edge of the map, physically and metaphorically. At this place, people are confronted with nihilistic terror, paranoia sets in and behaviour changes. Naturally, "societies are most vulnerable at their edges" (24), McClintock states. When explorers reach the edges of map, they enter a state Victor Turner refers to as a liminal condition.¹ Liminal, from the Latin *limen* or 'threshold' becomes another naming of the place at the edges of being where exchange with landscape occurs. At the threshold of consciousness, behaviour becomes most extreme, and, frighteningly, endorsed.

[A]s Douglas writes: 'Danger lies in transitional states ... The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.'² As figures of danger; the men of margins were 'licensed to waylay, steal, rape. This behaviour is even enjoined on them. To behave anti-socially is the proper expression of their marginal condition.'³ (McClintock 24)³

In writing *Tide Weavers*, I utilise this colonial theory of a liminal condition and explore how it applies to the characters in the script. The characters are operating at their own emotional and environmental thresholds, and a threshold is now described as a place where violence has motivation. Ordinary people crossing (or escaping across) desert expanses might run low on resources, energy and time, and adopt desperate ways to achieve objectives. During my time travelling the Nullarbor from 1987 to 2007, I have heard stories from other travellers of bandits, carjacking and

¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969, p. 13.

² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 78.

³ Douglas 79.

drug trafficking, murder and body disposal. These urban/desert legends can fuel the imaginative mind's deliciously exploitive fear of the Australian landscape. In these stories of the Nullarbor, these perpetrators are in a landscape that is on the edge of blankness where fear of the unknown breeds; they also circumnavigate dangerous cliffs plunging into ocean and are exposed to the very edge of the boundary between land and ocean. It is a place where endless driving causes fatigue and patience and reasoning fail, where expansive distances suck fuel from petrol tanks, where water and food are scarce, road accidents common, and the potential for violence ever present. For the *Tide Weavers* characters operating tenuously at their limits because of the emotional burden of grief, fear and fatigue, this creates action in the script that becomes unpredictable, exciting and potentially horrifying.

Because mapmaking is a process, there is no objective, 'correct' cultural representation that magically occurs. Since individual mapmakers are shaped by cultural contexts, people must then acknowledge the subjectivity of maps. The projection of body onto landscape in the act of mapmaking is not surprising, but logic tells us that alternative indigenous mapping processes still exist, as do Aboriginal songlines and dreaming stories. But mapmaking for indigenous populations is far more conceptual. Graham Huggan discusses this with examples drawn from Bruce Chatwin's

book *The Songlines*,⁴ which documents Chatwin's travels through the Australian outback. He details indigenous conceptual ideas of landscape understanding that have been orally passed down through generations.

The circuitous nomadic routes of the Aboriginals reflect the complexity both of their individual Dreamings and of the collective Dreamtime. ... To map the country is to dream it: the forward journey through space and the backward journey through time converge in the configurations of the Dreaming-tracks. (Huggan, *Maps* 62)

When non-indigenous scientific convention does not support oral indigenous theory, validation is absent. But there are similarities and opportunities for comparison. In *The Songlines*, for example, Father Flynn, an Aboriginal Rights activist, explains to Chatwin that Aboriginal people, although nomadic, have systems of land tenure, not with borders "but rather as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through'" (Chatwin 56). This anecdote supports the idea that sophisticated indigenous cartography encourages complicated and interwoven levels of understanding expressed more deeply than a surface or pictorial representation, perhaps incorporating concepts of the collective, and community enrichment. However formal cartography is at odds with indigenous thinking. There is a primary philosophical clash, followed by an ongoing struggle for connection, as Bird Rose explains:

Westerners face the future, the past is behind; the image is of generations of people marching into the future. Aboriginal

⁴ Bruce Chatwin. *The Songlines*. Ontario: Penguin, 1987.

people face the source; the image is of generations of people returning into Dreaming. (152)

Applying this conceptual difference to the development of the protagonists of *Tide Weavers*, non-indigenous Natch and Mirning woman Amie, does much to structure their emotional journeys. Amie initially resists her relatives' demands that she return to her spiritual source to address her pain. She attempts to move forward in her life, like Natch, but finds herself floundering. It seems probable I must remove the restrictions of maps for these journeys.

The belief that layering a landscape with the private subjectivities of any individual somehow renames this landscape seems inherently flawed. One person's crossing is only one more in a continued series of previous crossings performed with or without documentation. Superficially rephrasing the landscape in a particular language may make it more palatable and accessible for the culture that has germinated these techniques. But I would argue that this kind of connection with the landscape does not achieve the depth of the spirituality and integration that indigenous travellers might enjoy. Non-indigenous people may not require any extension or evolution of understanding that challenges the surface pictorial reproduction of the space, nor one that extends the boundaries of geography, or links disciplines which broaden people's understanding of what it is to traverse or absorb a landscape. But for an indigenous traveller, the illumination of fascinating

details, seasonal changes, songlines, oral history, the idea of 'hearing' a map, receiving directions, personal hints, warnings and stories via a person is very different. 'Hearing' a map may still involve subjectivities, but this from a person with a history and connection to that place. By discarding maps, engaging with the space on its own terms and being open to provincial ideas about it shifts a person's stance. A new traveller is initially vulnerable, and perhaps perceives endangerment to their survival. There is no guarantee that those holding local knowledge will share this information. Time is needed to observe and learn survival techniques. Some of a traveller's existing skills may be adaptable, but they can never assume that they have come to this space with all the tools necessary to understand it emotionally, geographically, metaphysically, in the way that a local resident or experienced person might. Travellers will have to develop new skills and understanding that will allow them to access the space.

Colonial Australia: monotony and eternity

"The general impression of the country was of oddity, monotony, melancholy, sterility and hostility" (Serle 15).

Just as blank, unknown and unnamed spaces in maps were frightening to early Europeans, the unfamiliar appearance of Australian geography repeatedly shook the explorer to the core. When confronted with the apparent monotony of the landscape, many threw up their hands in surrender.

Where the Western Australian explorer John McKinlay, for example, came across 'a fearful jumble of broken sandhills', he expressed the opinion that the landscape was 'quite unfit to be described'. The reason it was indescribable was that it displayed no clear differentiation, no sense of direction. (Carter 52-3)⁵

Carter writes of the "amplification of absence" where historically, commentary "supposes only external events and novelties worthy of record" (142-3). Monotonous landscape provides little external stimuli, and in the absence of detail or feature, something must provide a focus. So, the dialogue between writer and language assumes importance, where

[I]t faithfully records the existential condition of its own appearance as a diary entry. It is only that what this emigrant's words refer to is not an event, but a spatial occasion, a moment on the journey when the journey became an object of consciousness. (142-3)

Carter notes that Eyre's and Captain Charles Sturt's narratives present "the conspicuous uselessness of their journeys" (91). In Eyre's journals, there were "no important rivers to renumerate, no fertile regions to point out ... no noble ranges to describe ..." (Eyre II: 113). Sturt used subjective language to deflect attention from the expedition to the explorer's opinions of his journey. Like cartography, this narrative imprinting of personality on the land was arrogantly omnipotent/omniscient, and may have indulged in dramatics to cover environmental boredom. The use of embellishment sits comfortably within the culturally appropriate discipline of

⁵ Carter quotes from J. McKinlay, *Journal of Exploration in the Interior of Australia*. Melbourne, 1861, p. 2.

the storytelling narrative. Without being intentionally harmful, the material presents the public with interesting reading, and the aim is a representation of universal 'truth'; but it is really the explorer's own 'truth'. Although possibly entertaining, this threatens to create a barrier to understanding the landscape. There will perhaps be no real understanding of what is unfamiliar, no willingness to learn indigenous survival crafts, no ascension from the physical difficulties of the surroundings. Any opportunity of a transcendence or absorption into landscape that will help the development of a deeper connection between landscape and being may be missed.

An explorer's journal remains an imposition of the storyteller's values, experience, context, living style and domestic habits and tools. When I am in a desert space, I am also guilty – my interaction with landscape is exactly what I choose it to be, based on my own experiences, wishes and desires, in order to satisfy what I need. So culture and personal disposition have an enormous influence on perception and the way the traveller chooses to interpret unfamiliar information. When examining a desert space then, the characters of *Tide Weavers* will exhibit predetermined choices; their ability to access the space has a great deal to do with what is frightening to them, or alternatively, what is culturally familiar and acceptable, with distinctly different tellings.

Geography and the familiar

Gaston Bachelard writes of how, as children, our homes and surroundings bring comfort; and this concept is echoed in Martin Heidegger's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories that homes are places of performed habit, with familiarity and repetition bringing ease. All speak of how our landscape is contextually inscribed upon us. Bachelard argues that, dependent upon which locales lie at the centre of our intimacy – and he explores kitchens, attics, childhood rooms and nooks – these are familiar spaces, spaces of memory.

The word 'plain' in an Australian geographical context is quite particular; it implies wide, open expanses that are not necessarily level, and are surrounded by trees or scrub. When confronted with an alien, empty vista, one can imagine an explorer's train of thought. A flat desert landscape might allow a richer, or more terrifying experience of emotional and imaginative wandering. For some, this illusion of height achieved by standing on flat land is powerful. Carter speaks of "this diminution of worldly tallness (giving) the traveller a delicious illusion of upward power" (288) whilst standing on a plain. For others, this plain plays on the mind of the explorer and creates an original emotional state, a "spatial nausea" as Carter aptly describes it (147). Since colonial explorers left cities deeply steeped in industrial progress, they regarded the visual difference of the plain as a

disorientation of their senses, emotions and logic. These explorers' cultures dwelled more comfortably in the mythology of forests and dense cities, with emphasis on familiar vertical shapes and forms, reassuringly mimicking trees, buildings and walls. Carter speaks of "the profound tension between the horizontal and the vertical ..." (197). Returning to ideas of liminal states and thresholds, there is no possibility of viewing a pleasant scene from the safety of a doorway or frame, nothing to reinforce or comfortably support. The plain is a dangerous place, stifling and suffocating, becoming, as Carter observes,

[T]he focus of annihilation, the inescapable point of return, where all variety is reduced to a level. ... the waste of vital energies, the dissipation of promise, the oblivion of an imprisonment without walls. This is the double aspect of the plain: that it releases, but releases into nothingness. (197)

Another metaphor from colonial journals is that of the comparing/transacting of ocean with land. With the absence of familiar geographical formations by which land is normally gauged, desert assumes the less defining, poetic, unmappable physical characteristics and qualities of the open ocean. There is also the threshold space where ocean and land meet. Eyre traced a journey along the coast through this exact landscape. When referring to problems of travel through wild coastal areas, he writes of "dense impenetrable scrub running down to the very borders of the ocean" (Eyre II: 348) and the unpredictability of tides. Carter notes that: "The coast of Eyre's journey exists as a narrow passage. It is the track where opposite

possibilities continue to meet, continue threatening to cancel each other out" (93). And in this ambiguity, in descriptions where the horizon of ocean or land is unclear and boundaries blur, emerges the attractive metaphor. "Explorer and reader alike travel along an imaginary boundary, where opposites meet and threaten to become each other" (Carter 92). There is a bewitching beauty to the meeting of land and ocean, and the reality of geography is enhanced by imaginary factors, many incorporating ideas of the liminal state. This zone is a meeting of edges, a fertile place, where rare springs and rainwater trickle down into the ocean, and a volatile space where physical ownership of the coastline is shared, depending on the tides and erosion. Although it creates an unpredictability to any reading of the space and how one should respond, this aspect of the liminal helps one enter the awed disorientation of the author-traveller, where logic is abandoned, and the mind is delicate to imaginations.

Apart from the ironic truth of the Nullarbor's geographical history as a seabed, the metaphor parallels Mirning Aboriginal interpretation of the Nullarbor space explained to me by April Lawrie-Smith, my writing colleague. At places like Merdayerra, on the western edge of the Nullarbor, the rugged limestone cliffs and gashes, the dangerous and unpredictable tidal flats and quicksand give way to dunes that turn violet at sunset. This is an ancient meeting place, where Aboriginal people following tracks from the north met

to socialise and trade for flint found along the coast. In Mirning belief, Merdayerra is the place where ocean blends with sky and dune, salt water mixes with fresh water and horizon vanishes in one metaphysical plain – the crystalline colours, sea spray and acoustics of the area contributing to a seamlessness that is deceiving to the eye.

Not far from Merdayerra are ancient burial grounds where April's great-great grandparents were laid to rest. The rich stories from the area resonate with it being a deeply spiritual place akin to eternity. I set important scenes of *Tide Weavers* (with intense emotional impact) at Merdeyarra because of these beliefs, but also in order to draw upon the mythical beauty of liminal spaces. As Carter suggests:

[T]he true liberation that sea and land offered lay in the realm of the metaphor – in their power to intimate each other, to suggest an imaginary meeting place, where one became the other and both were transcended. (93)

I see similarities between this concept of land blurring with sea, and my thesis of being fusing with landscape. This mysterious fusion of boundaries describes constantly changing edges, a fluid exchange, reflection.

Despite colonialist confines, Eyre and Bates understood that the static division of ideas could not survive in this landscape, that blurring signalled complexity, and that nothing revealed to us in the landscape was what it at first appeared to be. These details have literary appeal, igniting one's senses

and bringing magic to the journey, creating a landscape in our minds that may no longer reflect reality, or even sanity. Bachelard writes of building places from the centre of one's intimacy, establishing which spaces are safe and familiar, and which are not, and in extension of this theory, subjectively one unconsciously or consciously builds landscape, from the centre of oneself, experiences and history. I believe landscape is less what people see and more reflections of themselves. As Schama explains:

For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock. (6-7)

Of course, perception of landscape is rarely based in factual interpretation and historically these perceptions reflect negatively on women. The indigenous female was hardly recognised as a political entity to the explorer, and there was a relative absence of non-indigenous women in the Australian outback during that time. However, ironically and sensationally, when interpreting landscape, the female presence is still strong, but in a negative and separatist reading, as I will now discuss.

Landscape, desire and woman

Eyre's personal transformation that occurred (as his connection with the landscape deepened) was not common. In some thirteen major Australian expeditions the primary motivation was the discovery of new resources, fertile farming land and the accompanying fame. The expeditions

were risky and treacherous, yet they attracted generous financial support. They were considered investments, motivated by an insatiable desire for resources in settlements where they were lacking. Like women, land becomes the passive object of desire and possession.

Accounts of expeditions to the interior of the continent commonly have recourse to the imagery of sexual conquest ... and the penetration (a word that occurs with extraordinary frequency in exploration literature) of the 'inner recesses' of the land. (Haynes 51)

McClintock pursues this metaphor, and this well-established theory is worth revisiting to understand the powerful reasoning at work. She explores her "myth of the virgin land" (31), and I draw parallels to the chapter's earlier concepts of the 'tabula rasa'. In virgin land, "women are the earth that is to be discovered, entered, named, inseminated and, above all, owned" (31), or more colourfully, the virgin (either land or woman) should be nonsexual, desireless and "passively awaiting the thrusting, male insemination of history, language and reason" (30). Virgin land is a misnomer, as few continents were discovered by colonisers; more so 'rediscovered' after being visited by neighbouring tribespeople or travellers, as with the Vikings in the Americas. Yet patriarchal narratives suffer without the romance, seduction and consequent 'taking' of the virgin, and what happens is so acutely political, even the feminine body is possessed in ways that simultaneously disadvantages woman and indigenous person.

Within colonial narratives, the eroticising of 'virgin' space also effects a territorial appropriation, for if the land is virgin,

colonized peoples cannot claim aboriginal territorial rights, and white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual and military insemination of an interior void. (McClintock 30)

This political action, this "strategy of violent containment" (McClintock 24), comes from a more vulnerable human motivation. Beyond megalomania, McClintock tells us the action "betrays acute paranoia and a profound, if not pathological, sense of male anxiety and boundary loss" (24). Where men (sic) operate at the edges of the known, dangerous and defensive reactions are deemed proper. Even Eyre, in his initial enthusiastic bravado, was not immune to the spell of possession and dominance of the land. As Kay Schaffer notes:

He penned his desire to penetrate 'the vast recesses of the interior of Australia, to try to lift up the veil which has hitherto shrouded its mysteries from the researches of the traveller.' For both Eyre and Sturt the land takes on the features of a veiled, seductive, exotic, unknown but desired maiden. (60)⁶

Desire is fickle; when actual possession then ironically eliminates said desire, the possessed is abandoned for the quest of conquering new, possibly richer landscapes. In reference to the fate of Botany Bay, First Fleet officer Watkin Tench writes that in possession, "the place itself disappears, ceases to be an object of historical desire"⁷ (Carter 35). This act of taking possession is, according to historian and religious writer Mircea Eliade, a re-

⁶ Edward John Eyre, *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery in Central Australia, and Overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound, in the Years 1840-41*. 2 vols. London: T&W Boone, 1845.

⁷ Watkin Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*. ed. L. F. Fitzhardinge, Sydney, 1961, p. 31.

enactment of an ancient act of biblical origins, of man re-enacting the actions of the gods.

[A]ll these wild, uncultivated regions and the like are assimilated to chaos; they still participate in the undifferentiated, formless modality of pre-Creation. This is why, when possession is taken of a territory – that is, when its exploitation begins – rites are performed that symbolically repeat the act of Creation: the uncultivated zone is first 'cosmicized,' then inhabited. (*Myth 9-10*)

Altering, customizing landscape and performing rites, such as cultivation and construction for familiarity and comfort allows invaders some control of actual creation over their environment. Within this interpretation, women are, Haynes notes, "inherently sinful" (29) and in contrast the desert stands as "a powerful metaphor for spiritual pilgrimage and a test of manhood, its very barrenness suggesting sexual abstemiousness along with rejection of debilitating 'softness', luxury and decadence" (29). But whereas Australian national identity seems grounded in a history of her conquest and possession, the land/woman ironically remains hard, unforgiving, indecisive and untrustworthy. The Australian landscape can reduce men, in their quest for survival against all odds, to 'feminine' behaviours of weakness and despair, hysteria or madness. Whereas the explorer faces life-threatening hardship in a malevolent landscape that may destroy, consume or send him mad, the land is a relentless, unforgiving lover, a vindictive, barren shrew, or worse: "a harsh, cruel, threatening, fickle, castrating mother" (Schaffer 62). For example, Australian director Peter Weir confronts masculinity with his

imagery in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, where the pubescent, innocent Victorian-age girls surrender, and are absorbed by mother earth. Schaffer also notes how Lindy Chamberlain suffered the ageless wrath of Australians when her baby Azaria disappeared into the earth – into the bowels of a cruel and evil mother.

These are entrenched and somewhat offensive interpretations to confront when preparing a script that attempts to establish an alternative relationship between women and landscape. Arguably, this is the result of the low profile women were afforded historically or a general ambivalence toward feminine interpretation, but it is with a consoling, arrogant ease that this reasoning is justified. This is because the suppression is a decisively political one by a dominant interest that seeks to monopolise power, perpetrated in language and societal conventions but masked as innocuous cultural norm. Thus begins the banishment of women into the category of the 'other'.

And then there was nothing but the dry red parchment of the dead heart ... where men are men and women are an afterthought. (Davidson 20)

Miriam Dixson's 1976 study *The Real Matilda*, quoted in Schaffer's work, is unapologetically decisive. She draws attention to "a profound unconscious contempt for women that pervades the Australian ethos"

(Schaffer 7).⁸ Australian women and femininity, Schaffer argues, are not absent from national identity, more "the myth of the typical Australian exudes a style of masculinity which excludes but also defines the Australian woman who stands in relation to him" (4). So women are cast into "the space of the other, what man is not" (10). Women are an adjunct to man, and only achieve status when their expressions of masculinity do not threaten social rules or defy their true nature – which is, presumably, of feminine sublimation and the willingness to be possessed. This dichotomy, Schaffer argues, is problematic, "but subjectivity and social meaning is never fixed once and for all" (10). Women's status is trapped within "the politics of language" (15). This language must be avoided in *Tide Weavers*, as I endeavour to reshape a dialogue that excludes or shapes women passively/negatively in regards to landscape. How my female characters speak and act can lead to a contestation of existing historical theories and conventions. This will be challenging, because Australian provincial history offers only a few surprising role models, which will be described in the next chapter.

⁸ Miriam Dixson. *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788 to the Present*. Australia: Pelican Books, 1976.

Chapter 3

Accessing contemporary landscape: feminine wild(er)ness

It's difficult to describe the sensation of standing on this Plain. Unlike many just passing through, I find the Nullarbor relaxes you, invites you to be peaceful. April Lawrie-Smith (*Gampa*)

Travelling the Nullarbor with April and her Aunties, I often imagined the horrendous fear of the early explorers. The discomfort of the heat, dust, flies and wind alone would discourage. Transporting heavy loads, negotiating direction and internal arguments, and the risk of attack from wildlife and tribal groups must have been very stressful. These real or perceived obstacles block true assimilation with landscape. The superior experience of the colonial male in navigating this space was assumed, and it was therefore a space unfamiliar and dangerous to women. There are also historical impressions of the desert as an all-consuming void. Even today, entering this void means risking sacrifice or death, and there are ideas that a person must remain a closed entity, a container, which is safe and uncompromised.

But would simply changing perception of the landscape and drawing on greater local knowledge really have eased the task of explorers? I am excited to have found examples challenging this colonial representation that provide profound inspiration for my task. With closer investigation, I found that alternative role models existed as early as the 1900s. Looking at the

heat haze blurring the horizon, remembering images formed during reading, I start to see a less celebrated figure emerge – tall, rigid and dressed in full Victorian clothing, including gloves and hat. This figure is one who I understand was as ambitious and disciplined as the explorers of the day, but quite revolutionary in her capacity for survival in this landscape.

Daisy Bates, whilst living among transient Aboriginal communities near Eucla (1912) and the railway line at Ooldea in South Australia (1919), lived a spartan life subsisting on a basic diet and sleeping in a tent. She travelled across the Bight with female Mirning companions Gauera, Balgundra and Ngallilea, administered medication to her community, valuably documented language, tribal kinship structures and hierarchy, and largely saw her role as a witness to the extinction of the Aboriginal people. Because of her age and her race, she began to assume a 'sexless' gender representation to the Aboriginal people she lived among and was, unusually, privy to some exclusively male tribal business and objects.

Living unafraid in the great loneliness, chanting in those corroborees that it is death for a woman to see, she had become a legend, to her own kind, long lost, 'the woman, who lives with the blacks.' (Hill 252)

Although not a trained anthropologist or ethnologist, she achieved a public profile at seminars in Perth and Adelaide, and left large quantities of research material detailing a difficult time in Australian Aboriginal history. But toward the end of her life she was eclipsed by myth, and people had lost

patience with old 'Kabbarli' (grandmother) living in isolation in the desert, apparently going mad.

Bates had lived in the desert for 35 years when journalist Ernestine Hill came into contact with her. Hill had spent five years travelling the Birdsville Track and Nullarbor, and recorded some revelatory observations of her environment.

It has just been discovered ... that the Nullarbor is not a sand desert, but the roof of a mighty honeycomb of mysterious caves of crystalline limestone and subterranean rivers, icy cold, flowing 50 miles southward to the sea. (Hill 250)

Although encouraged by the potential that Hill's presence and travelogues could have had in reclaiming this terrain for women and proving their survival skills in a traditionally 'male' territory, Haynes observes:

In her zeal to proclaim her own heroism, Hill presents herself as exceptional and the intrepid Daisy Bates as saintly, eccentric, genderless and anachronistic. Neither woman threatens the assumption that Central Australia is a man's world. (Haynes 152)

I believe it is possible that at this time, Hill was reluctant to confront the powerful archetype of the male explorer. Nevertheless, her books were incredibly successful, an indication of the popularity of adventure journals, regardless of gender. Daisy Bates, despite her comprehensive experiences with the Aboriginal communities in the south and west of Australia, and a feisty temper by many accounts, still battled determinedly with the patriarchy of the day in the communication of her ideas. In one account, when the

esteemed Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown met with her on the commencement of an expedition, associate E. L. Grant Watson was to observe and write in his autobiography:

(Brown) was quick to see that Mrs Bates was the possessor of a priceless store of knowledge ... (but) the contents of her mind, in his estimation, were somewhat similar to the contents of a well-stored sewing basket, after half a dozen kittens had been playing there undisturbed for a few days. (Watson 105-6)

Both Ernestine Hill and Daisy Bates encountered enormous odds in the pursuit of their objectives, and their stories have persevered and continue to compete with the male explorers' domination of the landscape.

Writing *Tide Weavers* in the contemporary moment means that I am afforded more freedom than women of previous generations. However, the archetypes and mythologies of gender and landscape linger. Whether a film is eventually produced or not, I have the opportunity to portray my own view of the Nullarbor region and its characters. What I should be conscious of is my own socialisation by existing opinion and culture. Society's expectations, often indicative of a film's ability to tap popular culture, can affect commercial, but not always personal artistic success. The challenge is to remain undaunted by these fears, remain true to my vision, and to write the work as honestly as possible.

This fresh look at landscape, thankfully, has precedent. For example, in a historical context, there exist some essential differences in male and female interpretations of the traversing of this landscape that are intriguing. In writing styles, male explorers often emphasise the need for physical strength and endurance. The encounter becomes a battle, against the unknown, against the void. Growth of a solid character is in defiance of the landscape, rather than an opportunity for the landscape to shape the man. It is noted that in contrast, female explorers' travelogues "were less intent on conquering and possessing the landscape than on understanding themselves ..." (Haynes 50).

Successful assimilation with the desert landscape begins with adaptation and surrender. Gibson notes wisely that explorers "cannot expect to conquer Australian nature without themselves undergoing conquest and change" (210). There are two examples of Australian contemporary literature that express this transformation effectively: Patrick White's *Voss* and Robyn Davidson's *Tracks*.

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, Patrick White's historical novel, *Voss*, was informed by his own experiences in the deserts of the Middle East, particularly Egypt, during wartime. When protagonist Johan Voss, an explorer obsessed with the conquest of the interior, is metaphorically joined

on his journey by Laura Trevelyn, she symbiotically experiences many of his hardships, including his final surrender and redemption. Her transformation, however, occurs earlier and is equally as profound: "... the material part of myself became quite superfluous, while my understanding seemed to enter into wind, earth, the ocean beyond" (White 239). Whereas Voss revelled in his environments, as often enthusiastically joyful as lamenting the possibility of his own death within this terrible void, Trevelyn, not privy to male-sanctioned physical exploration, had to participate in absentia.

In 1977, when Queenslander Robyn Davidson walked from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean, her participation was immediate. Yet while walking 2700 kilometres across the Western Desert, she confessed the motivational force of needing to gain the approval of her father, whom she imagined in the mould of a nineteenth-century explorer. Davidson published her account of the journey in her book *Tracks* in 1980. She describes, like that of a Laura Trevelyn, an equally introspective quest, fuelled by landscape-invoked dreams:

Capacity for survival may be the ability to be changed by environment. ... The self in a desert becomes more and more like the desert. It has to survive ... it desperately wants to assimilate and make sense of the information it receives, which to a desert is almost always going to be translated into the language of mysticism. (Davidson 196-7)

Haynes explains Davidson's mystical interpretation of her environment as being "explicitly associated with a female mode of knowing"

(273), and Davidson recounts a discussion with a Marxist friend where he "saw any entry into the morbid internal landscape as, traditionally at least, the realm of the female" (Davidson 100). Gendering landscapes in this way is the subject of recent research,¹ but I find it perplexing that submission or interaction with landscape is primarily labelled as feminine domain. This is an odd gender twist, contrasting with indigenous beliefs that both male and female have a connection to landscape.

Nonetheless, reading about these travel experiences offers a historical perspective for the growth of the female voice in landscape analysis. It is Laura Trevelyn and Robyn Davidson's experiences that provide a key to how, as a writer, I may free myself from thick masculine and historical interpretations, and utilise this lesser known, but valid approach to reading the desert. Kay Schaffer, in her book *Women and the Bush*, refers briefly to providing "a new space of articulation, and possibilities of meaning new for the land, women (and men)" (23) and it is at this place I endeavour to locate *Tide Weavers*. I then have the opportunity to describe a communication between the characters and their environment that includes a female perspective. It is an interaction with the landscape that is open and accepting, but not necessarily passive. It is detailed, which benefits the

¹ See Louise Johnson, Jackie Huggins, and Jane Jacobs. *Placebound: Australian Feminist Geographies*. Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 2000.

visual form I am using; and it is transformative, stimulating vital conflict and growth within and between my protagonists.

However, I see an immediate danger in pursuing this representation. The explorers' journals describe a very physical battle with the landscape. Although Davidson's experience in the desert was no less physical, there is an additional introspective dimension that has been defined as female, a label equally as constrictive as those of historical writings. The act of storytelling in any medium requires engaging the audience in a character's quest to surmount all obstacles in pursuit of goals. To write a script based around alternative ideas of interaction with the landscape, I must understand exactly what is happening internally – as fear, happiness, longing and comfort, for example, inform character motivation, decisions, and consequently, actions. If I do not need to possess and conquer landscape in order to feel success, what is my mode of communication and how does it manifest in actions?

I am attempting to write a film that is different from others before it, that emotionally engages the viewer, voices a new exchange between being and landscape, and yet does not diminish the difficulty of the location. This exchange challenges historical notions of a battle with land, but how does

this 'fusion' occur and, moreover, what evidence can I find that symbiosis is even possible? The first step is to place being into the landscape.

Accessing contemporary landscape: mastering the void

The silence of these eternal spaces terrifies me
 (Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie)
 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (qtd. in Casey 180).

A figure stands on a plain, and as a filmmaker I examine the components. There is physical being and physical landscape; or, more esoterically, physical being and metaphysical space. Trapped in the physical body, I find it difficult to assess the reverse point of view, that of landscape viewing physical being, but perhaps it is not impossible. If physical being may expand outward into the landscape, then it would seem logical that the landscape can expand inward into the being. At a purely physical level this can be reduced to the exchange of atoms. Involving metaphysical dimensions – and the complications of truth, knowledge, intellect, emotion, experience and memory – broadens the exchange. This exchange, enriched by subjectivities, then moves beyond superficial reflection. The most powerful resonance about placing a being on a plain is that looking into a landscape of 'emptiness', aside from the prospect of insignificance due to scale, evokes an examination of the consequential possibility of emptiness within, of transacting with emptiness, insignificance, the void without.

Because it is such a significant concept, it is useful at this point to revisit the void.

There are arguments concerning the existence of the void. The Atomists (c.500BC) maintained that all phenomena existed and could be explained as "indivisible particles ... and their interactions in space" (Chambers 81). They believed atoms, then believed to be the smallest particles of matter in existence, required space in which to move randomly. The continuous motions of atoms in their corresponding, constantly changing but finite spaces proved "if there were no void, there would be no motion; but there is motion; therefore, there is void" (Furley 78).² In contrast, Descartes argued the mathematical and philosophical impossibility of the void, preferring to see nature extending into indefinite filled space. He considered voids contradictions, because "for every time there is (thought of) space, there will be (thought of) matter that fills it" (Casey 155).³ For Descartes, Casey states, "A strict void would collapse upon itself, abolishing its own boundaries. It would be a metaphysical nonentity ..." (155). Despite the spectrum of opinion about the existence or composition of void (or lack thereof), it remains an enduring concept, which is used in a multitude of contexts to describe both purely physical and metaphysical states that seem

² Bird's view of Atomism is that it is representative of an oppressive and logical philosophy, "The social and cultural implications of atomism constitute pillars of Enlightenment thinking" (182) and "Atomism is connected with fragmentation minimally through the theory that because atoms are basic 'building blocks', the best path towards understanding is to disassemble structures to get to the basics" (182).

³ Letter of Oct 1645 from Descartes to the Marquess of Newcastle, *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p.184.

to inform all disciplines. In the context of my argument, it is the idea of 'void' rather than strict definition, that provides a canvas upon which emotional and philosophical ideas are projected. There is a pristine quality to the Nullarbor landscape, environmentally and metaphorically, and as a writer I use this symbolism. The characters of *Tide Weavers*, whilst engaged in reflection of their personal issues, seek clarity and resolution.

The original cosmological void is that of creation, filled in Judeo-Christian myth by a powerful patriarchal god who creates all. People exist in a place that once was void, and spiritually return to the void upon their deaths. First there is a struggle to name an unnameable space, emptiness, as 'no-place' or 'void', and then, once identified, this absence creates a powerful unease, a panicked state or an existential angst. This placelessness, this metaphysical death causes the anguish that people feel when looking out into void, whether internally/spiritually or as a description of physical place. And Casey proposes humorously that this anxiety may ascend mere mortality, as “the creator might well have been as desperate to populate the cosmic void with plenary presences as mortals are to fill in their own much more finite voids” (Casey 4).

Whereas the concept of the void overlays the example of the colonial explorer in the desert, contemporary landscape theory offers some solutions

to the fear of loss and absorption into the void. Casey talks about "rituals re-enacting cosmogenesis" (6) as a means of combating this placelessness, or actions of emplacement to remove abstraction and waylay "place-panic: depression or terror even at the idea, and still more in the experience of an empty place" (6). He offers examples of temporary nomad tribal 'ownership' of land, referring to the erection of totems to assign some familiarity to new places (Casey 5, Eliade, *Sacred* 30). Perhaps this is analogous to the placement of a traveller's watch, glasses and toothbrush on the bedside table of each new hotel room to create some sense of domesticity. Similarly Merleau-Ponty believed emplacement within new spaces is negotiated by the body and that actions and movement are the language with which the human being experiences and becomes familiar with space.⁴ And Heidegger, much earlier, promised that the negotiation of even unfamiliar spaces becomes easier through habit and repetition.

(Heidegger) describes simple skills – hammering, walking into a room, using turn signals, etc, – and shows how these everyday coping skills contain a familiarity with the world that enables us to make sense of things and 'to find [our] way about in [our] public environment'. (Dreyfus and Hall 2)

Merleau-Ponty had other names for this process that defines the difference between 'space' and 'place'. The body, Casey argues, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, "provides a privileged point of access to place" claiming "the places we inhabit are known by the bodies we live", and that movement is a

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 104.

way of discovering new places and revisiting those that stimulate in us a sense of intimacy due to their "abiding familiarity and our own corporeal habituality" (Casey 233). So when our bodies achieve this familiarity with spaces, they become 'named'. Our acquaintance is then recognised by our bodies kinaesthetically, by the secret knowledge they gather while experiencing the space – and consequently, as a result of the process – place. Casey argues, "The lived body not only feels but knows the places to which it is so intimately attached" (232).

Here then is an interaction between body and landscape that is both emotional and physical, and can be accessed as a tool in the writing process. Hence emotions must become physical through habit and movement and are then seen in action. This benefits the writing of characters. The opening of a bottle or locking of a door are more than simple actions. With an emotive quality and familiarity attached, each activity can become a labour of love, an action that reveals feelings, dispositions and body-based characteristics; and this is the basis of a great deal of writing and acting strategy. In the writing of *Tide Weavers*, characters are so restricted and behaviourally affected by grief that these simple actions will be windows to thoughts.

But returning to a philosophical basis, this process of familiarisation and habituation is what may assist people in reducing panic and conquering the void. Casey offers a solution: once people acknowledge that the void is an issue of place and cannot be reduced to nothingness, their inclination is commonly "not merely to fill the void as a way of allaying anxiety but, more especially, to *master* the void" (23), that is, not to create it, but to attempt to alter it in some way. Upon first reading it, I am intrigued by this assertion's resemblance to colonisation. This could apply to non-indigenous settlers construction of buildings, cultivation of crops and imposition of established cultural rules to increase comfort and ownership of new surroundings.

But have Indigenous Australians in essence mastered the void or 'no-place' through familiarisation and habitation, or have they even felt the need to master it. Traditionally, Indigenous people's survival depended on an integrated and constant exchange with the landscape as a source of materials and food, stories and wellbeing. Adapted to the physical challenges of climate and geography, their ability to thrive depended upon careful management of existing resources and the development of cultural and ideological infrastructure that supported well-exercised practices of sustainability. Perhaps the answer is less complicated: since the traditional interaction with landscape was a constant communication on all levels and

the exchange perpetuated on a daily basis, the evidence of division was less, and therefore the perception of the void non-existent.

Arguably the transformation of space to place would lessen the fear of void. The desert would be as strange an environment as any for a character to be forced to assimilate with, and fear would not be misplaced. The characters of *Tide Weavers* must find connection with this new landscape in order to function. There has to be a very real exchange occurring to overcome placelessness and existential fear, and this gradually improving connection speaks volumes about how adaptation in even the most alien of landscapes is eventually possible.

Accessing contemporary landscape: receptacles

Colonial literature generally discourages human fusion with landscape lest it signify the descent into madness or death. But it would be a contradiction for me to work within the assumption of complete separation of the humans from landscape in order to argue my thesis, if in the quest for evidence of a transaction between landscape and being I introduced the idea of a physical being expanding outward into the landscape, and the landscape expanding inward into the being. There is one theory that may initially satisfy both approaches, that each is a vessel that may hold what is being exchanged, and here I enter Aristotelian theory when exploring the

idea of body as container. A body containing elements of landscape is one obvious dimension of the exchange. At a subjective level, this becomes an exciting premise when I consider the landscape holding the projected fears and aspirations of the early explorers and ponder what the landscape was offering them in return. The premise similarly offers prospects at a narrative level, elevating landscape and characters to equal status and willing components in the exchange. However, in regards to women, French theorist Luce Irigaray points out this difficulty: where in Aristotle's model is completely closed and contained, Irigaray refers to a woman as "'a porous body-place' exhibiting 'the openness of the open'" (Casey 325).⁵

It is a question of something not just contingently but *in principle* open: 'Woman, insofar as she is a container, is never a closed (*fermée*) one. Place is never closed (*clos*). The boundaries [of her body] touch against one another while still remaining open.' (Casey 325)⁶

Further reference is made to pregnancy and sexual intercourse, whereby an open body creates the ability to be both "open to oneself within oneself and open to the other outside oneself" (Casey 325) thus destroying the practicality of the Aristotelian container.

This concept challenges colonial literature and is useful to consider when redefining the relationship the female characters from *Tide Weavers*

⁵ (Heidegger rephrased by Irigaray). Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. J. Collie and J. Still. New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 59.

⁶ Luce Irigaray, "Place, Interval: A Reading of Aristotle, *Physics IV*," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. C. Burke and G. C. Gill, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993, p. 51.

have with the landscape. Instead of assuming the purpose of the Aristotelian container has by definition failed, as the vessel (woman) is not closed, one may assume this unclosed state as an alternative model of transaction with the environment in which the feminine body is constantly engaged in exchange and borders are more ambiguous. Within the script's dramatic narrative, Natch and Amie can be involved in this type of relationship with their surroundings on a metaphysical, emotional or philosophical level, thereby providing unusual storytelling possibilities. Regardless of whether they are experiencing a voluntary or forced encounter with the Nullarbor, this relationship may possibly redefine them and the exchange also outlines new ideas of fusion.

Gaston Bachelard also speaks of the body as a container or receptacle for images, but acknowledges emotional content. Feelings and reactions formed by experience and memory are gathered internally like emotional currency in this exchange. Bachelard refers to this currency as "poetic images" (xxxi-xxxii), inferring that these particular experiences and memories are eventually laden with the expectations, patina and pathos of time passed. I enjoy the beauty of Bachelard's theory; it has obvious application to the filmic form and to accessing characters' rich emotional content. Casey states that

[I]mages offer location to their own contents, whether these contents be cognitive, emotive, linguistic, or (again)

imaginational. Scintillating on the surface of the psyche, while also proceeding from the depths, particular images act to implace such contents by offering them imaginal aegis, a home for their continued prospering. Bachelard calls this specifically imaginal sense of place 'felicitous space'; in contrast with the 'indifferent space' of the surveyor, this is 'the space we love,' that is, 'eulogized space.' (Casey 289)⁷

The *Tide Weavers* script is heavily invested with emotional content as characters move from a state of dislocation and grief to, eventually, a healing state. The Nullarbor space, as a motivating agent, becomes very important to them. Certainly they inhabit the process described in the previous section, that of transformation of space to place, but they also become far more emotionally invested in each other and their landscape as the story unfolds. Slowly, this landscape, albeit sensually strange and geographically unusual, becomes a touchstone for their healing. Their interaction with the landscape leaves them with a mnemonic love note; the landscape slowly comes to represent healing. The Nullarbor becomes that kind of "eulogized space" quoted earlier. So Bachelard's enhanced poetic interpretation invests the body as a potential container of another dimension: of what is familiar, or what may become familiar. Further ideas embrace what is the assumption of familiarity, echoing Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, as a solution to placelessness and anguish.

⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas, Boston, USA: Beacon Press 1969, pp.xxxi-xxxii.

This dimensional fusion, this sending out into the void of particles and subjectivities of ourselves, will be known as extension. The Greek philosopher Philoponus, in work that was critical of Aristotle and in ways advanced the theories of the atomists, defines place in terms of extension, "extension and not body, not even material body, is the very essence of place: place is 'a certain extension in three dimensions, different from the bodies that come to be in it ...'" (Casey 94).⁸ According to Casey, Philoponus was unique and revolutionary in terms of his distinction between three-dimensional spatial extension and bodily extension:

Bodily extension is equivalent to the particular place occupied by a given physical body. It is the room taken up by the matter of that body.⁹ Spatial extension, in contrast, is the extension that need not, in principle, be occupied by any given body or group of bodies: rather than being the room *of* a body, it gives room *for* a body. (Casey 94)¹⁰

I am imagining a spatial cocoon surrounding my characters, as equally generated by the being themselves as by the environment surrounding them, but a cocoon in the sense that the exchange of atoms, emotions and memories still transpires. As a writer I wonder about what kind of imprint the *Tide Weavers'* characters and landscape make on each other,

⁸ Philoponus, *Corollaries on Place and Void*. Trans. David Furley. London: Duckworth, 1991, p. 28.

⁹ Philoponus 66

¹⁰ Casey continues, "Furthermore, bodily extension fits into spatial extension but not vice versa (Philoponus 66). There is always *more* spatial extension than bodily extension, and spatial extension can be said to consist precisely in this 'more,' in fact so much more that Philoponus is tempted to regard spatial extension as tantamount to void. Where void can be defined as 'spatial extension extended in three dimensions,' spatial extension is 'bodiless and matterless-space without body' (Philoponus 23, 65). Both void and spatial extension are incorporeal and immaterial." (Casey 94)

and whether there are ways that this can be visually expressed. As these elements linger and transact, so the area involved in the transaction changes. Neither the being nor the landscape will be quite the same having undergone this interaction, but a common ground is created where both may exist, where awareness is mutual, accepted and constructive. In contrast, I wonder, what would the consequences be should a character choose not to respect this exchange? As a writer, it is necessary that I examine what is likely to happen in these circumstances, and what lasting legacy is created for each. Paralleling the Atomists, extension is paramount to a physical exchange between two spaces or places, and may in fact define a third space as yet unnamed – that where the exchange of atoms lingers indefinably.

In the visual image of the being on the plain/desert, I suspect there are many forms of exchange. The ideas of Atomism and Philoponus take us to the very mathematics of interaction; the ideas of Casey, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger acknowledge the body's place in the physical recognition of a landscape; and those of Irigaray show how rules are broken through gender. From Bachelard, the being takes place in an interaction that is layered with memory and experience. All attempt to define a transaction that is not purely physical or emotional, and each describes an indefinable, equitable space between being and landscape, where neither dominates, like a sacred or

liminal zone sketched in some form around the outline of our bodies, or relinquished by the landscape in the space surrounding our bodies. There is one more theorist who understands this space precisely: the German philosopher and mathematician, Gottfried Leibniz.

The beauty of diffusion

It was Leibniz that focussed my pursuit of ideas of exchange between landscape and being. Leibniz sees the visual as parts of the being preceding itself, interacting, shaping, involved in this exchange, as a natural function of the body, much in the way Philoponus expounded previously, but with other interesting dimensions. A simple definition is that

... extension would formally involve a diffusion of parts beyond parts, though that which is diffused will not be matter or corporeal substance formally but only exigently. That which is diffused formally will be locality or that which constitutes *situs*. (Casey 170)¹¹

Leibniz categorises extension as a phenomenon purely because of its focus on abstraction rather than substance. He acknowledges it as "the diffusion of that quality or nature" (qtd. in Casey 169), extending over, through and beyond the corporeal. The term 'extension' had originally been coined by Descartes. But Leibniz resonates with theories by Descartes, which have, according to fashion, moved in and out of favour. Rather than a deep examination of these theories here, they are offered in comparison

¹¹ Letter to Des Bosses of February 5, 1712, Gottfried Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Ed. L. Loemker. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1956, 2:977.

In place of Descartes' model of material body as a separate entity exhibiting a relation of *partes extra partes*, Leibniz proposes a model of a continuous entity whose parts inhere in each other in a continuous series of overlapping members. (Casey 170)

Where Leibniz differs is the acknowledgment of a lack of distinction between the physical or corporeal self and other dimensions of extension. To be part of a "continuous entity", of "overlapping", sets up an organic operation constantly involved in interaction *or extension* with environment.

I interpret this concept in support of my thesis as it references the possibility of a physical exchange between being and landscape, particularly at one's edges of the body (in the same manner that a map has liminal zones). While there is some return to the ideas of receptacle, it is perhaps more in line with something Irigaray might envision, that of a body as an imperfect container. Leibniz argues that the entity, rather than occupying a "volumetric place" defined by size, shape or position in relation to other entities, transacts in a blurring of boundaries, with no distinction between "internal" and "external" and that the idea of extension allows the definition of a new space. But this space is by no means separate from the entity:

The repetition of the implicit law is tantamount to the literal extension of the qualities, and both occur in the same place – a place not only of the extended being that is found there but that is itself extended in that entity and not separate from it. (Casey 170)

Based on the previously explored contexts of memory, experience and emotion, it is easier to argue the semantic possibilities of a metaphysical exchange between being and landscape. It is less quantifiable because the data is based in subjectivity and personal belief. But because it is known in theory that every transaction is based on the exchange of atoms, the thesis can also be read as a physical interaction. It is exciting to see ideas supporting the more challenging aspects of my argument of this physical transaction. The argument can be pursued to the most detailed level, in much the same way as a Mandelbrot set is described. Reproduced indefinitely, broken down through a calculation of fractal geometry, nature reproduces its own patterns. In the transference of organic matter, Casey notes Leibniz's alertness to the monad's (or single cell's – reflective of the Atomists' idea) "dynamical aspects, its animating force, its inherent vitalism" (Casey 180).

Far from being something merely mechanistic, the organic body of the monad-which we have seen to be intimately tied to place-is a 'living being' or 'divine machine.' Since every monad is in effect a world filled with monads at increasingly minuscule levels, organicity extends to everything in the end. (Casey 180)¹²

Casey tells us that Leibniz's ideas of "panorganicism" are worthy of exploration, as instead of separating matter and mind, they point to

¹² Leibniz 2:1055.

... a middle region in which the material and the mental are inextricably intertwined: a region of animate matter (which) ... might regain its own animation, its own dynamis. (Casey 181)

So what is occurring is a redefinition that enters into the core of my thesis argument, where "*nothing* is altogether separate in the Leibnizian monadology-they cohere" (Casey 170). And so this 'spatial cocoon' or 'lingering exchange' of atoms is described in powerfully biological terms. This can be applied to the writing process of the *Tide Weavers* script, when attempting to describe a character's physical expression, which an actor will be using to explain emotional subtext. A character will have a personality-specific relationship with her surroundings and this space around their body will bristle with a dynamic energy.

Like Philoponus, philosopher Alphonso Lingis looks at this transaction as a physical one, labelling the process as inscription, and identifying the fusion in physiological terms:

The sensitive body is the locus of inscription of inner postural axes on external visibility and of external visibility on its inner postural diagram. To perceive is not for a transcendental agency to extract itself from a drifting mass of sensations; it is to belong to the world one works oneself into. (Lingis 15)

I am reminded of the Atomists and the vibrant motion of molecules filling spaces, but here in ways where the very energy of that movement is transferred and reflected by muscle movement and stance. And this energy transference opens up one's perspective, no longer restricted by formal

boundaries of body and form, working in a way where energy passes freely between things; so this expression into artwork becomes a reflection of new meta-physiological states, and works independent of body, genre, discipline and expectation. This helps me to imagine how to access the space whereby a character fuses with landscape, and how to express this in exciting ways. As Lingis observes: "Our contemporary art now extends itself beyond ... the human sense organs to the spaces reached for by the mind and by its electronic relays-to microcosmic and macrocosmic exteriority" (39).

But what I want to achieve is also reminiscent of very old forms of art. Lingis offers examples of art forms that merge body and artistic goals such as yoga and mantra.

Leroi-Gourhan¹³ demonstrates that the first art is the most inward-an artistry done on one's visceral core in the yoga of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa four thousand years ago, an artistry than condensed song into a mantra that is sounded only inwardly, that interiorised the dancing motility of the body into the scanned rhythms of the circulations of air and blood and semen. (Lingis 38)

This physical approach to the idea of extension or interaction with the environment provides clues of how to demonstrate my argument in the very active domain of actors portraying characters. As mentioned earlier, characters locked in metaphysical realms do not translate well to the screen. This physiological dialogue is the only way for actors to truly communicate

¹³ Andre Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole, Technique et language*. Paris: A. Michel, 1964, parts I and II, chapter 11.

the shading of metaphysical realms the writer offers. It can be that I provide resistance in many physical forms for the character who combats landscape and finds survival difficult. Characters who are willing to surrender to landscape perhaps are involved in a very different experience. It is also the ideal opportunity to show what happens in the transition between these two mindsets. This can be expressed in minute physical details: a character's habits or the changing of them (Amie choosing to express her pain), the adopting of tools, advice or behaviours more conducive to surviving in the landscape (Natch accepting Trevor, Amie and Hazel's practical knowledge), and the emotional state of a character reflected in physical ease or unease (Natch repeatedly challenging her fear of walking out onto the open Nullarbor Plain).

Japanese writer Yukio Mishima explores this distinct thread of habitual physical expression providing metaphysical release. He survived the Allied bombings and the alienation of homosexuality only to take his own life; he was a man fixed in the promise of redemption through the hard and monotonous physical exertion of the military. He recognised the surrender or releasing of the bodily form in this type of transaction, seeing a distinctive splitting of the body, particularly in times of crisis and pain, which he refers to as self-abandonment.

The flesh beats a steady retreat into its function of self-defense, while it is clear consciousness that controls the decision that sends the body soaring into self-abandonment. (Mishima 42)

Lingis has explored this ground, stating the process as the ultimate principle of Buddhism, where the "surface thought pushes on to the outlying regions, the furthestmost edges of body and of spirit, seeking there the point of their contact" (89), where the point of contact "is not at the origin, the base, the summit, nor even at the end, the telos; it is at the outer limits toward which the forms extend their impermanence" (89). Lingis visualises a bodily form or surface thought expanding its outer limits indefinitely as exposure to death. He illustrates this process with the visual example of a swooping and soaring bird, exploring extremes of height and depth.

It is to that extremity of exposure that one must go if one is to find within oneself the splintering of the forms and surfaces under the swaying blue sky that, like a fierce bird of prey with wings outstretched, alternatively sweeps down and soars upward to infinity. At its outer limits, where the surface body touches death, it turns into pain, and ignites the most intense clarity of consciousness. (Lingis 92)

Whereas there are similarities between Lingis/Mishima's and Heidegger/Merleau-Ponty's theories of physicality and the habituation of the body to overcome sensations of displacement, there is also resonance with Bachelard's metaphysical ideas. At the heart of each example rests ideas of the extension of emotional and physical boundaries and a merging with environment. Although *Tide Weavers* characters Amie and Natch inhabit a location of physical extreme on the coastal Nullarbor Plain, it is apparent that

the expression of their emotional states of extreme grief are simultaneously threatening. But what exists in both physically and emotionally based theory is the possibility of positive transformation and ascension, which is what I hope to convey in the writing.

In my exploration of the thesis argument, there is an intertwining of the physical and metaphysical that is commonplace. This operates equally in the potential for exchange between being and landscape, in the portrayal of characters in the script, and in the work of the artist attempting to comment on the process. What the theoretical work and ideas reveal is the multiple possibilities available in demonstrating the intensity of this interaction. These ways of seeing and engaging with landscape inform the thesis, the production of the artwork, the motivations of characters and the essential style of the film. What is important now is to look at works of art, particularly films, which enable me to explore the theme and place *Tide Weavers* somewhere on the artistic spectrum.

Chapter 4

Films and intimate immensity: work that influences *Tide Weavers*

I love long-distance driving ... Without a partner. Completely alone. Relentless driving. Driving until the body disappears, the legs fall off, the eyes bleed, the hands go numb, the mind shuts down, and then, suddenly, something new begins to appear. (Shepard 157)

Artists continue to create art that explores the fusion between being and landscape, and this is particularly prevalent in Australia. An artist's connections are informed by subjectivity, knowledge, experience and memory, but in a state of emotional or actual solitude, can often be overwhelmed by the landscape's scale. There are particular artists I identify as recognising the possibility of being and landscape fusion: Glen Murcutt's¹ architectural design is sensitive to the immediate environment; John Olsen's² paintings blur boundaries between land and being, inner and outer space; indigenous artists Rover Thomas³ and Emily Kane Kngwarreye⁴ use extreme abstractions in style to communicate their connection; and Rosalie Gascoigne's⁵ sculptures embrace found objects. These artists wade into their landscape and, without disrupting or altering its representation, they examine the ways in which their particular interaction impacts or sustains them. Medium and technique vary, as does the expression of personal beliefs and experiences, but each attempts to capture some essence of this

¹ http://www.pritzkerprize.com/full_new_site/murcutt.htm

² http://www.timolsengallery.com/pages/johnolsen.php?artist_id=1

³ http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/rover_queenie/rover.html

⁴ http://www.abstract-art.com/abstraction/l3_more_artists/ma58a_kngwarreye1.html

⁵ http://www.roslynolexy9.com.au/artists/15/Rosalie_Gascoigne/

exchange that deepens understandings of people's complex relationship with landscape. The same principles extend to the motion picture frame, and so with *Tide Weavers* I look for guidance. Australian filmmakers Weir, Auzins and Sen, among others, present distinctive visions where landscape embodies or reflects human ideals, challenges and trauma, where landscape is inseparable from character or becomes character. These filmmakers sit in a wider international circle that includes Wenders, Antonioni and Malick, who explore ideas synonymous with this thesis and produce films with styles that influence *Tide Weavers*.

Exchange and embodiment in films: the 'desert-ing' of oneself

I believe film stories that emerge from 'desert' settings⁶ can have a powerful and epic quality. Standard framing of landscape commonly involves a division of one-third land below two-thirds sky. The status of a human being placed within this framing can be manipulated. Film composition often involves a small-scale vertical human form within an overpoweringly horizontal space, where a character can be mindful of their lesser power when they interact with the space. I believe variances in expression of the fusion of this outer space with inner space reflect the filmmaker's personal, societal or historical values. The films I find most exciting explore desert in unconventional styles.

⁶ I expand the strict definition of 'desert' to any setting of expansive scope or visual monotony, with resulting emotional resonance triggered within the viewer as they try to understand their surroundings and purpose.

In Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, 'desert' represents the alienation of young revolutionaries Mark and Daria, as they question the effectiveness of 1960s political activity, and corporations gobble up the virgin desert for eco-housing estates. But Mark and Daria's desert is also a place of idealistic freedom in which to explore the environment and each other, embarking on acts of recklessness and creation (ala Eliade) that are full of bravado and colour. While the real estate magnates hide in opulent architect-designed oases, Daria and Mark dream, smoke grass and make love in the Badlands, coated in silica dust. Due to their alienated state, they have little fear of merging with desert. [*Zabriskie Point* is] "... a unique vision of the desert as an expression of the anguish of incommunicability" (Berrah par.12).

Sam Shepard, *Zabriskie Point* co-writer, maintains a long-term affinity with the desert. In interviews he has expressed a fear of flying, preferring to instead cross the USA in marathon driving sessions. His writing explores the dry southern states, and his characters, including Travis in his Wim Wenders collaboration *Paris, Texas*, emerge from the desert like biblical castaways. Travis's self-imposed exile is a result of personal trauma and the desert has erased both his voice and identity. After spatially embodying the emptiness of his landscape, Travis takes a long time to remember and reveal the nature of the trauma that has forced him into willing oblivion.

In *Zabriskie Point* desert is a short form of character state: Mark and Daria willingly become desert. With the unmotivated actions and hippy vernacular of the era, the young activists' detached attitude toward each other and the rules of conservative society fit the landscape. They recklessly flirt with impending danger, which at least states their disapproval, and symbolically embrace their one last mortal choice of actual death. In *Paris, Texas*, Travis is also spiritually lost, but while walks the desert with assurance. His decision not to speak is as unequivocal as his final choices in the film. There is fear these characters won't survive this dangerous landscape, and yet they succeed. Films such as *Zabriskie Point* and *Paris, Texas* resist the popular negative portrayal of the empty desert and a character's emotional state.⁷

Bachelard's philosophical work can be referenced in the analysis of the filmic process of particular filmmakers who are interested in the relationship between landscape and being. He argues that this contrast between people's domestic spaces and the desert landscape exists because the spaces have lost "cosmicity". Our city houses have lost a connection with nature; our relationship with landscape has become artificial. As in nightmares, one cannot escape or take refuge, "space is nothing but a

⁷ Examples include *Fort Saganne*, discussed later in this chapter, *Sunday Too Far Away* and *Walkabout*; films that expose characters to isolation, illness and madness in their struggle to survive the desert environment.

'horrible outside-inside'" (218) and boundaries lose distinctness. He continues: "In this ambiguous space, the mind has lost its geometrical homeland and the spirit is drifting" (218).

But some films show the seduction of oblivion, if only as a respite for characters from crowded cities, or perhaps complicated personal demands. Just as with Natch and Amie in *Tide Weavers*, the 'desert-ing' of oneself buys time to think, reconstruct or heal trauma. The characters' imposed (Natch) or voluntary (Amie) transformation offers them a brief state of grace, away from distraction and inner emptiness, to renegotiate past, present or future. Their willingness to experience the transformation this state of grace brings is also interpreted as an acceptance of the universe's invitation to feel "infinity in intimacy" (Bachelard, ch. 8). Casey writes that one may experience the full extent of the universe by not physically moving and by not extending any part of the body out into it, but imagining it within, or as he states, it can be "felt from the very being of within" (294). This blurring of boundaries enters an ambiguous realm where we feel both "in the out" and "the out in" (295). Thus choosing to surrender initiates a double reversal, where "intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void" (Casey 295, Bachelard 218).

The desert can become a trigger, where a character is confronted by a challenging emotional state. What this reveals within and without depends upon the state of mind chosen. A character's acceptance that boundaries will blur is the same as that of the explorer who chooses not to enforce particular ideals upon the landscape, rather to work with it, and see what happens. Inviting this intimacy changes a character. In film storylines set in desolate landscapes, the surrounding sparsity naturally turns attention within. The landscape contains no sustaining interest, and, like travelling, in this meditative setting, characters are constructed to begin exploring internal landscapes: questions, problems and experiences which surface from the subconscious and demand attention. Perhaps this activity will allow trauma to (re)surface, be processed and resolved, or alternatively, it may create madness. Memories may be horrific or laden with nostalgia, regret or joy.

Characters can be temporarily trapped in this landscape, by unavailability of transport, or vehicles breaking down, by unexpected or imposed delays. There may be initial resistance to this stillness, expressions of frustration or even fear, a slow realisation, acceptance or rejection. This formula may also apply to the customary 'road trip' film where, especially if traversing a monotonous landscape, there is a sense of entrapment. Resistance or acceptance generally takes time, as familiar possessions and expectations are cast aside. When a character realises that everyday skills

are obsolete in this new landscape, s/he must look deeply within their instinctive self, to other guides or to the environment. The ability to survive depends on his/her successful assessment of their new surroundings, taking clues, adapting to new stimuli.

On the Nullarbor that stimulus is initially elusive, and it is so quiet one is distracted by the unexpected sounds of one's own body. Listening is heightened; the senses bristle and evolve. At first there appears to be an absence of sensorial detail, but this becomes quite the opposite, when multiple sights, sounds and smells emerge. This textural dimension flavours the *Tide Weavers* script. I also reinterpret some aspects of my desert travel with Aboriginal companions April and her family into the script, where environmental details provide a form of (un)conscious mapping for locating isolated sites. Animals and geographic forms, their absence or aberration, can distract one from the possible dangers of travelling in this isolated location. For me as a passenger, there is a brief, obligatory imposition of fear: should I be concerned about turning from a well-worn track into a faint one, or following undocumented markers? Reassuringly, the trip becomes an adventure because of the family's familiarity with the detail of the region. In film, these details can emerge powerfully from a landscape that is inherently sparse. Instead of a busy and complicated frame, the absence of competing details means greater symbolism is attributed to fewer elements. Whether

natural, as sand and grasses, or introduced architecture/vehicles, one's eye is drawn to that which breaks the monotony. One film portraying this powerful symbolism is *Fort Saganne*.

As Berrah explains, *Fort Saganne* "describes the gradual development of the relationship between the characters and the sand, which shapes their destinies and determines their actions" (par. 5). Charles Saganne, Gerard Depardieu's character in *Fort Saganne*, encounters the enigmatic warlords of the Sahara and learns how to triumph physically and politically. When Saganne's soldier companion perfunctorily and shockingly despatches himself with a pistol, it becomes clear that it is the soldier's alienation and lack of affinity with the landscape that has driven him mad. Posted in a desert fort surrounded by dunes, driven by boredom and despair, he dies face down in the sand.

"Trop d'espace nous étouffe beaucoup plus que s'il n'y en avait pas assez. (Too much space smothers us much more than if there were not enough)" (qtd. in Bachelard 221).⁸

Algerian sociologist and journalist Mouny Berrah argues that desert settings trouble characters – they struggle to adapt physically and psychologically to "the total freedom of the desert" and realise this is "a world where life is measured out in silence" (par. 5). Sand can be used as an unsettling or poetic reminder of one's own impermanence, bringing

⁸ Jules Supervielle. *Gravitations*. France: Gallimard. 1966. N. pag.

metaphors of erosion and futility, and characters must resist the urge to control these vast, shifting surroundings.

Philippe Diolé is another writer enamoured with the desert, with unusual background to draw on. As an experienced desert traveller and deep-sea diver, he believes these spaces are phenomenologically similar. His book, *Le plus beau désert du monde!* explores how inner space transacts with desert space. Bachelard refers to Diolé as "a dream-haunted traveller" and invites us to follow Diolé's advice that "the desert must be lived 'the way it is reflected in the wanderer'" (qtd. in Bachelard 204).⁹ He describes desert travel as meditation, where the landscape is "'annexed to inner space.' And through this annexation, the diversity of the images is unified in the depths of 'inner space'" (205).¹⁰

However, Bachelard adds that, unexpectedly, "this interiorization of the desert does not correspond to a sense of inner emptiness" (205). I know this sensation myself; in a state of grief and inner desolation, I was surprised that the Nullarbor's sparse plain, rather than fill me with unease and distress, smoothly surrounded and entered my body, creating calm and recognition, reflecting hope. Bachelard states, paraphrasing Diolé, "... each new contact with the cosmos renews our inner being, and that every new cosmos is open

⁹ Philippe Diolé. *Le Plus Beau Désert Du Monde!* New York: Albin Michel, 1955, p. 178.

¹⁰ Diolé 178.

to us when we have freed ourselves from the ties of a former sensitivity" (206). For Diolé, the desert's ability to change the nature of space is a renewing experience. His observations precisely outline the possibility of a transaction or fusion between human and landscape, the basis of the thesis. And once again, this exchange is only possible with surrender; by releasing habitual expectations, "and by changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating" (Bachelard 206).

Many films awaken unusual sensibilities to convey landscape in original ways; I have chosen those that I feel are specifically relevant. American director Terrence Malick uses a non-invasive and poetic shooting style that mimics how an eye caresses a landscape. Often his characters are framed from a distance, absorbed by landscape, and his themes explore this transaction. Malick's *Days of Heaven* presents an exquisite and moody landscape that is attuned with the trademarks of a desert space. A wealthy Texan farmer's gothic mansion towers over undulating and endless wheat fields. Bill, Abby and Linda are itinerant workers during the Depression, who take advantage of the 'Farmer', their terminally ill employer. They leave this economic plain and move into the mansion – and the prairie becomes a space of wealthy abundance, and carefree, childish games, until their betrayal manifests in a devastating insect plague and wildfire. Malick fondly

uses plains thematically in many films. In *The Thin Red Line*, the primary location is a Pacific island battlefield's lush, grassy knolls. These gently rustling grasses provide space for characters' memories and contemplations of past regrets and future trepidations. Soldiers wait in the grass for a predetermined attack time in an imposed state of grace, and it is as good an eternity as any; in the next half-hour it is drenched in the soldiers' blood. Equally, the breathless beauty of the 1607 Virginia wetlands in *The New World* is where the Powhatan people live in a seamless relationship with the reeds, water channels and forests; they travel in a choreography visually reminiscent of a school of fish, overlapping, leading and retreating to ensure the safety of the group. Character John Smith is seduced by the gentle creativity, curiosity and humour of these tribal people. Looking at his landscape in this new way, he certainly demonstrates aspects of Bachelard's "psychically innovating" (206) mind frame. But through his betrayal, he loses a woman's love, a community's friendship, and his joyful connection to the natural world.

Aspects of writing: landscape

I am an inland explorer, searching out lines that lead to the heartlands. (Thomas Watling in *Camera Natura*)

Ken Kelso urges screenwriters to explore not only setting as reflected in character, but *character as reflected in setting*. This exciting idea dramatically inverts traditional ideas and represents new possibilities.

Obvious outcomes would be that what a character sees in a landscape, the landscape becomes – with a subjective gaze. But a landscape reflecting a character could be immensely frustrating for a character, prompting shifts. What if a landscape then multiplies obstacles? A character would be forced to confront a reflection of his or her own personality or state of mind, or remain in a discordant status quo (which may not result in a satisfying storyline). In contrast, a character who opens to a journey of self-exploration may find extraordinary things reflected back from sand and sky. Berrah speaks of the early western genre's deserts "underscoring feelings, echoing emotions and mirroring characters" (par. 2), in addition to serving as background for the plot. Whereas it can represent an emotional space of a character, location can also enrich themes. Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* does this, beginning on dusty plains and elevating to a mountainous region, as tension, challenge and plot escalate. Jedda and Marbuck are pursued into rocky hill country and the climactic scene is at the edge of a deep ravine.

Bachelard suggests that people's individual reactions to environment occur in unique ways, creating a particularly intimate experience that emotionally changes the self and outlook. This intimacy is consolidated in occupation, thought about our purpose, and connection to the landscape. This exchange, as noted earlier, is the metamorphosis of space (infinite) to place (finite) and shifting identification, ownership and absorption of the

space. This alchemic process, according to Casey, shows that "while 'exterior space' is tantamount to infinite space, (it is) at once full and compressed into intimacy. ... They coalesce in a common *intensity* ..." (295). There is clearly a transaction that changes both being and landscape, but it also forms a new relationship between the two. This alone supports my thesis, but beyond the blending and metamorphosis of physical inner and outer is a created reaction that Bachelard delights in as he argues:

And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity (183).

This is the space of exaltation, dependant upon surrender and release. It is a joyful and subjective space. Because sensitivities vary, the transformation can even be subtle but pragmatic. Characters in films who deal with the land in the ways I have described often reflect their surroundings, seek solace in their landscape, and are changed by it. Characters can be silent, beaten by sun, dust and wind, and they can often bring enigmatic qualities more common to land than people. This is prevalent in John Ford's storytelling style in which he embraces his love of Utah's Monument Valley, where distant hazy buttes and farmland make a fertile, epic backdrop against which the characters in *Shane* and *The Searchers* play out their heroic roles. But equally, the shearers of *Sunday Too Far Away* are as fierce and competitive as their dry Australian Outback environment, and are trapped both within the location and their masculinity.

As seen here, there is a constant beyond cultural specificity, where landscape reflects or resonates emotion. Is memory the trigger for this transformation, where in silent contemplation or meditation the characters revisit places that fill them with immense feelings of grandeur? Can imagination achieve the same objective?

Bachelard believes either to be possible. His discussion of the ability to re-enter one's own intimate immensities outlines an inner image making, "a region of the purest sort of phenomenology" (184). He goes on to point out that:

In analysing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination. It then becomes clear that works of art are the *by-products* of this existentialism of the imagining being. In this direction of daydreams of immensity, the real *product* is consciousness of enlargement. We feel that we have been promoted to the dignity of the admiring being. (184)

Whereas Bachelard refers to the wider world, in film scripts this engagement also changes a character irrevocably: even while aware of his/her own insignificance and brutal meaninglessness, s/he glimpses grandeur, not from "the spectacle witnessed, but from the unfathomable depths of vast thoughts" and "the exterior spectacle helps intimate grandeur unfold" (192). What I call 'fusion' Bachelard then refers to as 'correspondences', which in principle "receive the immensity of the world, which they transform into intensity of our intimate being. They institute transactions between two kinds

of grandeur" (193). Writing and capturing this exchange cinematically is the challenge, but the transaction is natural, as Bachelard states:

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. (184)

It is this correspondence, or fusion, that changes people. Not only can it stimulate the production of artistic works, it can move us toward that 'plain' where grandeur can be glimpsed.

I can see particular application to the grieving state in *Tide Weavers*, where in a unique emotional state a transformation is possible. Bachelard refers to:

[W]hatever the affectivity that colors (sic) a given space, whether sad or ponderous, once it is poetically expressed, the sadness is diminished, the ponderousness lightened. Poetic space, because it is expressed, assumes values of expansion. (201)

The two intensities blend, "then the two immensities touch and become identical" (Bachelard 203). This poetic space is often the realm of filmmakers, who work to show how our environment changes us every day, through characters choosing to participate in this intimate embrace. Some films show very different environments from which the characters are inseparable. These are films that would fail without this intense and enriching connection. For example, in *Wings of Desire*, Wenders' love of the Berlin

cityscape emerges in a story spanning different historical, spatial and spiritual levels. In contrast, *Until the End of the World* moves through many future cities as the intense Sam/Trevor pursues a race against time to collect digital visuals his blind mother will actually be able to see. In this future world, this 'end of the world', an Indian nuclear satellite is spinning out of control and the West Australian desert is the place these characters retreat to escape the apocalypse. Likewise in Henri Safran's *Storm Boy*, the two characters Fingerbone Bill and Storm Boy adore the isolated South Australian Coorong wetlands – their presences barely distinguishable as they gently merge with the reeds, water and wildlife. When noise and destruction descend, the impact is profound because it is also perpetrated on the characters' souls.

One final example is when the non-indigenous female character Jeannie of *We of the Never Never* sits in opposition to the men of the Outback station by maintaining vulnerability to her landscape and compassion for the Aboriginal people living around her. Stimulated by loneliness, she crosses cultural boundaries and is richly rewarded. To the wary men, the Never Never is a place of evil seduction and madness – but Jeannie's bewitching is complete, and her love affair with her environment is deep and transforming. This is exactly the connection that Bachelard has described. Jeannie's contemplation and observation lead to an indelible change in her sense of

self. Bachelard sees the combination of space, solitude and surrender as a choice that each of us is capable of making, "He (sic) knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative" (10).

There are other authors who explore this space. Excitingly, a footnote in *The Poetics of Space* shows Bachelard referring to the Provence-based novelist Henri Bosco, in his work *L'antiquaire*, where he observes:

In the hidden desert that each one of us bears within himself, and to which the desert of sand and stone has penetrated, the expanse of the spirit is lost in the infinite, uninhabited expanse that is the desolation of earth's place of solitude. (Bosco, *L'antiquaire* 228, Bachelard 205)

Bachelard continues to examine Bosco's perception of desert in his book *Hyacinthe*, where Bosco's words echo this thesis when he states:

Elsewhere on a bare plateau, on the plain that touches the sky, this great dreamer gives profound expression to the analogies between the desert on earth and the desert of the spirit. "Once more emptiness stretched out inside me and I was a desert within a desert". (Bachelard 205)¹¹

This is the most precise and poetic description of the metaphysical and physical transaction between being and landscape that I have encountered.

Aspects of writing: anti exoticism, colonialism, post-colonialism, aboriginality and collaboration

Coastal-dwelling Australians have a strong attachment to the desert that describes a mythical rather than actual relationship. But our affinity to

¹¹ Henri Bosco, *Hyacinthe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1940, pp, 33-34.

open spaces is valid – road trips customarily involve long distances by spatial default. This affinity is constantly analysed in films. *Camera Natura* documents the Australian obsession with landscape, and discovers its origins in the literature of Anglo-Saxon convicts and explorers, but indigenous interpretation balances this colonial perspective with enduring ideas of land-being exchange.

The common Australian filmic landscape is vast and dry, with an open horizon. Films such as *Walkabout* and *Rabbit-proof Fence* promote this mythology internationally, but they also show that survival requires sensitivity to the spirituality of the land. Intruders with profit agendas and those ignorant to indigenous survival skills inevitably perish. The non-indigenous characters of *Walkabout* are dying of dehydration, having shed most useless traces of 'English' culture, when discovered by an Aboriginal youth. It's unclear whether Jeannie's husband Aeneas in *We of the Never Never* has died of a tropical fever or whether he has been mysteriously 'sung' to death. In contrast, runaway Aboriginal girl, Molly, in *Rabbit-proof Fence* knows how to cover her tracks from the policemen who pursue her, and she seeks spiritual guidance on her journey home.

Aboriginal connection to place is an international concept. *Cheyenne Autumn* director John Ford shows us a Native American community awaiting

restoration of their spiritual touchstone – their plains land – while white men slaughter their buffalo and engage in deceitful bureaucratic practices. The Comanche of *The Searchers* exist in such a strong symbiotic relationship with the land; to their trackers, they appear to have an almost malevolent, primitive invisibility. I find this mythical layering of indigenous characters perplexing. Learned skills are what dictate survival in any environment, and even Molly from *Rabbit-proof Fence* almost dies in her journey back to her mother. This would seem logical regardless of culture, but what happens in many films is considerably stranger.

The most powerful scenes of Peter Weir's contemporary essay into Aboriginal spirituality, *The Last Wave*, show nature invading the city as David Burton's descent into intuition begins. His connection to Aboriginal Dreaming signals these changes to be propelled by an ominous and prophetic force. The 1970s in Australian film marks a period of the cinema-going public's views when Aborigines were perceived as mystical and often threatening figures, and this was demonstrated in magical connections to weather and nature. But here lies a danger, where the interpretation of indigenous culture generates its own exoticism. I believe people's contemporary thirst for a restorative mythological and spiritual landscape can be equally as dangerous as the explorer/conqueror pathology that led us here. At a superficial level this is naïve, but this thirst is problematic and

blatantly hypocritical as it represents a cultural longing for that which colonialism sought to annihilate. As Ros Haynes argues:

The Aborigines, who a few decades ago were regarded as too primitive to subscribe to anything more than the vaguest animism, have now been categorised as the guardians of the eternal spiritual values that Western culture has allegedly lost in its pursuit of materialism. (276)

In the daily quest for life's meaning, people look for fictional yet emotionally sustaining evidence of the unknown and unexplainable: of fate, destiny, or god. Some people seek ancient knowledge lost through time, which they believe may help negotiate turmoil. In filmmaking, symbolism, myth, magical realism and the supernatural are story choices available to layer an otherwise pragmatic storyline with a dimension of the incredible. The trend of indigenous characters having supernatural skills, telepathic connections to other beings, to the environment, or the ability to read past or future satiated this need. Storylines often still include complex explorations of this innate ability; or demonstrate an enigmatic portrayal of a character harbouring some secret 'knowing' – often accompanied by traditional music – indicating the deep wisdom and connection this character embodies, based on their aboriginal status. I believe that particularly in Australian filmmaking in the 1970s, this increasing curiosity and acceptance of indigenous culture may have been based in more than just a growing awareness and escalation of the political profile of aborigines by civic leaders. For an evolving nation, it seems probable that some non-indigenous Australians would seek spiritual

connection with land, albeit layered with romanticism. Historian Ann McGrath observes that in people's imaginations

... the outback is where white Australians negotiate their present. As a highly flexible mythological site and signifier, it easily incorporates new historical traditions... By going there and 'seeing it', by witnessing living Aborigines in their own country, by breathing in the unpolluted air of the outback, such travellers enact rituals of colonial sanctification. (McGrath 123)

Haynes describes how non-indigenous people existing in a pressure cooker environment of over-population and industrialisation crave to stretch their wings and breathe – and bring their wallets with them.

[T]he immensity of space that so terrified British colonists has become an enviable asset. Silence, immensity, and ancientness, the characteristics of the desert, are now eminently marketable. (Haynes 6)

This ideal is sentimental and even pastoral, but not necessarily original. What Haynes calls the "romantic celebration of Nature's immensity, unsullied by human contact" (30) is persistent in literature – from Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau, for example. People seek a complete dichotomy – evidence of utopia before our own invasion (in this case the colonial invasion of Australia) – that which will always be altered by our very presence. This nostalgia is indicative of a craving for 'natural' simplicity, where our own preference for complexity will always destroy it. Exoticism is false industry, and ultimately unsatisfying. Huggan suggests the heritage industry, tourism, and indigenous cultural exploitation are examples.

However it is experienced, nostalgia enacts a complex dialectic of desire – it seeks a past of its own invention it knows in

advance to be impossible. ... But paradoxically, it is the very falseness of nostalgia that makes it all the more appealing.
(Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic* 179)

Cautious of this danger to a writer, I identify that the predilection for exoticism lies in ignorance. Education about indigenous life and history will quickly dispel romanticism, and allow for a meaningful connection to culture and the landscape. With education, the actual complexities of a culture become more fascinating than the assumed. In the details and challenges articulated, comes a greater possibility of finding similarities and parallels to one's own culture. Learning the reality of contemporary indigenous life, hearing what it means to those directly involved in daily struggle may lead to understanding and ignite a desire to connect in the activity of a mutual goal, or project. Such was the process with *Tide Weavers*, where careful background research and established working relationships were pre-established. We had always intended that the documentary *Gampa* and now *Tide Weavers* show a Mirning point of view. I have found that working collaboratively improves cultural representation, if simply by identifying innocent errors or misinterpretation in information. The checking and rechecking of cultural specificities can only be achieved in careful partnership with indigenous co-writers or advisors. Done properly, when all parties work together in a constructive fashion,¹² there can't help but be some truth to this process.

¹² Twelve years' experience as a community artist has introduced me to ideas of social justice and activism within arts approaches. Community arts endeavour to address

Deborah Bird Rose likens this activity to the ethical process of dialogue rather than monologue. She identifies in monologue hierarchical oppositions in Western thought and action that have "provided powerful conceptual tools for the reproduction of violence". Drawing reference to common dualities such as "man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, active/passive, civilisation/savagery", she argues they are "more properly described as a series of singularities because the pole labelled 'other' (woman, Nature, savage, etc.) is effectively an absence." (19) Difference is essential in dialogue, however, ethically beginning

... where one is. It acknowledges the legacies that form one's history and ground, seeking from that grounded position to turn towards others in an attitude that welcomes change. (180)

misrepresentations of people and communities, particularly those residing in low-socioeconomic areas. The aim is to facilitate creative working practices that encourage a democracy of expression by the target communities in which the community artist is based. The community artist's role is to ensure the purity of this expression is preserved, that collaborative creative development practices endure and that representation of the community is true and fair. Collectively, these collaborative working practices have become incorporated into my filmmaking. I believe that this methodology facilitates an approach that is less egocentric, more accurate, and provides a more satisfying experience for collaborators – whether co-writers or subjects, and produces a more genuine film text that is not disempowering in the way that media can be.

I had meetings with Murdoch University administration in 2003 concerning my reluctance to omit April from a co-writer's credit on the material we produce. This stemmed from experience in copyright and Aboriginal cultural heritage rights. Although not resolved, as April was not also a post-graduate student at Murdoch University, and my project is to be assessed as part of a university degree program, it was suggested that I monitor progress and open dialogue with the university about existing policy. Disappointed, April and I decided that I should write the first script draft based on research work accumulated over the last decade, and at a later date, when the development process led us to apply for funding to complete further drafts after graduation, April would rejoin the project as a co-writer.

My curiosity of the Nullarbor began with travel encounters, and I presumed the plain had some Aboriginal traditional connection. I learned that the scattering of the Mirning people, as a result of government policy, the Maralinga bomb tests and economic need, had led to an assumption of the extinction of the traditional custodians of the Nullarbor region. Much to my relief, I found that this view, steeped in colonialism, is false. Mirning people still live in the region, west to Kalgoorlie, east to Adelaide, north to Ernabella and beyond. The struggle for acknowledgment, rights and dignity of culture is as much external as within the community itself and, as in any community, conflict is a part of this, when meeting social, familial, economic and bureaucratic obstacles daily.

The practicalities of *Tide Weavers*

Tide Weavers is a difficult project to embark upon, considering ingrained racial divides. Attitudes evolve but there are identifiable ambivalences at any point in the historical timeline of interaction – as recorded in both indigenous and non-indigenous literature and comment. Having worked collaboratively, I know it to be an incredibly complex process, as a method in which one moves forward with simultaneously more, and fewer obstacles. But in my experience, the difficulty for the non-indigenous person to work collaboratively with indigenous people is the very reason why it should happen. Assumptions, not asking enough questions, not taking the

time to prove worth as a confidante, or ignorantly summarizing and thereby appropriating an indigenous person's cultural view are common pitfalls. Becoming familiar with someone from another culture, taking time, developing trust and being confronted with your own cultural biases is unsettling and challenging. Moving toward understanding, tolerating and accepting another culture is a difficult task, but the process cannot be short-circuited. To do it any other way is a lie. Lies quickly reveal themselves, often resulting in cross-cultural and even intercommunity discord, with lasting dissatisfaction and regret. I often struggle to comprehend research information of what it is to be part of a young nation built over the sites of an ancient indigenous people. I see how, against all odds, we are still conscious of the philosophy of the original people's connection to place, and I recall Mirning stories April Lawrie-Smith has shared that illustrate the endurance of their philosophy. For example, April states:

Many of our Mirning stories are connected to geographical landmarks. When you see the landmarks, you see the stories. I know of one story of a Mirning dreaming totem, the white whale. The whale has several clashes with the mystical Seven Sisters along the coast of the Nullarbor ... during the chase and struggle; the whale creates the rugged coastline. (*Gampa*)

My impatience with the historical writings of explorers is their detachment, which emanates from their egocentric interaction with the landscape. This contrasts with the sense of life and spirit I gain from contact with April as I learn her connection to this same desert landscape. She provides access to an understanding that has historically been denied to me.

What I feel in the light of history may truly be described as impatience, as I relish the intangible nurturing these stories bring. It is a thirst, a longing to know this landscape as she does. But instead of self-condemnation stimulated by a loathing of my own cultural predilection for exoticism, I try to gain awareness, identify and learn from this longing. After all, this is a landscape that surrounds me, that I intimately respond to, and about which I have a natural curiosity. As Tacey states:

Aboriginal consciousness and landscape are intimately bound; in fact, Aboriginal spirituality is primarily a spirituality of place. It seems to me that Euro-Australians are led to an encounter with Aboriginality in two ways: by the need for a 'local', Australian religious awareness, and by the need to know this country and respond inwardly to its landscape. If the need for an 'other' reality does not drive us to Aboriginality, the need for a keener sense of place and landscape will. (Tacey 57)

For April, the Nullarbor is not a wilderness where punishment or banishment from Eden occurred; it is rich and full of meaning. Her gaze is empowered, finding variety, depth and complexity, not sameness. The differences in viewpoints regarding landscape are immense, beginning with the use of the word 'landscape'. In the European sense, this word is used to imply separation, whereas for indigenous people it is profoundly different. As Tacey points out:

It is apparent that our English word 'landscape' is wholly inadequate to describe what Aboriginals actually mean when they refer to 'land'. Land for them is the living spirit, a kind of collective unconscious which holds the memories, dreams and reflections of an entire people. (60)

Tacey relates his retrospective observation of the racism present in Alice Springs when he was growing up, sparked as a defensive tactic against the Aboriginal 'spirit of place' that was so overwhelming in the region. Defensive tactics take many forms, another being exclusion. Interestingly, in the study of non-indigenous Australian art landscape, the Aborigine as a figure in the landscape is often absent, what Haynes refers to as actively conspiratorial, "to erase the Aboriginal presence ... " (Haynes 167). Peta Tait attributes this to "the immense power of image manipulation in maintaining the status quo" and continues to advise that "the stories of the landscape and its changes must be told and re-told to understand our place within it, not as domination, or alienation but to give an understanding of belonging" (238).

The process of working collaboratively creates immensely complex arguments. Artists' subjectivities and experiences vary, even in telling an identical story. Language disappoints, as a word's meaning varies. Care must be taken with cultural translation. And even then the purpose of storytelling is distorted. Aboriginal artistic works, created for the purpose of oral or visual information sharing, are released into the community with a completely altered purpose. As products, they must be marketed, promoted and sold within possibly unwelcoming discourses and industries. In regards to writing, Huggan argues:

[H]owever well intentioned, (industry practices) are necessarily – structurally – oppressive. It still seems safe to suggest that

escalating demands for Native authenticity on the part of mostly white middle-class consumers belong to a machinery of representation that constrains Native writers even as it provides an outlet, and an audience, for their work. (159-160)

The only creative process offering some success, Huggan offers, can be explained in works by Australian writer Mudrooroo:

Mudrooroo's vision of an authentic Aboriginal life-story seems to be one produced by Aborigines for Aborigines, rather than 'a heavily edited literature written and revised in conjunction with a European', and whose aim is in large part to 'explain Indigenous individuals ... to a predominantly white readership'. (163)¹³

Gareth Griffiths suggests a "strategy of disruption" to supplement smaller affirmative victories, an active valuing of indigenous culture within dominant discourse, and the celebration of hybridised artistic works

... which replicate the hidden condition of the dominant culture and which undermine and subvert its claims to seamless, discursive unity and dismantle its dominant narrative mastery. (Griffiths 76)

The skills I gained researching and producing the documentary *Gampa* apply directly to the process of *Tide Weavers*, regardless of one being a documentary experience, and the other a drama. While working with April as a collaborator,¹⁴ I learned valuable lessons about the writing process. It was a conscious, but painful exercise to strip the script back to the truth of the original experience. That was essential because of our

¹³ Huggan quotes Mudrooroo *Milli Milli Wangka: The Indigenous Literature of Australia*. Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997, p. 16.

¹⁴ April Lawrie Smith was credited as a co-writer of *Gampa* and although not credited as a producer, co-producers Brett Houghton and I had signed a partnership agreement ensuring all three parties resolved decisions unanimously before progressing. We felt that this way funding, community and artistic considerations were represented appropriately.

objective to represent a Mirning voice. It would be unrealistic to suggest that it would not be distorted by me – my very involvement precluded this 'complete' authenticity, however constant awareness of this danger could at least limit influence.



Fig. 4. April Lawrie-Smith (centre) her mother Elma (left) and Auntie Dorcas

Collaborative artists need intensive research and development time. During the writing of *Gampa*, funding facilitated a preliminary visit to the region. Travelling with April, her mother and aunts invaluable duplicated the documentary's narrative. Participation prior to the intimidation of camera set ups and crew reassured me that the experience represented in the script, and later on the screen, was similar to what would happen naturally. It was also an opportunity for them to get to know me, and become comfortable with the idea of working with a camera. This process also changed the way the script was written. April's Auntie Dorcas, a proficient and vibrant storyteller, got into the swing of things on the Nullarbor. Her initial requests of "Can we talk?" became, "Hey, Julie, turn the camera on now." Acknowledging the archival possibilities of the process, she didn't miss an

opportunity. Originally we had not intended April to address the camera directly - it seemed at odds with the narrative style. But on location, she naturally shifted from addressing me (the camera) and sharing various features, to interacting with her Aunties. It was not stylistically jarring, because of her warmth and ease; instead, as an audience member, I felt consistently included in the activity. My perspective simply shifted with hers: from the intimate and personal, to her looking out on her world. This, and past collaborative writing experiences within different kinds of communities have shown me that wherever possible, pure communication from the source participants to audience results in a superior product. Where storylines begin with an alien character 'entering' another community, curiosity, questioning, open-mindedness and assistance from guides of that community should allow us, as viewers, to reach as deeply as possible into the new culture, thus increasing the possibility of connectedness. Being in the Nullarbor environment, listening to stories, provided opportunities for April and me to refine the material. There was priceless information absorbed from watching, following, listening, doing, that now textures the script and documentary. Many sections were totally reworked to include original experiences that normally occurred in April's visits to the region. This was also an element of the 'Mirning style of storytelling' we sought: April and her family physically connecting with the sites – walking, sitting and drawing representations in the sand.



Fig. 5. April's extended family, Gilgerabbie Hut, Nullarbor Plain

During the filming of *Gampa*, using a 'go-between' seemed most comfortable for April's family. Having April as a filter, in both cultural directions, allowed interpretation of difficult funding body information, and also private discussions of what cultural material should be included – discussions that I was often not privy to, but briefed about at a later date. April's skills in human relations, her understanding of the perils of media, and a mutual consent of our expectations of the project certainly contributed to its relative success. However, difficult changes concerning content were made even beyond final edit, leading to quality compromises. This also led funding bodies to express their disapproval, when the decision was made to withdraw previously promised 'sensitive' material from *Gampa*. In behaviour I can only describe as vampiric, I remember an executive producer expressing anger that a Mirning dance sequence was omitted, inferring that content in the documentary was different from the submission documents. I likened this to the trend in autobiographical documentary making, where funding bodies are more satisfied when the filmmaker or subject's inner world is completely

bared (and exploited). This provided me with an interesting conundrum, as I watched, and tried to negotiate, difficult cultural concerns. I was determined to prevent unnecessary exploitation, and to remain true to April's trust; fortunately, this helped make difficult situations appear far less complicated, and became the moral measure by which decisions were made. Neither April nor I feel we were completely successful, but the process seemed to work for us within that context, and would be duplicated during the research for *Tide Weavers*.

Offering specific advice to others seems inappropriate, but the underlying principles we developed may be resourceful as other projects' collaborative artistic processes evolve. While adapting bureaucratic protocols, the more complex labyrinth of artistic collaboration on a personal level can be debated frankly, improving working templates. As difficult as collaborative procedures are to implement, and as flexible and creative as they must be, it is an achievement to finish making a film outside one's own culture and to achieve higher than usual levels of success – success being equated with the subjects' satisfaction with the process and product. Having experienced this through one complete creative process, it is my aim to do so again with *Tide Weavers*, should the working relationship remain strong and institutional rules allow it.

Non-indigenous directors Peter Weir, Bruce Beresford and Phillip Noyce have visually expressed a sophisticated view of indigenous people and culture. Slowly, Australian film is moving through developmental stages where the portrayal of Aboriginal people as 'Other' may be eliminated. Whether this is a reflection of society or instructive suggestion on where we should be as a society is less important than actually getting there. This is illustrated in historical progression. Curiously, *Jedda* used Hollywood story format to make Aboriginality palatable for non-indigenous Australians. Audiences of the 1950s were induced to understand an 'aboriginal' story in a framework completely alien to Aboriginal storytelling practices. *We of the Never Never*, *The Last Wave*, *The Fringe Dwellers* and even *Walkabout*, although sensitive and empathetic for their time, still represent an art form and industry in evolution. A recent film such as *Dead Heart* refreshingly addresses the ambiguity of modern racism in a time of stifling political correctness – with the ongoing joke about the ease of getting 4-wheel drive vehicles from the government, and Ivan Sen's sensitive stories of adolescent Aboriginals and their struggle for self-esteem in turbulent environments. One also notices the maturing relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers. Films such as *Radiance*, *Dust*, *Beneath Clouds* and *Night Cries* refresh audiences in their contemporary portrayal of Aboriginal

people, and have a long history of collaboration and skills sharing behind them.¹⁵

Waves of Aboriginal-directed shorts have established support for indigenous film making talent, beginning with *Harry's War* and *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*. Continued collaboration in films such as *The Tracker*, *Australian Rules* and *Rabbit-proof Fence* demonstrate varying degrees of success. It is difficult to separate a film's artistic success and production success – that is, whether the actual process successfully recognised protocol and indigenous content. Whereas guidelines are increasingly available, this is a project-specific argument, with no detailed working template. Whether *Tide Weavers* evolves as a script and subsequent production that successfully encounters and integrates indigenous content and contribution remains to be seen, but it is, in my opinion, a combination of research, trust and instinct that will best enable this to happen. I believe it is the authenticity of emotional content and theme that can transcend most political concerns, cross cultural boundaries and endear a film to an audience.

¹⁵ Also consider Rolf de Heer's *Ten Canoes*, where dialogue (but not narration) is entirely in Arnhem Land dialects, including Gunwinggu and Yolngu Matha. This and other films are not included in discussion, since production followed the completion of primary research.

Chapter 5

The ideas in *Tide Weavers*

The development of *Tide Weavers* is influenced by a range of films, each guiding particular aspects of theme and content. In Chapter 4, I referred to Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* for their intense subjectivity of style and landscape interpretation. In this chapter, Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* and Pedro Almodovar's *All About my Mother* demonstrate the risks of gender-biased filmmaking favouring female characters or male characters with feminine traits. The films *Paris, Texas*, Ivan Sen's *Dust*, the westerns *Cheyenne Autumn* and *The Searchers*, and particularly Peter Weir's *Fearless*, are inspirational in their superlative treatment of grief, violence and redemptive love. There is also minor referencing to Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, Robert Zemeckis' *Contact*, Thomas McCarthy's *The Station Agent* and David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*.

My approach to content in *Tide Weavers* was informed by a range of theoretical and philosophical works. Anna Takacs' thesis about grief, loss and violence¹ has similar themes to *Tide Weavers*. I reference Mircea Eliade's, Ros Haynes' and Richard Rohr's observations that when people's sacred spaces are destroyed, they cannot retreat and heal. Igor Auzin's

¹ Takacs refers mainly to the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, Julia Kristeva, Edmond Jabes and Jacques Derrida.

We of the Never Never and Patrick White's *Voss* portray characters finding connection to, and redemption in landscape. All of this research informs my scriptwriting process. Particular to *Tide Weavers* is that Natch and Amie are seeking refuge in the Nullarbor Plain landscape in individual states of grief. It is amusing how these themes parallel my own experience of this project.

When Rohr argues participation as a natural craving following bereavement, I feel personal reverberations. While it is gratifying to find academic material supporting my thesis, it is the participatory aspects of my initial Nullarbor journeys that remain the touchstone for my writing.

Stylistic influences: simplicity and the lyrical

Tide Weavers has a simple yet lyrical style. I compare it to the sanguinity of the film *The Station Agent*, where lonely and grieving characters connect shyly, in spite of their stubbornly reclusive urges. Their reticence intrigues and the visual and narrative restraint echoes Ernest Hemingway's use of simple words and metaphors for impact. *Tide Weavers* has silence and breathing space. Symbolism in image and dialogue is sparse and particular to content and location. The Nullarbor offers a striking, provincial landscape; characters have peculiarities of expression and history; in Aboriginal content there are words, objects and actions of intimate importance.

This style, with symbols of natural derivation, contrasts with complicated plots and reality-based approaches of other films; however, this will bring an original essence to the *Tide Weavers* film script. Nonetheless, stylistic influences should not be a distraction from motivating action. For example, Wenders and Malick correspondingly achieve this fine balance: Wenders using Peter Handke's book ended poetry style narration in *Wings of Desire*, and Malick using the Pacific Islanders' idyllic interaction with sea and song in *The Thin Red Line*. In further drafts, with April Lawrie-Smith as co-writer, I predict the film will have altered forms of narration or dual narrators, indigenous and non-indigenous, to offer an honesty of cultural expression in both vernacular and thought and to articulate subconscious longings. This will be particularly useful with normally taboo grief issues.

There are other techniques that move audiences to engage more deeply with a film. In Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, the camera ethereally follows a character, focussing on the delicate curve of an exposed neck or shoulder, giving the character a sense of fragility or impending danger. In the soundtrack of *Wings of Desire*, the 'guardian angels' listen to their wards' subconscious thoughts in libraries, buses and at accident scenes. As viewers we are voyeuristically privy to sensual realms: with the tactility of *Sense and Sensibility*, and through the spiritual whisperings of *Wings of*

Desire. A director can aim to engender sensual impact on an audience through shot selection, movement or soundtrack.

Tide Weavers begins in silence, imitating the 'city ears' of someone (dulled by traffic and noise) who cannot yet discern other delicate layers of sound. Eventually the soundtrack is rich in these more subtle sounds, of wind and ocean, dried grasses and campfire crackle. Natch later becomes aggravated when outsiders bring their radios, cell phones or chatter. Guided by her new companions, who are at ease in this realm, Natch learns to listen to her landscape and her thoughts. But there is also riotous spontaneity – that anyone familiar with large families or the mischievous humour of Aboriginal companions will understand. When Natch attacks the truckie at the Nullarbor Roadhouse, her Aboriginal friends effortlessly express their high spirits. She is encouraged into this protective, gentle humour, and uses it to engage with life, eventually moving beyond her grief.

Having studied cinematographic styles, ranging from dogme² to the manipulative splendour of Martin Scorsese,³ I find affinity with high calibre,

² 'Dogme' being the Danish film making movement created by Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, Kristian Levring and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen, where ten basic principles are adhered to as a means of providing a pure form of film making which concentrates on storytelling and acting. These principles include the use of natural lighting only; no introduced props; the absence of mechanised camera movement from cranes or jibs or even tripods; a ban on superficial action (e.g. murders) and no optical, sound or post production manipulation of the original footage of any kind. Films such as *Festen*, *Idioterne* and *Lovers* use this style.

poetic styles. The location's isolation demands a budget-conscious style, which I may resist, because documentary camerawork approaches are character motivated and I want to observe the character *in* the landscape. Beautifully plain, still-photography framing would work; so too would the framing in *The New World*, which was shot completely from steadicam to show the fluidity of the natural environment. Both shooting styles support improvisational acting. The audience is invited into the intense, and often silent, relationship between Natch and Amie. Through shot selection, Amie is the only person who truly 'sees' Natch in the depths of her grief and invisibility.

***Tide Weavers'* risk: feminine central, masculine peripheral?**

A film with strong female content can suffer without gender balance, and I examined films at similar risk. *The Hours* and *All About my Mother* are two very different films about women that are sensitive and complex in their narrative and stylistic approach. Whereas the restrained style of *The Hours* mirrors the grief and regret of the three female characters, *All About my Mother* is pure melodrama. Both are correspondingly stabilized by a core circle of females either through intercut worlds or friends reunited by circumstance. *All About my Mother* shows feminised men as transvestites or

³ Films such as *Casino* and *Good Fellas* demonstrate complicated and lengthy fluid movement of the camera. For example in *Good Fellas* – the 2.5-minute steadicam shot of Henry (Liotta) and his date Karen (Bracco) entering the Copacabana club. This shot is simultaneously unobtrusive, yet spectacular in its accomplishment.

transsexual, or not overly masculine – so as not to intimidate the women's revelation of deep emotions. Manuela's adored son Esteban is sensitive and intelligent; her transsexual friend Agrado is very emotional. In *The Hours*, Virginia and Laura's husbands seem supportive, but Virginia's husband Leonard isolates her from the vivacity of life that feeds her creativity, and Dan creates a 'perfect' 1950s life for Laura, remaining oblivious to her sadness and repressed lesbianism. Contrasted is Richard, slowly dying of AIDS, who decides to set free his loyal, self-sacrificing friend Clarissa.

The dominant female characters of *Tide Weavers* could push male characters to the periphery. In further drafts, male (or even female) characters could exert their masculinity, challenging the grieving Natch and Amie's sense of safety. Amie's cousin Trevor is cheeky and overtly sexual. He is accepting of multiple partners and satellite families, but paradoxically, Natch chooses to connect with him, despite an instinctive caution. Beyond mutual concern for Amie, Natch and Trevor have a pleasing, natural bond. Natch feels detached, but Trevor's comfort with transient relationships encourages her to accept his sexual overtures. This relationship nourishes despite its transitory nature. In contrast, other male characters such as the truck driver, the backpackers and the 'gangstas' exude violence. In further drafts of the script, I could expand upon this predilection for lawlessness that

an isolated environment brings and blur gender expectations, particularly through Amie's risk-taking behaviour.

I invert the idea of Aborigine or woman as 'other'. Both Natch and Amie have historical Nullarbor connections and each has character traits socially assigned to her race, so there are cultural crossovers. I am inspired by ideas from Aboriginal writers such as Jackie Huggins and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, who equally challenge white 'colonialist' male and potentially oppressive feminist attitudes toward Aboriginal women.⁴

***Tide Weavers'* location: endless highways and epic plains**

The locations in *Tide Weavers* span from desert plain to coastal dunes. The landscape is a strong stylistic element and the script counterbalances non-indigenous and indigenous impressions of the desert. Natch's opinion of the landscape changes gradually, with help from her guides. The freedom and silence initially create unease, but ultimately she is psychologically liberated and becomes more expansive.

⁴ The general argument stands that feminism has brought little to the Aboriginal woman, who often naturally assumed a position of higher authority and respect within her own culture, and had little need for feminist ideals that were considered culturally inappropriate. Yet despite this, feminism as a movement has often assumed a need to include Aboriginal women within the struggle. As a feminist non-indigenous woman, I cannot assume I can speak for anyone except the culture from which I come.

I enjoy films that negotiate huge, humanitarian concepts by coaxing audiences along by little steps – a local-global storytelling style. An extreme example of this is Robert Zemeckis' *Contact*. While showcasing space exploration and spiritual enlightenment, *Contact* concentrates on one damaged woman's struggle to achieve her goals. Any film can explain a local-global story, but from arguments discussed earlier in the thesis, more epic landscapes, such as desert, ocean or even outer space, have the potential to access visual and metaphorical language of exceptional power. Berrah believes that the desert's strategic role in films "lends an epic quality to what otherwise would have been mere adventure stories" (par. 3). Particularly in the western genre, characters achieve an elevated status as they walk this epic landscape. This 'epic' quality and mythology also informs *Tide Weavers*, as the characters draw a quiet, emotional strength from the landscape and become heroines for each other.

Landscape and detail

Despite its epic qualities, environmental details are also important to *Tide Weavers*. Camera movements should simulate natural 'glances' at detail, as the eye scans the landscape. Details are rich in symbolic meaning: water traces through porous limestone, wind vibrates and whistles through sun-bleached bones, and the landscape's different atmospheres express emotion. An audience can become more empathetic when understanding

what environmental detail means personally to a character. In *Contact* there are environmental messages of decay before Elly's father's death, with imagery of autumn leaves and celestial activity. As audience we accompany her from her most early grief-tinged memories of landscape, and as she journeys we develop a strong attachment to her.

Perception of landscape is subjective and the Nullarbor requires close exploration. These characters are the audience's eyes as they explore this place. Amie 'reads' a landscape differently from Natch. The landscape resonates within each person uniquely. There is recognition, validation. This ownership and connection is pivotal because the characters exist in a state of grief.

Landscape and grief

"Sadness occupies an entirely different site to language" (Takacs 30).

Takacs' thesis *Writing Loss: A Poetics of Grief* has astonishing poetic power. Examining Takacs' concepts of grief, language and silence about her father's death, I found that this academic document spoke more to the soul than the brain. It attempted to examine the very intangibility of loss and this was challenging. For those who have experienced loss, she argues, it is desirable to speak of grief, only that grief defies articulation and "speechlessness retreats to the sensuous realm" (6).

There is poignancy in setting a script about grief on the Nullarbor, where silence and sensuousness have profound impact. When the characters of *Tide Weavers* first meet, they recognise each other's grieving but the recognition is concealed. This is because grief and loss are complex, and there are damaging hidden traps in this emotional space. Mourners are struck doubly when, not only struggling with emotions that are ineffable, they finally insist upon speaking of a deceased loved one. Here *Tide Weavers* explores the link between violence and grief. The violence is linked to the repetition of realising that original loss, stimulated by remembering and speaking of the loved one. As Takacs points out, "In speaking of you in loss, I enact a second loss; the sorrow of this can be overwhelming. Thus I am speechless." (9) In this process, when the mourner finally abandons silence and focus is shifted from the other to the horizon, violence is perpetrated to the other as they become secondary. It is a terrible dichotomy, but a catharsis that must happen for the characters to recover from grief.

A desert is often the location of this kind of religious and personal quest, a space to ponder life and death. In films there is a tradition of shy characters with mysterious pasts occupying the desert landscape. Travis is a man escaping the pain of loss and internal demons in *Paris, Texas* when he re-emerges from the Texan wastelands and he does not speak for the entire

first act. When the plot shifts to the suburbs and freeways of Los Angeles, these locations continue blandly resonate his grief and shame about his family estrangement. Once confronted with the exhilaration of love, Travis' descent into jealousy and rage destroys his marriage and his relationship with his son. The reticent man who has returned from the desert must acknowledge his flaws, repair what was damaged, and reunite his family. But he believes he has wasted his chance and must walk away before he once again destroys everyone he loves. Ethan in *The Searchers* is another man with a violent past who returns from exile, this time from the Utah mountains. Laurie clearly adores this reserved and racist man, but has married his brother, instinctively knowing Ethan as a man of the wilderness, not of the hearth. Ethan displays discomfort in domestic settings, always framed through doorways against the Monument Valley vistas, but it is his paradoxical longing for security that drives him to pursue his kin's killers and pull niece Lucy back from the clutches of the 'primitive savages', the Comanche, into gentle civilisation. Nevertheless, his grieving for family is unsated and unresolved.

This contact with indigenous custodians of traditional land is obviously paralleled in *Tide Weavers*, and is inexplicably bound to the desert film. However *Cheyenne Autumn* shows an important reversal of the superficially negative image of the Native American people audiences have come to

expect. When removed from their traditional land, this community is grief-stricken. Patiently and with great nobility, they wait for their land to be restored, struggling through an icy winter of disease, hunger and government bureaucracy. *Cheyenne Autumn* is a tragic study of their suffering and revolt, but at the end they are proudly restored.

Tide Weavers follows the desert film's portrayal of the inevitability of the violence of loss. Both Natch and Amie are bewildered and erratic in their grief. Similarly, in *The Searchers*, Ethan is capable of unfathomable violence, even threatening to kill his own niece as he struggles to comprehend her 'soiling' by the Comanche. For Civil War veteran Ethan, violence brings redemption; perhaps this opinion comes from his history as a survivor of violence, who must then somehow rationalize the impossible. *Tide Weavers'* Natch and Amie, unable to escape the violence that has traumatised them, and the repeated violence of loss that pursues them, must endure a final act of violence to become cleansed. But the most acute form of violence they encounter is in the intense desire to speak of loss, to be cured and restored. Beginning with guarded attempts to connect with one another, they continue to suppress their pain, causing frustration and emotional fragility (Natch's crying) and self-sabotage (Amie's destructive behaviour). Speaking about grief would recover traces of the lost one and assist healing. It's a disappointing realisation for them that it is not possible

for one's mind to embrace the infinity of loss – and that this is part of the inability to process death. This aspect of loss stagnates the bereaved characters; there is unwillingness to move forward, and yet there is no choice. The decision to move, regardless, is what saves them. Surrendering to this is the start of mourning. It is the simple actions of the shedding of tears, of human interaction, that counteracts violence and the grief of violence, and this emotion can be reflected in landscape.

Dust, the Australian short film by Ivan Sen, shows landscape literally covering characters' unspoken grief. Itinerant workers toil in the vast cotton plantations of Outback Queensland, and the dry, red earth conceals tragic secrets to which one elderly indigenous worker is instinctively and historically connected. The landscape's monotony frustrates both non-indigenous and aboriginal workers, but while surface issues of racism dangerously simmer, a furious dust storm uncovers the shared colonial history of massacre that lies just below the topsoil. Only on viewing this, do both parties quietly stand in solidarity and respect for those who died.

Landscape and grief are at the genesis of this thesis, begun with the idea that a grieving being can take solace in his/her surroundings. This projection brings comfort without the complications that human attempts at assistance bring. Interaction with desert is personal and subjective. The

process and emotional satisfaction varies, but with sensitivity, exchange seems inevitable. With historical frequency, the artist finds surprising outcomes in landscape, and possibilities for restoration. As Balk states:

Three aspects must be present for a life crisis to produce spiritual change. The situation must create a psychological imbalance or disequilibrium that resists readily being stabilized; there must be time for reflection, and the person's life must forever afterwards be colored (sic) by the crisis. (par. 1)

Rafael Yglesias' filmic tale of grief and redemptive love, *Fearless*, explores similar territory. Architect Max Kline walks an emotional edge between his own perceived immortality at surviving a horrific plane crash, and the reality of domesticity with his wife and son. This event has elevated him to a space of painful awareness, a lonely realm of bereaved untouchables and ghosts. He is 'invisible' in grief, disconnected from his geographical and familial landscape. When the airline psychiatrist introduces Max to Carla, a Hispanic woman whose baby was killed in the crash, a deep but platonic love blooms.

What attracts them is their fascination with each other's reaction to the crash. Max is drawn to Carla's boundless grief just as Carla longs for a taste of Max's detachment. They've both died in the crash, but in different ways. (Conn par. 13)

That Max and Carla experienced the same event sheds layers of ego and deceit and allows them to communicate with brutal honesty. They discuss the carnage, the guilt, and explore their current lives in which neither is able

to reconnect to the people who love them and are desperately trying to reach them. Similarly in *Tide Weavers*, Amie recognises Natch's entrapment in grief, a preoccupation that is weakening Natch's ability to function. Amie's approach is low-key, watching, piquing her interest to draw Natch out. Amie sometimes shuns Natch because she is reminded of the rawness of grief (Natch later discovers Amie has lost a child). Although grieving herself, Amie intuitively understands that being in the desert will benefit Natch. She herself continues to retreat there, to try to heal herself. Both women seem impenetrable, but eventually share their vulnerability.

Beyond loss, there are other forms of violence in the script. If people viewed vehicles, planes and technology⁵ as sitting above humans on the food chain, they would be feared. This hierarchy would provide stressors and provoke unusual behaviour in humans. In the Nullarbor setting, a primary source of violence is the vehicle, along with nature's threats of sharks,

⁵ I'm compelled by the paradox of technology vs. humanity. Fascinated by the 2005 tsunami's force, I watched live images of horrendous suffering, and in the midst of my own selfish depression I am cleansed by the wonder of this cataclysmic natural event; it brings me closer to humanity. In contrast, whilst travelling to the Nullarbor in 2001, I was oblivious to the man-made terror of 9/11 and to this day have never seen the entire media saturation that impacted on most people. April told me of the events of 9/11, watching the whales, on the 12th of September. I am struck by the comparison, where technology was prevalent, and completely absent, and how that emotionally saves me in different ways. Films such as Wenders' *The End of Violence*, and *Until the End of the World* echo this intriguing theme also relevant to *Tide Weavers*. I discover high technological paradoxes to this isolated place: that military submarines may be tested off the Bight cliffs; Ceduna Observatory and Eucla's satellite towers; accounts of spacecraft sightings and navigational gridlines for galactic visitors; Mirning stories of supernatural interaction. Amie is a child of technology, despite her traditional connections. She has a DAT machine, her laptop is satellite and bluetooth enabled, and she uses these as naturally and holistically to record whale song and tribal language, as she would listen to dreams to explore her own connection to this place.

whales, reptiles, cliffs, caves and the ocean. From the beginning of *Tide Weavers* there is an undercurrent of violence: a sexual predator, a road accident, a hole in the earth through which you can fall and die, dehydration, sunburn and abandonment. The characters must treat some people with suspicion, but ironically, they must trust in order to survive. The level of threatened violence in the script does not yet reflect the possibilities of such a landscape, but it emerges in a banal and understated way – delaying and heightening the shock of realisation. Ruth is wary, but initially she's not fully cognisant that the roadhouse is being robbed. The chance of Natch being raped at the film's commencement is not fully absorbed by Natch at the time. Renegade Daisy's behaviour is psychotic, but this place encourages a tolerance of misfits.

In a scene from David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* the unnamed girl played by Sherilyn Fenn, is discovered by the roadside, looking for a decorative hairclip. This is seemingly banal, until the audience discover her hand in her hair is holding fast a gaping head wound, nearby is a horrific car wreck, and before our eyes, in seconds, she will be dead. There is a popular saying, "Walking away from a car wreck," using the brutal imagery as a metaphor for being laid open with emotional pain. I imagine the victim in an emotionally numb state, not quite cognisant through shock.

In *Tide Weavers*, Natch is walking away from a car wreck, literally, surveying her surroundings without emotion or engagement. Amie suffers equally, with involuntary responses from her repressed trauma. The randomness with which violence stalks these characters, what they have endured, emphasises their emotional fragility – they stumble and fill their lives with noise to avoid considering their mortality. Like blast victims they wander through the bombsite, a strange, cocooned landscape, deafened until their hearing returns. It reminds me of the passengers emerging like the living dead from the cornfield site of the plane crash in *Fearless*, urged by Max to follow him to safety. Do leaders always emerge in crises? Do people operate in love, a state of grace; or is this disaster management? My characters show that people need to experience crisis to know whether instinctive behaviours will be self-protective. Natch leaps backwards in time to memories, and forwards on a spontaneous, escapist journey far from home. Amie, in contrast, suffers in a self-abusive stagnancy. Her apparent proactivity conceals her anger and sadness; she has filled her life with distractions, which includes an engagement with risk-taking behaviour as a way of confronting mortality and challenging that which life has dealt her. Amie's deeper connection to her culture beckons as a way of addressing her internal unease, but she resists this because she wants to cling to what she has lost.

For both Amie and Natch, grief erupts unpredictably, manifesting in laughter, stress, irrational behaviour, lack of concentration, despondency. Grief can be dull subject material, so I focus on making it accessible, living, vibrant. In *Fearless*, Rosie Perez's Carla experiences incredible guilt concerning the death of her son, whom she could not hold onto upon impact. Max reaches into her catatonia and in return, Carla stimulates a therapeutic reaction in Max. "Perez goes full-tilt hysterical, and it is the simple sincerity of her outpouring that begins the process of cracking the shell of Max's posturing" (Conn par. 14). The love that develops between the couple causes concern for spouses and families, yet it is a pure, nonsexual, redemptive love.

Tide Weavers is also a story of love that is deeply transformative. The theme is complex and demands sensitivity. Amie recognises that Natch is grieving deeply when they meet. Travelling is a metaphor for Natch's desire to move beyond her grief. This initially distasteful location will be her salvation. Toward the plot midpoint, Natch's transformation (triggered by Amie) gains momentum and her spirit ascends, just as Amie's begins to rapidly descend, having exhausted all masks and games. Amie's descent will be complete when she faces death. She loyally attempts to save her then-estranged friend, by placing herself at risk (with masochistic relief) and then surprisingly, her instinct for survival takes hold and she decides to fight and

live. She retreats to Merdayerrah to consider this startling development within herself, and finally feels able to commence her traditional learning, which promises the beginning of deeper healing. Natch's participation is prohibited, but she will be nearby. So there is a sense that Natch and Amie will be there for each other for some time to come.

Richard Rohr states that shared grief "has unparalleled power to open our eyes and open our heart" (par. 17), but only with patience and trust in the necessary work. Exploration of this emotional territory in a film is challenging. Amie and Natch stumble through similar emotional landscapes, instinctively co-dependent. Demonstrating a meaningful and transformative relationship between them requires sustained thoughtful and compassionate writing. The measure of success of this process is audience empathy toward the characters. Only then will *Tide Weavers* possibly capture a rare quality in films. Lewis Conn discusses this quality:

There are certain films that seem governed less by the dictates of narrative logic than by the rules of shamanism. ... *BZ2*, *Persona*, *2001*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Vertigo*; films that more or less bypass questions of plot and ask that we enter them directly, unconsciously, as if by trance. ... such films may resonate in us very strongly, very deeply, even becoming personal touchstones of our lives. (par. 1)

In *Fearless*, the crash has left Max suspended above mortals, and others, including Carla, assist his eventual grounding. The process is unpredictable and deeply moving. *Tide Weavers* will also tell a story of two

people finding comfort in each other and assisting in their return from trauma, perhaps echoing the sense of release in *Fearless* that Lewis Conn describes as "both terrible and beautiful, orgasmic in its fullness and the variety of emotions it evokes" (par.15).

Retreat and sacred spaces

Many of my Aboriginal teachers in the Northern Territory ... believed that Whitefellas were in a state of epistemological crisis. In particular, they pointed to actions and ideas which to them indicated that Whitefellas were trapped in a state of confusion about their own past and their own place. (Bird 9)

Retreat can be embedded in thinking, reading, napping, grieving, crying, the creative process. There are secret places of retreat: a garden, a room, under the sea, under the covers, even a circle of close friends. One retreats when feeling exposed or exploited, for solitude, to regroup. Indigenous cultures speak of women's need to repose, particularly during menstruation to replenish, dwell in a joyful state, to ensure energy is gathered for coming tasks, to gently allow the self to begin again, renewed.

Sometimes sacred spaces are unfamiliar; likewise unrecognisable and hostile environments can still transform a character. Laura Trevelyn is changed by Voss's movement through harsh colonial bush, as is Jeannie in *We of the Never Never*, who evolves through initial resistance and vulnerability into a character who expresses curiosity and compassion. Her

integration with actual and Aboriginal landscape is unusual in outback fables. Motivated by pragmatism and a sense of justice, her humanity clearly stimulates the Aboriginal people's (and poignantly, the environment's) embracing of her. While men fall victim to madness, illness or superstition, her practicality leads her to a place of acceptance, but interestingly, not conversion. Choosing to connect with landscape or concepts of environmentalism is not a recent phenomenon. Schama discusses how Henry David Thoreau and John Muir drew attention to the "healing wilderness" (7) that humans crave, at least since industrialisation began changing our surroundings to a utilitarian, albeit unfamiliar form. This craving that humans inevitably feel is from loss of sacred space, space that reflects our inner world. The destruction of sacred space diminishes our ability to centre. Yet with acknowledgment of this dilemma, lies a solution, because a means of satiating this craving or thirst has existed long before colonisation. This may be the most important connection with Aboriginal people: this understanding that the land is a reflection, that people use this meditation for constructive purposes, and that consequently this space becomes necessary for human emotional and physical survival. Mircea Eliade states:

Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity, to 'found the world' and to live in a real sense. (Eliade, *Sacred* 23)

But this religiosity can also be recognised and created in profane space also, where elements provide an experience of spiritual meaning. Eliade highlights

"privileged places, qualitatively different from all others" (*Sacred* 24): scenes of a first kiss, the garden where a wedding occurred, for example.

[A]ll these places still retain an exceptional, a unique quality; they are the "holy places" of his private universe, as if it were in such spots that he had received the revelation of a reality *other* than that in which he participates through his ordinary daily life. (Eliade, *Sacred* 24)

Eliade continues to explain that these places provide personal touchstones in a chaotic life, where "the sacred manifests itself in space, the real unveils itself, the world comes into existence." (Eliade, *Sacred* 63). In this way, one is able to create connection with spaces, sacredness is restored, and meaning returns to very simple yet powerful moments in life.

Landscape and healing: a creative space

The Void
 In emptiness lies
 Creative possibility.
 A place for the imagination
 To ponder and wonder
 A place of finality.

John Olsen 'Lake Eyre, Aug 23' (1976)⁶

Artists recognise that this connection to landscape saves us from an unproductive existential exile. Whereas religious concepts of the saintly journey into the desert are weakened by contemporary lack of faith for some, there is an alternative reading becoming among artists. For the artist Arthur Boyd "the saint has been replaced by the aspiring artist, naked in the desert-

⁶ quoted in Sandra McGrath. "A Remote Eden", *Art & Australia Magazine* 14:2 (Spring 1976): p. 151.

wilderness, tempted by fame, wealth and ideology which threaten to paralyse him and stifle his artistic creativity" (Haynes 179). This theory assumes that nakedness – this stripping away of superfluous foliage or mountains, cultural or social demands – leaves one free on a plain of contemplation, unprotected in the environment, unprotected from vast emotional states, leading one to feel implicitly small. Haynes tells how Clifton Pugh's painting style changed after a Nullarbor journey in 1954, invoking the immensity of the desert vista "as a setting and a rationale for his cyclic view of life and death" (249); and how John Wolseley explains the desert using Zen Buddhism, "from which he derives his belief that his art 'is a form of involved contemplation. If you live in nature for a time you have almost mystical experiences'" (Haynes 257).⁷ This submission extends to Wolseley renaming himself: calling an artwork 'a landscape' intimates domination and possession of environment, and so, he prefers to call himself a 'land' artist "who seeks to 'de-claim the desert, to find out what the desert does to me rather than what I can do to it'" (Ferguson 41). These references resonate more closely with my own views of the desert. As an artist exposed to the unique physicality of the desert space, I find it beneficial to identify the emotional shift occurring, in order to speak of it in artistic conception and creation. The impact is consistent and repetitive. I interpret it as a space

⁷ John Wolseley quoted in Hawley *Encounters with Australian Artists*, St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1993, p. 146.

where time can be suspended, and creative thoughts can safely emerge. This suspension of time is similar to that experienced in a state of grief.

Rohr refers (in homage to Victor Turner) to grieving as a sacred and *liminal space*, a threshold to another state, a transition. He describes grieving as a place "betwixt and between ... between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer" (par. 9), noting that in busy lives only the sensation of pain is strong enough to lead people there. It is a space people often try to avoid; the unknowing makes us feel stupid and we look for shallow explanations to regain control. Trusting the threshold is unusual, but it will lead to a state "bigger and beyond any of us" that connects us to the sublime and universal (par. 8). Rohr then states:

Because we are not in control and not the centre, something genuinely new can happen. Here we are capable of seeing something beyond self-interest, self-will, and security concerns. True sacred space allows an alternative consciousness to emerge. (par. 9)

For the characters in *Tide Weavers* the Nullarbor landscape becomes this liminal space: a safe retreat for contemplation and respite, defying colonial ideas, gently moving them forward, quietly revealing details and resonances that supplement the characters' healing. This occurs in the same way that the Nullarbor, as a sacred space for the Mirning people, can reward those who stop, look and listen to what the stories and the land have to offer.

Rohr refers to pain as being the one sensation powerful enough "to destabilize the imperial ego and the cultural certitudes ..." (par. 17). Running "to quick formulas to avoid destabilization" (par. 17) is a reaction for some *Tide Weavers* characters. Denial and busy-ness are useful to avoid the processing of grief. For the courageous, Rohr continues, suffering is a means of transformation, saying, "We must teach people not to get rid of the pain until we have learned what it has to teach us" (par. 18).

Rohr writes that balancing on the threshold, without control, leads to participation. Still contemplative, approached with humility, without easy answers "we collapse into a deeper participation with the whole roller coaster of life and death" (par. 22). The *Tide Weavers* characters summon strength from their shared experience to abandon stillness and silence and move, make noise, participate. Why is it difficult to 'move on' and leave behind the hopelessness of loss? As an audience member, I watch Max Kline leading people from the crashed plane and decide that the origins are domestic, but courage in the face of fear is far from that. Basic movement reminds the body to function. Tasks are habitual, even meditative for the body recovering from grief. Purpose and validation return, even in small realisations. There is a possibility of return to a state of peace, or happiness, a movement initiating a natural domino effect that can reach inside to such depth that this affirmation recovers and reshapes the core of people's natures. This

inevitability of movement, in reassurance, means one can eventually emerge from the stillness of grief, the crossing of a landscape of grief can occur, and progress towards something resembling joy is possible.

Fortunately, often others are available to help this process. Support and redemptive love transforms the *Tide Weavers* characters. An intense, character-driven plot line develops when the growing trust between these two women is tested to the point of saving each other. Whereas *Tide Weavers* explores the darker side of character, it also displays an emerging sense of mischievous fun in the main characters and charts their return to emotional health.

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