

Staging the North

Finding, Imagining and Performing an Australian Deep North.

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this university or at any other university.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies the existence of a distinctive Australian North within a critical framework of spatial inquiry, and in so doing explores how this vast geographical and discursive space has been enacted in theatre praxis from Federation to the present. I say “enacted” because this study is especially interested in the way the North has been invented on the Australian stage, and how theatre in turn has had and continues to have a significant cultural relevance in the shaping and perpetuation of national tropes and visions. Drawing primarily from Gelder/Jacobs’s concept of the “uncanny,” Jennifer Rutherford’s notion of the “Great Australian Emptiness,” Joanne Tompkins’s concept of “unsettlement,” and Rob Shields’s formulation of “space myths,” the thesis utilises current critical inquiry into symbolic depictions of contested Australian racial/spatial politics to argue the case for a distinctively troped Australian North that has hitherto been unidentified as such and under-theorised accordingly. Key concepts the thesis identifies as being central to this formulation of a Deep North are the notion of the North housing a vast cultural “emptiness” on the one hand, and of it being simultaneously “full” on the other; full, that is, of the nation’s fears surrounding race and space. These fears centre around a century-long mainstream apprehension of cultural inundation/invasion/occupation/pollution at the hands of either the Asian (external) or Aboriginal (internal) “Other.” The North is analysed as postmodern frontier space, in this sense – as both the outer extremity and the key site of friction for the entire nation’s relationship with race, place and the cultural Other.

Further, the thesis asserts that the North operates as the stage onto which the South Eastern majority metropolitan population projects these fears/anxieties/fantasies, and as such it becomes the “playing field” for the nation’s collective repressed. Consequently, it is my contention that theatre becomes a prime medium for exploration of the enactment and re-enactment of national myths surrounding place, space and race. Theatre, this study argues, is all about space: it is about the fictionalisation, enactment, embodiment and symbolic representation of space in space. Using theatrical depictions of distinctly Northern topologies from Federation to the present, the thesis also then identifies a hitherto unacknowledged Northern body of theatrical works. It traces the *oeuvre*’s development over the span of the twentieth-century, from the North’s aetiology in Federation era melodrama, to its present state of post-colonial re- and self-invention.

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Introduction

Staging the North

Midway through Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia*, the young Norman Shillingsworth boards a ship in Batman, heading up the Eastern Australian coast to rejoin his family in the far northern capital of Port Zodiac. Norman believes himself to be the son of a Javanese princess. In what we would now read as classic Orientalist terms, Herbert describes how the first-class liner passengers are initially intrigued by Norman, whom they "had to thank for giving them something new and strange to talk about, and something exciting too, suggesting lust – lust in the sun, or before the moon's hot face, amid the scent of the frangipani and the throb of heathen drums" (210). The further north the ship heads, the more tenuous the romantic delusions become, and it is with the symbolic crossing of the ship from South to North – the crossing of the Tropic of Capricorn – that the fantasy dissolves altogether. Norman is recognised by a publican boarding the ship at Port Magnetic, who reveals him to be the illegitimate offspring of a "Capricornia gin" (211). Norman is ostracised by the first class and saloon passengers, forced by journey's end to cohort with the "dagoes and rougs of second class" (211). It is as though the further Norman heads into the Northern tropics, the harsher the glare of scrutiny becomes, and the harder it is for fantasy and self-invention to take hold. The North forces a brutal version of "truth" to prevail.

Louis Nowra uses this passage as the starting point for his 1988 dramatic interpretation of the novel, and similarly, the scene has acted as some kind of galvanising trigger for this thesis and what the Australian North is, if in fact it "is," and how this vast geographical and discursive space has been enacted. I say "enacted"

because this study is especially interested in the way the North has been invented on the Australian stage, and how theatre in turn has had, and continues to have, a significant cultural relevance in the shaping and perpetuation of national tropes and visions, rather than just reflecting them obediently in a form of theatrical mimesis.

This thesis offers a reading of the North through a theatrical lens. Such a reading might sit usefully alongside studies that focus on representations of the North in film, visual art, literature or music. Certainly the readings of the symbolic functions of the Australian North offered in this thesis are designed to open up ways of understanding the nation that might be applied beyond the bounds of this theatrical investigation. I frame an analysis of representations of the North in theatre within the critical lens of spatial inquiry. Spatial theory is a burgeoning field of critical and cultural analysis that applies especially well to theatre studies which is, of course, based on “space.” It is the cultural, political and symbolic analysis – the representation – of specific Australian spaces with which this thesis is primarily concerned. Theatre not only represents space, it enacts space. It reads, politicises and activates the ways in which we imagine cultural geographies. It brings Australian landscapes to the fore, and populates and physicalises them in conscious and frequently metaphoric or metonymic ways. In bringing together a study of theatre with an application of spatial inquiry to the theatre, this thesis offers a unique and specific reading of the Australian North over the past century in order to better understand what this hitherto under-investigated and under-analysed region might represent symbolically to the nation as a whole.

This curiosity about an Australian North is not mine alone, it would seem. Julianne Schultz describes Australia’s associations with the North in her introduction to a *Griffith Review* edition devoted entirely to the topic of unravelling the region’s mystique. Her overview of the North’s “myths, threats and enchantments” states:

It may be the product of living in the second most southerly continent, but every generation of Australians has had iconic images of threats from the north. Flip through your memory of popular history and there they are – Chinamen in pigtailed set to overrun the goldfields, Japanese aggressors poised to invade, dominoes tumbling on a Cold War map, Indochinese boat people searching for a safe haven and refugees stumbling out of leaky boats onto isolated beaches. Most of the images feature people with dark hair and Asiatic features whose intent is clear: to occupy the vast, virtually empty spaces between the northern coastline and the southern capitals. (7)

Schultz's equation of the North with anxieties about invasion and infiltration from a demonised Asian "Other" is a salient one, and I return to it throughout the course of this thesis. The other association embedded within this fear of what lies further to the North is a construction of the North as being "empty" and acting as a buffer between Asia and the Southern capitals. Those "vast, virtually empty spaces" along the Northern coastline to which Schultz refers are considered tacitly devoid of human population, despite the fact that the region is inhabited – even if comparatively sparsely – by tens of thousands of people. Schultz touches upon the perception that the majority Australian population unconsciously associates the North with emptiness because it is not deeply populated by *white* occupants.

Schultz identifies another "mythic" contradiction when she writes:

Now add to the mental mix the allure of the north, of warm tropical nights, coral reefs and palm-fringed beaches, of open roads surging through dramatic country, of millennia of indigenous settlement, of people who follow their dreams and find a home, or themselves, in the most unlikely places, of crocodiles in remote waterways and captivating exotica of Asia. Our imaginative sense of the north is a complicated one: full of contradictions and fascination tinged with fear, like submerged crocodiles. (7)

This thesis is preoccupied with the range of symbolic and seemingly contradictory mythic associations with which Schultz and Australians generally endow the North. I elaborate upon the ways in which this range of mythic configurations might be theorised within a historiographical and theatrical context shortly. Suffice it to say that the North is resonating strongly as a source of debate in Australian public life in this

first decade of the twenty-first century. The Northern states are leading the mining and natural resources boom that is underpinning national economic growth. House prices and population growth projections are spiralling upwards in Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory.¹ As the harsh realities of global warming and climate change settle in and large tracts of South-eastern Australia become seemingly permanently entrenched in drought, rainfall in the North remains high. “Go North, young man!” is the refrain of politicians hesitant to actively remove farmers from the land in regions of the country that were once fertile. The future sustainability of the nation, it would seem, lies in an exploitation of the North’s vast and hitherto untapped resources.

Despite this explosion of interest in the North for its resources and economic opportunity on the one hand, and for its symbolic and cultural cachet on the other, theatre representing the North has been long overlooked in terms of scholarly analysis. Certainly a fresh interest in the North is reflected in a burgeoning field of analysis in other artistic and academic fields, to which I see this theatre-focussed study as being both complementary and indebted. Australian cinema is frequently associated with Outback and Bush locales and their swag of mythic associations. Despite a spate of films dealing with specifically northern locations, including *Japanese Story* (2003), *Yolngu Boy* (2001), *Ten Canoes* (2006), *Lucky Miles* (2007) *Rogue* (2007) and, preceding these recent releases, the seminal *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), little academic analysis is devoted to viewing these films as a distinctively northern *oeuvre*. The rise of an Aboriginal presence and influence in film cannot be ignored, but the Outback, the

¹ The Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests that in September 2006, annual house prices in Perth and Darwin had risen by 45% and 17% respectively. The national average was 9.5%. Whilst Perth is not a Northern population centre as far as this thesis is concerned, there is little doubting that it is benefiting by association from Western Australia’s northern resource boom. (<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/6416.0Main+Features1Sep%202006?OpenDocument>)

Bush and the North all seem to roll in to one undifferentiated category as far as cinematography is concerned. A spate of recent academic cinematic writing has focussed, for instance, on the emphasis on representations of first contact, early frontier negotiations and reflections of the colonial past from an Aboriginal perspective in contemporary indigenous cinema (see articles and interviews by Jane Lydon, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower and Anne Brewster by way of recent-most example). None of it looks at the North, specifically, as a cinematic sub-genre or subject. The focus on this scholarly journal writing on indigenous cinema is very much concerned with reconsidering the Australian colonial era from an indigenous perspective, or on acknowledging past injustices such as the Stolen Generations.² Whilst set mostly in the North, these films are being analysed as metonymy for the entirety of Australia, and for the nation's colonial history as a whole. This thesis therefore seeks to address an under-theorisation of the North via the medium of theatre that is also lacking in, but can be applied to, the field of cinema studies.

It is in the field of visual art that such discrete investigation of an Australian North seems presently to be strongest. Daena Murray's recent PhD thesis on the Northern Territory in Australian art, for instance, provides evidence of a national and hitherto underrated tradition of indigenous and non-indigenous visual arts taking place in the Top End and Red Centre – categories that will be more clearly defined later – that also necessarily becomes an exploration of the function of the Northern Territory's range of symbolic spatial tropes. In justifying the focus of her own study, Murray states that she wishes to “continue a conversation begun by others in the 1980s and 90s about the significance of the ‘outback’ in Australian visual arts in the twentieth century” (13). In a similar vein, Nicolas Rothwell's latest literary memoir, *Another Country*, uses

² Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker* (2002) are added to this *oeuvre* in the context of these analyses.

Aboriginal art as the portal through which to enter an exploration of the Northern Territory for its mythic and symbolic contributions to themes of national identity and narrative. As Nicholas Jose points out in his review of the book, Rothwell's North "is not simply geographical. It fans south and west from Darwin, and east as far as Arnhem Land. Its core is in the Centre, in the Aboriginal realms of the Western Deserts: not only another country, but also, in the book's closing phrase, 'another time,' another dimension to the Australia we think we know" (16). Murray's and Rothwell's definitions of North are necessarily more Northern Territory-focussed than my own investigation. The discursive and topographical focus of this thesis is not restricted solely to the Northern Territory. And indeed, even within the Northern Territory, notions of "North" and "Centre" are complex and point to a diversity of spatial concepts – both cartographic and symbolic – that are in need of further unsettling, and I elaborate upon this point shortly.

For all this contemporary interest in the region (with its especially strong focus on indigeneity and visual art), the North remains strangely under-theorised and under-written, both in historiographical terms and more importantly for the purposes of this study, in the context of a national theatre tradition. Murray cites Paul Foss's 1981 essay on the symbolic effects of cartography, "*Theatrum Nondum Cognitorum*," in which Australia is configured as an under-developed, shadowy identity in relation to Europe's rich history of colonial era exploration and map-making. For Foss, Murray argues, this sketchy imaging of antipodal space "reflects the enduring implications – for the development of Australian identity and the culture it sustains – of the European idea that in Earth's unexplored extremities is an area 'not yet known'" (17). Murray takes this analysis a step further by arguing that

as the colonial project unfolded in Australia, the physical and imaginative scope of the 'not yet known' became narrower, leaving the Northern Territory and

myths about it as the last unexplored space in European terms. A contention here is that the Territory, as the repository of a residual ‘not-yetness,’ is the main focus in twentieth century Australia of what Foss terms “the void of distance or difference in which Australia was created and is still maintained.” (17-18)

Murray argues that the Northern Territory is Australia’s current *theatrum nondum cognitorum* in relation to the region’s outstanding visual arts practice and tradition. This thesis seeks to undertake a similar discursive investigation as it applies to my own field of professional and academic praxis, Australian theatre.

Theatre becomes the focus of this study for a range of reasons. On a practical personal level, as a playwright who was born in Far North Queensland and raised in Darwin, North Australian theatre is the area of both Australian arts practice and cultural/geographic reflection with which I am most deeply familiar. It is the symbolic and actual physical space whence my own cultural baggage has been inherited, and my current theatrical and broader Australian prejudices and perspectives most deeply and acutely formulated. I grew up without any Australian drama that staged – or even referred to – my “half” of the Australian continent, other than that canonical text *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* which remains omnipresent in Territory education curricula (which were devised, tellingly, from South Australia³). In this play, the North is mythic, imagined space referred to but not seen. It is because *The Doll* operates as a canonical national text representing the North, but is never considered as a cornerstone of a distinctly North Australian theatrical *oeuvre*, that I reclaim it for specialised attention here and discuss it in further depth alongside David Williamson’s *Travelling North* at the end of this Introduction. These key “national” texts are used to argue the case for an unacknowledged Northern theatrical canon, and also to begin this study’s specifically theatrical reading of what an Australian North and its range of cultural

³ The problem was even more acute for my compatriots matriculating in Geography, for whom site-based studies and references in the final examinations were exclusively South Australian.

functions might be. These two canonical texts are used to demonstrate what part of the entire thesis's project is: namely, to reclaim the "North" and distinguish it from more generic configurations of "the Bush" and "the Outback" with which so much academic investigation of national theatre, film, literature and visual art has been preoccupied for the better part of a century.

Aside then, from being acutely aware of the "*nondum cognitorum*" component of *theatrum* in the North – of the under-representation of theatre about the North in national canons and curricula – this study is also vitally interested in the ways in which theatre itself opens up a discussion and understanding of Australian spaces that are themselves under-analysed within national cultural and academic praxis. Theatre is, in a sense, always about space. It is primarily concerned with the representation of space in space. I elaborate on the ways in which space is currently being theorised within Australian theatre and academic fields throughout this thesis, but suffice it to say for the present that the performance and (re)enactment of both national narratives and geographies/landscapes in theatre spaces makes theatre a vital, active and inherently political and immediate form through which to understand the myriad ways in which national narratives are invented, articulated and, most crucially, performed.

In discussing Henri Lefebvre's formulations of space as they apply to theatre, Joanne Tompkins reminds us, "[s]pace is theatre's medium of articulation and thus an essential element in theatre's analysis" (*Unsettling* 3). Tompkins laments the surprising lack of theatre studies that employ an awareness of spatial dynamics – as well as the lack of spatial studies that usefully consider theatre as a vital reading of culture. For Tompkins, the stage can become the site of the symbolic representation of the outside (Australian, or in this case, Northern) "world." Tompkins refers briefly to the ways in which various theatre semioticians, such as Patrice Pavis and Gay McAuley, have

usefully provided taxonomies for understanding the ways in which theatre space itself can be configured and understood in systemic, itemised ways. My own study (like Tompkins's) is ultimately less concerned with the way in which individual performances and venues might be taxonomically understood, and more concerned with the ways in which theatre might be explored for its representation of specific Australian spaces. This thesis also avoids sustained and detailed analysis of individual plays beyond their relevance to/in/for the North.

In summary, this thesis addresses the omission of both historical representations of an Australian North in theatre praxis; and of a specific analysis of Northern spaces within the field of contemporary cultural studies. It does so by linking the two: by identifying a history of theatrical representations of the North from Federation to the present; and by reading key texts within this *oeuvre* for the illumination they might shed on the symbolic functions the North possesses in the national imaginary. As part of this process, I begin to outline a distinct body of work (with certain strict, disciplinary definitions) that might form the basis for a Northern theatrical *oeuvre* or canon. In this Introduction, I articulate my approach to all of the above, providing a structural overview of the thesis as a whole before concluding with an example of how two key canonical national texts (Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and David Williamson's *Travelling North*) can be re-read and reclaimed as part of this discretely Northern canon.

Defining the Australian North.

So what, then, is this North? Where is it? By whom is the designation of "North" conferred? Sherrill Grace asks similar questions about the Canadian North in her

introduction to a collection of plays depicting that country's vast, isolated, icy northern limits:

To claim that one can put the North on stage is immediately to ask: Whose North? What stage? And these questions open out to reveal others: Which playwrights? Staging for whom? The "true North" like the "we" who guard it in the Canadian national anthem,⁴ is a complex, changing and problematic term. ("Staging" ix)

Canadians, it could be argued, have a much more precise sense of a North-South cultural, political and geographical dichotomy than Australians. Latitude sixty is used to divide the territories from the provinces (as of 1 April 1999, these included Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut Territory), so there is a sense of a politically-diluted non-self-governing North being constructed in contradistinction to a politically and culturally dominant South. Rob Shields describes how the provinces, like the Australian states before the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory gained self-government (in 1978 and 1989 respectively), have comparatively greater "control over energy and resources, judiciary, health, education, housing and land use policies, taxation powers, constitutional veto, and the use of coordinated inter-provincial pressure on the Federal Government" (165). Shields goes on to argue that in the Canadian context this geographical and political divide segues into a broader, more slippery, and less clearly empirically definable North-South cultural imaginary.

It should be noted here, however, that this North-South Canadian divide is complicated by the fact that Canada is also caught in another such cultural and

⁴ Grace is referring here to the lyrics of the Canadian national anthem:
"O Canada! Our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
we stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land, glorious and free
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee,
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee."
(Calixa Lavalle, *Oh Canada*)

geographic dichotomy within a broader North American context. The entirety of Canada is often constructed as the (cold, arctic, remote, recalcitrant) North to the United States' hegemonically dominant centre, in much the same way that Australia has traditionally been imagined as South to Britain's (and indeed, the rest of the "civilised" world's) imperial centre. Australia has been imagined as a "Great Southern Land," even prior to its "official" invention as a nation. One of the key points being made here is that it is possible for a number of these seemingly contradictory culturally and historically imagined spaces to co-exist alongside, or even over the top of, each other. It is possible, in other words, for an Australian North to exist within a nation imagined from its inception as *terra australis*.

So if there is an Australian North, how does one define it in geographic and political, much less in cultural, terms? Does one disregard state and territory boundaries and carve a line across the continent along, say, the Tropic of Capricorn, as in Herbert's novel? Or, to enact the old Brisbane Line mentality,⁵ is there still an arbitrary divide that somehow veers anachronistically across from Brisbane to Perth, as though population alone decides what divides a militarily defensible "real" Australia from The (empty, expendable Northern) Rest? Where, in other words, does an Australian North, whether real or imagined, begin and end? And how does it sit alongside a veritable latticework of other such internal geo-cultural divides?⁶ I have highlighted the word "real" to iterate the point made by Murray earlier that Northern Australia is often constituted as a culturally, politically and historically diminished sub-

⁵ The Brisbane Line was an imaginary line of defence drawn from Brisbane across to Perth during World War Two. It was hypothesised that this might be the line against which Australia might retreat in the event of a Japanese invasion/occupation. Land to the North of this line was thus considered expendable, reflecting not only the logistical but also the symbolic value of the Australian North at that time. I elaborate on this phenomenon in more detail in Chapter 3.

⁶ Australian spatial binaries include city/bush and coast/outback. The Australian Bush and the Outback exist as much as legends and myths as discrete socio-geographical spaces (the United States of America's Deep South or Wild West could be argued to operate as similar phenomena), and I discuss Shields's concept of space-myths shortly.

space within the broader Australian imaginary. Jon Stratton, for instance, argues “‘Australian’ history has traditionally located itself in a factual history of white settlement occurring from the south-east of the continent. The North of the continent has been constructed as the site of the Other, of that which has been repressed in the south’s production of the real” (38). In such a discursive equation, the South becomes defined as the “real” at the North’s expense, and the North is well on its way to being invented as mythic space.

Stratton goes on to argue that the further North one travels, the less historically inscribed and accounted for – the less *real* – the area becomes. “The area denoted as the Northern Territory,” Stratton claims, “is [by logical extension] the least ‘real’ area of Australia, and is, therefore, the weakest moment in the articulation of the dominant discourse of ‘Australia’” (38). In this deft psychoanalytic manoeuvre, a historically meaningless geographical North is constructed not in contradistinction to a generalised Australian South, but in relation to a very specific urban Melbourne-Sydney nexus that in turn constructs itself as the authentic Australian cultural, if not geographic, centre. “We need to note,” Stratton says, “that, in this mythic geography, there is no Deep South or Far South[...] The north, as a discursive element, exists not in relation to the south but in relation to the claimed reality of Sydney/Melbourne” (39). The South, in effect, does not define itself as anything. It simply “is.” The North again emerges as discursive “other” space produced as a psychological appendage to the Southern urban “self.”

The major focus in this study is on this discursive and perspectively relative North as much as it is on an empirical one, and I am aware that I must delimit where this study’s North begins and ends. Is Brisbane, for instance, North, South (as it seems from Rockhampton or Cairns), East or “Great Southeast” (as it is referred to in local

media advertising)? Alice Springs may be someone's North, but not from the perspective of Darwin, Cairns, Townsville or Broome. It may be that these spaces overlap: that the Top End⁷ and the Kimberley, for instance – reasonably empirically quantifiable spaces – are also able to operate in the cultural imaginary as the Bush, the Outback, and, I would argue, the North. This study is aimed at distinguishing the North as a discrete cultural and discursive space that is able to operate alongside other such spaces.

I borrow from Henrietta Drake Brockman's classic Northern play, *Men Without Wives*, to begin the search for the Southern border of my Australian North. As discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, *Men Without Wives* is one of the earliest plays to place a Western Australian version of the North on the nation's mainstage. The play is premised on a string of North-South binaries, and is essentially a drama about women occupying masculinised space. Early in the play, while the pastoralist Jack Abbott is introducing his young wife to the characters with whom she will be living during her time in the North, he refers to Fred as "[t]he man who bakes the best bread north of the eighteenth latitude" (13), as though this is somehow the demarcation between civilised and uncivilised worlds. As it turns out, the eighteenth parallel extends from an area just south of Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, bisecting the Northern Territory just north of Tennant Creek, before reaching the eastern Queensland coast just north of Townsville. While Jack Abbott's delineation performs the fortunate task of setting aside the Top End and Kimberley, it eliminates Townsville, Charters Towers and some of the Barkly Tablelands in the Northern Territory, all key specific spatial co-ordinates depicted in texts to be

⁷ Stratton makes a similar point here, positing that "[t]here is another geographic term which complements and overlaps with the term Far North and that is the Top End. This term has been given a meteorological definition: it is the area within which the Australian tropical climate defined in terms of Wet/Dry occurs. The Top End has thus become a technical term for an area which is experientially defined as tropical" (39).

discussed in ensuing chapters of this study. Hence, this study draws its Australian North's boundary just below Drake-Brockman's, at the twentieth latitude south.

Sherrill Grace makes an excellent point about the mobile nature of cartographic border-making at the symbolic level. She invokes the imagery of the Magnetic (as against the geographic) North Pole to describe the Canadian North, because

the Magnetic Pole *moves*. Like the Arctic ice pack, it shifts; it will not be pinned down. What is worse, the closer you approach it, the more will the Magnetic North Pole send your conventional compass needle veering wildly off any fixed course. Magnetic North, then, encapsulates a North whose parameters seem always to be shifting, a North, I would go so far as to say, that cannot be understood apart from this protean capacity. (*Canada* 51; original emphasis)

Given the equally undulating or mirage-like quality of the Australian North and the Northern frontier outlined throughout this thesis, Grace's floating North seems to be an eloquent metaphoric template for my own study.

Of course a rigid delineation of space defeats the purpose of arguing the case for a multiplicitous range of discursive and mythic Norths. Certainly one of the key premises grounding this study is an understanding that binaried depictions of space, culture and history, whilst useful – even strategic – for certain comparative investigations, are limiting in their depiction of other complex relations. This study explores the transition from binaried descriptions and analyses of space (in theatre texts, as well as in cultural and historiographical analysis) inherent in colonialist discourse and much of the theatre of the post-war and New Wave periods, before moving on to examine the ways in which a (postmodern, postcolonial) contemporary North (or range of Norths) “writes back” and constructs itself as a multivalent, complex and frequently unstable spatial phenomenon. This is not to collapse this study into progressivist narratives that take us from a purportedly “simplistic” past into a rich and

complex theatrical and cultural present. Indeed, contemporary theatre is equally as capable of perpetuating romantic or one-dimensional stereotypes about space and place, including post-colonial stereotypes of cultural diversity that can effectively whitewash the rich complexity of Northern race relations. Similarly, this thesis does not seek to undermine or dismiss the progressivist discourses of the work, say, of those women playwrights working in the 1930s and 1940s like Katharine Susannah Prichard and Henrietta Drake-Brockman whose theatre was not just dramatically complex for its time, but continues to offer inspiration in this regard. All theatre is “of its time” in some sense, and contains (whether by way of active challenge or passive perpetuation) an engagement with the ideologies and tropes of the culture of the day.

Finally, I am not seeking to construct a reductive imaginary, metaphoric North of my own. I am simply offering a commonly understood starting point from which to launch an analysis that at once unsettles and complicates the notion of there being a monolithic, monocultural, monochrome edifice that is regarded as an empirical Australian North. This study’s aim is to unpack some of its cultural functions.

The Functions of the North.

Having posited *where* this chimerical Australian North might conveniently be found, I turn now to gain a clearer understanding of *what* an Australian North might be – to elucidate some of the ways in which these cultural and spatial constructions might function in both practical and ideological terms.

Grace reminds us that the creation of a North/South divide in Canadian theatre and literature is as much a discursive manoeuvre as a geographical one. “[T]he dominant culture,” she argues, “produces images of North that are creations of a southern imaginary and that serve and legitimise southern needs and interests”

(“Staging” x). Representations of physical spaces on stage and in literature, as faithfully as they may adhere to a culturally agreed-upon naturalism or descriptive verisimilitude, are still “*representations* of the North and [as such] they do crucial ideological work. As representations, they have great power over our imagination: we repeat them unconsciously and come to believe in them” (“Staging” xi; original emphasis).

Shields expands further upon this line of reasoning and uses the term “space-myth” to describe the processes by which frequently nationalistic discourses are utilised to create doctrines about the development of particular spaces in order to substantiate or justify a range of practices, from colonisation itself through to the formulation of personal as well as broader cultural identities. In relation to the formation of a space-myth around the “True North Strong and Free” (as the Canadian national anthem proclaims), Shields argues that this construction of the North operates as an active if sometimes subconscious process “whereby Southerners construe the North as a counter-balance to the civilised world of the Southern cities, yet the core of their own personal, Canadian identity” (163). In Canada, the North becomes a mythical space even as it exists as a discrete geophysical space, where the two categories (“real” and “mythic”) blur and coalesce, and “isolation,” for instance, and “coldness” or “whiteness” become metonymic signifiers of, say, “purity” or “nature.” This process, according to Shields’s logic, acts as a function of a dominant (that is, Southern) need to build “a cultural identity from both sides of the equation civilised-uncivilised or culture-nature: of defining a dichotomy and then reappropriating elements which are often rejected because the dualism becomes associated, metaphorically, with other black and white categories such as good-bad” (163). The same principle can easily be applied to the Australian example.

The North thus becomes a mythic or fantasy space defined against the dominant majority's "real" Southern self, and can operate, amongst other things, as a dumping ground for disowned longings, fears and fantasies, and a tranche of other psychological projections in much the same way that Orientalism might be seen to work on a broader scale: that is, when the East becomes an exoticised projection of the West's disowned fears, fantasies and longings.⁸ The "Real North," however arbitrarily it may be empirically defined, becomes subsumed into an imagined "True North (Strong and Free):" it becomes a space-myth. Spatial theorists might argue that this is how imperial history generally tends to be recorded, or rather that the Shields space-myth model is an extension of other kinds of inquiries taking place within the field of cultural studies. Paul Carter, for instance, distinguishes between "imperial history," which seeks to record literal and seemingly inalterable facts – dates, times, places – of settlement in order to legitimate colonialism (xvi), and "cultural history," the "spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence" (xxii). The latter approach forms the basis of the Shields model, and I elaborate upon these inquiries as they relate to theatre studies.

Shields quotes Stratton to posit that there may be something of an Australian equivalent to a Canadian North, though its defining tropes and properties, I would argue, are vastly different. "The Canadian dualism of north and south," Shields claims,

appears also in Australia where Stratton has argued that Southern Australia discursively defines itself as "civilised" in relation to its Northern Territory, which is constructed as the site of the Other, of that which has been repressed in the south's production of the real. (Stratton qtd in Shields 164)

⁸ I am drawing upon the work of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, and more recently Anne McClintock and Ann Stoler who point out that, whilst not being solely reducible to sexual metaphor or motivation, the violent military and economic violations inherent in colonialism can plausibly be viewed through the prism of sexual imagery. Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson, for instance, argue that when viewed in this light, the colonies become "places where desire repressed in Europe can be released," a kind of dumping ground for what Stoler would refer to as a (Freudian) hydraulic male ejaculatory fantasy (Jolly and Manderson 7).

In analysing Canadian playwright Judith Thompson's *Sled*, Sherrill Grace posits that the play

foregrounds the fact that "North" is always *staged*, is always a simulacrum. As a wild zone, "North" is the absence of "South," all that the south is not. As such it can be used to define *us* (southern Canadians), while it eludes our grasp – as it must if it is to retain its power. ("Going North" 159; original emphasis)

Grace's observations contain a number of crucial illuminating clues as to how this (Australian) analysis might proceed.

Firstly, it contains a reminder, or contention, that the North is *staged*, reiterating this thesis's overall emphasis on theatre's pertinence to spatial fields of inquiry. It is called into textual existence through performance. This not only points the way for similar insights into a potential Australian North, but it ties in directly with one of the key tenets of spatial critical inquiries which I am invoking to frame this thesis: that history, like space itself, is a fluid and subjective construct. Ruth Barcan and Ian Buchanan draw on the work of Paul Carter (who in turn draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault) to argue that "space isn't an emptiness, a void to be filled, the neutral scene for action. Rather, space is imagined – called into being – by individuals and the cultures of which they are a part" (8). Space is, by extension, *enacted*, making theatre a particularly apt art form for reading geographical spaces for cultural inscription. By logical extension theatrical space – whether physical or textual – can never be empty space, devoid of wider associations and implications. Theatre does not exist in a vacuum. According to Alan Read, theatre "is not innocent space, neutral space nor utopian space, but manifestly organised by the dominant relations of production" (158). Theatre deals, among other things, with projections and imaginings of the material, social world, becoming, if we are to follow Read's line of thinking, political space.

Joanne Tompkins points out that the arrangement and management and creation of space on the stage must also produce social and political space in contexts that are relevant outside the theatre. Tompkins draws on the work of Henri Lefebvre, Gearóid Ó Tuathail, Elin Diamond, Paul Carter, Una Chaudhuri, and Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs to argue that “[r]epresentational space performed in Australian theatre not only contests conventional Australian history and culture; it also stages alternative means of managing the production of space in a spatially unstable nation” (*Unsettling* 5). Tompkins refers to the contested nature of occupation of space in Australia as a “settler” and “multicultural” postcolonial nation. She elaborates:

Debates over land rights, anxieties regarding nationalism, settlement, reconciliation, traces of what was known as the yellow peril and subsequent invasion scares are preoccupied with space. These debates have resulted in the paradoxical depiction of Australia as an unlimited, empty land, at the same time as it is said to be too “full” to accommodate outsiders, such as asylum seekers. (*Unsettling* 6)

Remaining mindful that these contrasting visions, versions and uses of space are loaded with cultural and political baggage and carry with them real as well as metaphorical power relations and practical struggles and contests, Tompkins’s approach reads with an awareness of significantly divergent interests competing for valid occupation of space, rather than instating one case as being inherently superior or more authentic than the other. Barcan and Buchanan agree with this case for multiplicity, stating that “[t]he work of Aboriginal activists has forced white Australians to recognise that white ways of seeing and imagining ‘Australia’ were only one way of envisioning, understanding and inhabiting this continent,” and that “[e]ach time a new vision of the world is presented, a new formulation of space is also presented, and vice versa” (8). I want to draw on this premise to argue the case for an enacted, multivalent and culturally and politically loaded Australian North.

This leads into the final point Grace is making which proves useful in better understanding what (and why) an Australian North might be: that this binaried relationship between South and North is, like most dichotomies, culturally loaded and serves a uni-polar power nexus. Defining the North as Other serves the South a political purpose. This perception forms the basis of Shields's space-myth model, one that is applied to many of the plays in this study: namely that these space-myths are created in order to maintain or reinforce a cultural hegemony. Grace argues that the South's hold on cultural pre-eminence is "reinforced by the binary opposition that constructs 'North' as a function of the southern imaginary and as an obscure subject of southern urban desire for the Other, without which it cannot survive" ("Going North" 159).

I want to borrow and apply from this preliminary comparative investigation a general principle of what we might call space-myth enactment, and to connect this with the spatial critical analysis outlined above, reminding us again that space generally (and therefore the North specifically) is never neutral or divorced from subjective reality. As Barcan and Buchanan summarise, "the biological, geological, material world around us is discursively imagined, understood and produced, and [...] even our bodily perception and experience of it does not occur outside of culture and history" (9). Hence, a binaried analysis of the relationship between North and South is just one way of understanding space, culture and history (within a theatrical context), and that such an analysis can reveal the existence of an ultimately much more complex, dynamic and multi-layered discursive Australian North.

Defining the Theatrical Parameters of this Study

The main thrust of this study is to establish the extent to which an Australian North might be seen to exist, both in the popular imagination and as a distinctive socio-geographical phenomenon as it has been invented on the Australian stage; and the ways in which Australian theatre praxis has been of substantial influence in the forming, shaping and reflecting of national cultural myths and discourses. This study focuses on what I consider to be key texts that distinguish themselves for the following range of reasons. Texts have been selected because of their thematic and structural excellence, competence and clarity of vision; or for the cultural impact they have made in their performance histories. Some plays show particular engagement with the notion of “North,” or depict the North displaying a rigorous engagement with the region, both in terms of theme, and depiction of landscape, character and atmosphere rather than the North being an incidental, convenient decorative backdrop or panorama whose location is ultimately irrelevant.⁹ Other plays in the study are the best known or most highly regarded examples of work from a particular writer’s *oeuvre*, or have been influential or popular texts in a local sense yet have slipped through the national radar in terms of literary and/or academic review. In some cases, plays are included simply because they are the only plays from certain periods depicting the North that I have been able to locate.

Some plays that may have been included by others have been left out here: for example, Thomas Keneally’s *Bullie’s House* (1981), whilst set in northern Queensland, deals with themes and issues that render the local national. This is ultimately, I would

⁹ For this reason, the Northern Territory thus becomes the focus for the Federation era of the thesis, through the work of Randolph Bedford and Jo Smith. Lincoln J. Carter’s *The Great Rescue*, on the other hand, is certainly an early twentieth century melodrama that happens to be set in the Northern Queensland goldmines of Charters Towers and a pub in Townsville, but the setting is only incidental to the action in that play. Whilst it contains depictions of cultural stereotypes (the drunken Irish fool; the English nob; the foul-mouthed anti-authoritarian Scot) that may be interesting for certain kinds of studies, the North just happens to be a painted cyclorama used by way of backdrop for a “great chase” plot, that could in effect take place anywhere. There is little by way of description of life, or even land, in the North, much less an analysis of this “exotic” setting in relation to the metropolitan South, or even Britain.

argue, a play about Australia's broad unreconciled relationship with indigenous cultures, and does not engage as centrally with its specific geographical settings as others I have chosen.¹⁰ They are not plays, essentially, that offer a reading, much less a thesis, of the North. For the purposes of this study texts have been prioritised that are more thematically, culturally and discursively addressed to the precise problematics of the concept of an Australian North.

For the most part, this thesis uses text-based theatre as the basis for its focus, and in doing so I am by no means attempting to privilege text-based performance praxis over the impact and presence of physical, environmental, site-based or other live (theatre) performance modes. Indeed, the work of Tracks Dance Theatre in Darwin, for example, which was originally a dance company, but is now perhaps better described as a physical performance ensemble, plays a key role in depicting Northern Territory spaces and, frequently, intercultural narratives within those spaces. Darwin Theatre Company similarly took on a more site-based focus under the 2001-2004 artistic directorship of Tania Lieman – for instance, *Site and Sound* (2002) and *Filling in Time* (2001). Stalker Theatre and the Marrugeku Company's Festival of Darwin production of their physical (environmental) performance piece, *Crying Baby* (2000), performed in the remote Aboriginal community of Cahill's Crossing, was important not only in terms of sheer intercultural logistic endeavour, but for achieving a kind of national and international arts media exposure that frustrated local companies have only been able to dream of in recent times. Chapter Five examines the broadening definitions of theatre as they are occurring in contemporary praxis in the North. For the greater part of this study, however, a text-based focus is chosen as much for the sake of convenience to documentary resources as disciplinary clarity. To explore depictions of the North in,

¹⁰ Louis Nowra's *Radiance* is another play in this vein.

say, dance, film or multi-media live performance is, ultimately, another project, but the theoretical framework and the particular analysis surrounding the text-based plays engaging with a physical and discursive North in this thesis can be adapted and applied to analyses of other performance modes.

Within the category of “text-based theatre,” this study encompasses a number of differing text-based forms, ranging from melodrama, through an array of naturalistic and realistic twentieth-century forms to postmodern pastiche: for example, *Ningali*, which incorporates stand-up comedy into dramatic monologue; and the work of William Yang, which weaves photographic slide imaging and personal memoir into a monologue form. The common expressive thread linking these temporally and stylistically divergent performance modes is their foregrounded use of the written, as well as the spoken, word. It is not my intention to delegitimise or marginalise other (for example, oral) traditions or performance modes, but such work falls outside the investigative boundaries of this enquiry. My examination of certain performance scripts is thus taken as symptomatic in uncovering the tropes and traits of an Australian North as encountered through the dominant literary, performative, generic and stylistic modes of twentieth-century Australian theatrical writing. This study sits alongside other such investigations¹¹ and contributes to, rather than detracts from, an appreciation and awareness of live performance practices in the North over the past one hundred years or so.

It is important to establish from the outset that this study does not seek to be an empirical historical overview of North Australian theatre. For every text chosen, there are inevitably others that are neglected. In contributing to the identification of a North Australian theatrical canon, “Appendix A” contains a fuller and more representative list

¹¹ I refer to Daena Murray’s visual art analysis, or Nicolas Rothwell’s literary and visual arts memoir-styled reading of the North, discussed earlier.

of plays over the past century that have depicted the North in some pivotal or substantial way, which may aid further enquiry and research in this area.

Structurally, the thesis follows a roughly chronological century-long trajectory from the Federation era through to the first decade of the twenty-first century over five chapters, diverting in Chapter Four for an extended examination of Darwin as Northern city space. Each chapter employs strands of spatial theoretical inquiry as its critical framework, and I now elaborate upon this critical endoskeleton which is explained more fully in the first chapter.

Chapter One of this thesis, “Inventing and Theorising the North,” outlines how Australia was imagined as the Great Southern Land even before it was “discovered” by various European imperial powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It emphasises the importance of this process in producing key binaried perceptions of the continent, which continue to influence the development of Australia’s cultural imaginary from “settlement,” throughout the colonialist era to the twentieth century. The chapter then explores colonialist discourse as it manifests in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australian theatre, focusing primarily on turn-of-the-century melodrama. The second half of this chapter involves an exploration of two melodramas set in the Northern Territory, *White Australia or The Empty North* by Randolph Bedford (1910) and *Girl of the Never Never* by Jo Smith (1912), reading them for specific ideologies, tropes and stock characters that establish and perpetuate space-myths surrounding the North from its period of imperial settlement.

Chapter Two, “The Northern Frontier,” explores the development of colonialist discourse in Australian theatre history over the first half of the twentieth-century, as it evolved from the British and American traditions of melodrama and vaudeville outlined in Chapter One. Early theatrical forays into what might be termed Australian

Naturalism will be examined for depictions of the North. I read key colonial¹² theatre texts including Henrietta Drake-Brockman's *Men Without Wives* (1938) and "The Blister" (1937), Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Brumby Innes* (1972),¹³ Sydney Tomholt's "Anoli the Blind" (1936),¹⁴ Louis Esson's "The Drovers" (1923) and Louis Nowra's 1988 adaptation of Xavier Herbert's 1938 novel, *Capricornia*. Using a spatial theoretical framework, this study assesses some of the ways in which ideologies, tropes and particular space-myths surrounding an emerging sense of a discrete Australian North took hold beyond a melodramatic theatrical aetiology. This chapter specifically examines how the North is configured as frontier space; and how early twentieth-century anthropological investigations were aimed at solving the problem of how the "white man" might survive in the tropics.

Chapter Three, "The North as Asian Buffer and the Black Man's Zone," explores the development of depictions of the North over the second half of the twentieth century. Continuing the examination of the North as Australia's "buffer" against Asia that began in Chapter One, this chapter begins with a discussion of how Australia's Asian invasion anxieties were effectively realised with the Japanese bombing of the North during World War Two. The North is read as a militarised zone: the site of actual military bases in the Top End during World War Two (and still the site of military bases in Darwin, Katherine/Tindal and Townsville, to this day) on the one hand; and a vast unprotected coastline vulnerable to enemy infiltration on the other. Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles* (1948) and Jill Shearer's *Shimada* (1989) form the

¹² By "colonial" here, I am referring to the pioneer era of Northern pastoral development which, whilst occurring after Australian Federation, was arguably "colonialist" in its introduction and transportation of European cultural values and practices to a section of the country that had at that time not been "settled" in the way the metropolitan and more comprehensively pastoralised Southern regions of the country had.

¹³ *Brumby Innes* was not performed until 1972, but was written in the 1920s and originally published in 1940.

¹⁴ "Anoli the Blind" was published in 1936, but entered in a short play competition in the *Bulletin* in 1913, so was obviously written much closer to the time in which it was set (1905).

basis of the postwar theatrical representation of the North in this context. The chapter then returns to the notion of a mid-late twentieth-century Australian frontier residing in the North. This can variously be a frontier that either separates Australia from Asia, or the “civilised” South from the “wild” North; or White Australia from the “Black Man’s Zone,” depending on the prevailing cultural doctrine of the time. John Powers’ *Last of the Knucklemen* (1973) operates as the New Wave theatrical exemplar of a dying Northern frontier in which the North is configured as exclusive idealised male space. In order to round off an interrogation of the North as the “Black Man’s Zone,” I read Frances Vickers’ *Stained Pieces* (1949), Gordon Francis’s *God’s Best Country* (1987), and David Malouf’s *Blood Relations* (1988) for their negotiation of the Black/White Australian frontier in the pre-Mabo era.

Chapter Four, “Darwin as the Frontier Capital: City Space in the North,” breaks momentarily from a temporal progression of analysis to focus on depictions and representations of Darwin as a special case: as an urban/bush space anomaly. The work of Michel Foucault, Kevin Hetherington, Michel de Certeau, Derek Gregory and Edward Soja is used to explore Darwin’s “other spaces” and the extent to which the city can be configured as postmodern frontier in which Black, White and Asian cultures cohabit shared space in complex ways. The chapter thus also analyses ways in which Darwin is either idealised as utopian multicultural space, or demonised as a dystopic former frontier garrison. I discuss the extent to which both versions of the Northern city may be simultaneously “uncannily” true (or false), arguing that the city is neither utopia nor dystopia, but instead comprised of a range of counter-discursive heterotopic spaces that ultimately resist romanticised utopic/dystopic reading. Texts utilised for this discussion for their respective interrogations of Darwin spaces along racial lines include: Louis Nowra’s *Crow* (1994); Gail Evans and Tania Lieman’s *Tin Hotel*

(2004); Philip Dean's *First Asylum* (1999); Betchay Mondragon's *Inday: Mail Order Bride* (1995); Gary Lee's *Keep Him My Heart* (1993), Reg Cribb and David Gulpilil's *Gulpilil* (2004), and Graham Pitts' *Eyewitness* (1998). Plays that frame the concluding discussion of Darwin as postmodern frontier town include John Romeril's *Top End* (1988), Janis Balodis's *Wet and Dry* (1991), and Suzanne Spinner's *Dragged Screaming to Paradise* (1994).

This specialised focus on Darwin brings the study back to a temporal “present” in Northern theatre praxis. Chapter Five, “Seen From Up Here: The Multiracial North,” examines ways in which a postcolonial North is “writing back,” focussing particularly on emerging trends as they are finding expression in Aboriginal and other multivalent voices in contemporary theatre “up North.” The first section of the chapter critiques predominantly Aboriginal-generated work that challenges the notion of North-South Black-White binaries, but which also resists notions of the North as the starry-eyed Southerner's multicultural utopia. Work explored here includes *Bran Nue Dae* by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles (1990); *Windmill Baby* (2005) by David Milroy; *Ningali* (1994) by Angela Chapman, Robyn Archer and Ningali Lawford; and *Welcome to Broome* (1998) by Richard Mellick. Passing reference will also be made to *Solid* (2000) by Phil Thomson, Kelton Pell and Ningali Lawford.

The second section of this chapter focuses on multiracial theatre taking place in the North over the past decade, including a discussion of the work of William Yang, with a special focus on his groundbreaking performance text *Sadness* (1996); and Janis Balodis' *The Ghosts Trilogy*, focussing primarily on the first in the series, *Too Young for Ghosts* (1985). The work that Lesley Delmenico refers to as Darwin-style intercultural performance praxis is surveyed, including the work produced by Darwin's East Timorese community and Andrish St Clare's *Trepang* (1996). Brief overviews are

provided of predominantly women's intercultural performance praxis identified as emerging from the North by Jacqueline Lo (*The Heart of the Journey* [2000] by Lucy Dann and Mayu Kanamori) and by Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins (Top End Girls' *Salt Fire Water* [1994]).

The chapter concludes with an examination of the ways in which this "intercultural" range of practices is taking place at the same time as an emerging urban(e) theatre culture in the North, such as Darwin Theatre Company, Cairns' Just Us Theatre Ensemble (JUTE), and the emergence of what Suzanne Spinner has referred to as a brand of "Territory Grotesque" in the work of Knock-em-Down Theatre in Darwin ("BLOCK" [1999], "Roadhouse" [2001] and *Surviving Jonah Salt* [2004]) to create a distinctive yet diverse series of versions of an Australian North (or Norths), constructed and performed from within. In other words, I explore whether the North is, in fact, still being created by the South for its own ideological purposes, or if it has moved beyond this (and beyond parochialism) toward a more locally-based and richly-articulated phase of cultural self-actualisation.

Before launching into this extended century-long study of representations of the North in theatrical praxis, I elaborate now on the spatial theory that will form the critical spine of this thesis and apply it to a reading of two canonical Australian theatre texts, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* and David Williamson's *Travelling North*, that reclaims them as part of a Northern *oeuvre* for the purposes of this study.

Spatial Theory and its Application to this Project

Gearóid Ó Tuathail reminds us that:

[g]eography is about power. Although often assumed to be innocent, the geography of the world is not a product of nature but a product of histories of

struggle between competing authorities over the power to organise, occupy and administer space. (1)

Barbara Bender concurs, and argues that “landscape is never inert, people engage with it, re-work it, appropriate it and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed, whether as individual, group, or nation-state” (3). Space theory as it applies to this study focuses on what I view as a two-pronged interpretation of Ó Tuathail’s postulation: that history/geography is a study of the ways in which space is organised both *practically* (map-making/cartography, border definition, land rights, land politics, etc) and *discursively*. It is with this realm of the symbolic or representational that theatre is especially well positioned to engage at an exploratory and performative level. As Ó Tuathail concludes:

The struggle over geography is also a conflict between competing images and imaginings, a contest of power and resistance that involves not only struggles to represent the materiality of physical geographic objects and boundaries but also the equally powerful and, in a different manner, the equally material force of discursive borders between an idealised Self and a demonised Other, between “us” and “them.” Viewed from the colonial frontier, geography is not just a battle of cartographic technologies and regimes of truth: it is also a contest between different ways of envisioning the world. (14-15)

It is this contest between different ways of envisioning the North with which this thesis is centrally preoccupied. As Allaine Cherwonka iterates, Australian history (like most colonial histories) “has been imagined in relation to geography. Its history testifies to how colonisation largely depended on spatial practices that shaped the landscape” (6). Cherwonka reminds us that in an Australian context, “race, civilisation and national identity are imagined through geography” (6), and it is my contention that this formulation becomes more specific in a Northern context.

The spatial theorists upon whom I base the majority of my own focus on Northern spatial practices are Jennifer Rutherford (via her postulation, from Patrick White and Lacan, of a Great Australian “nothingness”) and Ken Gelder and Jane M.

Jacobs (via their postulation, from Freud, of an Australian “uncanny”). Also referred to throughout is Rob Shields’s concept of “space myth,” as defined earlier in this Introduction. In applying these central proponents of spatial inquiry to a specifically theatrical Australian context, Joanne Tompkins’s concept of “unsettlement” has been central to my thinking.

Drawing upon Freud and Lacan, Jennifer Rutherford argues that one of the ways Eurocentric Australian culture has dealt with its encounter with spaces it has been unable to conquer and settle is to posit such geography as a vast textual, geographical and symbolic “nothingness.” Rosslyn D. Haynes utilises similar thinking in the context of her own theorisation of Australian desert spaces in her study of literature, visual art and cinema, and borrows from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to tailor his concept of African “blank” spaces to an Australian context. Haynes explains that half a century before Conrad, “one of these blank spaces had been the centre of the Australian continent. To some this geographic enigma was an alluring challenge; to others it was, as the *Argus* newspaper of Melbourne called it, a ‘hideous blank’” (36). Concepts of a “dead heart” or “red centre” inform one particular space-myth that have been particularly aligned with a romantic quasi-spiritual quest (popular, according to Haynes, as a trope in Australian desert fiction, art and film¹⁵) and it is one example of a study of Australian spaces that sits comfortably alongside, and sometimes overlapping with, my own configuration of a discrete spatial North.

Writing on precisely one such of these overlapping configurations of Northern/Central/Outback Australian spaces, Christy Collis expounds on what might be called the politics of emptiness in reference to Australian desert space in Central Australia. She argues that colonialist constructions of the Australian inland as empty

¹⁵ Patrick White’s *Voss* springs to mind as a key literary exemplar of the romantic inland Australian quest.

serve several cultural functions. Aside from masking a European failure to “conquer” the harsh interior, there was also another space-myth, another active cultural agenda at play. Collis argues, “[n]ot only did this production of the desert as passively empty alleviate the threat of failure for the explorers, it also served the purpose of erasing the facts of Aboriginal ownership and presence” (40). My own thinking here is that a similar trope of emptiness operates as one space-myth in theatrical and broader cultural imaginings of the North from the colonial period through to the present, although the imperialist pretext upon which this particular space-myth is founded is being complicated, challenged and unsettled by contemporary theatre praxis, particularly (though not exclusively) with the advent of Aboriginal and other multivalent cultural voices writing back from within the North. As stated earlier, this thesis is particularly interested in the ways the North appropriates and tailors its own versions of national (space-)myths, such as Emptiness and Whiteness, in order to produce what this study seeks to identify as a distinct Northern identity, or set of identities.

One specific example of a theorist whose work this thesis appropriates by way of further illumination of Northern space is Jennifer Rutherford, who argues that “the bush” or “the outback” or “the never never,” or a range of other references to Australian landscapes away from the metropolitan seaboard, have all been used to depict an aggressive relationship with a perceived Other constructed in counterpoint to an Anglo-Celtic White Australian male(ness). Rutherford argues that a cultural fantasy of “nation and national type” has thus sprung up around this construction of a putative Australian “self” which has manifested as hostile to anything representing its opposite, resulting in “a certain experience of emptiness, of a symbolic fragility or inequality to the task of representing this nothingness” (12). Rutherford concludes that the

underbelly of this “consistent fantasy” of Australia as a “good and neighbourly nation” under threat from a perceived antipathetic (Black or other non-White) Other is

the Australian legacy: dispossession of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, the White Australia policy, the assimilation policies of the twentieth centuries, a pronounced antipathy towards and intolerance of the feminine, and a continued cultural policing of traits that metonymically carry the stain of difference. (12)

I apply Rutherford’s psychoanalytic reading of Australian spatial and race relations to key theatre texts depicting the North throughout this thesis, alternating her analysis of the key Australian fantasy of “nothingness” with Gelder and Jacobs’s reading of the friction of intercultural contact.

Gelder and Jacobs’ Freudian reading of postcolonial spatial practice runs contiguously to Rutherford’s Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of Whiteness and Australian spatial practice, and is best summarised in their phrase, the “uncanny Australia.” According to Gelder and Jacobs, postcolonialism is frequently coupled with an underlying anxiety, erupting at critical points at which the nation feels itself to be under threat from a perceived hostile indigenous Other that seeks to contest (White) Australian access to and occupation of space and place. They cite the 1992 Australian High Court decision resulting in the Native Title Act 1993 – the Mabo decision – as one key recent instance of such an intensification of national anxiety.

Gelder and Jacobs explain:

[*t*]erra nullius, the founding fantasy of modern Australian nationhood, was rejected by this ruling and Aborigines were given the opportunity to make claims over a much wider range of lands than had previously been provided for under existing land rights legislation. The rejection of *terra nullius* was certainly read by some as the moment when *all* (or at least, “too much”) of Australia might become available for Aboriginal reclamation. (*Uncanny* 150)

Gelder and Jacobs use the Freudian psychoanalytical term “uncanny” to account for this broad cultural anxiety of having something familiar – one’s home, one’s land, one’s sense of self as it is defined in connection with this spatial attachment – being

rendered suddenly simultaneously *unfamiliar* by virtue of it belonging, or being claimed by, the Other. An “uncanny Australia” then, according to Gelder and Jacobs’s logic, is one which operates simultaneously as “ours” and “theirs,” yet which resists “conventional, colonial distinctions between self and other, here and there, mine and yours” (151). The nation’s homogeneity is subsequently troubled by a range of complex postcolonial narratives in which simplistic binaried definitions of, and relations to, space and place are challenged by the reality of dynamic multicultural co-existence and co-occupation.

Howard Morphy, writing on the “politics of landscape” in a specifically Northern Australian context, concurs and argues that

[a] landscape-based cosmology is one of the ways in which Aboriginal identity has been maintained in a post-colonial context and also one of the areas of conflict between black and white Australians. Landscape provides an excellent framework for representing the clash in values and the different interests of Aborigines and colonists. (206)

For Morphy, the North becomes the focus of this tension because it is part of a continuum in which “the ‘wild’ landscape became the ‘frontier’ and then the ‘outback’ and finally ‘settled’ Australia” (209). In this progressivist narrative, the North (and, as with Jon Stratton, the Northern Territory in particular) becomes the “least settled” remainder of “wild” or “frontier” Australia. In this equation, Morphy and Stratton reiterate this thesis’s articulation of the case for a discrete Australian North, in historiographical terms. My own study brings together these fields of spatial inquiry and theatre studies, in a distinctly Northern context.

In a similar vein, Joanne Tompkins elaborates upon the Gelder/Jacobs concept of the uncanny and applies it specifically to Australian theatre praxis. She points out that the Freudian concept of the repressed returning which underpins the formulation of the uncanny is especially ripe for theatrical application, because:

[i]n Australia, the repressed usually signals knowledge of what was done to places and the people in them; a key theatrical response to this knowledge is the staging of issues of presence and absence particularly locating Aboriginal people in Australian history. Countless plays stage an Aboriginal “presence” in light of the legalistic practice of “absence” created by *terra nullius*. (8)

Tompkins, like Gelder and Jacobs (and other commentators including Paul Carter, Stephen Muecke and Bob Hodge), is referring specifically here to the conflicting interests, and perceptions of space between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal occupants of land in this country, and I am also interested in this “uncanny” phenomenon as it applies to Northern Australian spaces. Tompkins goes on to articulate her own concept of an “unsettled” Australia in specific relation to a national theatre canon, where she argues these national tensions and anxieties surrounding contested spatial practices are performed to the nation and enshrined most constructively and critically in national narrative-making processes. She expressly chooses plays that “contribute to an unsettling of the nation’s historical and/or spatial identity” (*Unsettling* 16) in order to investigate the source of these anxieties. This thesis also owes an intellectual debt to Tompkins’s work, and I employ and/or refer to her concept of “unsettlement” throughout my own study.

Where Tompkins applies her own analysis of spatial practice to Australian theatre studies, this thesis departs from comprehensive readings of Australian spaces and race relations to a specific analysis of a discrete discursive, historiographical and performative North. Whilst Gelder and Jacobs’s formulations of the uncanny, like Rutherford’s formulations of White Australian fantasy and Tompkins’s concept of unsettling, operate as umbrella theses for the whole of Australia, I am primarily concerned here with how these complementary psychoanalytic models apply particularly to the North; and will articulate some of the ways in which the North

might consequently be viewed as emblematic Australian space in relation to contested Black-White cultural and spatial practices.

Additionally, it is my assertion that the North can be viewed as a projective repository for such national anxieties, to act as the scrim (or stage) upon which the South's, or the majority population's, fears, tensions and fantasies are projected and writ large, even disowned. This latter qualification of denial is an extrapolation iterated throughout this thesis: if the North operates in the manner I describe as a projection of the swathe of anxieties surrounding Australia's symbolic relationship with a perceived internal Aboriginal or external Asian Other, outlined by Rutherford, Gelder and Jacobs, Tompkins and others, then one of the key functions of the North in broad cultural terms is as the site for the majority population's disowned racism, or, by extension, its own range of romanticised configurations of indigenous (or other) cultural, political and spatial practices. Examples of simplistic Cartesian-like postulations that emerge from this formula might be: "people living in the North are redneck, therefore I am not a redneck because I do not live in the North;" "the North is contested Black space, therefore my backyard in the 'South' is safe;" "the North is Black space, therefore that is where I need to go in order to encounter authentic indigeneity;" or even "you are from Down South, therefore you can never appreciate what 'real' multiculturalism or 'real' Aboriginality is."

In highlighting some of the psychological and cultural functions the North might perform, I am by no means offering these as proscriptive or reductive definitions of what the North – or, indeed, the rest of Australia – as lived space actually is. Like Gelder and Jacobs and Tompkins, this study is interested in unsettling, rather than perpetuating, simplistic binaried equations, in order to instead argue a case for dynamic, even if fraught and contested rather than conveniently

harmonious, co-existence; and for simultaneously operating (if not always *co-operating*) postcolonial narratives.

In this manner, spatial theory acts as a framework for “reading” the plays throughout the thesis. As well as examining the texts for plot, and for physical depiction of a range of Northern settings, the study works to better understand how these depictions produce a range of ideological assumptions, not just about the North, but about Australia generally. In reading the Bedford text, *White Australia, or The Empty North*, for example, for its patriotic agenda to spatialise the North as “empty” because it is devoid of large numbers of “white men,” we receive very clear messages about dominant cultural values held by the fledgling nation at the time. The point here, moreover, is that there is a clear relationship between North and South: the North exists as a repository of Southern (white) projections and insecurities. The specific space-myths of emptiness and whiteness reflect one (of a swathe of many) Southern fears of invasion and contamination by the Asian hordes imagined to be knocking on the Northern doorstep.

To summarise, then, each of the chapters outlined above uses a critical framework of spatial theory to read relevant theatre texts for their cultural and historiographical inscriptions of a mooted Australian North. This does not necessarily mean the same thing in each chapter: the structure of this thesis allows for a comparative analysis of theatre texts and praxis over a period of approximately one hundred years. As times change, so too do cultural and historiographical depictions of space. Theatre, as stated earlier by Read, Tompkins and Grace *et al.*, can both reflect these changes and contribute to a cultural understanding of these visions.

***Applying a Spatial Reading to Two Canonical Examples: Summer of the
Seventeenth Doll and Travelling North.***

I begin with an example of the way this system of analysis can work by reading two key Australian plays that invoke an imagined North from a Southern perspective to explicate their conflicting constructions of similar geographic terrain.¹⁶ Whilst each text borrows or constructs a sometimes contradictory range of *topoi* – tropes about place – to create this discursive North, both deploy a similar strategy of space-myth enactment to do so. The end result is that a distinct, if fractured, image of a culturally, ideologically, semiotically loaded Australian North as imagined by the South begins to emerge from the metaphoric darkness.

When looking to theatre to provide examples of the ways in which the North is invoked within the broader Australian imaginary, one could do worse than to turn in the first instance to that key text of the national canon, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. The North exists in the play as what Gay McAuley might call an "unlocalised off-stage physical place" (301) in counterpoint to the milieu of the inner urban Melbourne terrace house that constitutes the entirety of the on-stage action. As well as being off-stage fictional space, the canefields of Far North Queensland perform a symbolic function in the text. The North is represented metonymically in the text by the men themselves and the homosocial and generational battles proper to the Northern canefields that they bring to Carlton. The North itself, however, remains undepicted in the text. It functions as the site of the imagined Other in relation to the play's (certainly

¹⁶ Both plays, intriguingly, and in support of this study's central thesis of the North's current importance to Australian cultural life, are enjoying high profile remounts on the Brisbane mainstage in 2008. *The Doll* is being staged at La Boite Theatre Company and *Travelling North* at the Queensland Theatre Company.

the characters', and by extension, the urban audience's) "real" urban Australian self.¹⁷ Certainly many of the reviews at the time of the play's first series of domestic performances made much of the *Doll's* "true" Australian qualities. The *Daily Telegraph* lauded the fact that "someone has written a genuine Australian play without kangaroos or stock whips, but an indigenous play *about city dwellers*" (Griffen-Foley qtd in Brisbane xxvii; emphasis added). The city, in other words, is the site of the "real" Australia with the North (specifically) and the Bush (generally) occupying the realm of romance and legend. John McCallum has argued that the *Doll* has been frequently read as an allegory representing the demise of what he terms the "Bush Legend," and it is worth quoting him at length here by way of explication. Quoting Kippax, McCallum argues that the *Doll*

embodies, in its study of the painful process of maturation and the destruction of youthful ideals which Roo and Olive experience, the maturation of Australia as a nation. The lesson which the characters learn – the destruction of the old bush legend, and the need to face the realities of modern urban life – are lessons which Australia was learning as it came to the end of what was seen as a period of protracted national adolescence[...] [T]he play quite literally "brought the outback into the city and confronted the 'Australianist' legend with the realities of modern, urbanised, industrialised Australia." (Kippax qtd. in McCallum 36)

McCallum does not define the "Bush Legend" in precise terms, but refers to it as incorporating a "romanticised" and "sentimental" view of the bush as being the "real" Australia, in which qualities of "maleness" and "mateship" are central and valorised above others (36).¹⁸

¹⁷ Although an alternative psychological reading here might be to posit the North as uncannily erupting as the repressed Self: as the returned repressed that threatens to vanquish healthy individuation when Self and Other merge during the play's crisis.

¹⁸ The Bush Legend can be argued as having a political dimension, too, upholding rural exporting interests during the Liberal-National Party Coalition during the postwar Menzies era in Australian politics. *Doll* was the first major Australian mainstage play to depict this era of transition from post-Federation pastoral squattocracy to a postwar nation whose political and economic foundations were being challenged by the realities of changing international conditions.

In this sense, the “Bush Legend” might be seen to operate as a specific space-myth: it actively promulgates interpretations of Australianness, constituting particular qualities in particular spaces as being authentic at the expense of others. It serves a cultural function, in other words, privileging (presumably white, youthful) maleness as being somehow quintessentially Australian, and it is this tranche of foundational cultural assumptions that the play can be argued to question. Jonathan Bollen, Adrian Kiernander and Bruce Parr argue that creations of a masculinised Australian stereotype around the time of the *Doll* are a practice “grounded in the nation’s history, evident in home-grown cultural expressions like theatre, and implicated in the social experience of contemporary life” (4), and that this practice segued neatly from the colonialist discourse prevalent for much of the first half of the twentieth-century. According to Bollen, Kiernander and Parr, tropes associated with this nationalised masculinity, as it was represented in theatre at the time, include: inarticulateness; violence; (social) impotence; and the occupation of homosocial male milieux in historical settings (4-5), all of which can be seen actively portrayed in the *Doll*. But to return the discussion to a reading of the text for its representation of an Australian North, it is important to be aware of these other concomitant (space) myths, legends and cultural practices in order to frame a discussion of the North within the context of wider Australian narratives and discourses.

In specific relation to the *Doll*, then, the question might thus become: is it important that Roo and Barney are *North Queensland* cane cutters, or could the play’s central themes, symbolism and tragedy unfold equally as effectively if the men were, say, Murray River grape pickers or Northern Territory uranium miners, as Barney threatens to be by play’s end? Or is there a sense that, the further North the literal and

metaphorical terrain, the more distinctive or powerful the theme, and the more specific the space-myth?

The North is established from the play's outset as a male space, and, more importantly, a hypothetical world in which the material specifics are of little interest to Olive, who is only really interested in the North as far as it facilitates (and funds) a fulfilling fantasy life for her with Roo in Melbourne. The canefields are where the men go to work so they can play "Down South" with the women, during the official summer lay-off period. Barney and Roo are constructed as being somehow more authentic than the men available to Olive (and, she hopes, Pearl) in Melbourne. They are "real" men, as against their presumably inauthentic southern counterparts. Olive elaborates:

Nancy used to say it was how they'd walk into the pub as if they owned it, even just in the way they walked you could spot it. All round would be the regulars, soft city blokes having their drinks and their little arguments, and then in would come Roo and Barney. They wouldn't say anything – they didn't have to – there'd just be the two of them walkin' in, then a kind of wait for a second or two, and quiet. After that, without a word, the regulars'd stand aside to let 'em through, just as if they was a – a coupla kings. (15)

Olive's patent mythologising of the men here immediately reveals the extent to which she has woven a fantasy life around them, which does much to undermine her claim for (their Northern) authenticity.

In fact, the mythology Olive (and, by association, a complicit Barney and Roo) have created around the North is beginning to sour as the realities of age start to hinder the men in their ability to compete with other younger rivals for work on the canefields. The men are only useful there, only able to operate effectively in the North, as long as their bodies will allow them to endure the heavy physical toll of the cane cutting seasons. The North, then, whilst constructed as a place of productivity, fertility, masculinity and mateship, is also a finite resource that would seem to brutally favour youthfulness and physical might over "softer" cerebral or other non-manual labouring

career options. The men are only “kings” up there and down “here” while their youth and masculinity are intact. In this sense, the North might be argued to represent a kind of immaturity of spirit that Kippax and McCallum have interpreted as a symbol of Australia’s vexed, adolescent relationship with its own history as expressed in the Bush Legend.

Certainly for Barney the North represents a certain freedom from constraint and responsibility – and from personal history. He has fathered several illegitimate children in New South Wales. The further North he heads, the further he is from attachment to his irresponsible past. He tells Pearl,

I put me age up to twenty-one, and I worked like a Trojan. Paid all their bills right through, I did, everythin’, for both of them. And after that I started payin’ maintenance. But I left it up to them which one I was to marry. You decide, I said. Well – they’re sitting up there in that little one-horse town in New South Wales still arguin’ about it! And I’m as far off marriage as ever I was. (39)

The North seems to be constructed here as a space in which a certain kind of self-invention is able to take place. In contradistinction to *Capricornia’s* Norman Shillingsworth, described at the beginning of the thesis, whose delusory self-invention is dashed the further North he heads, Barney seems able to maintain his own fantasy while he is up there. And yet, perhaps in the mounting tragedy unfolding in the seventeenth summer, the elastic is stretching as far as it is able before retracting back upon itself.

At age forty-one, Roo is forced to find work in a paint factory in Melbourne to supplement his income during the lay-off. Olive resents the reality of financial constriction intruding upon her romantic fantasy world. She has also invested seven months of bar work annually in sustaining the lay-off festivities in Melbourne. When Barney brings Roo’s young rival Johnny Dowd to the Carlton terrace home to enforce a (doomed) truce between them, Olive resists it with passionate vituperation. “Righto,”

she yells, “so it means a lot to all of you up North. But why the hell couldn’t you leave it up there? It’s got nothin’ to do with our time down here, has it? Did you have to smash that up as well?” (81). But which is fantasy and which reality? North or South? It is just, on one hand, a matter of perspective. For Johnny Dowd, the Melbourne lay-off life has been the mythic one, and the reality is shabby by comparison. “Funny thing,” he says, “I imagined this place pretty often. Oh, of course I’ve never been here, it’s just the reputation that’s been built up among the boys. I reckon you could say it’s almost famous up north... [*He eyes the souvenirs disparagingly*] ... I just can’t see it” (67).

By play’s end, Olive’s fantasy is in tatters. Roo has proposed marriage to her in a last minute bid to salvage something permanent and solid from their seventeen-year affair. It is Olive’s brutally frank mother Emma who points the obvious out to Roo:

You and Barney are two of a pair. Only the time he spent chasin’ women, you put in being top dog! Well, that’s all very fine and a lot of fun while it lasts, but last is one thing it just don’t do. There’s a time for sowing and a time for reaping – and reapin’ is what you’re doing now... ‘N’ if you’d had half an eye between yez, you would have seen what you was headin’ for long ago. (84)

Olive resists Roo’s offer of marriage in the play’s bitter denouement, leaving the men psychologically and physically battered, but with their dented and arguably dysfunctional contract of mateship intact. Barney rejects the offer of work from Roo’s triumphant rival Dowd, and offers Roo a fresh start together: a homosocial marriage contract up North to replace the failed heterosexual partnership on offer down South. They exit in silence together into a mythic, tainted North of promise to accept the play’s great central tragedy: a kind of grim fatalistic acceptance of ageing and the unsustainability of fantasy. The play’s central thesis, in this sense, seems to be that it is impossible to be a “real” male in the city. Such a version of maleness is fantastic, and to fulfil that fantasy, one has to go as far away as possible.

Distance, it would seem, (and an ability to accommodate a gendered “frontier” sociality) plays a significant role in creating the North’s mystique, and may well be a key factor that distinguishes the North specifically from other spaces (both mythic and empirically definable) like the Bush and the Outback, not just in the *Doll* alone, but in the Australian cultural imaginary in general. In *Doll*, the North is, *inter alia*, a site of work that facilitates pleasure “down South.” According to Jon Stratton’s argument, this pattern of behaviour should function in reverse. His “rhetoric of the [North Queensland] tropics” (50) associates the North with “heat, luxuriant growth, sensuality, and a general construction of being different, Other, a place which threatens civilisation *by promoting lassitude over work*, and a general degeneration in social etiquette” (50; emphasis added).

For David Williamson in *Travelling North*, the North is more like Stratton’s vision than Lawler’s: it is a site of paradisaal verdure and freedom from constraint and work, and hence a place of second “childhood,” retirement and death. This anomaly of Lawler’s North versus Williamson’s North is one example of how space-myth enactment can be manifested in contradicting ways within different texts depicting similar spaces. I explore this particular anomaly in further detail now.

David Williamson’s *Travelling North*, like *Doll*, also stages Far North Queensland as unlocalised offstage physical space in contradistinction to the “reality” of cold, wet southern Melbourne. In that play, the central characters Frank and Frances find themselves caught mid-way between the two geographical extremes, in a beach house near Tweed Heads at the Queensland-New South Wales border. This geographical limbo is an apt setting for the couple’s metaphoric limbo: caught between retirement and death, Frank and Frances are trying to work out exactly what it is they want to do with the rest of their lives. “Frank wanted to go right up north,” Frances

tells her daughters, “but we’ve settled for Tweed Heads so I’ll be able to fly to Melbourne” (10). They are tethered on the one hand to the connection with Frances’s family in Melbourne and the concomitant swathe of responsibilities and sources of guilt and duty that family represents, yet not quite able to head all the way North to, say, Townsville or Cairns, into a realm of fantasy and adventure, because Frances is afraid complete immersion in this world will risk Frank’s health. As Philip Parsons observes in the play’s introduction,

If Melbourne is associated with the diminished life of winter, it is because the whole world it represents – the world of business, of buying and selling, of marrying and giving in marriage, of babies and the daily domestic round – is to be seen as less than fully vital. In the midst of life we are in Melbourne. And if the paradisaical north is associated with renewed and heightened life, it also means dying. To move from Melbourne to the tropics means to pass from one dimension to the other. (xii)

Ironically, if Frances is worried about the North being too much for Frank, Frank is also convinced Melbourne will kill him. A return to the cold, wet, wintry South will mean a death of the spirit as well as exposure to illness. “It’s not just physical,” Frances explains to her daughters, “it’s psychological. He wants the colours and the light. He really is terrified that if he stays down here much longer he’s going to die” (63).

Tweed Heads really is a threshold, then, from which to launch a romantic “twilight” life of carefree adventure and travel together. Their retirement is to be an idealised time, and the North’s function within this schema is to act as a utopic space in which fantasies of lassitude, languor and pleasure are enacted. This sits squarely with Stratton’s theory that:

[o]n the geographical journey to the limits of the discourse of Australia, Queensland marks the half-way house, the moment of a difference which can be acknowledged and incorporated into the system. The moment of pleasure, the acceptable *jouissance* [...] of the Gold Coast¹⁹ marks that capacity. (39; original emphasis)

¹⁹ Tweed Heads is only a handful of kilometres south of the Gold Coast.

Unfortunately, the physical reality of ageing intrudes upon these plans, and Tweed Heads is as far North as Frank and Frances travel together. The North remains as untravelled potential by play's end. Frank dies, having confronted a number of issues surrounding his mortality – the intractability of his personality; and his failure to foster truly nurturing relationships at an intimate level, whilst being able to engage passionately with grand issues of social justice, art and literature, and so forth. A grieving (if exhausted) Frances decides it is time for her to live truly independently (of spouse, family, and prospective suitor) and continue the journey into the paradisaical North. Parsons concludes,

As Frances remarks that she believes she will continue travelling north, the author directs that Frank will rise from his chair and join the others at the front of the stage to acknowledge the audience applause. Wherever death may be in this play, it is not here. That is what it means to travel north. *Travelling North* is the most religious play that Williamson has ever written. (xiv)

Travelling North obviously explores more thematic terrain than the strand focussed on here – the rise of Whitlam and a popular Australian political Left; the Vietnam War; class and gender issues, etc – but my intention is to concentrate on the play's depiction of an Australian North to illustrate how it counterpoints with Lawler's construction of a similar geographical space written some twenty or so years earlier. The North, then, is established as two things: on the one hand, it is a utopic physical space encapsulating Stratton's "rhetoric of the tropics," a *topos* that represents pleasure, lassitude, heat, freedom from responsibility, and so forth. It is the exotic Other to the South's cold, urban, industrial and commercial Self. On the other hand, it is also, according to Parsons, a symbolic metaphysical (or quasi-religious) space, in which "travelling

North” means to pass from one (physical) realm to the other (with a lower case “o”): in effect, to die.²⁰

This contrasts with Lawler’s depiction of the North as a masculinised space in which mateship, hard work, youth and physical prowess are features that are valorised and romanticised above all others. The two plays construct the North as seemingly contradictory discursive spaces, and fill it with commensurately opposing *topoi*: a romantic, languorous rhetoric of the tropics versus a Bush Legend-inspired masculine work ethic based on a renewed and quickly exhausted supply of white muscularity and youthful virility. Yet at the end of each play, characters head off into a fantastic North that promises continuity, and a realisation of some kind of romanticised yearning for adventure. This is the romantic quest alluded to previously as one of the central major discursive properties of the North – that of a mystical space of Australian self-exploration; a psychological terrain mapped out on a geographical one. Whilst the hue of the physical and metaphorical terrain of each North is different, the North is constructed as the exotic Other to the South’s disillusioned self: it acts as a projection, as Stratton, Shields and Grace might argue, of that which has been repressed in the South’s production of the real. The North exists in these plays as a mythical space that is only “real” inasmuch as it exists as a projection of Southern fantasy. It is, in other words, enacted as a space-myth whereupon the further North one travels, the further from the Melbourne-Sydney nexus and production of the “real” one heads, the deeper the capacity for immersion in that fantasy.

It is possible for the North to exist as any number of such fantasised projections at the same time. This is, in effect, an appropriation of the Gelder/Jacobs “uncanny”

²⁰ Reg Cribb’s 2004 play *Last Cab to Darwin* works nicely as a companion piece here. Its central protagonist, Max, is a cab driver heading to Darwin from Broken Hill in order to take advantage of the Northern Territory’s mooted euthanasia laws. He is lured to the far North on the promise of death, only to find himself stymied upon arrival by bureaucratic and moral opposition to the new laws. He is forced back south through a haunted Australian interior to complete the job he headed North to accomplish.

and Tompkins's notion of "unsettlement." The above reading of Lawler and Williamson provides one example of how the North is produced according to Southern perspectives by two popular playwrights of national stature. The analysis of the texts in this thesis as an *oeuvre* reveals the extent to which distance, and a panoply of other factors, contribute to constructions and enactments of a "Deep North" in Australian theatre; and the extent to which this is a corollary, or a projection, of a broader cultural conception of the North in the national imaginary. In the following chapters, a range of perspectives are explored which dart off in disparate tangents from this departure point, before arriving at an analysis of the myriad ways in which the North comes to imagine and regard itself.

Chapter One

Inventing and Theorising the North

Before elaborating further upon what the North is, and how it has been spatially constructed and imagined from an Australian cultural perspective, it is important to define “space.” This chapter surveys the field of spatial inquiry that forms the basis of this thesis’s focus on and application of Rutherford, Gelder/Jacobs and Tompkins, as outlined in the Introduction. The chapter then turns to an exploration of ways in which Australian spaces have been “invented” according to contemporary cultural analysis, before applying this reasoning to a specifically North Australian context. This invention of a symbolic North is read alongside a brief cultural history of racial politics in Australia before Federation. To apply this thinking on representational space to the theatre, attention then turns to the “invention” of the North on the colonial Australian stage, in the form of federation era melodrama. This chapter explores colonial Australian melodramatic tropes surrounding character, plot, landscape and ideology in Randolph Bedford’s *White Australia or the Empty North* (1912) and Jo Smith’s *Girl of the Never Never* (1912). These two key texts – amongst the first to represent the North on the federated Australian mainstage – are thus read as formative in their establishment of spatial tropes that concretise images of the North in metropolitan audiences’ eyes. They are read through the critical lens articulated in the introduction to this thesis: using Rutherford’s concept of the Great Australian “nothingness,” the Gelder/Jacobs “uncanny,” Tompkins’s concept of “unsettlement” and/or Shields’s space-myth model as is appropriate for each text; and they are done so in order to reclaim them as foundational texts in the theatrical articulation of a discrete Australian North.

First, however, “space” itself needs to be more comprehensively defined in order to better understand the critical and theoretical infrastructure of this study.

What is Space?

Pre-empting Carter’s distinction between “imperial history” and “cultural history,” space theorists Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja contend that “history” has long been configured temporally rather than spatially. Drawing primarily on the influential investigations of Foucault into “the nineteenth century obsession with history” (10), Soja argues that historical epistemology has neglected geographical considerations in deference to temporal and chronological emphases on human events and action. Soja’s call is for a “distinctly postmodern and critical human geography” (11) in which space joins time as being of equal strategic value in reading historical and geographical representations of socio-cultural dynamics. Geography, in other words, like history, is socially constructed.

Like Soja, Lefebvre calls for an active analysis – a theory – of the way spaces and, by logical extension, histories are socially produced in order to “try and ascertain what paradigm gives them their meaning, [and] what syntax governs their organisation” (16). Much as Soja distinguishes modernist from postmodernist readings of history and geography, Lefebvre divides his analysis of social spaces, which he distinguishes from physical and mental spaces, into a conceptual triad, which has formed one of the most enduring bases for subsequent spatial theoretical analysis. The triad is configured thus:

1. *Spatial practice*, which embraces production and reproduction, and particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society’s relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*.

2. *Representations of space*, which are tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations.
3. *Representational spaces*, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of space than as a code of representational spaces). (33; original emphasis)

Lefebvre’s triad can be interpreted in any number of ways, and can be difficult to pin down and apply to spaces in a proscriptive manner. Spatial practice, as Tompkins points out, is a quotidian ordering of space, and “could be defined as getting from ‘a’ to ‘b’” (*Unsettling* 2). Representations of space, Tompkins argues, are more concerned with “where a culture’s social power and authority are located and enforced. They may be buildings (banks or government edifices), commemorative town squares, or columns” (*Unsettling* 3). The third category, representational spaces, moves into the realm of the symbolic and is the most common component of the triad with which cultural analysts are preoccupied. It refers more to the symbolic function of certain spaces – what they come to signify in terms of the national imaginary.

Andy Merrifield engages with Lefebvre’s central governing Marxist concern with the ways in which space is produced, highlighting its potential usefulness for reading the capitalist dynamics inherent in this process. Whilst the triad is a useful tool by which to “*expose and decode space*” (171; original emphasis), Merrifield notes that “the production of space can be likened to the production of any other sort of merchandise to any other sort of commodity” (172). Even if operating in the realm of the symbolic, the production of space – whether “urban space, social space, physical space, experiential space” (173) – is ultimately linked to capitalism’s end goals of expansion and profit. Merrifield concludes that Lefebvre’s conceptual triad ultimately “loses its political and analytical resonance if it gets treated merely in the abstract: it needs to be *embodied* with actual flesh and blood and culture, with real life

relationships and events” (175; original emphasis). It is this embodied application of the symbolic with which this thesis is preoccupied. This study seeks to uncover the material ways in which an Australian North is produced in the popular imaginary, and to unpack in the process what cultural and psychological functions this production of a symbolically loaded North involves.

When analysing the Australian imaginary for representations of a symbolic spatial North, it is not particularly useful superimposing Lefebvre’s triad upon this investigation as its governing organisational strategy. The first two categories might lend themselves usefully, for instance, to such extended analyses of Northern spatial practices as Northern land politics or to legal and geopolitical productions of Northern physical geographies. This study pursues the ways by which the North is produced as symbolic cultural space, aligned most closely with the third category of Lefebvre’s conceptual triad.

It is more productive to undertake any analysis of symbolic – or representational – spaces with an awareness that they are, in many tangible ways, inextricably connected with other spatial practices, such as those outlined above. Even if not choosing ultimately to focus on, say, specific discussion of physical land formations or Northern land politics – much less specific buildings (theatres, especially) housed within the North – these factors still shape the constitution of a Northern imaginary and undoubtedly underpin the production of the various space-myths used to frame this thesis’s analysis of theatre texts. As Lefebvre summarises,

[i]t is reasonable to assume that spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces contribute in different ways to the production of space according to their qualities and attributes, according to the society or mode of production in question, and according to the historical period. Relations between the three moments of the perceived, the conceived and the lived are never stable. (46)

The strands of spatial inquiry and the theorists that most aptly apply to this study's especially theatre-based investigation of constructions of an Australian (Deep) North have been iterated in the Introduction to this thesis (Gelder/Jacobs, Rutherford, Tompkins, and Shields). Broader perceptions of space by alternative theorists also apply to this study at various other points. Foucault's concept of heterotopia, for instance, is invoked in Chapter Four to examine some of the ways in which Darwin can be seen to accommodate heterotopic space in its theatrical (and broader cultural) depiction of race relations. Foucault develops his theory of heterotopia from his interest in the spatialisation of history. He distinguishes heterotopias from utopias by referring to the latter as "sites with no real place" (24). They are, in effect, idealised places, or projections of longings that "present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (24). Heterotopias are, by contrast,

real spaces – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites [...] that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. (24)

Indeed, this sense of otherness is inherent in the word itself – "other places" – and Kevin Hetherington further elucidates their meaning when he describes heterotopia²¹ as "spaces in which an alternative social ordering is performed" (40). Heterotopia, according to Hetherington, comprises sites of deviation and transgression in which the usual social order ceases to function. The examples Foucault gives are spaces like ships, prisons and asylums – sites that contain internal systems of social order in discrete relation to the broader culture of which they are a part. As Hetherington summarises:

²¹ Hetherington pluralises "heterotopia" without an "s," unlike Foucault.

[t]hey can be both marginal and central, associated with both transgressive outsiderness as well as carceral sites of social control and the desire for a perfect order. But in both cases heterotopia are sites of all things displaced, marginal, novel or rejected, or ambivalent. They are obligatory points of passage that become the basis of an alternative mode of the ordering of those conditions. (46)

Read in this light, the Australian North in its entirety might be argued to operate as a heterotopia within the broad cultural imaginary. This depends on perspective and strategic distance from the North as an actual or real space. Such a thesis is ultimately unsustainable, given the North's vastness and internal complexity. On the evidence of the texts, this thesis argues rather for the existence of a number of distinct counter-sites within the North that might operate as heterotopias on the basis of their relational transgressive social ordering.

In his postmodern geographical reading of Los Angeles, Soja refers to the "territorial segregation of races and ethnicities" (242) within that city; he describes the Latino and black boroughs as "ethni-cities" that operate as "a dazzling array of sites in this compartmentalized corona of the inner city" (239). These, and a number of other racially-determined "specialized economic enclaves" (239) can be argued to operate as heterotopias, though Derek Gregory takes issue with Soja's inability to "bring into focus" such spaces by neglecting to examine thoroughly enough the human occupation of these sites, thus failing to invoke a sufficient "conception of resistance" – a "politics of space" – to qualify them in truly Foucauldian terms (Gregory 297). An analysis of lived space thus becomes meaningless without detailed consideration of the complex political and social relations that occupation of such racialised enclaves entails.

Chapter Four elaborates upon this train of thought, and examines whether such sites might be argued to exist within Darwin as an urban-bush "multicultural" space. As Una Chaudhuri states in relation to contemporary American theatre, "[i]n the

emerging drama of multiculturalism, it seems to me, are the outlines of a new *heterotopic* account of the relationship between persons and places” (15; original emphasis). As foreshadowed in the Introduction, it may well be the case that the North operates on various levels, serving various cultural functions for a divergent range of interest groups with the nation as a whole. Geographical (ergo geopolitical and cultural) proximity to the North may well be the crucial discriminatory factor distinguishing this range of symbolic investments. This chapter will now remain with the notion of multiple meanings/readings of space, before going on to trace a brief aetiology of the imagining and invention of Australian spaces within contemporary cultural studies praxis.

Shields (drawing again on the work of Lefebvre and Foucault) reminds us that notions of borders, and divisions of space at a cartographic level are a traditionally Western practice and – particularly in an age of mass-migration and globalisation – do little by way of uniting divided cultures in a pure, ethnographic sense. “At the level of nation-states, a coherent and hegemonic vision of ‘the nation’ which binds and implicates people with territory and the history of specific regions and locations is a purely social construction” (62). Within this analysis of physical and geographical place, comes Shields’s formulation about the operation of space-myths, which complicate matters further by creating a “mythology or formation of positions which polarises and dichotomises different places and spaces” (62). A veritable latticework of divisions and subdivisions of “real” and “symbolic” spaces emerges in which “[p]lace- and space-myths are united into a system by their relative differences from one another even while they achieve their unique identities by being ‘set-off’ against one another” (62). “Place” myths and “space” myths are thus entirely different phenomena and need to be distinguished as such.

The chief difference between place- and space-myths in this regard may be that the former are primarily material in nature, while the latter operate at a more abstract or symbolic level. Specific place-myths about Darwin, for instance, might be that it is imagined (by Southerners) to be larger or smaller than it actually is, or that crocodiles and buffalo regularly roam its streets. Space-myths about Darwin may be that it is imagined or constructed as masculinised space; or, alternately, as either pejorative “redneck” or idealised multicultural space, depending on the perspective or agenda of the observer.

Tompkins argues a similar case for multiplicity in analysing (specifically, though not solely) Australian spaces, drawing primarily on the work of Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, and Paul Carter’s theory of “methexis” to formulate a theory of “unsettlement” in specific relation to Australian theatre praxis. Tompkins points out that Australian spatial practices are inherently fraught with tension and contradiction based on the fundamental paradox of contested Aboriginal and European claims to land, and all it signifies. In Tompkins’s analysis Australian spaces are “unsettled” because they are contested by competing indigenous and non-indigenous interests, in terms of land rights and ownership. Australian spaces are also fraught in this equation by their “paradoxical depiction” of being vast, empty tracts on the one hand, yet too full to accommodate migrants and asylum seekers on the other (*Unsettling* 6).

Tompkins touches on both the Gelder/Jacob uncanny here and Rutherford’s formulation of the Lacanian “fantasy” of emptiness in Australian land practices. She also touches on a range of key cultural debates that have taken place since European “settlement” which this thesis will demonstrate have been – and continue to be – played out intra-nationally in specific relation to the Australian North. As Julianne Schultz points out in the Introduction to this thesis (4), the North becomes the canvas

upon which these contradictory national anxieties about invasion, infiltration and emptiness are writ large. Whilst Schultze (and I) focus primarily on the North, Tompkins continues her national analysis by concluding that these moments of debate about conflicting spatial practice

converge in the historical context of settlement, but settlement – which tends to overlook the killing, “taming,” or ignoring of indigenous peoples and the redistribution of their lands among European settlers – gives way to moments of what I call “unsettlement” in Australian theatre. (*Unsettling* 6)

This specific theatrical application of Tompkins’s concept of unsettlement is premised upon the argument that the theatre in fact becomes a site where the national repressed becomes “remembered” and re-enacted. There are a range of other such sites – monuments and town squares, for instance – where this “unsettlement” takes place. Where Tompkins’s focus is on Australian theatre’s (and playwrights’) active social agenda to remember and unsettle traditional history narratives in this country, the basis of this study’s focus is on theatre’s ability to articulate a discrete theorisation of the Australian North that sits alongside other such national narratives.

Similarly, in applying Gelder and Jacob’s articulation of the uncanny, this thesis is concerned with an exploration of a range of representations of Northern spaces and spatial practices as reflected in theatre praxis over a one hundred year period. Its purpose is to uncover a multivalent and potentially fraught and fractured kaleidoscopic vision of the North as it is imagined and invented by the South, and from a range of diverse voices from within. Race may well be one of the key factors that determines this complex range of perspectives, but it is not the only factor determining cultural difference. Rather, this thesis seeks to broaden the terms of the uncanny to encompass more than the notion of competing indigenous and non-indigenous claims to Australian spaces, which seems also to be Tompkins’s point

when she refers to the potential for building upon the “unsettling” range of competing spatial practices in this country.

Inventing Australian Spaces

Some of the ways in which Australian spaces have been historically invented in the popular imaginary are outlined within contemporary spatial theoretical praxis within the field of Australian Cultural Studies. As Paul Longley Arthur summarises, “[t]he Australian land mass was an alluring enigma in the European imagination centuries before its ‘discovery’ and colonisation” (37). According to Arthur, speculation about a Great Southern Land had been rife since Classical times, so that “when British settlers finally arrived in 1788, they brought with them a vast store of prior expectations and images, based both on actual reports of explorers and on historical myths, which persuasively moulded their way of seeing the unfamiliar land and its people” (37). To invoke the logic of Lefebvre, Soja, Foucault *et al.*, Australian space – social, symbolic and actual – had been produced before it had been encountered. In his landmark text, Richard White argues Australia had been (and continues to be) invented before its advent. “Discovery” is a loaded and near-terminally fraught term. Not only is it a misnomer in the obvious sense – that Australia had been discovered and occupied for millennia prior to its “official” European discovery²² – but even within European imperialist discourse, White argues that there was “no moment when, for the first time, Australia was seen ‘as it really was’” because “national identity is an invention” (viii). This is the postmodern historiographical argument made about constructions of nationhood that has been employed by Carter, and by spatial theorists working in the field of Cultural Studies after him. The question

²² This concept is itself internally fraught. Which European culture “discovered” Australia, anyway? The French, the Dutch, the Spanish, the Portuguese, or the English? And was Australia not “the South” to the Macassans who traded along the North coast for 400 years prior to Australian Federation?

where all of these theorists begin, according to White, is: “When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve” (viii). This thesis is preoccupied with such foundational questions of constructed national identities.

John O’Carroll goes some way to tracing an aetiology of the creation of the Australian nation state before its “official” inception, and uncovers a number of key defining tropes embedded in the European psyche and projected onto the Australian (physical and symbolic) land mass as a result. O’Carroll’s study is worthy of closer attention here in order to better understand the way specific space-myths about Australia might have originated; and how these, in turn, have mutated and developed since European occupation, and acted as a springboard for imagining/inventing/producing an Australian North as a discrete phenomenon within the broader cultural imaginary.

Invoking spatial theory as a tool for re-reading Australian history and to better understand ways in which this culture/country represents itself to itself, O’Carroll states there is “value in exploring the tissues of amnesia that permeate *colonised* space” (13; original emphasis). For every act of representational remembering, there is another act of elision. O’Carroll identifies a number of tropes and “problematic cultural imaginings” used to invent Australia as colonised space – “as ‘arse-ended,’ as land upside-down, as bad experience, as paradisaal tourist space, as site of an identity crisis” (13) – but argues that, rather than see this identity construction process as originating with Britain (as, presumably, anglophile historians have sought to do), we need to look much further back into the “European history of imagining” (13).

For O’Carroll, British along with other seventeenth and eighteenth century expansionist European imperialist forces, received aspects of their “rhapsodic” fantasies about the “elusive *terra australis incognita*” (17) from Greek and Roman antiquity. Australia was, effectively, imagined into being before it was encountered as spatial reality and configured as utopian space in the first instance as a result.²³ The concept of Utopia (of island utopias specifically) is obviously traced back to Thomas More. O’Carroll reminds us that More, in turn, was inspired by Plato – by ancient Greek philosophy and politics, which he utilised to “establish a geography of encirclement” (21). This geography, O’Carroll continues, “is profoundly binary in character and it makes the island both the ground of reality on the one hand, and its speculative paradise on the other” (21). Such binaried constructions of space are common, according to O’Carroll, in Greek geography. Indeed, even the idea of there being a great southern continent implies a counter-balancing and hitherto undiscovered presence to offset the “known” world of the northern hemisphere (and Europe, specifically). The known/unknown world dichotomy, too, was, according to O’Carroll, “a feature of all ancient Greek culture” (23). When later Europeans added an *incognita*, then, to the Greek and Roman concept of *terra australis*, they began a search for a continent to which they were already attributing a “host of signifiers: oddity, difference, distance, paradise” (23) configured in binaried terms, and they were thus imagining into being and transferring to the actual colony once it was founded “a two thousand year history” (23).

Terra Australis Incognita had been dichotomously imagined, then, as simultaneously utopian space, and as strange/odd/dangerous space, so that when it was finally “discovered” by Europeans it was on the one hand a crushing

²³ Recall Foucault’s argument here that one of the founding tenets of utopian space is that it is unreal space. The unreality of an actual Australian continent facilitated fantastic projections of it.

disappointment (barren, hot, infertile, inhospitable); but filled with strange plants and animals that confirmed its oddness and “topsy-turviness,” on the other. Add to this the inconvenient presence of occupying human cultures, and the colonising equation is thrown into further chaos. The principle of *terra nullius*, as various commentators have pointed out, and as elaborated upon further in this thesis, can be viewed as the greatest founding projection of European fantasy of all: the (space-) myth of emptiness, which, in turn gives rise to the (space-) myth of whiteness.

For Rutherford, this is also the foundational moment of her conceptual analysis of Australian spaces. The Lacanian “gap” that forms the basis of the Great Australian “emptiness” has its origins, according to Rutherford, in this first colonial encounter. It is

[a] gap that speaks a missed symbolic interface with a continent already spoken, imagined and peopled – but requiring a literal and imagined emptying for the colonial fantasy to unfold. In colonial writing we witness this anxiety as it generates multiple forms of closure and exclusion to combat any trait that might refer to a threatening void. The genesis of white Australian culture involves a collective endeavour, through fantasy, idealisation, and aggression to self and Other, to keep this void at bay. (32)

Allaine Cherwonka concurs, and points out that whilst a symbolically loaded troping of geography is not unique to Australia, “the Australian context provides an especially rich field for understanding how political orders and culture are spatialised” (6). For Cherwonka, as for Rutherford, this colonial relation to geography links crucially to race and national identity. Cherwonka concludes:

Settler Australians expended a great deal of effort imagining their nation as coterminous with Great Britain; they did so through legislation such as the White Australia Policy (1901-1973) and through more informal cultural practices like eating roast turkey and Christmas pudding in an enactment of a “proper” British Christmas... Locating Australia in Britain and later in “the West” was a means of circumventing the physical proximity to Asia, long viewed as a threat to Australians’ status as white and civilised. (6)

This thesis concurs with Cherwonka's argument, but only up to a certain point where a crucial distinction regarding the North needs to be made. I agree wholeheartedly that settler Australians attempted to recreate British notions of home and to transplant these cultural practices upon the Australian landscape upon arrival. And whilst I also agree that asserting a sense of Australia as the Europe of the South helped stave off a psychological assimilation into Asia, it is this thesis's own contention that the North in particular becomes the crucible for the fomenting of these national spatial anxieties. Its proximity to Asia, and its relatively heavy Aboriginal populations and small European populations – up to and including the present day – mean that these attempts to imagine Britain/Europe and deny Asia and Black Australia have never been as comprehensive or as successful in the North as they might be in large metropolitan areas of the South-East. Moreover, the North becomes the site of the national repressed in relation to this cultural and spatial denial: it becomes the locus and projection of national anxieties surrounding race, place, invasion, occupation and inundation. I elaborate on further aspects of this racialised approach to cultural history in other parts of this thesis – with particular reference to constructions of Aboriginal Australia and the late nineteenth century anti-immigration debate as it influences the White Australia Policy. This latter area of investigation holds particular currency for formulations of the North as it emerges as a discrete space within the Australian imaginary in the early stages of the twentieth century. What has been established are major popular representations and inventions of Australian cultural and historical narratives which will be identified as operating in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century theatrical tropes, stock characters and broad cultural myths about Australia as the Great Southern Land in relation to Britain as the imperial Centre.

During this period, melodrama was the most popular and ubiquitous theatrical form (in both Britain and Australia) and acted as a popular and influential conduit for colonialist discourse. Whilst essentially British in origin, as Richard Fotheringham explains, “[w]hen professional theatre established itself in Australia between 1830 and 1850 melodrama had already become the major form of British drama” and by 1860 touring plays starring the famous English actor Charles Kean “were proving more popular with Australian audiences than the lavish Shakespearean productions for which the actor was famous” (“Melodrama” 360). The British template for melodrama, according to Fotheringham, developed in opposition to the “legitimate” drama in the early nineteenth-century, when only a select few theatres were issued with licenses to produce spoken-word performance. Melodrama used music and song to circumvent the law, and employed other subversive strategies such as “mime, pantomime, musical interludes, dance, visual spectacles, and trained animal acts” to embellish stories which in turn also followed well-known and well-worn narrative templates (“Melodrama” 360). As Fotheringham explains:

Melodrama borrowed heavily from the Gothic novel, with its haunted castles, graveyards, and macabre stories, and quickly became ideally suited to examining the psychology of the individual and of a society under stress. Wish-fulfilment, nightmares, tricks of memory, telepathy, guilt and revenge, chivalry, infatuation, private thoughts and public postures, and the effects of the environment on the individual, were all popular subjects for dramatic treatment. (“Melodrama” 360)

This template was adapted for (and subverted by) the Australian landscape and culture over time, as shall be discussed in more detail shortly. Suffice it to say for the present, though, that this chapter turns now to an analysis of how theatre discourse in the form of Federation era melodrama contributed to the establishment and perpetuation of particular space-myths about Australia. This leads to consideration of the

invention/production of an emergent and discrete Australian North within theatre praxis specifically, and the popular Australian imaginary at large.

Inventing Empire on the Colonial Stage

In their summary text, *Acts of Supremacy*, Bratton, Cave, Gregory, Holder and Pickering make a powerful case for the influence of theatre generally, and of melodrama particularly, in nineteenth-century British cultural and political life. With nationalism and patriotic interest in Empire at a high during this period, theatre combined effectively with other modes of public debate to contribute to a “web of meaning” in which “Empire was naturalised” in broad popular cultural terms; and where part of theatre’s rhetoric at this time was to actively represent “the Englishman [as] the natural leader of the world” (Bratton 3). Nineteenth-century audiences attended melodramas for their topicality, so that a play’s title and subject matter might bestow authenticity and quasi-documentary status to its content for a crowd hungry for information on affairs of state. Theatres attracted interest in this way, Bratton claims, “perhaps explicitly claiming to deal with authentic information, but the tale told was endowed with meaning by formal principles not determined by the events it supposedly reflected or reported” (4). There was, in other words, an imperialist agenda to theatre in the Victorian era – though not necessarily always an uncomplicated or uncritical one, Bratton claims, as it did “also reveal stress points and problems of imperialist discourse” (3).²⁴ As a general rule, though, popular theatre of the time did naturally reflect its culture’s preoccupations, and it contributed centrally to the creation of a number of tropes and stock characters whose function it was to

²⁴ And indeed, within an Australian context during the same broad period, Veronica Kelly has argued a persuasive case for melodrama’s redemptive and counter-discursive quality on the domestic front, calling for a reassessment of Australian colonial popular theatre’s ability to act as a more complex site of potential resistance to certain manifestations of Englishness and imperialism (“Hybridity” 40-54).

communicate and, arguably, to perpetuate those ideological concerns. Bratton provides extensive analysis of the nature of these tropes and stock characters, as well as providing reasons for their emergence over time, and the nature of their influence and psychological functions for British-based Victorian audiences, initially, and then through cultural filtration, for audiences in Australia and throughout the British Empire. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that local knowledges and conditions could sharply inflect the ways in which this information about “Empire” was received in Australia, and I elaborate upon that point shortly. By way of summarising this exhaustive investigation into the way Victorian theatre constructed and perpetuated Imperialist tropes and doctrine, it is worth quoting Bratton at length:

A very common transaction in the Victorian theatre was the interpellation of every Briton, however humble, not as a member of his class but as an empire-builder, and a natural superior of the other races and nations of the world. There were less overt hegemonic practices involved, especially in the construction of “them” not simply as the Other, all that is opposed and hostile to us, but as a projection of those things in ourselves that we do not wish to countenance or acknowledge. On to the transgressive and hostile imperial subject on stage the audience could project all sorts of anti-social characteristics, and these could well be the same evils which were condemned as characterising the working class, and which also present problems of control in the individual psyche. (5)²⁵

This not only established “local” stereotyping around notions of, say, the English (middle class) hero as opposed to the Irish and Scottish (working class) ingrate or infidel; it also established notions of Mother England as Home and the colonies, in classic Orientalist terms, as sites of exoticism, alien-ness and danger. It created stock characters in terms of the exoticised/demonised (frequently Black) Other, establishing “images of savagery and backwardness [that made] civilised intervention a Christian

²⁵ It is Australia’s early working class population and its status as a penal settlement that ascribes to it what Kelly describes as qualities of “imperial abjection” (“Hybridity”, 40) in much the same way as Bratton describes Victorian theatre’s working class audience. Kelly argues that in an Australian context, this abjection “was both an ever-present phantasm and a lived social reality” (40), which gave local popular theatre its transgressive and more complicated counter-colonial potential.

duty” (Bratton, 6). Imperialism and heroism became inextricably linked on the Victorian stage, and colonial settings became increasingly popular, not only for their topicality, or as reflections of an upsurge in interest in politics amongst late nineteenth-century audiences, but as justifications for particular modes of British behaviour in the colonies. As Heidi J. Holder argues, “writers of nineteenth century spectacular melodrama made frequent use of colonial settings” to create “the necessary sense of a hostile, unjust world [...] in a land largely unknown, except by the measure of its hostility toward the British” (129). Upholding of British legal (and moral) values became an increasingly popular trope in these colonial melodramas, further compounding the binaried nature of melodramatic tropes. Holder references Sander Gilman to argue that:

[t]he strong social, racial and geographical oppositions present in colonial melodrama seem to provide a “realistic” basis for a comprehensive view of the world as divided into “us” and “them” or – to use Sander Gilman’s terms – “self” and “Other”[...] Melodrama, a genre based on the embodiment of binary oppositions, draws its vitality largely from what Gilman describes as “the illusory image of the world” that exists in stereotyping. (130)

This melodramatic affection for cultural (and frequently, racial) stereotyping inevitably reflected English – rather than indigenous – perspectives. “Foreign places and peoples were ‘realised,’” Holder argues, “on an English stage, by English people, for English consumption” (135). When it came to specific depictions of the colonial Other, Richard Fotheringham observes that

as the British empire expanded and consolidated its vision of an international order dominated by the fair Anglo-Saxon race, the public stage responded with stories of Imperial adventure in which audiences saw a greasepaint facsimile of the peoples of the world, sometimes lent added verisimilitude by being set with a circus-like frame of real animals. (*Australian Plays* lii)

The colonies and their inhabitants – whether “native” or “English” – were viewed through a British cultural lens. Veronica Kelly and Fotheringham both remind us that this translation of “Englishness” as an ideology did not necessarily sustain itself when

transferred to Australian (or other colonial) playing spaces. The colonial world depicted on the English stage was necessarily read through a local filter when such productions toured or enjoyed independent domestic seasons. In qualifying Holder's reading of English melodrama's translation of Empire, for instance, Kelly states, "British' identity, like Orientalism, is not a uniformly inflected discourse throughout even the white regions of empire, since colonial audiences will appropriate it for very different purposes than metropolitan ones" (Review 211). Different audiences in different continents are going to read the performance texts idiosyncratically "since in these differently empowered areas of Empire it cannot be the 'same' production" (Review 211).

Kelly points out that Australia's status as a settler colony populated mostly initially by imperial England's working classes meant that "Australian" subject-identity is a more unstable category, and so

while sharing certain imperialist assumptions about race and empire, it seems feasible that metropolitan and Australian colonial readings of, and investments in, such pervasive discourses as Orientalism are in fact diverse in the cultural uses made of them in these differently empowered areas of empire. ("Orientalism" 33)

While Kelly agrees there is ample textual evidence to suggest that Australian colonial audiences did "simply suture their readings of Orientalist spectacles with imperialist ideologies of racist supremacy over 'our' empire and its non-white inhabitants," for instance, white Australians' complicated settler status necessarily offered "an ambiguously expansive range of implicit options in their readings of Orientalist representations" ("Orientalism" 33).

Whilst potentially ambiguous in application, stock characters and tropes still nonetheless made the antipodean transfer with relative ease, and were adapted to suit local cultural references and demographics. In her introduction to the Currency

edition of George Darrell's *The Sunny South*, Margaret Williams argues "Australian melodramas are very much to the traditional pattern," though they "readily developed their own gallery of colonial characters and their own distinctive flavour" (xiii). All of the "recognisable figures of early Australian lore" (xiii) are represented in these melodramas, and it is worth quoting Williams at length here by way of elucidation. The popular Australian melodramatic stage was, according to Williams, peopled by

bull-voiced bushrangers, often with more bravado than real villainy, noble bushmen, good-humoured diggers, impossibly naïve new chums, spirited squatters' daughters beside whose strenuous activity English heroines paled into insipidity, faithful Aborigines full of humour and resourcefulness, Chinese market gardeners, hoboos and larrikins, and the inevitable 'wukkin' man'. (xiii)

This assortment of characters is still regarded and constructed as harmless comic relief – they are considered no threat to the aims of Empire – up until the 1880s. But a broad cultural shift in Australia taking place in the lead-up to Federation – exacerbated by economic depression and the ensuing heated (anti-)immigration debate – heralded a concomitant shift in the representation of these characters on stage around the turn of the century. Naturally, too, when Australian playwrights are responsible for the construction of the characters represented on local stages, this representational lens shifts again.

Fotheringham provides an exhaustive account of Australian plays for the colonial stage between 1834 and 1899 in his anthology of the same name, and his text provides a fuller detailed understanding of the works themselves and the ways in which British plays were translated for local audiences than it is possible to accommodate in this thesis. Suffice it to say by way of summary, that original Australian works did certainly exist throughout this period, but were rarer than the English or American import. Sometimes "the Australian-written play could be just a matter of changing city and suburb: 'London' to 'Sydney' or 'Camberwell' to 'St

Kilda,” but “[t]he original play which tried to deal in a more sustained or detailed way with Australian society was seldom more than a novelty item” (*Australian Plays* xxxvi). Fotheringham makes the point – like Kelly – that whether adapted from the English metropolitan stage or written originally for local audiences, theatre’s markers and signifiers were and are unstable and subject to variation and interpretation according to the audience before whom the work is being performed. He concludes that

[t]he public meaning of theatre was unstable, contradictory and based on myths which affected a far wider community than regular theatregoers. The cultural significance of a popular play was produced as much by the legends about it as by the experiences of particular theatregoers at particular performances; indeed perhaps even more by gossip and in spite of any one performance. But, to colonial society, theatre *mattered*. (*Australian plays* lxxix; original emphasis)

Fotheringham’s emphasis here reminds us of the popularity of theatre in the colonial and early federation era²⁶ and the subsequent influence it had in shaping as well as reflecting popular “mass enthusiasms and anxieties” (*Australian Plays* lxxviii) through its content. The lead up to Federation in 1901 heralded a period of increased formal national debate and introspection, and this cultural shift in thinking and representation is the context within which the two Australian melodramas in this chapter will be read.

I turn now to the Federation period of Australian history and explore the emergence and parliamentary articulation of one of the foundational Australian cultural fantasies and space-myths: the notion of a White Australia. This brief cultural historical analysis will be amplified by an examination of a melodramatic theatrical representation of this debate as it sites its imaginary in the geographical North in *White Australia* (Bedford) and, briefly, in *Girl of the Never Never* (Smith).

²⁶ Melodrama was the dominant entertainment form right through until live theatre’s relative demise at the hands of “the talkies,” when sound on film was introduced in 1929-30.

This frames a more detailed analysis of a political, demographic and anthropological emergence of an Australian North in Chapter Two, which focuses on colonialist theatre of the first half of the twentieth century.

Inventing National Space-Myths and the Emergence of a Discrete Australian North in the Federation Era

“The first major legislative issue considered by the parliament of the newly-created commonwealth of Australia,” Andrew Markus states in his comparative study of nineteenth-century race relations in Australia and the United States, “was the Immigration Restriction Bill of 1901” (xi). The Bill prohibited certain “classes of persons” – including “the insane, the diseased, criminals, prostitutes, contracted labourers” (xi) and anyone who failed a fifty word European language dictation test – from settling in the new nation. The list of unwanted types reveals popular prejudices and fears of cultural as well as medical pollution and contamination.

The clause catering for European language proficiency was especially noteworthy, Markus contends, because it was “aimed directly at non-Europeans” and was “the culmination of nearly fifty years of agitation directed solely against the Chinese until the 1890s” (xi). It reflected a fear not only of cultural infiltration in the broad sense – of Australia being an isolated British outpost surrounded entirely by Asian and other “coloured” races – but of a specific apprehension of Chinese labourers who, it was assumed, would compete especially effectively with (White) Australian workers for manual jobs at a time when these were becoming increasingly scarce. Interestingly, the language test was imposed by the British Colonial Office. Australian politicians wanted a more comprehensive colour bar, but it was watered down in deference to Anglo-Japanese alliances.

Markus argues that the Japanese were also included in this broad anti-Asian sentiment, but that they incurred different racial stereotyping, being admired on one level by the British for their own “high” imperial culture. “They were regarded as dangerous,” Markus argues, “because of their good qualities: their inexhaustible energy, their power of applying themselves to new tasks and their endurance” (xii). The Chinese posed a greater, more immediate threat, it was considered, by the framers of the 1901 legislation (Attorney-General Alfred Deakin chief amongst them), because of their sheer volume in numbers on Australian soil. And nowhere was this logistical and demographic anxiety borne out more acutely than in the Australian North.

After several earlier failed attempts, the first permanent settlement in the Northern Territory was established at Port Darwin in 1869. Gold was discovered shortly after in Pine Creek, approximately 250km south of Darwin, and, as Markus points out, by “December 1880 the non-indigenous population [of the NT] stood at 5000, of whom 4300 were Chinese” (137). By the end of that decade, as local attitudes to the Chinese shifted in line with flailing economic fortunes, “the Chinese population had reached 7000” (137), and began to receive national attention. Restrictive legislation was already in place in South-eastern colonies, aimed at stemming the flow of Asian (specifically Chinese) population growth, and in 1888 “it was widely believed that Chinese were rushing to enter Australia through the open port of Darwin, and the Government Resident at Darwin fanned the excitement by exaggerating the number of Chinese arrivals” (Markus 137). Darwin specifically, and the North generally, was fast coming to be viewed in spatial terms as an “open doorway” – a site of Asian infiltration – and as a repository for national fears about

cultural contamination. “Whatever the motives of the Chinese,” Markus states, “the NT [sic] served as a focus for fears in the south” (138).

The South Australian government, who administered the Northern Territory until it was handed over to the Commonwealth in 1911, promptly introduced a Poll Tax charging all Chinese £20 upon arrival in the Territory, and any Chinese “venturing more than 200 miles south of Darwin were to pay a similar tax. It was not made clear how the *imaginary border* was to be policed” (Markus 138; emphasis added). I emphasise Markus’s notion here of an “imaginary border” aimed at containing Chinese population growth to highlight what can be viewed as a putative North-South geographic divide originating in racialised discourse in the late nineteenth-century – a shortly-lived precursor, perhaps, to the notorious Brisbane Line of the Second World War; or even a prototypical attempt to articulate a discrete racial, if not cartographic, Northern space.

Henry Reynolds concurs, and provides an elegant photographic companion to historical investigations of a multiracial Federation era North in his book, *North of Capricorn*. Whilst most of the landmark text is devoted to specific ethnographic record-recovery in specific towns, islands and communities along the entire North Australian coast, Reynolds makes an excellent key summary point when he argues

White Australia was consistently hostile to the multi-racial north. Almost every aspect of life in the tropics brought forth condemnation, eliciting abuse and derision. Queensland was dubbed “Queensmongreland,” the “mongrel province,” or simply “mongrelia.” The whole north was referred to as “Piebald Australia.” Popular journals like the *Sydney Bulletin* and *The Worker* regularly carried paragraphs and stories about the horrors of racial mixture and dystopian travelogues about the dangers threatening the nation. (*North* 145)

Clearly a particular Northern space-myth along racial lines is being articulated here, and, if Markus and Reynolds are correct, it was a presumably popularly held view in the South that the “piebald North” was the porous border through which Asia might

be absorbed through a kind of circumstantial osmosis unless something drastic was done to staunch the flow.

This was the broad cultural environment into which the “White Australia Policy” of 1901 was introduced, and it must be noted that although the legislation enjoyed near-unilateral political support when introduced to parliament by the majority Labor government, there was some token opposition from the Free Trade Party. Sir William McMahon, leader of the Opposition, argued that, in fact, non-European labour was “necessary for the development of the northern part of the continent,” and that whilst it was desirable to “prevent any ‘large’ influx,” total prohibition was not desirable (Markus xvii).

A major trope of “Emptiness” can thus be inferred and attributed to the fledgling North here: lack of a non-Aboriginal population equated to a lack of population *per se*. Southern newspapers, as Reynolds and Markus both point out, were broadly supportive of the Immigration Act, but there was a similar split on the issue of labour in the North, and population growth was considered necessary to protect the vulnerable North from an imagined Asian invasion. Melanesian labour was already being exploited in Queensland in the 1890s, and considered necessary by the Melbourne *Argus* in articles it ran during the 1901 election campaign (Markus 231). According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Melanesian labour should only be phased out gradually, and the *South Australian Register*

uncompromisingly campaigned for the maintenance and extension of the plantation economy of the North by the employment of non-European labour, arguing that nature had absolutely barred Europeans from manual labour in the tropics. Australia’s “blackman’s zone” needed to be developed “by the employment of the only labour for which it is fitted.” (231)

This anthropological argument about the aptitude, or lack thereof, for survival of the “White Man” in the tropics is specifically elaborated in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Suffice it to say for the purpose of the present analysis that there is ample evidence in the political and cultural debate surrounding the race issue, as it culminated in the Immigration Restriction Bill of 1901, to suggest that a discreet Australian North is emerging in the broad popular Australian imaginary around this time; and that two of its key defining tropes centre around issues of race and population.

The North thus fits neatly into what David Walker describes in *Anxious Nation* as an “invasion narrative” emerging in Australian and British (imperialist) literature in the late nineteenth century. This period, according to Walker, saw a shift in the way Asia was regarded by Australia and Britain – though in markedly contrasting ways. Not only were Chinese numbers in Australia increasing and precipitating the shift in cultural apprehension of them outlined earlier in this discussion, but the British were coming to formalise their imperialist views of Asia (and Asians) in cultural policy, literature and language. Whilst Britain still maintained an expedient alliance with Japan against Russia in the Naval Treaty (a “friendship” which Australia regarded as a betrayal of empire – and of “us” specifically²⁷) a previously “passive” Asia was being painted increasingly as an “aggressive” Asia – an attempt, in the jargon of Charles Pearson’s popular and influential political tract of 1893, *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, to depict the “lower” (non-White) races as being hell-bent on superseding the “higher” races. As Walker explains,

Australia appeared to be almost surrounded by Pearson’s “lower” races among whom the struggle for survival was said to have reached its most frighteningly intense form. The conviction that there was an aggressive Asia, bent on conquest, was a challenge too strong for visions of a golden, aestheticised Orient to withstand. (2)

²⁷ This “betrayal” becomes the topic of Bedford’s *White Australia*. See footnote 28 for more details.

In the same decade as Pearson published this dire caution, the hitherto admired Japanese empire became increasingly regarded as an expansionist military and economic force – hence the coining of the phrase “yellow peril,” attributed by Walker to Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, “who spoke of it with the Chinese in mind” (3).

Walker continues to argue that:

[s]hortand phrases like the “awakening East” and the “yellow peril” were often used to transmit a warning to the West that in Asia a new era was in the making. Race war and the unrelenting battle for territory were the keys to this disturbing world of contending masculinities. Many authors turned their hand to accounts of the coming world order. (3)

Hence, a new global genre emerges: Walker’s “invasion narrative”, and it is worth quoting Walker at length here as he outlines and identifies the unfolding genre’s historical aetiology. Some of its signature tropes apply to this thesis’s reading of Bedford:

These were anxious male narratives foretelling the end of Europe’s dominance and the coming destruction of the “white world.” In these stories, Australia appeared as a vulnerable continent subject either to direct attack from the East, or to a more gradual loss of its British heritage at the hands of the Asian intruders, a betrayal commonly blamed on Australia’s elites, who were accused either of colluding with the Asian enemy or of being duped by him [...] Australia came to nationhood at a time when the growing power of the East was arousing increasing concern. This in turn came to influence how Australians saw themselves as an outpost of Europe facing Asia. (3-4)

The focus of Walker’s analysis of this global literary and theatrical genre is obviously Australian, and the international application of this essentially European anxiety needs to be borne in mind here. In an Australian context, however, the front line of defence for this European outpost facing Asia was naturally, inevitably, and by sheer virtue of its spatial/geographic positioning, Darwin and the North.

I offer this brief cultural analysis of the (racialised) context into which Australia’s transition to nationhood took place in order to position my reading of Bedford’s 1909 play, *White Australia*, as a paradigmatic example of the way the

North was being represented in literature and popular theatre: as a repository for, and extension of, national fears, anxieties, prejudices and fantasies (some more valid than others) at the time in which the play was written and performed. I do so not in an attempt to merely denounce the text's ideological shortcomings from the relative luxury of (chronological) distance. Indeed, as Helen Gilbert states in her reading of the play, "there is much in the text that invites, indeed compels, deconstructive analysis" ("Millennial" 16), but, like Gilbert, who is in turn "[f]ollowing Veronica Kelly's lead in reassessing the potential of colonial popular theatre to deliver powerfully subversive performances of empire" ("Millennial" 16), I am also happy here to trust the intelligence of the reader to take the text's overt racism as a given, rather than merely list the instances of racist caricaturing – and there is something on nearly every page to offend in this way. This thesis instead attempts to read between the lines, as it were, in an attempt to understand what these racial depictions say about an emerging Australian North, and to investigate what this construction in turn says about the South, and its relationship with the North – and indeed with Asia – during the Federation period of Australia's cultural history.

Introducing the North on the Australian Mainstage: Connecting Spatial Theory and Theatre

The "invasion play" reached its zenith in appeal both locally and internationally during the post-Federation era of Australian cultural politics. As Richard Fotheringham summarises, "British-Australians shared the anxieties of Empire. Both feared the alien abroad and in their midst, hence the curious genres of foreign invasion and white slave-trade plays which circulated in both countries from about 1909 to the end of World War I" ("Theatre" 146). Fotheringham identifies Randolph

Bedford primarily, but Jo Smith also as playwrights emerging from this period who form part of an increasingly distinctive Australian theatrical voice. Although Bedford is, for Fotheringham, “one of the most chauvinist of playwrights” (“Theatre” 146) who “marred” his plays “with his avowed white-Australian racism and hasty, careless writing,” (“Randolph” 84) he was nonetheless engaging with internationalist politics in his vehement anti-British nationalism. Smith was amongst the first twentieth-century playwrights to “[break] away from English formulas in his best-known play, *The Bushwoman* (1909)[...] *Girl of the Never-Never* (1912) went even further outback, to the station of a cattle king in the Northern Territory” (“Jo Smith” 533). Where Fotheringham reads these texts as formative (albeit flawed) examples of a burgeoning distinctively Australian theatre within the turn-of-the-century melodrama tradition, Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo read both texts for their articulation of foundational racial anxieties at the moment of national Federation. Gilbert and Lo’s reading of the texts as expressions of what they term an “anti-cosmopolitics” that underpins Australia’s outward appearance of multi-culturalism will be elaborated upon shortly. I distinguish this thesis’s own readings of the texts from those of Fotheringham, Gilbert and Lo by arguing that, as well as performing the national foundational functions the above authors claim, Bedford and Smith’s texts are also amongst the first to articulate a distinctive spatial-cultural Australian North. Whilst the anxieties they express about race, space and invasion/contamination are national, the playing field is distinctively local in both plays’ depiction of a North Australian gateway through which this invasion might occur. Together, the plays may well represent the moment a distinctive Australian North was depicted, troped and articulated to a mainstage (Southern, White) Australian audience. They represent the

theatrical birth of the North, and are canonical in terms of expressing what this North's properties and cultural function(s) may be.

*White Australia*²⁸ is, in many ways, the melodramatic invasion narrative *par excellence*. Set alternately on Arafura Station and Marandana²⁹ near Katherine in the Northern Territory, and in the Joss Houses of Port Darwin's Chinatown in the first decade of the twentieth century, it centres on the Pearse family and their attempts to save Australia from a Japanese attack and occupation of the "White Man's" land. In the *Dramatis Personae*, Bedford divides the play's characters into a list of White Men, Black Men and Yellow Men (with women of each "hue" being conflated within the three categories), establishing the writer's ideological approach to race from the outset.

Australia is feared to be under attack from expansionary and aggressive Japanese military forces, and, whilst Sydney is the ultimate prize, Darwin and the North are viewed as the door through which the enemy might enter. The Overland Telegraph, which connects Australia symbolically with the rest of the world, makes Darwin an even more pivotal axis upon which access to the rest of the country might swing. As Kelly points out, the Overland Telegraph operated increasingly as an indicator of Australian vulnerability, because of its "symbol of technological progress and colonial access to the wider empire lying beyond" ("Alfred" 477). It thus contributed to a perception of the Australian North as being viewed as the first and

²⁸ There are two versions of *White Australia*: one entitled *White Australia – The White Man's Land or "For Australia"*; and the other entitled *White Australia or the Empty North or The White Man's Land*. Opinion is split as to which was the version that was performed in Australia in 1909. The former version is more radical in its attacks upon British neglect of Australia and its purported infatuation with the Japanese Empire. The latter differs in the staging of its denouement – the failed Japanese attack on Sydney – and is more conciliatory in its treatment of the "white traitor," Cedric, who, in the earlier version betrays his country to the Japanese and perishes violently as a result. I am going to use the earlier version of the script, signed by Bedford and annotated as having first been performed on 27 February 1909 at the Protestant Hall, Exhibition St, Melbourne. I shall make comparisons between the two versions as their differences become relevant to this study.

²⁹ There is a Mataranka homestead just south of the real Katherine in the NT.

last line of national defence – a technological as well as geo-physical nexus linking Australia with Home via an increasingly “threatening” Asia. As Kelly argues, “Randolph Bedford’s tropical adventure *White Australia; or The Empty North* gave memorable embodiment to the telegraph line and internal enemy paranoia when performed in Melbourne in 1909 during the global spate of invasion literature” (“Alfred” 477).

The Chinese characters in the play – cooks, market gardeners, traders, cocaine addicts and joss house habitués – are omnipresent in the play’s *mise en scène*, and are constructed as manifestations of the internal enemy paranoia to which Kelly refers. Quong Ping, a Chinatown merchant, and Hop Lee, a market gardener, are painted as stealthy, sinister characters with indiscernible but vaguely usurpatory inclinations, and the “White” characters³⁰ are initially unable to distinguish them from the Japanese characters. Kate Carlton, the play’s Tasmanian *arriviste*, is initially affronted by Hop Lee and his attempt to sell her cabbage and passionfruit. “I told you to go away – you’re not wanted,” she declares in the play’s opening line. “We don’t want any, thank you. Is it a civilized country? To think of coming all the way from Tassy [sic] to find a place with twenty to two white men” (3).

There is an interesting spatial juxtaposition here as Tasmania, the southernmost Australian landmass to the Top End’s North, seems to be associated with an *über* Whiteness³¹ that does not prepare Kate for the multi-chrome racial nature of the North (Tasmania also “eradicated” its Aboriginal population, at least

³⁰ I capitalise the racial colour codes here in relation to my discussion of the play to highlight the ideological deployment of them within Bedford’s text, as he does, to indicate their use as specialised and actively loaded categories.

³¹ Helen Gilbert quotes Richard Dyer to describe “extreme whiteness” as a category deployed in the text: “‘Extreme whiteness coexists with ordinary whiteness [but] it is exceptional, excessive, marked. It is what whiteness aspires to and also[...] fears.’ Thus extreme whiteness leaves a residue through which whiteness becomes visible as a racial marker rather than simply passing as an invisible, disinterested and normative category” (Dyer qtd in Gilbert “Millennial” 16). I use “*über*” in this sense throughout this thesis to refer to a state of heightened or extreme Whiteness, or “Northernness,” or any of a range of other conditions to which the German adjective is applied.

discursively); and, in keeping with a growing sense of a broad Australian cultural space-myth, this whiteness is equated not only with “real” Australianness, but with civilisation. Kate ushers Hop Lee away again as he seems truculently opposed to moving, and he retorts, “Whaffor! Buyembye me countlymen takem all Australia,” (3) and there the play’s central thesis is spelled out on the first page.

Compounding this racial(ised) invasion narrative is the fact that the “Yellow” characters are conflated into one totalising category of sinister apprehension.

Yamamoto is a Japanese spy acting as a servant to Cedric Pearse, the traitorous, anaemic and effeminised Anglophile nephew of Geoffrey Pearse, the station owner. In fact, Cedric is in Yamamoto’s thrall – and debt. The patriotically named Victoria, Geoffrey’s daughter (and the Northern heiress), comes close to guessing as much when she tells Kate that “that Japanese is more than servant; sometimes he looks as if he were Cedric’s master” (6). It is a recurring trope throughout the play for the Japanese to regard themselves as a superior race to the “White” characters. The prospect of an Englishman or Australian being subservient to a “Yellow” man is clearly untenable, and is viewed in the play as the ultimate indication of the treacherous streak in Cedric’s character. Kate responds to Victoria’s observation of the relationship between Cedric and Yamamoto by declaring, “I wish that sneering Englishman would take himself and his yellow man away. I’m tired of yellow faces.” “So am I,” Victoria replies, “but we cannot get white servants here” (6).

Bedford is clearly engaging with the labour shortage issue (discussed earlier), which was inherent in the (anti-)immigration debate of the time, and seems to be informing southern audiences that, as crucial as the North is as a buffer zone to Asian infiltration and invasion, it is necessarily peopled by Chinese and Japanese labourers owing to the White population’s refusal to do their patriotic duty by taking on the

harshness of the tropical environment, and doing the hard work necessary to populate and secure the region. Bedford's mission statement is, in part, a call to populate and establish the North as a substantive White cultural and military centre. He is effectively using his theatre as a political dais upon which to articulate, in almost Brechtian terms, the need for a permanent North Australian state that will act as buffer to the imminent Asian threat.

The second broad space-myth of Emptiness is iterated here in one of the play's sub-titles. Indeed, it is another recurring thesis throughout the play that laziness and spinelessness on southern "White" Australia's part is one of the key reasons they have failed to civilise and cultivate the North. Rutherford's evocation of the Lacanian "gap" is demonstrated patently here, as the mooted "emptiness" threatens to be filled by aggressive Asian hordes. It is, she might argue, a projection of the (Lacanian and Freudian) "Thing" onto Australian spaces – and here, specifically the North – in which a symbolic intruder is constructed as the "unsymbolised remainder" that threatens individual psychological well-adjustment (32). Only here, of course, the Thing isn't *unsymbolised*: it is made manifest in the form of the hostile Asian intruder.

Englishness also comes under especial scrutiny and attack in the text. It is Cedric's affection for England and Empire, and his repudiation of his "native" Australian birth that makes him especially ripe for treason. This English neglect is repeatedly cited in the text as a key reason for Australia's susceptibility to Japanese attack. Jack Macquarie, Victoria's suitor and the play's ostensible hero has built an airship with a special armoury that will single-handedly fend off the Japanese and save Australia from invasion. It becomes the central object around which the play's action hinges as Yamamoto decides that, after knocking out telecommunications by

cutting the Overland Telegraph line, ownership of the airship is his coveted goal. More importantly, though, the airship is seen as a symbol of Australian military autonomy (and of an ingenuity to match that of the Japanese) in the absence of British protection, as the following passage most clearly indicates:

MACQUARIE: If Australia should be threatened tomorrow we are ready.
(*Enter Yamamoto ... intently listening.*)

CEDRIC: War! (*laughs*) Why with England nobody can touch you and without England you'd be taken in a week.

GEOFF: We'd do our best. Anyhow Australians are not children and men don't hide behind their mother's skirts.

MACQUARIE: Do you know how big Australia is? China's ... 700 miles closer to Port Darwin than Melbourne is. But Australia will not be taken I hope till every Australian has first died in her defence.

CEDRIC: Really, my dear uncle, is Australia worth so much heroism?

KATE: It's worth it to us. Go back to Oxford....

GEOFF: My dear, you are too severe. Cedric is alright. He's not one of us all wool Australians; he's an imperialist, that's all.

KATE: Then I hate such imperialists. (9-10)

This is the strident anti-British sentiment that has been excised from the second edition of the script. Cedric is a hated imperialist in this 1909 performed version of the text, and remains one throughout, selling himself and, by extension, Australia to the Japanese. He plunges to his death with Yamamoto from the airship in the dramatic climax of the play's action in this version. In the second version, there is still enough Australian blood left in Cedric for Victoria to be able to appeal to his latent and congenital patriotism. He betrays Yamamoto in the key dramatic scene in that version and dies instead a latter-day martyr to his nation. Either way, the Yellow Peril is defeated in the end and Australian nationhood is saved, no thanks to the British.

Missing from this analysis so far is the role, and representation, of Aboriginal characters in the drama. The two "Black Men" listed in the *Dramatis Personae* are,

in fact, an Aboriginal man and woman: Terribit, a “tracker of Marandana,” and Minimie, “his gin” (1). Terribit and Minimie operate essentially as clown characters in the text. Their Pidgin English and childlike naïveté are a particular source of humour throughout the play. They are established from the outset as intellectually and racially subordinate to the White characters. Kate tells the irredeemable alcoholic Bill he should be ashamed of himself for providing “cursed drink” to Terribit, to which Bill responds, “If it’s cursed drink, it’s best to give it to the inferior races” (4).

There are instances peppered throughout the script where the Aboriginal characters are either referred to in disparaging terms of inferiority such as this, or, more tellingly, refer to themselves in a similar diminished subhuman (that is, sub-White) capacity. Towards the end of the play, for instance, Geoffrey Pearse ushers Minimie on to the airship before him in accordance with gentlemanly “ladies first” protocol, to which Minimie replies, “I no been lady – I been gin” (78). And in an extended comedy routine only included at the start of the Third Act in the second version of the script, Terribit and Minimie dress up as “Misser Pearse” and “White Mary, Missa Wiketoria” (Second version, 37). In an act of inverse minstrelsy, they mimic middle class white table manners and affectations, the teetotalling ways of white women, and the comparative diminished masculinity of white men. Helen Gilbert argues that this scene is indicative of an “important way in which whiteness registers in Bedford’s melodrama as a constructed rather than natural category (“Millennial” 18). Gilbert describes the scene as a “kind of cross-cultural transvestism, overtly staged as a self-reflexive performance” (“Millennial” 18) which, in combination with other representations of Terribit and Minimie, serves to make whiteness (as well as blackness and yellowness) a social construct. Even if such a project is unintended on Bedford’s part, Gilbert suggests that it potentially acts as a

“first step in dismantling [whiteness’s] authority” (“Millennial” 19) as a totalising “natural” category, providing the postmodern reader with a means to read the text in a way that liberates it from the apparent limitations of its genre.

While Bedford may not intentionally be opening up the possibility for a postmodern reassessment of the text in the useful way Gilbert describes, other literal representations of the Aboriginal characters in the play are, if not progressive, at least marginally more affirming. It may not provide the contemporary reader with much assurance that, within the hierarchy of “inferior races” portrayed in the script that Terribit and Minimie are firmly placed alongside the “White” characters as “real” Australians in contradistinction to the “yellow peril” who constitute the enemy within the embedded invasion narrative. But this representation is interesting for its representation of Aboriginal characters as custodians or defenders of White Australian claims to the nation, rather than competitors for the same. It is, effectively, the *terra nullius* principle writ dramatic.

There is thus an awkward invocation of Tompkins’s “unsettlement” here, or of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny, inasmuch as what is “theirs” in *White Australia* automatically becomes “ours” – “we” just need “them” to help us defend it. The unsettlement that is taking place here only occurs through the prism of a twenty-first century reading, in which the era’s doctrine of dispossession of Aboriginal land and culture becomes a glaringly apparent policy of the day. Clearly, audiences in 1909 were not expected to be unsettled by the portrayal of Black-White relations, but instead by the underlying theme of Asian menace on Northern shores.

By play’s end Terribit has helped fend off the Asian marauders, and in an extraordinarily unself-reflexive act of colour blindness, the stage directions then signal that he enters in war paint and spear, but wearing “trousers in addition” (86).

He introduces Minimie to the Mayor, and then stands shaking the spear to a swelling naval chorus, as if embossing the play's conclusion, sealing it with a coat-of-arms image of a native standing side-by-side a symbol of White civic authority.

Again, this final image, and the construction and representation of Aboriginal characters throughout, appears in the first instance to invoke Gelder/Jacobs's uncanny Australia – a dual occupation of Australian spaces in which “what is ‘ours’ is also ‘theirs’, and vice versa” (150). Unlike the postcolonial narrative Gelder and Jacobs call for, however, in which the stable binaries of “difference” and “reconciliation” are meant to be challenged and unsettled, Bedford's Aboriginal co-tenants of Australian space are subsumed into wider White Australian discourse, and placed ceremonially on the mantelpiece after they've effectively won the continent on the “White Man's” behalf. This is, then, more an instance of ironic imperial history in the terms Carter might describe it. For Carter, Gelder and Jacobs argue, “(n)aming Aborigines [...] renders them mute. It produces an embodied articulation of *terra nullius*” (153). The Aboriginal characters in *White Australia* remain silent at the end - the “‘absent others’ of imperial history” (154). Because Bedford situates the Aboriginal characters in the text without the irony necessary to read them within a postmodern template, Gelder and Jacobs might argue that this “colonial designation of a mute Aboriginality” (155) prevents the text from being redeemed, or reclaimed as an enabling postcolonial narrative in this context – unless through conscious unsettlement in performance – and I am inclined to agree.

Where the possibility for a “subversive performance of empire” as Gilbert might describe it, does exist within Bedford's colonialist discourse, is in the multi-chrome – even multicultural – *milieu* that Bedford unwittingly establishes to situate the North. It is this emergent depiction and articulation of a distinctive Australian

North that might most usefully be applied to the spatial analysis that is the theoretical emphasis of this study. Even while the “awakening East” and the “yellow peril” are defeated within the play’s invasion narrative; and even though the Aboriginal characters might be assimilated – dressed partially in trousers and war paint – within imperialist discourse, the irrefutable fact of their presence still prevails. It might not be his intention, but the picture Bedford paints of the Australian North, which, on a strictly demographic basis, is consistent with evident population analyses of Darwin and the Top End at the time of production, is one in which Chinese, Japanese, Aboriginal and Anglo-Saxon characters all co-exist (uncomfortably) alongside one another – in roughly even proportions. Non-white characters in the play exist in culturally-distinct heterotopic sub-spaces within the fragile White Australian outpost. Kate Carlton might be affronted by the North’s multiracial reality compared with the Tasmanian fantasy of blanket Whiteness; she and Victoria might be “tired” of all the “yellow faces” (6) preventing Australia from becoming a civilised nation; and these anxieties and prejudices may well be accurate reflections of the dominant cultural discourses of the time. Indeed, fears of specifically Japanese invasion of the North might even have been proven well-grounded given the events of February 1942, when Darwin was, in fact, destroyed by Japanese military forces. But what is also inalterable historical “fact” is the “reality” of an Australian North that is initially (and continuously) populated by richly divergent cultures – a cultural aetiology of cosmopolitanism co-opted, packaged and promoted within contemporary tourism industry discourse in the North to the present day. Such romantic cosmopolitanism can be argued to be as equally flawed as its imperialist antithesis, and is the subject of further investigation later in this thesis.

Jo Smith's *Girl of the Never Never* is, by comparison, a much less shrilly-patriotic text, but like Bedford's text, also carries a call for a civilised White Australia, indicating the depth of feeling surrounding the topic in early twentieth-century public discourse. Written and performed only three years later (in 1912), it is set in the Gulf Country of the Top End that drove Bill Pearse to drink in *White Australia*, and is populated with an array of racial and other stock Northern characters consistent with Bedford's demographic depiction of the North. Like *White Australia*, however, the melodrama does carry the racial prejudices of its day in a range of constructions of and references to indigenous and Asian characters equally confronting as those in Bedford's text. It also makes direct reference to the "piebald North" phraseology that Henry Reynolds reminds us the South used to imagine and construct the North during this period. The text can be differentiated from Bedford's in its ultimately redemptive call for racial tolerance, and a claim that all-comers are welcome in the Top End so long as they adhere to certain social codes of Christian virtue. As Gilbert and Lo point out, the text "similarly [to *White Australia*] thematises white imperatives to keep the country from becoming racially 'piebald,' but in fact stages a vision of northern Australian society as already multiethnic, and not always regrettably so" (37). Where Gilbert and Lo analyse the text as an only slightly less problematic expression of anti-cosmopolitics (than Bedford's play), I read and reclaim the text alongside Bedford's as a formative theatrical one in which the national racial-spatial anxieties Gilbert and Lo refer to are in fact localised in such a way as to articulate the emergence of a discrete and nascent national sub-space: the Deep North.

By way of brief plot summary, the melodrama centres around Fred Cunningham, Manager of the Roper River cattle run, trying to seek his fortune in the Roper region goldfields in order to win the hand of the boss's daughter, Pearl. He is

challenged on both fronts by the dastardly (white) Felix Pratt, who conscripts Japanese pearl diver Kami Maru's help to sabotage Fred's efforts to lay first claim to the gold discovery he has made inland.

Of especial interest to this thesis is how the era's debate surrounding the White Australia Policy and the purported threat of Asian labour manifests in the play in the specific spatial milieu of the North as being metonymic for, or representative of the nation as a whole. Ironically, it is the American *arriviste* Eb T Grant – the arch-capitalist beef baron – whose alterity provides him the necessary overview to “see” the agricultural development potential of the North and to articulate the unsentimental work that needs to be done in order to conquer and tame the land and its resources. His argument is that the Aboriginal custodians of the land have failed to exploit its agricultural potential and therefore forfeit the right to ownership. “I don't believe any race of people have a right to hang on to a country if they're not prepared to put it to good use,” he declares (53). His solution is to “[d]evelop it. Grow the stuff that the Almighty intended should be grown on it. Why this land here's as rich as Rockefeller for certain products – but they're tropical products – and you won't raise them with white labour” (54).

This strand of the text's underlying narrative thesis is interesting for two reasons: it challenges not only the underlying space-myth of “emptiness” inherent in much of the literature of the day, including the popular invasion narratives, by positing a hitherto unappreciated natural fecundity and Aboriginal stewardship to the North; but it also challenges the dominant White Australia Policy doctrine by taking the politically opposite view (discussed earlier in this chapter) that non-White labour is essential to the North's, and therefore the nation's, future development. Grant's argument is refuted by the station's erstwhile military representative, retired Corporal

Bob Hardy who articulates the drama's (and the genre's) invasion narrative by declaring that the North is there to be defended from all ill-intentioned traducers:

There is no false security about it. There is a very real appreciation of the dangers ahead and a very real determination to prepare for them. When the time comes you will find us ready and what's more you'll find us willing. We're going to keep this country and we're going to keep it *white*. (55; original emphasis)

Bob's call-to-arms is something of an over-reaction to Grant's otherwise "practical" land management advice, and Gilbert and Lo make the salient observation that the early scenes of the play in this manner appear to mount the case for a White Australia only to countervail it with a more pragmatic, if not entirely tolerant, pluralistic case for a multiracial workforce, if nothing else. They state:

[a]s well as suggesting the fluidity of the racial map of northern Australia, *Girl of the Never Never* also reveals slippages in the discourse of whiteness. The early scenes celebrate and centralize whiteness through devices such as the claptrap [referred to above][...] but the obsession with an exclusively white Australia wavers as the narrative develops. (38)

The play – like the North itself – is populated by Chinese cooks, Japanese pearl divers, and Aboriginal trackers and housemaids, though they all remain subsidiary characters to the central White romantic and adventure plots; and subsidiary to the dominant competing spatial practices of the White characters. As in Bedford's text, however, it is an Aboriginal character who thwarts the subversive malevolent attempt of the corrupt White antihero and his Asian ally. Cinderella³² overhears the Pratt/Kami sabotage plot and employs her tracking skills and her familiarity with the country under dispute to expedite Cunningham's own claim to the gold. She points out that she's in the best position to thwart the counterclaim, because "that's my country" (60): though Smith seems not to be mounting any kind of proprietorial claim

³² The Aboriginal characters all have "pet" names like this (Othello and Desdemona are others), aligning them "humourously" with fable and fiction, in a discursive manoeuvre that presumably also serves to neuter them of their claims to authenticity, and by extension, to competent stewardship of the North itself.

to the land here in Cinders's name. There is no sense that the founding national space-myth of *terra nullius* is being challenged here. Rather, the Aboriginal character is generously providing her services to abet the "good" White characters' own claim to the land.

Gilbert and Lo argue that this incident, combined with Pearl's testimonial as to Cinderella's trustworthiness, and later to her insistence that Kami not be left to die in the wilderness because "[t]here's not a house in the Territory that would close its doors to a sick man or a hungry man be he black white or yellow" (78), combine to "rupture the hegemony of whiteness [and] also hint at a nascent cosmopolitan consciousness, at least on behalf of some of the characters" (38). As Gilbert and Lo conclude, both *White Australia* and *Girl of the Never Never* point to an underlying federation era national doctrine of resistance to impure racial inundation and infiltration of Australia. I concur but again iterate the point that this "national" invasion takes place through the specific portal of the North. In combination the two popular melodramas mount sufficiently distinct arguments within the broad national discourse surrounding race to indicate a level of complexity in the public's engagement with the White Australia doctrine of the day. As well as (arguably unwittingly) mounting a case for the pre-existing and "natural" multiracial of the North, if not of the entire nation, Gilbert and Lo argue that the two plays:

offered a ready template for staging a cast of characters and a series of situations seen as compromising the racial future envisioned at federation. In this respect, the invasion dramas discussed and others of their kind synthesize anxieties connected with the sedimentation of the White Australia Policy *as a form of racial/spatial management*. (38; emphasis added)

This final point is an important one in relation to my own study, which goes a step further by arguing that this debate surrounding national racial and spatial management tensions has a recurring focus on the North, particularly, as the mythic "unreal" space

at the nation's imaginary fringes through which such invasion might take place, and upon which such national tensions are played out in a collective kind of act of dissociation that places the "danger" of the hostile Other "out there," safely away from "home". If the North doesn't hold, the theory might contend, then the South is next. The North is required to act as both quarantine and frontier for "Australia" as a whole.

As examples of a nascent North Australian theatrical canon, these plays replay national anxieties and prejudices surrounding race, but ultimately conscript and absorb indigenous claims to land in displays of loyal advancement of White pastoral and military spatial interests. They are extremely useful indicators of the aetiology of the North in theatrical (if not in broader cultural) terms, and act as a beginning point from which to trace the trajectory of the depictions of the North from without and within over the course of the twentieth century. The following chapters explore the ramifications of a more hostile clashing of Asian-Australian and Black-White claims to spatial hegemony as they emerge in theatre of the twentieth century.

Chapter Two

The Northern Frontier

The two broad foundational tropes that this thesis argues have defined the North from inception are its function as a repository of national fears about infiltration or invasion from a perceived hostile Asian Other residing further to our North, and its function as the site of an oscillating frontier between Black and White Australia. This chapter explores the second phenomenon in closer detail, focussing on the ways in which theatre especially has been fundamental in representing the North to the metropolitan Centre in the inter-war period of the twentieth-century. Following on from the melodrama of the Federation era used as the focus of discussion of invasion anxiety-themed texts in Chapter One, this chapter focuses initially on the notion of frontier space and the idea of the North being a frontier between Australia itself and Asia. Attention then turns to the notion of the North as Black-White frontier *within* Australia and reads the so-called “bush realists” of the 1930s and 1940s – Henrietta Drake-Brockman (*Men Without Wives* and her short play “The Blister”), Katharine Susannah Prichard (*Brumby Innes*), Louis Esson (“The Drovers”) and Louis Nowra’s adaptation of Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* – for their specifically theatrical representation of the North to metropolitan audiences. This will work to argue theatre’s centrality in the establishing and reiteration of these national tropes and mythologies. As with all texts explored in this thesis, these plays are read within a spatial critical theoretical framework that links back to either the Gelder/Jacobs notion of the Uncanny, Rutherford’s Lacanian concept of the Great Australian Emptiness, or Tompkins’s notion of Australian spatial and cultural Unsettlement. Attention then turns to the ways in which the Northern tropics were also represented in

anthropological studies of the period as spaces that were intrinsically hostile to “civilisation” and “cultivation” by the Caucasian races. The “White Man in the Tropics” anthropological studies of Raphael Cilento, Grenville Price and A. P. Elkin are used as the focus for this analysis.

All of the texts cited above stage Northern spaces in Western Australia and the Northern Territory during the period covered in this chapter. During this period, Sydney Tomholt’s short play, “Anoli the Blind,” is one of the few theatrical ventures by established modernist-era Australian playwrights representing Far North Queensland, and, unlike the other plays, is not an example of representation of frontier conflict between either Black and White Australia, or Australia and Asia. It can be read instead as an example of the way alternative European representations of the Other (in this case the Far North Queensland Italian community) are used in early twentieth century melodrama to depict anxieties of internal racial “corruption” in the region.³³ Despite its tangential intersection with the themes of the other works from the era discussed in this chapter, Tomholt’s work is cited in order to contextualise its basic theme and cultural preoccupation within the broader (Northern) anthropological political discussion about the “White Man in the Tropics” referred to above.

The North as Frontier Space

The anxiety about an Asian infiltration of Australia via the North rests largely, obviously, on the North’s proximity to Southeast Asia. Discursive, as well as geophysical, boundaries begin to blur the farther they exist beyond the metropolitan (Southeast Australian) field of vision. The perceived boundaries separating Australia from Asia are less clear for the majority of the Australian population, one might

³³ It can be read in this sense as a peasant fate tragedy in which extreme passions need extreme regions to operate. Far North Queensland, in this context, becomes a liminal zone where the “rules” don’t apply – a frontier, in fact.

argue, because “no-one” is “there” to verify and articulate them. The term “North” thus becomes, according to Jon Stratton, an open one. Where Australia and Asia begin and end, he argues, “is inevitably vague” (40), affecting national security in more than one sense of that word. Stratton argues, “[i]f the north is a frontier, and it is open then Australia’s discourse is not secure. This, indeed, is one effect of the lack of realization of the north. The discourse is unstable and the Other may enter. If this occurs Australia will lose its definition” (40). In this equation, the North becomes a broad liminal zone, the boundaries of which blur and dissolve. The North is intangible, and slips deftly from the realm of the “real” to the “symbolic,” and area in which theatre, especially, is well situated to exploit.³⁴

Stratton is referring specifically to the Northern Territory in his description of the Northern frontier. Northern Queensland and Western Australia, he argues, are more solid geocultural and spatial discursive phenomena because they have been written more firmly into “official” Australian historiography. They are included in national narratives, mythologies and historiography because Queensland and Western Australia, as states within the Federation, each possesses large populations in their own southern corners; and each of the states has documented its own post-“settlement” histories in a way the Northern Territory has not, until relatively recently.³⁵ Moreover, Australia’s national historical writers – including Geoffrey Blainey, Manning Clark, A. G. L. Shaw, and even Keith Hancock when writing specifically about tropical Australia – either omit discussion of the Northern Territory altogether or render it to a one or two page afterthought. Until relatively recently, Stratton concludes, “the NT is excluded from Australian history, excluded from

³⁴ And, indeed, playwrights of this era such as Esson and Tomholt considered themselves first and foremost “symbolist” playwrights, even working within the respective forms of bush realism and melodrama as they each did.

³⁵ Alan Powell’s *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory* is the most widely acknowledged local seminal historical text.

reality. Even Richard White's book, *Inventing Australia*, which is a book about the history of mythic constructions of Australia, excludes the NT" (42-43). This under-representation in national historiographical discourse goes on to become, according to Stratton, a "gap of desire" – a "lack of reality" (43) – which ends up becoming a "longstanding topos" that the Northern Territory uses to construct and mythologise itself (43). The whole of the Northern Territory thus becomes "the North," according to Stratton, and it "figures the limits of the Australian discursive system" (54). As the "least real part" of national discursive spatial myth-making, the Territory becomes "constituted binarily in relation to the rest of Australia" (54), and, most important for the present focus of discussion, "it is the frontier, the limit of civilisation to set against the civilised south of the country" (54).

Whilst this thesis whole-heartedly concurs with the thrust of Stratton's argument, there are two important distinctions to be made in terms of an analysis of the North as frontier space. Firstly, it is this thesis's contention that, over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the North-West of Western Australia and Far North Queensland are equally as under-represented in national myth-making, historiography and, particularly in the case of Far North Queensland, theatrical praxis. Whilst tropical North Queensland is certainly the focus of the "White Man in the Tropics" anthropological studies by Raphael Cilento, Grenville Price and A. P. Elkin during the first few decades of the twentieth century, the principles and logic of much of this speculative investigation were used to justify attempts to open up the entirety of the North for potential exploitation. The underlying assumption that this field of investigation was attempting to contest, moreover, was the notion that the North was uninhabitable for European races, which ultimately confirms the argument that Queensland was also at this time under-populated and subsequently under-theorised

and under-exploited. Similarly, the North West of Western Australia, and the Kimberley region in particular, is represented in Australian literature and theatre as a multi-ethnic nexus between White, Aboriginal and Asian cultures, and is as much a liminal space between the two continents – a frontier, in the sense Stratton describes it – as the Northern Territory.

Secondly, it is problematic constructing the whole of the Northern Territory as “North” when culturally, geographically and topographically large sections of it are clearly not “North” but “Centre.” Australian desert space, as signalled in the introduction to this thesis, is troped quite distinctively from Australian tropical space (though certain symbolic spatial categories such as “Bush” and “Outback” do obviously correspond, as they do with many non-urban southern Australian spaces). As Tom Griffiths points out,

in Australia, the closer one gets to the Centre, the further “outside” you are. That paradox reveals how different Australia’s West is from America’s. Australia’s “frontier” was called “the outback,” “the inland,” “the back country,” “the outside country,” “our backyard,” “back o’ Bourke,” “the Never-Never,” “the Dead Heart,” or “the Red Centre:” the descriptive metaphors are about hearts and backs, but never about heads or fronts. (223)

Just as it is the case that “Central” Australian desert space fails to fall neatly along and within the Northern Territory’s borders with South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland, so too it is this thesis’s contention that Australia’s symbolic North fails to begin and end with the Territory’s coastal borders with adjacent states; and that it is, in fact, perfectly feasible for one *geopolitical* spatial entity – in this case the Northern Territory – to house more than one *geocultural* spatial entity. It is possible for the Territory to be North and Centre and Bush and Outback and more than one imaginary frontier at the same time.

To hark back to Sherrill Grace's invocation of a Canadian North, I reiterate the notion of an oscillating Northern frontier in this country: a moving frontier (inherent also in the American definition of the Western Frontier discussed later in this chapter) that shifts up towards the Australian border with Asia and down to an internal border separating Black and White Australia. More erratically, it has at specific moments been situated as far south as Brisbane during World War Two, or two hundred miles south of Darwin for a Chinese citizen living in the North in the 1890s. The Northern frontier is thus variable according to the nature of the external or internal "enemy" from which Australia perceives itself to be in need of protection at any one time.

Understanding Australia's Northern Frontier through the American West

In much the same way that Ancient Greek and Roman cultures imagined a Great Southern Land to counterbalance European spatial configurations of "home" and "self," so too the "New World" of the "West" has operated as an extension of Eurocentric mythological speculation, and as the manifestation of what Jeffrey D Mason describes as "an impenetrable vastness that had encouraged generations of fantasies concerning what lies beyond the sunset" (127). Just as Chapter One of this thesis argues that Australia was imagined into being as a spatial entity before its "official" European "discovery," so too, Mason argues, once Europeans

realised their ships could cross the water [without falling over the edge of an imagined flat earth's precipice] and reach not Asia but completely unfamiliar lands, they wondered whether their dreams were materializing, whether God were expanding the limits of human experience to include ancient mysteries. (127)

"Discovery" of the Americas by Columbus and succeeding generations of Europeans keen to forge new lives in the New World did little to stem the flow of optimistic postulations about the region. Westward migration was, according to Mason, charged

with a missionary Arcadian or Edenic zeal from the outset, and time did little to abate matters. Mason writes:

[t]o move west and there reconstruct the East was to fail; the West was the future, and if the great migration led to repeating the past, there was no point in leaving home. The myth defined the westward movement as part of the constant becoming of western culture, as the final journey toward the perfection of mankind. (130)

Noting that all of modern day America has at some stage been configured as “West,” Mason’s argument would seem to indicate that the New World’s rapidly unfolding exploration and westward-bound (frequently violent) urge to conquest was not troped upon “discovery” and encounter as alternatively utopic and dystopic space, as Australia is argued to have been. American spaces were quickly mythologised and troped in binaried terms along what we might regard now as classic colonialist lines: the East represented home, civilisation, culture, industry, the familiar, and the known; the West represented wilderness, nature, primitiveness, savagery and Outer space.

As an actual line of contact between these two putative worlds, the American frontier was pushed farther and farther westward until in 1893 it was officially declared “closed” by influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner. As Gerald D Nash explains, “[b]y 1890 settlement had become so dense that supposedly the frontier had come to an end[...] And with that pronouncement, Turner declared with much nostalgia, a major era in America’s growth faded into history” (3).

This brief cultural history of American projections of the frontier is obviously simplistic and condenses many centuries of complex activity into a neat chronological narrative. It does, however, enable an understanding of the typical ways in which frontier spaces are socially constructed, and troped according to dominant cultural ideologies. Such frontier spaces as the American “West” act as projections of national fears, fantasies, aspirations and longings – operating most effectively, in

terms of critical spatial analysis, as what Lefebvre describes in his symbolic triad as *representational* space, even as it must necessarily be constituted of (albeit contested and unstable) “actual” space, with concrete geopolitical elements and practices. The American Western frontier is troped most often in terms of its motility: it is constantly moving, shifting and changing.³⁶ But regardless of its actual geographical coordinates at any given moment, it is constantly mythologised in a revealing and frequently reductive euphemistic series of tropes that serve to romanticise bloody conflict and to legitimise the dynamics of imperialist contest for occupation of that space.

As Richard Anthony Gale writes, “[t]he West is often synonymous with space, and the openness which that space represents. It is also a region which was constantly converted to the known through the active and intentional naming of its parts – the conversion of space to place through knowledge” (13). Gale also contends that the West effectively becomes metonymic for “America” – a site of quintessential or über-American authenticity – where “space is laden with more significance than in most geographical locations” (16). Reinstated through popular representations in literature, melodrama, theatre and eventually, in the twentieth century, film, the West becomes a repository for American aspirations of self – the American Dream, in fact. Writing of twentieth century filmic representations of the West – a corollary of all the cultural representations that have come before it, from dime store novels to Wild West melodramas – Jane Tompkins argues that the West:

functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanised existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, [and] political injustice. The desire to change places also signals a powerful need for self-transformation. (4)

³⁶ Grace’s concept of the Magnetic (constantly shifting Canadian) North operates similarly here.

The tropes used here to describe the American frontier are familiar in an Australia saturated with American cultural product and values. For precisely this reason, representations of American cultural spatialities generally are as familiar to Australians, if not more so, than many of our own spaces – certainly more familiar than popular cultural representations of an Australian North, a shortcoming which this thesis is in part designed to address.

Jane Tompkins’s list of tropes resembles how one might describe the function of the Australian North *qua* frontier space, and goes some way to articulating what the function or characteristics of frontier space in general may be. I turn the focus of this discussion now to the notion of frontier space as drama or performance. I do so here, as the early twentieth-century sees the North being actively troped as Australia’s “final frontier” in terms of attempts at White settlement, and as a genre of “pioneering” plays (in the work of the so-called “bush realists”) becomes popular from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Staging Frontier Space: the Centrality of Theatre to the invention of Frontier Space

In his account of the staging of the American frontier, Roger A. Hall argues that, because possession and ownership of the advancing American West was so central to its invention – hunters, trappers, land speculators, settlers and miners all wanted to lay claim to it in some way – the only way for “those who remained behind in the cities of the East” to own the West as a “distinctive phenomenological experience” was to “stake their claim to a portion of the frontier simply by purchasing a ticket” (2) to the theatre. He states that theatre offered an immediacy – a live action experience of the West – that other popular literary forms could not. Fictional renderings of the

“drama” of the frontier thus proliferated in the late nineteenth century. Melodrama was, according to Hall, by far the most popular genre of all, working in tandem with more traditional comic and naturalistic dramatic genres to reinforce popular, but misleading, images of white settlers as victims of native populations responding with violence only when provoked by savage atrocities, and offering “its images in a particularly compelling manner in that elements it employed were so tangible – genuine heroes, horses, guns and natives” (3). Hall contends that, despite assumptions contemporary audiences might make about frontier plays and their preoccupation with contact violence and conquest, the majority of melodramas at the time “focussed instead on a romantic and sentimental story between hero and heroine” and that “[a]s the genre developed, some of the main characters exhibited flaws, including drinking, swearing, lying and fornicating. Their basic moral strength, however, remained firm” (5).

A series of “frontier” tropes and stock characters thus emerges that recognisably operate in Australian melodrama of the same period, outlined in Chapter One: Chinese cooks and laundrymen/women; blacks played by whites in black make-up; hyper-masculine men (cowboys/bushrangers) and hardy, straight-talking, gun-toting women. Critical differences between American and Australian notions of frontier space (and thus their respective frontier tropes and stock characters) make their comparison of ultimately limited value for this thesis, however. As Stratton points out:

the frontier is inflected differently in different national discourses. In America, for example, the frontier, a myth which has been explored for a long time, has been constituted in relation to a nature that has positive connotations. From within this context the frontier is formulated as the site of challenge. In Australia, on the other hand, where nature has negative connotations, much effort is spent consolidating the frontier. (footnote 10, 55)

It is not the aim of this study to advance the exploration of the Australian North by a detailed comparison with American discourse on melodrama, useful as these points of contact are in suggesting an international set of “settler” images dealing with liminal national spaces. I examine the North as a frontier through its articulations in early twentieth-century Australian drama. This thesis argues that what emerges after the historical period outlined in Chapter One is a more distinctively Northern spatial commodity – distinct, that is, from more general representations of Australian “Bush” and “Outback” spaces which separates these zones from what lies beyond. The Australian frontier is essentially pushed farther outward and upward during the first few decades of the twentieth century, with melodrama being largely replaced by other theatrical genres of Australian realism (in the case of Prichard and Esson) and naturalism (in the case of Drake-Brockman).³⁷ I differentiate these two styles (realism and naturalism) in that the former appears more uncompromising in its effort to depict life in the North “as it really is.” Language, custom, climate, inter-racial and gender relations are presented in “vulgar” or coarse candour. The latter, whilst realistic in setting, offers more sentimental depictions of plot, race, pioneering endeavour and nationalistic spirit in general – though the Nowra adaptation of *Capricornia* could be argued to alternate at times between these two broad generic camps. Of the plays selected for analysis here, only Tomholt’s “Anoli the Blind” (set in 1905 but published in 1936) adheres to traditional melodramatic form.³⁸

³⁷ Indeed, Paul Makeham quotes John McCallum to point out that realist bush dramas were, in fact, the predominant genre of the “thirties and forties” and that “even though Australian realism has accommodated both urban and rural settings and concerns, the bush plays have been somewhat privileged in theatre histories” (24).

³⁸ Also worthy of mention in passing here is the current resurgence of frontier plays in contemporary Australian theatre. Andrew Bovell’s *Holy Day* and Hannie Rayson’s *Inheritance* are theatrical responses to the internal cultural frontier between Black and White Australia enjoying an arguably belated resurgence in popularity. Whilst Nowra’s work has frequently courted this colonial site of contest (*Crow*; *Inside the Island*, *The Golden Age*, *Capricornia*), it would appear that capital city subscriber audiences are presently demanding, or at least attending, a theatre that engages with our sullied racial history of violent conquest at the edges of “civilisation” and “the bush”.

Staging the Black-White Australian Frontier

First performed by the Pioneer Players in Melbourne in 1923, Esson's one-act play, "The Drovers," is immediately noteworthy for its grim, laconic – even fatalistic – tone, in contrast to the heightened and hyperbolic nature of the melodramatic genre that preceded it. Set in similar country to *Girl of the Never Never*, "[a] droving camp, on the edge of the Barklay [sic] Tableland" (6), the play's *mise en scène* is, effectively, a threshold: a temporary stopover point between the trading ports and supply depots of the Far North Queensland coast, and the cattle stations of the remote North-West. The drovers are tracking the Northern frontier from East to West. A number of already familiar tropes are established at the outset to locate the action in a kind of paradigmatic Outback space. This is distinguished by extreme heat and aridity; dependence on alcohol to relieve boredom and numb pain; harshness of language, land and custom; male stoicism; and a heightened form of masculinised environment in general. There are no women in the play. Nor, in fact, are females referred to – aside from the "Banka-Banka mare" one of the men fantasises owning (13).

Indeed, Esson's depiction of the "long flat dry stage" (18) can be argued to be a masculinist representation of geographical space – a kind of male testing ground, that is free of "female" domestic accoutrement or design. This contrasts neatly with the North depicted by Prichard and Drake-Brockman, who focus their drama on indoor/domestic space within the harsh environment, and for whom the outdoor world is either masculine White or Aboriginal space that infiltrates the female domestic *milieu* through doors and windows. Northern outdoor space, then, for Esson might be viewed not just as representational or symbolic space, in terms of Lefebvre's

conceptual spatial triad, but as actual/lived space. It is the sum total of the world the men occupy. It is active and omnipresent, rather than being mere backdrop or allegory. McCallum argues in relation to “The Drovers” that “the real protagonist, as in so many bush plays right up to the 50s, is the land” itself (“Something” 49).

Makeham concurs, and quotes Leslie Rees to claim that the land acts as:

a character whose influence over drovers’ lives is manifested both in naturalistic and in metaphysical terms. That is, the laconic stoicism of the men is presented as directly conditioned by the heat and dust and vastness of the Barklay [sic] Tableland, while at the same time the landscape has “the grimness of a fate that broods over men who pit themselves against our vast inland wilderness.” (“Across” 55)

In one sense, then, *The Drovers* can be read as a social Darwinist parable, in which land and nature reclaim “man,” with only the fittest surviving. Briglow Bill, the forty five year old bush-bred top cocky, is critically injured in a stampede. In the absence of appropriate medical attention, with an urgent need to keep the stock moving to the next water hole and “nothing in front of us but the long dry plains” (7), the men are forced to leave him behind with a plug of tobacco and some whisky to die a noble and stoic death in the middle of the Never-Never. Whilst it may be, as Makeham states, the land as protagonist that claims him, Briglow has actually been injured because of the rash actions of the neophyte city-bred jackaroo, whose inexperience caused the stock to stampede. There is thus a concomitant hand of (arguably Southern) intervention in Makeham’s interpretation of “death by landscape” (13).

Of more immediate interest to this study is the depiction of Aboriginality through the character of Pidgeon, and the particular version of frontier ideology this racial construction produces in the text. At first glance, it seems as though Esson is perpetuating stock caricatures of Aboriginal characters familiar to a Southern audience through the minstrelsy employed by popular melodrama in the decades preceding the play’s 1925 Melbourne performance. Pidgeon enters from behind a

tree, and is described as tall, thin, young and dressed in ragged trousers and shirt, “but a little black growth of whiskers gives him a comical appearance” (10). Indeed, his initial function in the text appears to be one of comic relief from the play’s otherwise bleak realist tone, as he is chased out by the Cook to prevent him from stealing tobacco. His key dramatic – and social – function transpires to be that of guardian over the dying Briglow at the end of the play. Upon initial reading, this appears to be little more than a facile, if well-meaning, depiction of the Aboriginal character as noble savage, designed to contain racial Otherness by constructing him as “tame” and self-sacrificing and devoted to the White boss’s needs, in much the same way as Terribit dutifully attends colonialist needs throughout Bedford’s *White Australia*.

But Esson’s construction of Aboriginality in the Northern frontier country is more complex than this. Rather than reinforcing racial hegemonies and distinct Black and White divisions along the cusp of the border between cultures in the North, Esson blurs the boundaries by subsuming the White character into what the playwright must assume to be Pidgeon’s conception of death and reincarnation. As Briglow dies, Pigeon declares:

You, Briglow, and old man Boss, you savee bush all-the-same blackfellow... I think first time you black-fellow, Briglow. You die, then jump up white fellow. Now you die, and bye ‘n’ bye... next time, you jump up black-fellow, alonga new fellow country – good country – plenty water, plenty fish, plenty tucker[...] You die all right. (18)

Esson’s agenda here seems to be one of speculative acknowledgement of Aboriginal cultural practice and connection to (if not legal possession of) the land; and of the “authentic” land-loving Northern bushman being subsumed by the open, harsh country he loves, and being returned to it. In an invocation of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny, there is a (romantic) double inscription here, then, of Northern spaces being simultaneously Black and White. The danger with this, of course, is that it still

ultimately reinforces White colonialist claims – both cultural and practical – to country. As Makeham concludes:

[t]he drovers can therefore be, simultaneously, hard white cattlemen *and* spiritual beings with a quasi-religious connection to the land. In this way, the play does acknowledge a special Aboriginal response to the landscape[....] However, “The Drovers” finally subordinates its Aboriginal discourse to a dominating discourse of the propriety of white occupation, and the concomitant use of land such occupation entails. (“Across” 61; original emphasis)

The play’s subliminal ideology in its most extreme form, according to Makeham, becomes a metaphor for White colonial conquest of Aboriginal space. The “crossing of the long dry stage,” Makeham argues, “stands for the play’s impulse to represent Australia as if it were itself a *stage*” (“Framing” 130; original emphasis), across which colonial spatial practice is played out before a metropolitan Southern audience. Makeham’s point about Australia as a stage (and, by extension, nationalism as a performance) is critical to this thesis’s contention of theatre’s central importance to studies of space within an Australian context. Not only do these theatrical depictions of the Australian North predate those of film and television for metropolitan audiences, thus acting as formative visual encounters with that region of the country for those attending the performances. The play, in concert with others discussed in this chapter, also activates a symbolic performance of nationhood – possibly idealised – that represents a shift from the shrill patriotism of Bedford’s melodrama discussed in Chapter One. Esson is amongst the first here to be “playing” co-dependent Black-White social and spatial relations into practice. In addition to abstractedly articulating the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny (discussed above) in the way that an essay or a novel might, the play also *performs* it before a live metropolitan audience, replaying and reiterating it into imputed meaning.

Makeham makes the important qualification here that, whilst ultimately perpetuating White colonialist hegemonic pre-eminence, and espousing “the kinds of images of Australianness on which the white mythologies of national character and nationhood were built” (“Across” 61), Esson’s construction of Aboriginality is still markedly more sophisticated than the “standard facile treatment afforded indigenous perspectives in early twentieth century drama” (“Across” 61). I would argue in support of this that in spatial theoretical terms, the play at least attempts to venture into Gelder and Jacobs’s territory of the uncanny by positing more than one way to occupy Northern spaces. Even if unable to write from an Aboriginal perspective, and even if ultimately reinforcing White cultural hegemonies, Esson seems to be acknowledging the contested nature of spatial cultural practice at the Northern edge of the Australian “bush” frontier. He conveniently conflates these dual practices, subsuming the one into the other when, in the final lines of the play, Esson has Pidgeon plan Briglow’s burial according to White (Western/Christian) cultural practice; but protects his spirit according to (Esson’s postulation of) Black cultural practice. Pidgeon says:

Me make little-fellow hill; me build up little mound, grass, bushes, stones,
keep off bad spirits alonga bush. That one frighten-im debbil-debbil... debbil-
debbil can’t catchim Briglow now.

*[Pidgeon picks up the pipe, and then sits smoking, again chanting to himself,
and clicking the sticks together]. (19)*

It is a kind of inverse formulation of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny Australia where what is “theirs” effectively becomes also what is “ours,” rather than the reverse, as would be the case in an “ideal” postcolonial narrative.

If Esson performs one image of a blurry yet strangely harmonious Black and White negotiation of the specific spatial and cultural division of a Northern frontier, then as this *mise en scène* shifts westward in the theatre of Katharine Susannah

Prichard and Henrietta Drake-Brockman, the focus between Black and White cultures comes into starkly sharper relief. Both women produce useful progressivist and sympathetic discourses surrounding Aboriginality. But in the process, they create theatrical worlds where the distinction between North and South (even as it resides spatially, specifically, within Western Australia) becomes the axis upon which much of the tension of their plays revolves. For Prichard, this North-western frontier space is an eminently bleaker, harsher and more hostile world than both Drake-Brockman's more sentimental and nationalistic pioneer space, and than the South itself, as it is imagined to be in the South-Western capital of Perth. In both plays, however, Black and White relations are sexualised – and the North is rewritten from what we might call an early twentieth-century feminist perspective.

If “The Drovers” was distinguished by its attempt at staging the vastness of Northern physical spaces – the “long dry open stage” – and of masculinist ways of marking and occupying territory, then *Brumby Innes* and *Men Without Wives* (and, to a lesser extent, “The Blister”) are immediately notable for their depiction of domestic pioneer space. The women are enclosed within masculinist *mises en scène* in hostile country at the very heart of the Northern Black/White frontier. Aboriginality is “out there” and all around, insinuating itself either menacingly or, in orientalist terms, exotically in the form of forbidden sexual allure. Spatially, it manifests itself in doorways, on verandahs, and through windows – visible or audible through literal as well as figurative thresholds; threatening, in the case of *Brumby Innes*, to intrude violently into the rough-hewn sanctity of the pioneer homestead, or, in the case of *Men Without Wives*, quiescently, and in a form of “dignified” domestic servitude. Of verandah space as threshold, Tompkins claims that it “offers a hint of the outside, even providing some semblance of the bush landscape that extends to off-stage space,

while retaining the option of the relative safety of a retreat to an interior room”

(*Unsettling* 22). Bill Dunstone argues that this is a dramatically loaded representation reflecting White insecurity or tentativeness in Black space, which suggests that

[o]nly the Aboriginals can successfully “read” this landscape. To the European imagination, the transition from the “readable” south to the North West represents a crossing over a threshold into spaces and experiences which jeopardise all sense of psychological essence and continuity with the environment. (74)

In both plays, the world of the White pioneer is represented theatrically as interior space poised defiantly, if fragilely, on the cusp of the “Black Man’s Zone.” As Dunstone points out, the plays

explore the dilemma of the local European imagination which, in an immigrant condition on the periphery of what it sees as the civilized world, must choose either to retreat from or come to terms with the alien hinterland and the threat it represents to transmitted notions of the self and the community. (67-68)

Prichard’s depiction of this site of colonial contest is franker and more uncompromising than Drake-Brockman’s. Indeed, the most interesting initial observation to make about Prichard’s award-winning text was that its depiction of Northern life was deemed too confronting for Southern audiences to witness. Despite winning the Triad prize for playwrighting in 1926, the play was not performed until 1972, in a co-production between the Australian Performing Group and indigenous company, Nindethana Theatre – three years after Prichard’s death. As Prichard herself augured in her preface to the 1940 (published) edition of the text, “[o]ne writes as one must: produces as one may. Which is to say, the language of a Nor’-westerner must be tempered to the ears of city-dwellers. So be it!” (Prichard 51). Evidently Prichard’s self-censorship did not go far enough. Her crime, arguably, was to deliver a frank – even feminist – discourse revealing the far North as a site of violent amoral conquest; and a lawless bastion of anarchic male sexuality allowed to run

“unbridled.”³⁹ My reading of *Brumby Innes* focuses not so much on plot or character analysis, but on how it articulates and dramatises a Black/White frontier: a contest for actual and symbolic occupation of space in the remote North, away from the scrutiny or censorship of the “civilised” world of the South. This can be read as a metonymic extension of what Dunstone would argue as specifically Western Australian psychological projections of the North as an increasingly discrete cultural imaginary.

Prichard paints the North-West very much as contested cultural space. Rather than depicting a White world that has staked a claim in an (unseen) Black space, the borders between worlds in Prichard’s text – the windows, doors and thresholds – are wide open and regularly transgressed. Act One is an attempted realist depiction of Aboriginal ceremony. Brumby violates the sanctity of this ceremony when he drunkenly intrudes to claim access to one of the women (Wylba), who has been promised to Mickina. When Mickina attempts to prevent the kidnap, Brumby shoots him. Jack, Brumby’s ageing right-hand man, takes the injured man back to the station to tend and revive him. Wylba and Polly – two of Brumby’s “mares” – assist him, establishing a sense for the rest of the play of competing racial spatial occupations: the station represents a White occupation of Black space; yet it is “infiltrated” by Aboriginal characters, and is surrounded by an angry Aboriginal mob who seek violent retribution for Brumby’s initiating act of assault.

When May, the only “white girl” in the district, arrives to flirt with Brumby, foolishly and wilfully ignorant of his bloody temper and his sexual history with the Aboriginal women, the unstable nexus between Black and White worlds is further complicated by the necessity to shield her from the manifold realities of those social relations. The rest of the play hangs on the tension created by the gradual unravelling

³⁹ The allusion to horsemanship here is intentional – indeed, is signalled in the eponymous anti-hero’s name, and will be discussed further shortly.

of this gendered, racial and cultural conceit. As Dunstone puts it, “[t]he crisis for the individual is thus to resolve the problem of space” (74): to either accede to the “amoral” realities of frontier occupation; or to resist them and leave. Dunstone argues, “[t]he domesticated interior of Innes’ homestead signifies the Europeans’ attempt to impose limits and structures, that is to establish meaning in self-defence against an external world of seemingly limitless space and distance” (74). Because this space is occupied and prepared to be defended, violent contest between cultures “naturally” occurs.

The North is also constructed here as a hyper-masculine lawless zone where White justice holds sway in any such rival encounter. As Brumby says, in response to an accusation he has been stealing neighbouring cattle, “white men’s got to stand together or there’ll be no livin’ in the Nor’-west” (80); and later, when it is revealed Brumby has been acquitted of a charge of impregnating a thirteen year old Aboriginal girl, he exults in the claim that despite “lyin’ like a tripe hound,” he is “[d]ischarged without a stain on me character” (93)! Whilst he is happy to exploit indigenous women for sexual release, his purist eugenic thesis is ultimately articulated through the play’s equine allegory. Having successfully “serviced” May, he refuses to allow her to leave the station. “What you’ve got to understand,” he says, “is you’re one of Brumby’s mares. You gallop with the mob” (97). Sexual and colonial rulership are deftly conflated into one anarchic frontier schema as Brumby stakes his claim to spatial permanence in the North. Women are viewed as breeding stock – a necessary violation of hyper-masculine space; and White women, particularly, are incongruous and alien interlopers who are intent to “do men out of being plain, ordinary decent male animals” (80), though they are necessary for breeding “thoroughbreds.”

Brumby reclaims nature as the White man's province, attempting discursively to simultaneously align himself to the country, and to assert colonial pre-eminence over the Aboriginal characters in the play. As he tells May, "I want youngsters, and I want'm thoroughbred" (98). But he also wants the unscrutinised liberty to continue his sexual exploitation of the Aboriginal women. Wylba reappears at the (symbolic) threshold between worlds at play's end, and is gradually coaxed into the domestic space of White male fantasy:

The little native girl dances forward. Brumby prances with her. May watches a moment, then with a gesture of defeat goes out. Across the plains the sun is setting. Brumby's laughter and Wylba's shrill giggling mingle with the gay, harsh music of the gramophone. (99)

Dunstone argues that Brumby's anarchic sexuality and "dionysiac revelry" indicates that the White frontiersmen are "incapable of achieving a creative, therapeutic release from the self in the manner of the classical world" (76). That may well be the case, but it is my contention that Brumby is in fact well in control of both his psyche and his environment by play's end, and, in fact, can be viewed as the successful and complete psychological *conquistador* of contested frontier space. He may be psychologically unstable, but in Prichard's world of rough White justice, sexual violence, misogyny, alcoholism and racial conflict, Brumby Innes is the pioneer *par excellence*, perfectly suited for colonial adaptation to the erstwhile "Black Man's Zone."

In Drake-Brockman's *Men Without Wives*, by contrast, it is the women who must make the social adaptation necessary for survival in the "man's country" of the North. Written eleven years after *Brumby Innes* and, interestingly, finding an audience in Sydney almost immediately, Drake-Brockman's depiction of the Northern frontier is one where White patriarchal occupation is taken as a given. There is no violent contest between Black and White worlds here. But the remote and extreme

environment is seen as antipathetic to women and to feminine ways of occupying and utilising space. As Dunstone explicates, it “embraces both the physical privations of station life and the equally strong privations which women especially suffer in the patriarchal North West society in which they are destined to live” (71). Dunstone also argues that Drake-Brockman’s gendered reading of the North sets up a binary displacement between the social roles of women in the remote North and the urban South. It is this emergent (and gendered) dichotomy between North and South that acts as the dramatic framework for the play, and which I would like to focus on now by way of analysis of an “evolving” depiction of the North over time.

Men Without Wives is essentially a play about women occupying masculinised space. It draws heavily upon gendered imagery to sustain its thesis of women having to adapt to life in “man’s country” (68) in order to survive. To achieve this, Drake-Brockman creates portraits of two contrasting women: Ma Bates, the “weather beaten” and “deeply suntanned” (4) tough pioneer woman who has successfully and dutifully made the North her home; and Kit Abbott, the young, romantic and naïve southern *arriviste*. In social Darwinist terms, Drake-Brockman indicates in her stage directions that Ma Bates has made the necessary cultural adaptation to life in the North. “It is noticeable,” she notes, “that the men treat her as one of their own” (4). She wears a man’s hat, shirt and trousers, swears like a trooper, and there is an inference she wears the trousers in her marriage to Joe. Ma has a patriotic commitment to the North, but is dying due to her refusal to acknowledge the extent of her illness or to make the necessary trip South to seek medical attention. To head South is to return to a feminised world of artifice that threatens to suffocate her, even if only in a symbolic sense, so it is, effectively, a form of death for her either way.

Kit's arrival is constructed as a feminine infiltration of masculine space – “a charming young woman invading a realm of men” (11). The North-South binary is developed here with Kit's (arguably hyper-) femininity being linked with the city. To travel North for her is to travel into fantasy space. In an interesting parallel with May in *Brumby Innes*, Kit describes the North as romantic, illusory space that sits oddly with Ma's description of it as *real* space. “All day,” Kit says, “I felt as if we were driving across the setting of some exciting Hollywood drama” (12). For May the North is a “queer sort of dream” in which “you can't move: the red dust blows into you.... It's suffocating me” (84). The North eventually suffocates Kit too as fantasy cedes to Drake-Brockman's naturalistic version of reality. By the Third Act, Kit's femininity buckles under the heat and her idealism gives way to indolence, temper tantrums and an anticipation of nervous exhaustion that necessitates returning South for recovery. Ma is simultaneously forced to concede defeat and head South for medical treatment: the North is, effectively, making both women ill.

The environment – the masculinised (and largely deracinated)⁴⁰ White frontier space – is thus a test of the courage and commitment of both women. Ma dies after the curtain closes, though not before finally meeting the “flash tart from south” and exhorting her to stay and make a fist of things in a final speech worthy of melodramatic claptrap status:

You an' me, we're the only white women here ter make a bit er home life.
But you – you ain't got the guts ter stick by Jack[...] It's the likes er you what hinders the north. Won't there be discomfort and loneliness as long as the women won't stop ter make life better? I'm not denying it's a man's country – but I tell you that ter live it and stick it the way they do, takes real men! (67-68)

It is this nationalistic pioneering exhortation that found apparent sympathy with

Sydney audiences in 1938 and urged Dunstone to conclude that:

⁴⁰ There is an Aboriginal maid, Channa, present sporadically throughout the text. She is essentially a silent and obedient character.

[t]hough the play ostensibly celebrates the courage of women and suggests that they can achieve self-fulfilment in the hostile north, it actually endorses a conservative, fundamentalist and patriarchal view that woman's place in the world is to be subservient and without choice. (72)

Dunstone also argues persuasively that this serves to put the lie to the play's North-South binary of real/masculine versus artificial/feminine by reinstating the North also as stifling and culturally constrictive space for women. "In effect," Dunstone concludes, "though the characters see the opposite to be the case, the prospect of self-fulfilment as the culmination of the journey northwards is an illusion, and the northern landscape becomes a theatre of society's judgement upon women" (72-3). It is this notion of "a theatre" of gendered Northern spatial relations that is especially relevant to this thesis, preoccupied as it is with the notion of performed representations of space, and I elaborate upon this point after the following brief discussion of "The Blister."

Drake-Brockman's theme of gendered space is re-echoed in "The Blister," a short play that examines one woman's place in the North, and the ability of the North to provide sustainable (if not necessarily) fulfilling options for women. Myrtle is provided with the option of escape from her life behind "the bar of a pub in a North Australian coastal town" (175) when her English suitor, Dunham, nets the play's eponymous "blister" – a pearl large enough to guarantee a financial return that will ensure Dunham's passage back to the United Kingdom, and "Home with a capital aitch" (179). At first, Myrtle appears attracted to the option of release from what appears to be the alternative if the pearl turns out to be a "dud" – poverty and trawling "on a rotten little bit of a boat crawling with 'roaches...Ugh...Month after month. Nothing to do but open the slimy oysters, hoping to God you'll find a pearl. No one to talk to but cheeky Japs. Oh, I'd love that, I would. Like hell!" (179). It transpires, at the play's crux, that Myrtle has in fact been secretly hoping the blister turns out to be

a “dud.” The North is not “real” home for Dunham, but for Myrtle it is “the life I’m accustomed to” (189) and she seems to draw some sense of defeatist pride in telling Dunham she’s opting instead for a “free life – and a merry one. It’s just too bad, but I don’t happen to fancy England” (192). She allows the man to leave with his fortune, accepting instead a dubious offer of a night on the tiles with the “authentic” North Australian (irresponsible, alcoholic and hyper masculine) Mutch. At the end of the play, she “walks around behind the bar and begins to tidy up. Quite suddenly she brushes the damp hair from her forehead and drops her head on her arms, down amongst the empty bottles and dirty wine-glasses. Slow curtain” (194). Dunstone’s thesis that the North offers women an illusory version of freedom within patriarchal space is corroborated here by Drake-Brockman’s 1937 performance text.

The especially interesting point about theatrical representation of a gendered and racialised North as it occurs in the drama of Prichard and Drake-Brockman is the fact that Drake-Brockman’s theatre was performed within her lifetime and almost immediately after her texts were written. There are logistical considerations that come into play here, of course, as Prichard’s play requires a large cast of indigenous actors which, in the post-melodrama era of bush realism, renders a team of blacked-up White actors theatrically (if not at that time culturally) untenable.⁴¹ More crucially, though, it is my contention that Drake-Brockman created a theatrical version of the North that was more palatable to Southern metropolitan audiences, avoiding as it did frank and brutal depictions of inter-racial sexual relations, and this became the North that was performed and reiterated in the national imaginary. “Claiming that she would rather have been a playwright than a novelist, and that there were almost no opportunities for Australian plays when she had begun to write” (“Drake-

⁴¹ Esson presumably had Caucasian actors playing his Aboriginal character when “The Drovers” was first performed in 1923.

Brockman”), Drake-Brockman’s short plays were performed in Perth and Melbourne throughout the 1930s, and *Men Without Wives* won the New South Wales Sesquicentenary Competition for a full-length play in 1938, and was produced in 1937. Prichard’s prize-winning 1948 text, by contrast, was not produced until 1972.⁴² There is some suggestion here in terms of theatre’s ability to embody, express and perform national agendas, that the national narrative that Prichard articulates in her theatre of the North was not one that 1940s Australia was ready to see or hear. If theatre can be read as cultural thermometer and playwrights as *agents provocateur* of their time, then the programming politics of performance in the work of Drake-Brockman and Prichard tell us the South was ready to hear about the idea of a gendered pioneering North in the 1930s and 1940s, but not one in which inter-racial sexual relations were commonplace. The illusion of discrete (and discreet) Black-White worlds was not shattered until the early 1970s. Drake-Brockman’s stated desire to be a playwright over a novelist also reminds the contemporary reader how little theatre there was depicting the North at this time, and how seminal both women’s work was in defining, imagining and problematising the region during their lifetimes.

Between them, Esson, Prichard and Drake-Brockman as “bush realists” of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s establish a powerful series of tropes depicting the North as an increasingly discrete internal Australian frontier between Black and White cultures that are, in turn, reflections of the national psyche and reveal much about the way the North is being configured in the broad cultural imaginary at the time. It is configured consistently as fantasy space – as brutal, masculinist and patriarchal fantasy space, for which women are ill-suited but nonetheless required to help comfort men and lure them from the temptation of intercultural sexual transgression. Women are required

⁴² The *Australian Dictionary of Biography Online Edition* claims that Drake-Brockman greatly admired Prichard and wrote about her work (<http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A140035b.htm>).

in this male space to help propagate White culture – to “breed thoroughbreds” as Brumby Innes would have it – and thus to perpetuate an active colonialist settlement and expansion of the nation northward so that the Australian frontier itself may be pushed farther upward and outward.

Drake-Brockman’s texts avoid an engagement with a racialised spatial schema in the North – though an Aboriginal presence is acknowledged in *Men Without Wives*, and an Asian presence acknowledged in “The Blister.” Drake-Brockman doesn’t seek to engage head on with racial/spatial tensions by exploring the cracks in the fault line that constitute the Northern Black/White frontier. In this sense, she neatly sidesteps the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny. The competing cultural and land practices that inevitably take place in the North are much more strongly present in *Brumby Innes*, where Prichard makes a concerted effort to represent Aboriginal cultural practice (as problematic as one might argue this representation to be), and to acknowledge the violence inherent in competing claims to space and its range of Lefebvrian symbolic and representational practices. There is a conscious attempt to depict two separate and discrete cultures with their own range of spatial practices co-habiting the North on the very cusp of the Black/White frontier. The key point of friction – Joanne Tompkins’s dramatic unsettlement, the uncomfortable re-telling of national narratives – is explored in the text through the prism of sexual relations. Aboriginal women’s bodies become the currency of exchange, and the symbol of White attempts to violently contest, conquer and occupy the North itself.

The fitness of the White Man (and, more precariously, the White Woman) to occupy the Northern frontier is behind much of the social anthropological and quasi-scientific eugenic fieldwork popular in the 1920s and 1930s and being championed by exponents such as Cilento and Price (and, later, challenged by Elkin). This adds

weight to the notion of such themes being a reflection of national cultural preoccupations in the theatre of the time. I now outline, briefly, the thrust of such investigations before applying them to Louis Nowra's theatrical adaptation of Xavier Herbert's depiction of a fledgling Australian North in the Northern Territory in the 1930s that defiantly resisted such totalising and reductive visions of a monochrome Northern frontier.

The White Man in the Tropics: Reading "Anoli the Blind" and Capricornia through the Eugenics Debate

The political push for a White Australia in the lead-up to Federation was underpinned by the central irony that where the perceived threat of an Asian (cultural and military) invasion was greatest, insecurities about the ability of the "White Man" to survive and permanently settle were also at their peak. The nineteenth century had produced orthodox scientific opinion that the tropics were antipathetic to the "White Man's" constitution, and would, in fact, over time, induce physiological degeneracy in the Caucasian race. As David Walker points out:

[i]n an age before Pasteur, when the source of [...] deadly diseases [such as cholera and typhoid] remained unknown, contagion was often thought to arise from the heat itself. James Johnson expressed this view in *The Influence of Tropical Climates on European Constitutions* in 1836[...][and] warned that if a European was fortunate enough to survive his early years in India, his successors would *gradually degenerate*. (125; original emphasis)

The British colonial experience in India was the obvious source of such quasi-medical speculation, and this conventional wisdom was transferred to Australia when White settlement of the Northern tropics was undertaken in the final decades of the nineteenth-century. Key political and social commentators – including playwrights responsible for depicting and articulating the Northern tropics in the early twentieth century, Smith and Bedford amongst them – were, according to Walker, keen that

Australia not repeat the British practice of “reliance upon ‘servile natives’” (though perhaps for different reasons), and were convinced that the Australian tropics “must be developed by white labour even if the weight of expert opinion [...] was against this idea” (126).

There was, in other words, a political imperative for dispelling theories surrounding degeneracy and heat and the ability of the “White Man” to survive in the harsh “Black Man’s Zone” – even if, ultimately, this meant attempting to reconstitute it as White space. One fear that arose as this argument gained currency in Australia was that Whites would effectively have to “turn Black” in order to survive – an inversion that is given short parodic shrift in Nowra’s adaptation of *Capricornia*. Walker refers to examples of these anxieties taking place in public debate in the 1920s, splitting the orthodox opinion about whether long term Northern settlement was feasible or even desirable. Walker quotes a Dr Nesbit, who “argued that in the tropics a white man ‘must become a blackfellow, or at least a brunette’” (146); and he mentions that E W Cole “used similar logic to argue that a White Australia Policy could not be successful because white people in the tropics became ‘coloured’” (147).

As medical knowledge about bacteria and parasites increased, the argument surrounding heat and degeneracy fell out of favour, and the debate turned to militate instead in favour of Northern development. The restorative properties of sunlight were used as bait to lure fragile White women to the palliative tropics, in order to counter the view that physical discomfort from heat was too great a disincentive to head North. As Walker points out, “[t]he great climate debate persisted well into the 1930s” (151) and perpetuated the age old conundrum of sustainability. Whilst it may have become medically or eugenically possible for fragile European constitutions to survive in the tropics, they did not necessarily want to do so under such physically

exacting conditions. This set of factors produced a double irony: in the Northern Territory, particularly, where soil was less arable than in the fertile volcanic tableland and coastal country of North Queensland, Europeans were especially ineffective at maintaining their own health through a diet of fresh fruit and vegetables. “Now that Europeans seemed unable or unwilling to meet local requirements for fresh produce,” Walker claims, “it was proposed to allow the Chinese back in to re-establish their market gardens” (153).

A series of reports for and against permanent development and sustainability of the North again split public, political and scientific opinion. Grenfell Price, for instance, speaking on national radio in 1934, was unequivocal in his condemnation of what he regarded as futile speculation and government investment in development of the Northern Territory. His conclusion on the matter is worth quoting at length:

[O]ne would say that history and science provide the answer to those who ignorantly criticise our empty North and our policy of White Australia. The only parts of our tropics which any nation – white or coloured – can hope to settle closely are the coasts and highlands of eastern Queensland, and here we have already planted successful white industries and a white population which is apparently an unexpected lesson to the whole world. The remainder of North Australia is at best cattle country. We have poured out £17 000 000 in unsuccessful attempts to settle one portion – the Northern Territory. Agriculture, with coloured Chinese labour, has been an utter failure, and the Japanese very wisely refused our invitation when we invited them in. (11)⁴³

Price’s argument was, effectively, one for white purity – an emotive counter to the growing claims that non-White skilled labour was still essential for the region’s future. As the more socially progressive A. P. Elkin argued in 1946, the White Australia Policy had, by this time, become “a national dogma” (215), a founding tenet upon which Federation had been based and, indeed, upon which the very Australian national character was being defined. “That suggested modification of the policy,”

⁴³ Price argues that “[f]ew people now realise that in 1876-7 the Japanese Government emphatically refused an official offer by South Australia for an extensive Japanese settlement in the Northern Territory, including free transport for the first 200 Japanese” (8).

Elkin opines, “should be labelled heresy, is in keeping with its status as national dogma” (217). Price used Cilento’s thinking to draw his own conclusions about the North during the 1930s. Raphael Cilento, one of Queensland’s most eminent and patriotic historians and social scientists, believed that the efforts of the White settlers and farm workers in Queensland were an example to be emulated by other White tropical colonial ventures the world over. Writing in 1925, he believed that “Australia has the unique distinction of having bred up during the last seventy years a large, resident, pure-blooded white population under tropical conditions” (5), and that these pioneers were “dealing essentially with *two distinct problems*” (9; original emphasis): in order to survive the White Man had only to overcome questions of diet and physical discomfort.

Cilento and Price’s analyses are problematic for all sorts of reasons. Price, for example, believed the “aboriginal and half-caste problem” was one of the key “outstanding questions of North Australia” (11), and argued in favour of segregation of [full-blooded] “blacks, where it is possible, [...] in Melville Island and Arnheim [sic] Land” (11). He argues for the breeding out of “half castes” through intra-marriage and by marrying the “surplus girls to white people” (11). Price argues with some pride that “to the utter astonishment of the scientists of all nations, we established a working population of 150 000 white people in North Eastern Queensland” but this included the (by inference, dubious) “question of alien Italian penetration in the most Northern sugar districts, and it is very significant that in these areas foreigners or naturalised subjects number no less than 43 percent” (9). This is clearly the demographic and political framework within which Tomholt’s revenge melodrama, “Anoli the Blind” is written.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ In 2005, Adam Grossetti’s *Mano Nera* would follow the same framework.

Set in 1905, written in 1913⁴⁵ and published in 1936, at the height of the eugenics debate outlined above, Tomholt constructs the Italian community in the play as sinister Mafia-connected, vendetta-obsessed, overly emotive types whose voices are “as monotonous [...] as the landscape outside. And as maddening” (84). “Native superstition” (93) grips the isolated community and infiltrates their patch of bush, creating instead a “borderline of hell!” (95) in the otherwise White bush precinct. It is, effectively, a “dark” European threat to Australian “whiteness” – though not in any active way an anti-immigration polemic. In some senses the “colourful” Italian *milieu* is more a convenient backdrop for a good story than it is a political tract on Northern race relations. Much like Makeham’s reading of a “long, dry stage” in relation to Esson, Tomholt’s North Queensland bush is an isolated – almost heterotopic – “empty stage” where the “cry of the Queensland whip bird” shatters the silence and “only accentuates the utter loneliness of the place” (81). Rosa, the play’s tragic heroine, is alone in the bush hut and observes that the setting sun is “a ball of heat flung back over the hills[...] like a bursting heart” (82). It is thus also an environment, like Drake-Brockman and Prichard’s North Western Australia, that is hostile to women and which requires, to place it in the context of the eugenics debate of the time, adaptation to local conditions in order for survival to take place.

Rosa instead dreams of escape. She has blinded Anoli Ferari, her husband and “captor,” with a knife in a fit of Mediterranean passion, and is hoping her swarthy new suitor, Antonio, will deliver her from Hell. They are waiting for Peter the Carrier to arrive. He is the ferryman who will carry them, not across the Styx from Hades, but to the coast and on to a steamer that will take them South to Brisbane. Anoli’s preternatural Gothic antihero’s powers – his “other senses” are heightened as a result

⁴⁵ Although published in the 1930s and not performed earlier than this, there is a reference to it in *The Bulletin*’s Red Page on 16 January 1913 which suggests that Tomholt entered “Anoli the Blind” in a One Act Play competition at this time.

of his blindness – conspire to thwart escape. He kills Antonio in the dark, and Rosa is doomed to permanent exile in the wilderness.

The play is of interest to this thesis not only because of its rarity (in terms of being a Queensland text set in the North), but because it indicates the close relationship theatre has with the cultural politics of the time. All of the texts in this thesis, I would argue, perform the same function – of performing cultural politics – and this demonstrates the point of reading theatre as a basis for understanding the North itself. The North, in Tomholt's microcosm, is an isolated Gothic world in which the "dark" European Other is able to quietly enter the nation unobserved and reproduce the "sinister" cultural practices of Home. The North Queensland bush is transitioning, in a sense, from being the Black Man's Zone to the White Man's Home, and becomes a Dark European laboratory instead. The play engages with the broader Australian cultural politics of the era which sees the North as the liminal zone through which this incursion by the Other might occur.

To conclude the eugenics debate taking place in the region at the time, if Price was arguing for a separation of "pure" Black and White races in the North, or for a breeding out of "Brown" admixtures through intermarriage, Cilento, by contrast, believed there was a distinctive White Northern "type" evolving in regional isolation over the generations. This evolving Northern male would effectively become a social Darwinist kind of "tall and rangy" and "slow-moving" Superman able to "conserve his muscular heat-producing energy" ("Triumph" 74) with a gracefully-moving freckled female counterpart. Together, they would become the representation of a race "in a transition stage," (like my reading of Tomholt's "Dark" European heterotopic North Queensland) and provide clear evidence of there "being evolved

precisely what one would hope for, namely, a distinctive tropical type, adapted to life in the tropical environment in which it is set” (“Triumph” 74). As Walker concludes, today “theories about the effects of climate on racial character and civilisation are no longer analysed with the passion evident” (153) in debates such as those outlined above. Technological advances – air conditioning prime amongst them – have made tropical life every bit as feasible as settlement elsewhere. Yet this debate surrounding climate and race and White settlement of the North in the inter-war years of the twentieth century highlights “both the ambiguous nature of northern Australia well into the twentieth century, and the perceived close connection between climate, civilisation and racial character” (Walker 153).

It is within this socio-political environment that Xavier Herbert was advancing his own rambunctious and frequently unfashionable versions of a multi-chrome and racially inverted social hierarchy in the “unfeasible” frontier country of the Northern Territory in the 1930s. *Capricornia* is a sprawling great saga depicting inter-racial and social hierarchies within what Henry Reynolds might like to refer to as the “piebald North” of the 1930s. Set in the Port Zodiac (Darwin) and Red Ochre Station (Katherine) regions of the Top End, the novel was published in 1938 (the year it won the Sesquicentenary Library Prize), and Nowra’s adaptation was commissioned for and produced during the contentious Australian Bicentennial “celebrations” of 1988. I ironise the term “celebration” here, of course, because the Bicentenary was noted for its status as the focus of considerable Aboriginal protest, disputing whether White invasion/settlement was an occasion worthy of being marked by national rapture. The landmark event had the more politically progressive, but arguably no less divisive ancillary effect of drawing national attention to issues of race and cultural co-occupation of Australian spaces and histories. According to Helen Gilbert, Herbert’s

reputation as an avowed critic of Australian racism, and Nowra's status as one of "Australian theatre's most insistent anticolonial" voices (*Sightlines* 111) made them obvious bedfellows for Belvoir Street Theatre's "Radical Classics" season during that heated, portentous and exceedingly well-funded year of national self-reflection. The text thus becomes doubly interesting to this study as an "enactment" of national themes and dramas taking place outside of the world of the play, within the polity at large, and for a 1988 audience watching the 1930s being performed. Whilst the play can be read in this context (as Gilbert and Tompkins do) as a national thermometer for race relations and notions of hybridity and co-tenancy within Australian spatial/racial politics, this thesis summarises such analysis and then uses it to read the text for its articulation of a distinct and separate conceptual North.

Nowra chooses Norman Shillingworth's denial of his Aboriginal parentage as the play's central dispute, adroitly mirroring the tacit contemporary national debate being addressed beneath the patriotic veneer of the Bicentennial commemorations. In so doing, Nowra creates a theme of racial inversion and cultural topsy-turviness that seeks to debunk, or at least parody, notions of a White Australia as it is imagined to manifest in the social elites of the nation's far North. Race is an entirely fluid category in the world of Herbert's novel, and the performance text is infused with the political, scientific and cultural arguments encircling the whole question of Northern identity popular in the 1930s outlined earlier, including debates on: eugenics; miscegenation; the sustainability of White settlement in the tropics; inter-racial social justice issues; and the on-going omnipresence not just of Aboriginal, but of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Greek and other racial categories in the North. Where this thesis examines the text for such an articulation of a discrete Australian North, Gilbert focuses her analysis of the play on this issue of hybridity and argues that Nowra's interpretation

of *Capricornia* “celebrates miscegenation to the point of dislodging racism as its central subject,” and in so doing “threatens to radically destabilize imperial order” (*Sightlines* 112-113) within the settler society discourse Herbert uses as the target of his considerable scorn.

Norman’s initially innocent disavowal of his Aboriginality begins, in Nowra’s play, on the voyage by steamer North to Port Zodiac. He declares himself to be the son of a Javanese princess, and is taken at face value as such in the first instance; but the fantasy quickly dissolves as the ship heads farther North. The eugenics debate permeates the microcosm of the ship’s White first class section. An old man, spying Norman’s mimicry of a Balinese demon, declares, “[t]hey can ape the white men but they can never get our sense of humour. Genes win out” (7). If the ship is a closed study in racial prejudice that intensifies as it heads North, arrival in Port Zodiac institutionalises what has been an informal social and racial stratification in transit. The city is divided into heterotopic exclusion zones (which will be elaborated upon in Chapter Four) – discrete spaces where “Blacks,” “Coloureds,” and “Whites” are prohibited from commingling. Norman, for instance, is prevented from drinking in the front section of the public bar; the Aboriginal Compound is unseen off-stage space, represented only in performance by the sexually subversive catcalls of the women spying on Norman as he passes in the street; and the Mission is the equivalent of a religious indoctrination camp designed to “civilise” the half-caste girls, represented by polar opposites: the subversive Tocky, and the compliant Christobel.

It is in discussion with Mrs Hollower at the mission that Dr Aintee advances the Price-like 1930s eugenics ideology when he declares, “[t]he good thing about the Aborigine is that all signs of him will disappear in three generations of white matings” (26). As though taking Dr Aintee’s theory as licence for full sexual transgression, the

play is replete with characters intent on forming both furtive and open inter-racial sexual unions, and whose racially hybrid lineage renders strict demarcation and policing of race unstable. It is not just “Blackness in Aborigines” that is “a weak gene” (27), as Dr Aintee would have it; the notion of pure Whiteness is also under assault. If Norman is a Black man intent on denying his Aboriginality, he is surrounded by others intent on proving the inverse. Tobias, for instance, is a mentally unstable White man intent on rubbing red ochre into his skin in an effort to turn himself Black. His grasp on English language is being subsumed by thick Pidgin, leading Sally (a part Aboriginal woman) to conclude, “[t]he bush here send some white men crazy” (32). Northern spatialities are, effectively, held responsible here for confounding erstwhile racial certainties.

For Norman’s racially “pure” White sister Marigold, the North is also a source of degeneracy. She accounts for her urgent departure and marriage to the working class Steggle to Norman in the following critical passage:

Don’t you understand what is going to happen? This country will drag you down. It will corrode you. All these people here: no hoppers, madmen, killers.

[Looking at her purse.]

This purse was made out of a snake. It was made by a man who has just killed a Chinaman. I keep it with me to remind myself what a disgusting place this is.

[Ferociously.]

This is a shit-hole!

[Norman is amazed to hear her swear.]

You’ll end up going completely Abo. (24)

Norman does, in fact, go “completely Abo” once he accepts and reconciles himself to the full reality of his illegitimate and miscegenetic origins. But rather than this signalling a long-term descent into degeneracy, Norman’s reconciliation with his Aboriginality allows him to find (albeit ultimately thwarted) love with Tocky. And, for a while, he successfully manages a cattle station built entirely on non-White

labour. White justice threatens to unravel him in the end. He is framed for killing a White man; and by the time he extricates himself from the corrupt White legal system, Tocky has died waiting for him. The play's central romantic union is shattered, and Herbert's political indictment of racial and social hierarchies and the White legal system in the North is certainly damning in this regard. Yet his inversion of propriety and of the very same hierarchy he and Nowra lampoon provide ample scope for destabilisation of the imperial order in the manner that Gilbert suggests.

For Tompkins, the (Northern) landscape itself is the source of this inversion of the social order, but one in which concealment and absence are played out to the detriment of full indigenous individuation. Because "sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women produce children who are disowned and whose privileges as human beings are severely curtailed," Tompkins argues, "there is little room for performing the Jacobs/Gelder uncanny" (*Unsettling* 61). For Tompkins, the landscape "robs its inhabitants of identity" and subsumes Aboriginal characters into dominant White discourses and practices. The North thus becomes the melting pot in which national anxieties about race relations are simmering. Both 1930s eugenics and Bicentennial era race politics for the nation as a whole become concentrated and projected onto the North at a distance safe enough to suggest that if these difficult and challenging national narratives are taking place "up" or "out there," than "we" can be seen to be dealing with them "here." Read in this light, the performance text aids the process of sublimation discussed throughout this thesis in which non-indigenous audiences in the major metropolitan centres are able to project their racial/spatial anxieties onto the North and construct it as the site of such "play." In relation to race and space, the North becomes the site of the national repressed.

The ruling White elite that oppresses Norman as a Black Man, and excluded and mocked him when he was operating under the mistaken belief he was descended from Asian aristocracy are still in place by play's end, but can be read as a manifestation of Southern White social infrastructure imposed upon the "piebald North." So too the text's ostensible study of Northern racism *for* Southern audiences can similarly be read as a strategic manoeuvre Herbert and Nowra might deploy to cause wider Australian audiences to address problematic issues of race and identity that apply equally to the comfortable middle class urban (and, apparently, White) South. Nowra deftly allows Norman to dismantle the notion of the North being a spatial periphery – a marginal frontier somehow disconnected from mainstream Australian ideology and accountability, by telling Tocky:

A year ago I was in Melbourne, working in the locomotive yards as a mechanic. My world was one of streets, electric lights, pictures. Now, here I am. On a cattle station. My girlfriend is a half-caste, and she's pregnant. I feel like I've fallen down a hole and ended up in topsy-turvy land. (93)

But Norman's topsy-turviness is arrival, rather than banishment. His courtroom declaration seems as eloquent a summary as any of Nowra's tacit agenda for *Capricornia* – its "message" for Southern audiences, if one likes – and for the nation during its orgy of self-congratulation in its Bicentennial year. It is also as fit a summary as any of the thesis Herbert might also have been advancing for a wider White Australian readership in 1938. In the play's penultimate scene, Norman declares:

I want to stay. See, things up here are very clear. Crystal clear. In the big cities down south you don't see Australia clearly. Up here you do. You see all the hypocrisy, lies and violence that have made this country. It's not the top end of Australia, it's the very centre of it. (109)

The margin has become the Centre, and the North is cast as a microcosmic reflection of the nation's disowned fears, anxieties and prejudices. I return here to one of this study's central theses: that the North serves a crucial cultural function – and one can see it most explicitly played out through theatre, that most performative form of cultural expression. The North becomes metonymic space upon which the nation's abject or disowned cultural crises are projected and performed. The North, to come back to the thesis advanced by Stratton at the beginning of this chapter, is the site of the South's repressed. Theatre is central to the way in which this psychological manoeuvre finds expression inasmuch as the play is articulating contemporary (1980s) national anxieties about race and space through its reconstruction and re-enactment of the North of the 1930s. Not only is the North metonymic for the nation as a whole in this schema, but the past is replayed and re-enacted – recreated, in fact – in order to make a political point about the zeitgeist of nation during which *Capricornia* was produced. The play activates, updates and recontextualises the novel. As with the other plays in this chapter, Australia's shifting cultural, racial and spatial relations find expression through the theatre of the era to summarise, demonstrate and enact national anxieties and points of friction – the drama of the age.

Chapter Three

The North as Asian Buffer and The Black Man's Zone

If collective national narratives surrounding, and projected onto, the North in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had focussed on invasion anxieties by a perceived hostile Asian Other, World War Two effectively saw these fears realised. Fear of Japanese, Chinese, and even German, invasion and colonisation of the North (or of Australia *via* the North) had regularly oscillated according to the international political climate throughout the half century leading up to Japan's attack of North Australia in 1942. Indeed, these were the simmering anxieties underpinning the White Australia Policy (WAP) and which fuelled the imperative for the policy's bipartisan induction into Australian law in the first place.

This Chapter examines the WAP's gradual decline in favour over the period from World War Two to its official abolition by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1973. It begins by analysing the obvious ways in which the War, and in particular the Japanese bombing of Darwin and other settlements in the North, compounded national anti-Asian sentiment and reaffirmed the North as the repository of national invasion/infiltration anxieties, best exemplified by the Brisbane Line Controversy. Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles* (1948), set in the Top End during the War, is then discussed for its intriguingly laconic and indifferent counterpoint to such national apprehension about Asian wartime infiltration. Jill Shearer's *Shimada* (1989), set alternately in World War Two and the late 1980s in a North Queensland coastal town, is briefly examined within the framework of a socio-political summary of the decades following the War to analyse some of the problematic ways in which the text depicts the postwar generation's perpetuation of lingering Japanese invasion anxieties; and to

illustrate how the North continues to be imagined as the national stage upon which such anxieties might be articulated and acted out.

By way of counterpoint to *Rusty Bugles*, this analysis of the North as a violent (or, antithetically, innocuous) testing ground of hyper-masculinity is book-ended with John Powers's *The Last of the Knucklemen* (1973), set in a far North Western Australian mining camp. This text is used to frame the above analysis in order to identify a continuum in the North's coding as a "battleground" and frontier – a buffer zone between civilisation and its chaotic, lawless antithesis – once national fears and fantasies of Asian (or at least Japanese) invasion and colonisation have subsided by the year of the WAP's demise.

The final section of Chapter Three returns to an investigation of the ongoing ways in which the North is configured as a frontier – or nexus – between Black and White Australia in the second half of the twentieth century. As outlined in Chapter Two, and indeed, throughout this thesis, the North is frequently troped as the "Black Man's Zone" and as such becomes the backdrop against which national racial complexes are acted out. The broader domestic and international political climate tends to dictate the precise periods during which the North is perceived as either a frontier between Black and White Australia, or as a buffer between Australia and a hostile Asia. An internal domestic-settler invader narrative runs contiguously with Australia's ongoing invasion narrative, most recently exemplified by the rise of Hansonism in the late 1990s, and by the post September 11 "War on Terror" refugee crisis of the early twenty-first century. Frederick Bert Vickers' *Stained Pieces* (1949) is the theatre text through which this cultural analysis is read and applied.

The final section of this Chapter explores ways in which this latter narrative shifts according to government policy and other socio-political or cultural imperatives

operating over the second half of the twentieth century, from the assimilationist era in indigenous policy to the Land Rights era of the 1970s-1990s. These narratives are played out especially in the country's North, as exemplified through Gordon Francis's *God's Best Country* (1987) and David Malouf's *Blood Relations* (1988). Part of the reason the North becomes the canvas upon which Black/White tensions are imagined is not just because the North is where the heaviest relative proportion of Aboriginal Australians live, but because the South in part seeks to hold its fantasies and anxieties about Aboriginal Australia – whether these are pejorative or progressive, conservative or liberal, punitive or romantic – “out there” in mythic Northern frontier space. Even for a progressive, liberal White (or other non-indigenous) Australian “us” in the metropolitan Centre who wish to see Aboriginal dispossession and systemic abuse remedied, in the post-Mabo era considered here, the North again becomes spatialised as the canvas upon which national racial fears and fantasies are projected.

Evolving from early twentieth-century depictions of the North as the “Black Man's Zone,” the updated formulation of the North in racial terms a century later sees it becoming reduced and binarised as either idealised, romanticised Black space, or as racially prejudiced redneck space. Each configuration deftly exculpates the South. If the North is still the Black Man's Zone – even if a romanticised and politically progressive version thereof – *and* the site of the nation's active anti-Aboriginal cultural practice and government policy, then the South is, by inference, neither prejudiced nor Black. Urban middle-class observers conveniently imagine themselves as both the nation's liberal humanist conscience and yet to somehow view the metropolitan Centre as deracinated: not White, but not Black either. In this equation, the South is configured as “real” space, as against the North's more nebulous constitution. Heading into the twenty-first century (the subject of Chapter Five's

analysis), the North becomes concomitantly idealised Black and Multicultural space and in many ways actively seeks to constitute itself as such, yet also racist space against which the South deftly defines itself in the polar opposite.

I offer this cultural history as a means of reading and understanding the selected theatre texts as being representative of the North during this post-war period terminating with the socially significant Mabo decision. These plays also demonstrate theatre's centrality in terms of its engagement with not just Northern, but national political and cultural life.

Updating Invasion Anxieties in the Mid Twentieth-Century: World War Two and the Brisbane Line Controversy

Beyond the cusp of a new millennium, it is easy to dismiss the litany of twentieth-century fears, phobias and national paranoias as a series of claustrophobic fancies. However, it would be easier to maintain such totalising ahistorical generalisations were it not that Australians in the post-"9/11" era are also living in irrational and raw-nerved times, replete with their own assortment of both fresh and recycled cultural prejudices, with political and media articulations aimed at reinforcing the nation's (indeed, the Western world's) present sense of insecurity. In the 2007 federal election campaign Senator Bill Heffernan, Minister for North Australia and Chair of the government taskforce studying development of water and land resources in the North, conflated Asian invasion with climate change anxieties. In an article for *The Bulletin* (quoted in *The Australian* by unnamed sources), Heffernan warned that "underpopulated northern Australia has to be developed and settled to avoid [invasion by Asian refugees who have run out of water because of climate change]. 'Without being alarmist, it would be better for us to do it than letting someone else'" ("North

Faces Invasion”). While this is obviously just one politician’s view,⁴⁶ its articulation and wide media circulation during the context of a federal election campaign suggests that it had the capacity to tap into national fears at a time in which the country was “at risk” of changing hands to a government presumably “weaker” on the issue of border security.

A current difference between the fears held at the turn of this century and those held at the turn of the previous one, is that 2002 Bali bombing and 2004 Australian embassy attack in Jakarta notwithstanding, the previous century’s fears of hostile Northern attack were eventually realised – albeit half a century after they were initially popularly expressed. Darwin, along with a number of other ports in Western Australia and Northern Queensland, were bombed by the Japanese in 1942, during World War Two. As Julianne Schultz indicates, “[w]hen the Japanese bombed Darwin in February 1942, the threat [of an Asian invasion] was made manifest and deep seated race memories of Asian invaders quickly came to the fore” (7-8). Schultz issues the compelling contention, though, that the bombing cannot be assumed as evidence of a Japanese intention to invade and occupy the North, although this apprehension is “one that quickly gained a life of its own as the link between anticipation, propaganda and observation embellished the threat” (8). She introduces Peter Stanley’s argument that the attack on Darwin has “assumed a greater significance in memory and imagination than it deserves” (8) as part of a current project of reassessment of the Brisbane Line controversy from within academia and, indeed, the military itself. Stanley is principal historian at the Australian War Memorial. The debate surrounding the Japanese bombing of Northern Australia and the Brisbane Line controversy falls roughly into two ideological camps: the left-wing

⁴⁶ Senator Heffernan did, however, claim in the article to be sharing the view of Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty (“North”).

reading, which supports the theory of a plan to surrender the North to the Japanese as evidence of a class betrayal of the rural North on the part of big business interests in the South; and a right-wing reading which seeks to “rescue” the plan from being a Conservative Menzies and Lyon governmental plot, attributing responsibility for the strategy instead to the Curtin Labor government.

On the progressive side of politics, Drew Cottle’s view is that the Brisbane Line is part of the “left’s mythology,” the popular appeal of which faded during the Curtin government’s tenure. Curtin’s “implementation of industrial and military conscription and rationing measures to win the anti-fascist war during 1942” served, according to Cottle, to quieten working-class fears that the Labor government could be part of any such plan to surrender the country to the Japanese. Cottle cites Eddie Ward (Labor’s Minister for Labour and National Service) as a recalcitrant voice within the party’s Left faction, whose accusations of a Menzies conservative conspiracy to enact the Brisbane Line resulted in a Royal Commission which found that no such conspiracy – even if momentarily entertained – was ever official government policy. Cottle’s own view, ultimately, is that “Japanese imperialism and its relations with an influential group within Sydney’s business and financial community” (21) constitutes evidence sufficient to reappraise the mythological status of the Brisbane Line and concludes that neither the “conventional nor ‘popular’ interpretations, despite their different presuppositions, methods, aims and audiences, have investigated the Brisbane Line in a context of dominant class interests and the rivalries and ambitions of imperialism” (30). Such “conventional” and “popular” interpretations of the debate include those propounded by Paul Burns and Carl Bridge, the latter of whom rejects Cottle’s argument as “a somewhat bizrre throw-back to this now discredited [Communist] tradition” of historicism (Footnote 2, 371). Bridge

supports Burns's view that even if a Brisbane Line as such never existed as an "Antipodean equivalent to the Maginot or Siegfried lines," it did still exist in the form of a contingency plan "prepared by the Australian army to concentrate its main forces in the vital industrial areas around Sydney, Newcastle and Port Kembla" (379). Bridge cites Burns to argue that this was in fact a plan "in existence under both the Menzies and Curtin Governments and was only abandoned when American and other reinforcements made it redundant" (379). Burns provides the most comprehensive historical and political background leading up to the controversy, which is worth summarising in somewhat greater detail here.

In the decades leading up to World War Two, apprehension about Japanese aggressive intent in the Pacific region had been fuelled by a number of factors. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance, initially signed in 1902, and renewed in 1905 and 1911 had, according to Burns, been designed to allay Australian fears about its vulnerability in the region and to assure it of the British Empire's protective Australasian intent. By 1914, however, conservative Prime Minister Joseph Cook was "complaining about British failure to establish a Far Eastern Fleet in Pacific waters, where Japan now more than held the balance of power over Britain, Australia and the United States combined" (3). When Australian forces ousted German colonial territories in the South Pacific during World War One, these were ceded to the Japanese navy at Britain's request. The Japanese seized the German North Pacific territories, and the Marshall, Caroline and Marianas Islands, though "[u]nder the terms of capitulation of German New Guinea, these islands had been surrendered to Australia. The Japanese refused to give them up, thus convincing Australian authorities of Japan's future aggressive intent" (3). Burns cites "Japanese atrocities during the Sino-Japanese War[...] especially the rape of Nanking in central China, described by the Melbourne

Herald as a ‘fearsome warning’ for the peoples in the Pacific region, Australia included” as making defence preparedness “a major issue in the September-October 1937 federal election” (15).

Burns queries the “anti-militaristic mood of the Australian Labor Party” (4) throughout the inter-war years, but points out that in the 1936 Labour Party Federal Conference, home defence became a key plank in its political platform, contrasting markedly with the conservative United Australia Party (UAP) Government’s “policy of dependence on the Imperial Navy” (15). It was in this political context that the so-called Brisbane Line Controversy arose, and I focus on the circumstances of its emergence in order to analyse its ramifications for mid-twentieth century *symbolic* (as well as purportedly *literal*) militaristic renderings of the Australian North.

The ALP first raised the mooted existence of the Brisbane Line at their fiftieth Federal Labor Conference in 1939 following inside reports of the Lyons (conservative) Government’s 1936 Defence Committee report. Burns reports:

Seconding a motion proposed by W. Forgan-Smith, the Queensland Premier, that Labor in government would defend all states, E. M. Hanlon told the conference that he had been informed by RSSILA [Returned Sailors and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia] members that there was no provision for the defence of northern Queensland in current defence preparations. He had been asked by high-ranking military officers to “prepare a plan for the total destruction of all property in northern Queensland in the event of an attack by an aggressor.” Specifically, he alleged that Australian’s “first line of defence commenced a few miles outside of Brisbane.” (19)

The ALP were, according to Burns, politicising the issue and perpetuating smoke and mirrors accusations of a Menzies-inspired Brisbane Line plan in which the Australian North would be surrendered to any hypothetical invading forces. Burns’s study is aimed in no small part at establishing the unsubstantiated nature of the ALP efforts to paint the conservative parties as perpetrators of the Brisbane Line plan and to clear Menzies of any association with the ensuing controversy, which saw the rumours of

the plan gain sufficient traction within the community to bring about Menzies's electoral defeat in 1941.

General Douglas MacArthur visited Australia in 1942⁴⁷ and immediately weighed into the controversy. Speaking of the visit twenty years later, MacArthur claimed Australian Chiefs of Staff had informed him of the Brisbane Line straight away and had:

[t]raced a line generally along the Darling River, from Brisbane, midway up the eastern shoreline to Adelaide on the south coast[...] Such a plan [...] involved the sacrifice of three-quarters or more of the continent, the great northern and western reaches of the land. Behind this so-called Brisbane Line were the four or five most important cities and the large proportion of the population [...] As the areas to the north fell to the enemy, detailed plans were made to withdraw from New Guinea and lay desolate the land above the Brisbane Line. Industrial plants and utilities in the Northern Territory would be dynamited, military facilities would be levelled, port installations rendered useless and irreparable. (MacArthur qtd in Burns 99)

Burns questions the veracity of the MacArthur claims, countering that a number of factors – political and military – had combined to instead create the false impression of a Brisbane Line, and which was used at various times by the Americans and the ALP for their own political ends. Despite his own tacit political bias – to establish the Brisbane Line “myth” as an ALP “canard” (204) and to clear Menzies of his “wrongful” association with the left-wing conspiracy – his conclusions about the reasons why the “myth” resounded so spectacularly with the Australian electorate are of key interest to this thesis, and are thus worth quoting at length. Burns states:

One of the main causes of the acceptance of the “Brisbane Line” myth by a whole generation of Australians was the 150 year-old fear about the “yellow peril” looming above Australia's northern shores. We had at our disposal a large, vulnerable land, ideal for settlement by the supposed teeming millions of Asia. Remote from all forms of military and naval assistance in the Northern Hemisphere,⁴⁸ fearful and aware that the “White Australia” policy

⁴⁷ He entered the country at Batchelor Airstrip, in the Northern Territory – only a matter of kilometres away from the setting of Elliott's *Rusty Bugles*.

⁴⁸ Note Burns' unconscious capitalising of the European ‘North’ here whilst the Australian “northern reaches” remain curiously under-emphasised in the same paragraph.

was a cause of resentment to our Asian neighbours, Australians could see no way in which the whole of the Australian land mass could be defended. Consequently, belief in a “Brisbane Line” was our barometer of fear about the vulnerability of the continent[....] With the rise of Japan as a military power there was in the Australian people *a necessity for the invention of the Brisbane Line*. (200; emphasis added)

Peter Stanley goes a step further and makes the claims that in fact the Japanese never intended to invade and occupy Australia at all. The Darwin bombing was a pre-emptive strike aimed at incapacitating the Australian defence forces and any counter-attack they might launch on the Japanese in Southeast Asia, and Timor specifically. Stanley claims that the Japanese had “considered the idea [of invasion, in 1942] and rejected it” (19). The invasion threat was, according to Stanley, a furphy generated by the Curtin government:

in order to motivate the Australian people to work, fight and save. Curtin, along with other Allied leaders, had learned of Japan’s actual plans in May 1942 but could not disclose that invasion was not planned (even if he’d wanted to) because that would have revealed that the Allies were able to read Axis codes. The invasion myth had remained alive for 60 years, abetted by the seeming need of Australians to dramatise the situation in 1942. (19-20)

Of more immediate interest than whether or not the Brisbane Line was official state policy, and precisely where it ran, is, as Burns suggests, the Brisbane Line’s mythic, psychological appeal. As Stanley concludes, the Japanese invasion narrative served cultural and political aims in which Darwin (and the North) is constructed as “a symbol of vulnerability and threat, and [as the site] of a self-interested, parochial conflict against chimerical foes” (24). I am interested in what this readiness to accept the notion of the Japanese invasion and Brisbane Line theory says particularly about the way in which the North – or as Rutherford might have it, the Great Australian Emptiness – is regarded in the broad Australian imaginary.

The immediate conclusion one draws here is of the North’s tacit dispensability to the rest of the country. The Brisbane Line controversy pinpoints internal national

ideological and political conflicts about dismemberment of the whole “national body.” The undeniable impression created by the prospect of ceding large tracts of the nation’s inessential outer extremities to a perceived hostile Other, is of the amputation of a gangrenous limb so that the body proper might be saved from contagion or disease. Excision of the North was a life-saving operation. The inference here, of course, is that the metropolitan South-Eastern seaboard houses the body national’s vital core. If the North had been troped for the previous half century as the industrialised South’s buffer between the nation’s “heart” and the perceived hostile Other threatening viral attack from without, then Japan’s wartime incursion into the Northern liminal zone – the White/Yellow frontier – suddenly saw the North regarded as an appendix: an expendable, empty mass that, if ceded, would absorb the hostile intruder and save the White body national.

The double inference here, of course, is that the North was empty, as has consistently been the case throughout imperial Australian history. A pocketful of racially hybrid sea ports aside, the extensive Aboriginal population dotted throughout the North is either elided altogether; deemed not worthy of the effort by being “saved;” or, at worse, a problem best handed over to the invading forces. It may well have been the case that Northern evacuation plans also included remote Aboriginal communities. Certainly, Arnhem coastal communities, for instance, were involved in the nation’s armed defence during World War Two and are belatedly being acknowledged in that capacity. But whether through omission on the Federal Government’s part or on Burns’s part, his analysis focuses solely on mooted military plans for primary evacuation of the major Northern White population and trade centres. Conversely, it may well be assumed that part of the alleged plans to surrender the North to the Japanese may have contained an underlying assumption that the vast

empty spaces that had proven so inhospitable since European occupation would prove equally as inhospitable to the invading forces and would engorge or absorb them into Rutherford's Great Australian Emptiness. Either way, there is a tacit assumption here of expendability; or of a vast geographic, cultural and semiotic nothingness separating the civilised, industrialised South from Asia.

The final point to be made here by way of summary of the import of the Brisbane Line controversy to this thesis is, as Stanley aptly points out, the fact that “almost all the fabulous incidents [in World War Two] occurred in the North, a mystic place that most Australians still know little of” (23). The events of the Second World War served to heighten rather than lessen the North's appeal as mythic space, a phenomenon that theatre depicting the region during this era soon went on to reiterate and imprint in the popular urban imagination.⁴⁹

Wartime Theatre in the North: The Rusty Bugles Phenomenon

It is within this context of the North as a geo-cultural wartime liminal space that now frames an analysis of Sumner Locke Elliott's *Rusty Bugles*. In his preface to the 1988 Currency edition of the play, included in the programme for the original 1948 Independent Theatre Sydney production, Elliott neatly sums up both the play's documentary intent and its symbolic rendering of the “great Northern Territory of Australia” (vii). In accounting for the work's non-Aristotelian realist structure, Elliott explains that “[t]he six months' action of the play is exactly the time that I myself spent in the Territory in this lonely strip of barren and seemingly endless sandy waste of ant hills and stunted trees – thick, hot, red sand in the winter time and a sea of mud

⁴⁹ For theatre that situates its drama around the Brisbane Line controversy, see Margery Forde's *Snapshots From Home* (1995), set in Brisbane, or more recently, Kate Mulvaney's *The Danger Age* (2008), set in the town of Kalbarri in Western Australia. Both plays deal with settings and *topoi* too far South for this thesis's discursive parameters.

during the dreaded Wet” (vii). In describing the geographical North as a great empty wasteland, Elliott also tropes the activity or cultural use of that space as being similarly discursively represented. In accordance with Lefebvre’s conceptual spatial triad, Elliott demonstrates that the social practice taking place within the representational space is similarly troped as infertile and futile. The “real” action of the War took place off-shore, and farther to the North. In the North Australian liminal zone, “[w]e never saw a single Jap plane, we were never bombed, machine-gunned or sniped at like our pals in New Guinea, who were never free of excitement, we thought. We were the backwash. No one knew we existed and yet we did – several hundred of us in this wasted red dust bowl” (vii). Peter Stanley’s analysis of the North during this period equates neatly with Elliott’s. He laments that:

Instead of being the place where Australia was attacked, Darwin could have figured as the base for a great offensive in which Australian, British and American divisions liberated the Dutch Indies and beyond perhaps a year sooner than they were. Such a vision was not to be. Once the bombs stopped falling, Darwin became a tropical backwater, evoked by Sumner Locke Elliott’s powerful play *Rusty Bugles*. It was a place of tinea where men went troppo: where the root of the troops’ frustration was that Darwin was where the war wasn’t. (23)

This theme of the Top End being an unliveable hell-hole, a vortex, a limbo or a geo-cultural kind of heterotopic space forms the basis of the play’s drama, and is repeated in various tropes and guises throughout the play.⁵⁰ Elliott’s “documentary” drama unfolds like a six-month military sentence in which no “action” as such occurs. This all happens off-shore, on the islands to the North of Australia. The drama is instead reduced to the interpersonal power plays that stem from isolation, inactivity, physical discomfort and boredom, all of which fester in the cauldron of the Northern

⁵⁰ The notion of heterotopic sub-space is developed further in relation to Darwin in Chapter Four. For the present discussion, suffice it to say that Foucault’s notion of heterotopia, as outlined in Chapter One, refers to liminal space which, sometimes temporarily becomes the site of subversive or marginalised social practices that operate parallel to or even within other formal more socially sanctioned areas of “normal” cultural practice.

wastelands. The major source of plot tension stems from the endless Beckett-like waiting the men must endure while they anticipate replacement from Southern recruits. An end to the War itself does not seem to figure in the soldiers' estimation.

Rod, the play's ersatz interloper – the new recruit – is told “[t]his is the greatest bastard of a place on Earth. You never get out of here, mate, I’m drummin’ you” (8). The Top End, under the auspices of the military, is troped consistently in this way by its refusal to adhere to regular chronologies and by its absences. In defining the North as inverted space, it is contiguously devoid of the factors which constitute civility, even as it is overlooked as the site of dehumanising action in the form of war. The Ordnance Depot operates, for instance, as a heterotopic sub-community. It is a space of carnivalesque inversion or hybridity in which authority is mocked, strong communities are formed in adversity, and new forms of sexuality and personal relationships are gestured to. Even the rigid internal hierarchic military system of complex laws and protocols breaks down in the “unreal” North. Rod is rapidly educated about the habitual travesties of justice that distinguish the Depot’s internal system of order. Authority is abused in the absence of military activity, reduced to petty and anarchic personal obsessions and vendettas. Rod is told that any charge their commanding officer makes against them “is a death sentence.” Resisters are sent to Brooks Creek, “the Stalag of the Territory” where men regularly suicide, attempt to flee South, or go “nuts” (19). The North sends men mad, and its overwhelming heat and isolation prevent effective escape. There is a pervasive underlying sense of futility, not just with the dehumanising effects of the military system and the war, but surrounding the North itself.

As Rod resigns himself to his term of duty and familiarises himself with the North, nature remains hostile and alien. The dingoes sound like “a lot of kids being

scalded to death.” At night particularly, time passes slowly, and the landscape is alien.

Rod declares:

Gosh, what stars! I’ve never seen nights like this down South. It’s as though they were blazing right into you. They’re like drops of ice. *[Pause.]* I always feel there’s something insane about walkin’ up and down a road at four in the morning with the rest of the place asleep. Makes you feel a bit unreal, doesn’t it? [...] I can’t see much sense in it myself. It’s crazy. We stand for four hours in the middle of the Never Never, ten thousand miles away from anything, to guard a few old sheds...from what? (47)

The distance from action the North facilitates allows the men to see through the sham of wartime profligacy, racketeering, bureaucracy and politics. So whilst it is configured and consistently troped as unreal space by virtue of its absence of law, justice, action, women, civility, comfort and temperance, the North’s liminal status also provides the men – much as it provided Norman Shillingsworth in Nowra’s adaptation of *Capricornia* – with an outsider’s perspective of Australian meta-narratives: in this case the politics of nationalism and war. The men may rue the inactivity of being denied participation of the “real dinkum war” in the islands to the North, and of being relegated to the nation’s “forgotten regions” (83), but while they sit and wait for the Wet to descend, or the replacements to arrive, or the war to end, there is an eventual fatalism that permeates the compound by the play’s conclusion. The unreal space becomes home in a temporary sort of way: familiar, yet alien at the same time. The men are concomitantly at home and in exile. Vic declares:

O.K. I’m not going on the leave draft. Well, O.K. I know there’s blokes up [further] North now who’ve got more worries on their mind than leave...that wake up wondering if it’s the last time they’ll ever wake up...I’m safe...I sleep at night...I watch the sun and stars...It’s a pleasant way to rot in the sun looking at an anthill – well, it isn’t painful anyway, so what the hell. (79)

Rusty Bugles played to Sydney audiences only three years after the war’s end, and could only corroborate, in this sense, a Southern constituency’s perception of life –

and Australian spaces – north of the Brisbane Line as being troped in waste, emptiness, barrenness and expendability

Despite *Rusty Bugles*' inherent disrespect for internal military power schema and taxonomies, it was controversial primarily (like Prichard's *Brumby Innes*) for its "blasphemous" and "indecent" (Northern?) language and idiom. A censorship row provided the opening season with unplanned publicity, ensuring in no small part a run successful enough to warrant a tour of the Southern states – both bush and metropolitan centres in all of the Australian states – and New Zealand. The only Australian jurisdiction not to have played host to a professional production of the play remains, ironically, the Northern Territory – to this day. The play is regarded as an Australian classic. H G Kippax's *Sydney Morning Herald* review of the New Theatre's 1979 remount declared the original production "historic" because it was "the first Australian play to win a national audience after the arrival of the talkies:" and "was a portent, the precursor of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*" (xxx Elliott).

Interestingly then, Australia's first two most successful postwar plays, *Rusty Bugles* and *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, were both pieces that fictionalised and mythologised the deep North for Southern audiences. It reaffirms in this sense one of the central tenets of this thesis: that theatre itself matters, and can be considered as being central to formative perceptions of the North for Southern audiences during the postwar period. Along with *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, it is the most successful and extensively toured and performed Australian work of the postwar era. While much theatre historicism focuses on both plays' achievements in terms of depicting Australian characters, idiom and settings, this thesis also reclaims the texts as being seminal in their depiction and symbolic configuration of a distinctive Australian North. Whilst troping the Northern Territory and Far North Queensland differently in

specific details, and whilst the latter was not represented as on-stage space in *Doll's mise en scène*, the combination of representations suggest the readiness with which metropolitan audiences were able to constitute the North as mythic space, and as an extension of the broad cultural imaginary: a playing space on which to project broad national anxieties and masculine “frontier” hopes about Rutherford’s Great Australian Emptiness stemming in turn from the growing claustrophobia of postwar suburban repression.

The North also potentially becomes the land of “frontier” expansion and escape from suburbia in this equation. After the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries’ national anxiety about Asian invasion and contamination via the North had subsided, it was safe for the great Northern “wasteland” – the site of what Freud might refer to as the nation’s repressed, or what Rutherford might refer to as Lacan’s national “thing” or absence – to reflect the shifting cultural preoccupation of the 1950s and 1960s and beyond. The Northern frontier shifts again and becomes defined in contradistinction to (or as a projection of) the moral and manifest constrictions of burgeoning metropolitan suburbia. The North thus becomes a lawless, masculinist testing ground; or fantasised leisure space; or an uncultured wasteland; or, again, the Black Man’s Zone. I trace the latter series of configurations throughout the second half of the twentieth century over the course of the remainder of this thesis. I now examine the notion of the North as masculine frontier space, in order to connect my readings of Elliott and Lawler with John Power’s *The Last of the Knucklemen*.

The North as Masculine Frontier

The Last of the Knucklemen was first performed in November 1973. Hence, this play and *Rusty Bugles* effectively trace theatrical representations of the North from World

War Two to the year the White Australia Policy (WAP) was abolished. There is also another unconscious instance of theatrical book-ending taking place if the text is aligned and imagined as a postscript to Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. At the end of that play, Barney and Roo head back North – this time to a different North, a kind of über North in the nation's remote untrammelled far North-West – to retreat into an utopic space, devoid of women, and free of the constraints of “civil” society where urbanisation and moral convention prohibit them from sustaining their youthful delusions of idealised masculinity. The North is a hyper-masculine zone in which a weathered code of mateship will, they believe, allow them to maintain notions of themselves as authentic men: they believe their bodies, language and psychosexual development will find a sympathetic environment in which to express themselves unimpeded by feminine scrutiny and censure in the mythic realms of the deepest reaches of Western Australia or the Northern Territory.⁵¹

Similarly, Elliott's Ordnance Depot in the Top End is heterotopic space in which the power hierarchies and the laws and conventions of external “civilised” – certainly “civic” – Australian culture do not hold sway. It is, again, a hyper-masculine space entirely devoid of feminine incursion, aside from the Rita Hayworth pictures screened on film night, which are themselves regarded as an unbearable reminder of the sexual release prohibited in the homosocial (and inherently homophobic) military cultural *milieu*. The women are all “down South,” accessible only via the Overland Telegraph line. In their absence, Bruce Parr argues that subliminal homoerotics – according to the laws of temporary inversion associated with heterotopic space – are provisionally activated by way of substitution. Lawler and Elliott thus configure the

⁵¹ There is, though, a strong female presence in the play's “real” North during their youth. Barney's mistresses and the series of women who judge him becoming increasingly sexually inadequate as the “Cassa of the North” are all part of the world from which he appears to want to escape when he heads into the hyper-masculine North in WA and the NT with Roo at play's end.

North alternately, yet contemporaneously, as utopic and dystopic space respectively, though they are troped quite similarly in specific detail. In each case, there is a strong sense of social Darwinist adaptation being necessary for survival in the brutal expanses of the isolated mythic North.

Powers's bunkhouse in the North-Western Australian mining camp operates similarly to Elliott's dystopic/heterotopic hyper masculine Northern stage, in which the absence of mitigating external civilising influences – law, justice, culture, femininity, comfort, temperance – creates a “survival of the fittest” ethos where adaptation in the form of masculine strength, youth and mental alacrity and endurance determine physical worth and social order in the play's internal *mise en scène*. It is the sort of work in the sort of camp where one might imagine Barney and Roo to have found themselves as they headed up the Western Australian coast on the cusp of middle age in 1955. They would be in their early sixties by the time of Powers's play, the same age as the character Methuselah, who acts as *Knucklemen's* exemplar of ageing and its concomitant effects on masculinity and survival. Methuselah is, in a sense, the eponymous last of the knucklemen, a generation of North Australian men whose lineage can be traced back to Brumby Innes, and for whom a reliance on an exalted form of physical prowess and violence determines their potency and usefulness in Northern social space.

Like *Rusty Bugles*, *Knucklemen* is a “waiting play.” As Kippax stated of *Rusty Bugles* in his 1979 *Sydney Morning Herald* review, “[i]n place of contrivance, we have themes, stated, developed and recapitulated, as in *The Three Sisters* or *Waiting for Godot*, masterpieces in which, notoriously, nothing much happens” (xxx). In *Knucklemen*, the workers are either waiting to save up the money and escape South, to comfort and women; or, having discovered that the North is the only social space in

which they are adapted to survive, they are simply working until their bodies give out. They are waiting, effectively, to die. The North becomes (perhaps similarly to David Williamson's *Travelling North* or Reg Cribb's *Last Cab to Darwin*) "God's waiting room."

The heterotopic confines of the miners' camp dictate a series of terms and physical conditions that run parallel to but in defiance of the outside world. Aside from the flouting of Southern protocols surrounding interpersonal contact (the men shower, ablute and masturbate in shared space), it is also a wildcat mine, so even regular industrial laws determining living conditions, wages and contracts fail to apply in the camp's extreme isolation. The North-West itself is, as in *Rusty Bugles*, configured anatomically as "the arse-end of the world" (21) and "the anus of the earth [...] the dead-set centre of that stinking black little ough" (35). The North is thus a centre of sorts, but the centre of an anthropomorphised void, a wasteland again, or as Rutherford might have it, the centre of Patrick White's Great Australian Emptiness.

The text adds a range of useful tropes to those already established over the preceding seventy years of literary and theatrical depictions of the North as representational space, allowing an updated understanding of some of the cultural functions of the North in the late twentieth-century in the broader national imaginary. As well being a profoundly foul-mouthed, alcohol-soaked hyper masculine space in which (as with *Men Without Wives*, *Brumby Innes* and "The Drovers" before it) only the fittest or those most suitably adapted to the heat, harshness and isolation survive, the North is also a space into which men can retreat to escape the past – or the "real" acculturated world – in order to reinvent themselves. As Tassie states of the men in the camp:

You're never safer than with a pack of thieves. And that's all this territory is up here – a vast bloody bolt hole. Everyone on the run heads for the North-

West.⁵² Vanishes into outfits like this. Becomes “Lofty,” or “Bluey,” “Tassie,” or “Horse,” “Pansy,” or “Methuselah.” Skips from outfit to outfit. Except for the wogs, maybe. And who knows about the wogs. (35)

Between them, the men are escaping alimony suits, the monastery, a murder conviction, failed relationships, social ostracism, poverty and unemployment and restrictive social conventions that, despite the hostility and brutal expression and conditions of the North, mean they find an odd sort of misfit’s egalitarianism there. Horse is a wog; Pansy is fat; Methuselah is old; Monk is soft; Mad Dog is crippled. Prejudice is rife and unabashedly expressed within the camp. But it is not the characters’ marginalised ethnic, physiological or personality traits that determine their fitness for survival or social acceptance within the space. Codes of violence and a corrupted, heat-warped form of mateship determine social rank and endurance within Powers’ North, as the following exposition from alpha male Tarzan best illustrates:

You don’t like the look of someone. Or he don’t like the look of you. Or he’s in your way. Or there’s women. Or money. Pains in the head. Sometimes there’s just nothin’ better to do. Or you’re cranky. You got shit on your liver. Or it’s just one of those days when the thing you want most is to give some bastard a whack in the mouth. There’s more reasons for a punch-up here than there’re days in the year. An’ up here you’ve got to be ready for it all the time. It’s not a natural life. (45)

The mantra of survival of the fittest is reiterated throughout the text, reinforcing Powers’ critique of the sacrosanct Australian code of mateship. Given the North is as far away from “civilised” space as it is possible to be; and given that the heterotopic confines of the wildcat mine contravene established industrial or social laws and protocols, that great foundational Australian myth also fails to hold sway in the

⁵² The North is still troped in this way to the present time, and is still able to capture the nation’s imagination in this notorious regard. The most recent example of this “lawless frontier”-type configuring of the North/West may well be the Falconio case, in which British backpacker Peter Falconio was allegedly abducted or killed whilst driving on the Stuart Highway in the NT in 2001. His killer, John Bradley Murdoch, was eventually traced back to Broome and convicted of his murder and imprisoned in Darwin in 2005.

lawlessness – the zero gravity – of the Great Australian Emptiness. As Pansy concludes:

We live together, we eat together, we crap together – so what? You said yourself five minutes after I walk outta this dump you wouldn't remember I'd been alive. Same goes for the rest of us. Who'd give a damn if Tassie got mashed by one of those ground-gobblers out there? We'd all say, 'too bad. Tough shit for poor old Tas.' An' everthin'd roll straight on. One thing I've learnt in this world, feller – look after Number One. First, last, an' always!
(69)

The camp thus operates as a heterotopic space within the broad liminal space – the frontier space I have described elsewhere in this thesis – that is the North. It is, effectively, a microcosm within a marginalised macrocosm; the black hole in the centre of the Great Australian Emptiness. It houses the most extreme forms of dysfunctional masculinity, and it is measured by its distance from civility in the industrialised metropolitan urban centres of the South. The men marvel at their extreme isolation and identify the North-West as a liminal zone, measuring their peripheral status and postulating on the ways in which they are regarded by the outside world by projecting their fantasies onto the jets that fly overhead. The mine is the farthest tracking point that international flights use to identify the northwest corner of the Australian mainland as they head to or from overseas. The men project their escape fantasies onto the distant lights, and postulate how they are, in turn, a set of distant lights onto which the flights' passengers may in turn project their own fantasies of wonder at isolation and distance:

TOM: It's incredible to come this far North – to the arse end of the world – and find yourself on an international flight route.

PANSY: So there's a bloody plane flyin' over. So what?

METHUSELAH: I like to know they go over. Sometimes if I'm lyin' awake in the night an' I hear 'em – it's good. Not sure why. Maybe just the feelin' that at least there's a reason for bein' here – to be the first lights they see – the start of the great country.... Who the hell but youse bastards knows I'm alive any more? Nobody down south. An' nobody

in the east now. But the planes are a sorta link – comin’ from the big places an’ goin’ to the big places.

MAD DOG: Well they shit me! They make me remember I’m up here – rotting!

MONK: Then why don’t you go back to the city?

MAD DOG: ’Course I wouldn’t survive there. (56-57)

The play descends inexorably into violence, with the last of the knucklemen enjoying a full-scale barroom brawl described in the stage directions as possessing “no sophistication, no skill – the survival of the toughest, roughest, and most durable. The fighting of outback Australia – raw, crude and hard as it comes” (97).

The effect here is of an age passing: of a generation being handed over. It is, in a sense, Powers’ inscription of the Bush Myth⁵³ itself, lingering on like an endangered species in an isolated pocket of nature, then passing away unnoticed having long been regarded by the outside world as extinct. The North is the last such pocket of extreme Australian nothingness in which the dated ethos – a hangover, in turn, of imperialism and settlement era Australian self-definition in contradistinction to British overlordship – can exist; and it too has finally turned in on itself and imploded. Being performed, as it was, on the tail of the Vietnam War, in the heady early years of the Whitlam Labor government, and in the year in which White Australia officially became Multicultural Australia – at least in terms of government policy – the symbolism of the North as a bastion of a dying Australian frontier credo becomes even more potent.

Updating the Northern Buffer Zone: the Austral-Asian Frontier from World War

Two to the 1980s and Jill Shearer’s Shimada

⁵³ The Bush Myth is discussed in the Introduction on p.40, and refers to a romanticised and sentimental view of the bush as being the “real” Australia, in which qualities of maleness and mateship are central and valorised above others. (See McCallum, “The ‘Doll,’” 36.)

I return now to the fading concept of the White Australia Policy (WAP) and trace a summary outline of its fall from grace and eventual abolition in 1973.

David Walker describes Australia's engagement with Asia over the past one hundred years or so as possessing two broad narrative strands: the first depicts the relationship outlined in earlier chapters of this thesis, stemming from nineteenth-century cultural fears and phobias, in which a menacing Asia poses the threat of inundation, generating what Walker refers to as "profound anxiety and a fear of cultural annihilation. A close engagement with Asia seemed to promise loss, shame and degradation" ("Cultural" 11). However, Walker claims that by the close of the twentieth-century, a second Austral-Asian narrative unfolds as the threat of invasion subsides and is instead replaced by a desire, at least in political and trade terms, to represent Asia as being an inherent part of Australia's commercial and cultural future, and even this priority is subject to the whims and biases of the government of the day. As Walker explains, "[r]ather than disappearing into Asia, leaving no trace of its existence and few signs of its whereabouts as a culture, Australia is represented as a country that is about to find itself in Asia" ("Cultural" 12). Walker was writing here on the brink of the Howard government's ascent to office, just after the Keating government's sustained and concerted prioritisation of economic and cultural engagement with Asia, and so is mindful of the vicissitudes of this by no means seamless transition from "apprehension" to "engagement" with the region. Both narratives, he concludes, "simplify the complex realities about racial difference that pervade the history of European settlement in Asia" ("Cultural" 12), and both narratives find their expression in theatrical representations of the nation – especially as these national narratives are played out in the North in particular – as will shortly be discussed in relation to Jill Shearer's *Shimada*.

The postwar period of the 1950s keenly exemplifies this friction between Walker's two narratives. After the Japanese attacks on the Australian North, and the broad national responses to this realisation of the long-held fear of Asian invasion, anti-Japanese sentiment was rife for the better part of a generation. And yet, the realisation at governmental level that economic trade with Asia was vital to Australia's future, especially in the light of Britain's inexorable postwar economic retreat into Europe, meant that Australia was sent on an internal collision course as postwar cultural prejudice and economic expedience seemed set in diametrically opposing trajectories.

Decolonisation proceeded across Asia in the immediate wake of World War Two. The Philippines declared independence from the US in 1946; Indonesia declared independence from the Dutch (following Japanese occupation) at the close of World War Two; Indian and Pakistani independence from Britain was declared in 1947; Burma and Ceylon followed suit in 1948; and the Menzies government was returned to power in Australia in 1949 – the same year as the Communist uprising in Indonesia and the Chinese (Maoist) Revolution. The heightened anti-Communist sentiment of the time fuelled Australia's wariness of certain Asian regimes, exacerbating lingering prejudices from World War Two. Japan, despite being a recent political enemy, was not such a Communist regime, and Menzies signed a controversial and historic trademark agreement with them in 1957.

As Christopher Waters argues, the 1940s had been something of a watershed decade for Australia. Even if the experience of World War Two had intensified anti-Asian sentiment in some quarters, the war had forced Australia out of its anglophile regional hibernation. Waters concludes that

[t]he times did produce among some Australians a more engaged view of Asia, and a recognition that the relationship had been significantly changed by

wartime and postwar developments. In the longer term it would become evident that the war's deeper effect was to open Australia much more to international influences. (133)

David Goldsworthy concurs and points out that by the 1950s, "the growing recognition of Australia's economic complementarity with Japan and potentially with other parts of East Asia in the long run, led to major initiatives in Australian trade policy" (6) such as the 1957 agreement, and this increasing trade engagement led to a concomitant process of liberalisation of immigration terms and conditions throughout the ensuing decades.

In other words, the shifting trade imperative helped forge a shift in the cultural climate providing those in favour of liberalisation of immigration policy and the WAP itself (the Australian Communist Party, the Immigration Reform Movement, and eventually, the Australian Labor Party prime amongst them) vital grist for their argument for its eventual abolition. As Walker summarises:

By the late 1950s it was clear that events in Asia would attract increasing notice in Australia and that Australia's racially exclusive immigration policies were becoming increasingly inappropriate and downright unneighbourly. A tentative but important step was taken in 1958 with the removal of the notorious dictation test, which had long been a contentious mechanism designed to control the flow of immigrants from non-European backgrounds. The formation of the Immigration Reform Group in the late 1950s marked the beginning of a systematic and ultimately successful campaign to remove racial criteria as a basis for the selection of Australia's immigrants. ("Cultural" 19)

Walker also points out that the rise of apartheid in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and that country's burgeoning economic and cultural estrangement from the world as a result of its racial policy, acted as a further reminder to Australia of the perils of racial and economic isolationism.

The phrase "White Australia" itself finally began to fall out of favour in the 1960s as sections of the Labor Party – the party responsible for the policy's formal introduction to Australian public life – belatedly echoed calls by the Australian

Communist Party for the policy's abolition. Writing in 1970, H. I. London states that in the lead up to Holt's succession from Menzies as Prime Minister in 1966, the Labor Party recommended in an internal committee review in 1965 that the phrase "White Australia" be replaced with "predominantly homogeneous population" and "suggested the elimination of distinctions between European and non-European migrants – a suggestion considerably more liberal than any Liberal proposal" (33). London argues that Holt was more liberal than the retiring Menzies on immigration policy, but that it was the Labor Left that opposed the WAP in most vociferous terms. London quotes Whitlam in 1965 making a "stern rebuttal of racial discrimination in Australia's immigration policy" as Deputy Leader of the Opposition at the Citizenship Convention in Canberra. "He urged that Australia 'remove as far as possible any racial aspects of discrimination' and specifically noted that the fifteen-year residence requirements for Asians was glaringly racist" (Whitlam qtd in London 37).

The ensuing war in Vietnam, whilst fuelling the then conservative government's (and its followers') anti-communist paranoia, had the dual effect of intensifying Australia's relationship *with* Asia – in the contradistinctive manner in which Walker describes Australia's dichotomous narratives with Asia. As Walker concludes, whilst the war embedded fear of communist contagion "in the community and at the highest level of government," the involvement with Vietnam had the corollary effect of demonstrating:

that we were assuredly a part of the Asia-Pacific region. Australia had entered the war under a Liberal Country Party government with the "White Australia" policy still largely unmodified. It left Vietnam with a Labor government in office and with the "White Australia" policy replaced by a non-discriminatory immigration program. ("Cultural" 21)

Goldsworthy describes the final three decades of the twentieth century in economic terms as being ones of unprecedented regional economic growth, including:

the emergence of the Asian tigers, the end of the Cold War and the rise of economic and technological globalisation, all of which helped push Australia into forms of Asian engagement built much more upon commercial hopes than upon strategic fears. Here, in essence, was the oft-remarked transition “from battlefield to marketplace.” (8)

It is this perception of Asia generally, and Japan specifically, shifting from military invader to economic partner that underpins Jill Shearer’s *Shimada*, carrying with it an implicit subtext suggesting the fears of Japanese (cultural) infiltration linger well into the 1980s for the wartime generations; and that Japanese economic investment in Australia is an extension of unfinished business from the wartime era – occupation by stealth. Shearer’s text can be seen in this regard to negotiate Walker’s duelling Austral-Asian narratives, locating the testing ground for this latter-day shift “from battlefield to marketplace” squarely in the Australian North.

Shimada is set alternately in the south-east Asian jungle in 1945 and in a coastal Queensland town somewhere North of the Tropic of Capricorn in 1987. Clive Beaumont has been a Prisoner of War (POW) with the Japanese in World War Two and, after his death forty years later, has left his family with a once-thriving bicycle business. The business is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, having anachronistically resisted modernisation in the form of cheaper Japanese-designed equipment. Clive is dead, but his POW mate Eric lives on, acting as a broker between the worlds of insular wartime Australia and the increasingly globalised 1980s. The family business acts as a metaphor for Australian reluctance to fully embrace either multiculturalism or “globalisation” and de-industrialisation in the changing international economy of the 1980s. Eric’s resistance to Japanese investment in – indeed, mooted salvation of – the family business is anomalous to his generation’s cultural resistance to a perceived latter-day Japanese intrusion into the sanctity of White Australia and its value system. The Second World War, for Eric, was about

protecting fortress Australia. Forty years later, “[i]t’s the same country.... The same...people. Only... somewhere... something’s gone wrong....” (11). The play thus straddles the transition between national narratives relating to Asia that Walker identifies as being central to twentieth-century Australian engagement with the region.

The play is, effectively, a contemporary invasion narrative. The Japanese have already made incursions into the nation’s Northern margins and peripheries. As in *Rusty Bugles*, where the war’s “real action” was offshore, on the islands to the North and in the Coral Sea, in *Shimada*, the “battleground” remains the same with the Japanese corporation buying up islands on the Barrier Reef, with an eye to a mainland economic assault. The new war is a trade war being fought on Northern soil, only this time without a Brisbane Line beneath which to retreat into cultural sanctity and security. The inference here is that Japanese occupation is, in keeping with traditional Australian invasion narratives, taking place through the nation’s back door – through its indolent Northern leisure spaces – in small but steady increments while the rest of the nation slumbers. The North is the trade war’s front line, another invisible and unofficial geo-political line having been drawn in the sand.

When Toshio Uchiyama arrives to inspect the Beaumont family business and shore up a trade deal, Eric mistakes him for POW commandant Shimada. Indeed, he is played by the same actor. The time periods coalesce as Eric’s anxiety intensifies. The workers strike over the perceived Japanese cultural invasion, and Uchiyama decides Australia’s industrial climate is too unstable to risk investing in. He reveals that, rather than being an extension of wartime Japanese expansionary aggression, his company had actually forged a covert agreement with Clive to merge with Beaumont, “[t]wo samurai, side by side” (45). The wartime generation’s cultural paranoia has

blinded them to the possibility of fruitful partnership and the company is instead handed over to the next generation, though not – ironically – before it is saved at the last minute by an eleventh hour American contract. There are obvious patriotic references here to the assistance Australia received from the United States in the dying days of World War Two, and the play somehow fails to problematise the prospect of late twentieth-century American economic and cultural invasion and occupation of the (North) Australian “battlefield.” Another reading of the text might be one in which this American rescue of Australia is viewed as being deeply ironised, replaying the wartime narrative but now shifting and blurring the identities of the rescuers and the antagonists.

Either way, *Shimada* still serves as a useful theatrical representation of Australia’s conflicted cultural and economic engagement with Asia in the postwar decades, as it is borne out metaphorically in the battlefield/marketplace of North Australia. It dramatises the reluctance with which wartime generations in regional Australia have embraced multiculturalism and economic globalisation, and can be read once again as the North being configured as a microcosm – a stage upon which broad national cultural fears and anxieties are being played out. Rather than reduce the North to the cultural backwater that exclusively houses these xenophobic anxieties, my reading of the play is that the North functions paradigmatically here. Having been the backdoor through which Asia might enter during World War Two (and, more or less, consistently over the half century or so preceding the war’s narrative climax of invasion), so too Shearer configures the North metaphorically during the height of Australia’s economic engagement with Asia as the backdoor through which the Asian Tiger might enter.

It is, of course, true that Japanese investment in Far North Queensland and the islands of the barrier reef did begin, and reached something of a consumerist frenzy during the boom decade in which *Shimada* was written, and that the play thus reflects the anxieties of its time. But *Shimada*'s successful Southern run (it was workshopped and initially produced by Melbourne Theatre Company in 1987), and the play's eventual (short-lived) transfer to Broadway in New York, would seem to suggest its themes found connection with national – indeed, international – audiences equally as complicit in negotiating the complex line that bifurcates Australia's frequently uneasy relationship with Asia: the duelling narratives of invasion/engagement that Walker articulates, and which the country continues to participate in to the present time.

If, as asserted in this thesis, the North can be read as the site of two contiguous or alternating frontiers – the contested space separating Australia from Asia, and, internally, the uncomfortable threshold between Black and White Australia – then one of the key attributes of this, or any other, frontier may be a certain kind of friction or anxiety underpinning these competing spatial configurations. Such anxiety surrounding definitions and ownership of space and place is, Gelder and Jacobs argue, part and parcel of the postcolonial condition. And certainly, Tompkins's notion of unsettlement contends that Australian theatre is the perfect site for articulation of this friction, though whether a play like *Shimada* unsettles or reaffirms national racial narratives is debatable. Just as there are a number of divergent ways in which the North might be troped or analysed as frontier space, so too there are a divergent range of ways in which this spatial (or postcolonial) practice might be psychoanalysed.

Rutherford has provided one such psychoanalytic way of reading Australia's broad and frequently hostile relationship to what she refers to as Patrick White's

Great Australian Emptiness. For the remainder of this chapter, I use Gelder and Jacobs' articulation of the uncanny in order to read three texts that depict the Black-White cultural divide as it manifests in the North, from the assimilationist period in Vickers' 1949 *Stained Pieces* through to the Land Rights era in Francis's *God's Best Country*. I focus primarily on this problematic second text before making summary reference to Malouf's postcolonial re-working of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in *Blood Relations*, set in far North-West Australia during the same period as Francis's text, and coinciding with the Australian Bicentennial "celebrations."

The Northern "Black Man's Zone" in the Land Rights Era

It is important to note that the Northern Territory operated pre-emptively as a test case for the national Mabo legislation of 1993. The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (henceforth referred to as "the Act"), was a piece of Commonwealth legislation facilitating native title claims with the Northern Territory in much the same ways as the Mabo decision did nationally, and it is this Act and the ensuing cultural anxiety it produced in the North specifically that forms the basis of Francis's exploration of contested cultural and land practices in the Territory in the 1980s. Indeed, the Act was used cynically by the conservative Country Liberal Government (CLP) to rally and galvanise non-indigenous political support for much of its twenty-seven year reign in the Northern Territory. Native Title, and the perceived threat to Territorians' homes and leisure spaces, mining leases and Crown land as a result of the Act were consistent election-time themes from the Act's (federal) inception right through until the CLP's ejection from office in 2001. Chief Minister Denis Burke's disinclination to engage in Native Title scare-mongering (presumably against party administration's best advice), along with his miscalculated

decision to preference One Nation over the Labor Party, are two of the key strategic reasons the CLP lost support across Darwin's middle-class northern suburban seats in that election. In that instance, aside from losing middle-class White votes, the CLP lost the crucial support of previously conservative-voting ethnic communities including Darwin's large Greek, Filipino and other south-east Asian populations. The result, whether ultimately intended on the part of "middle Darwin" or not, was the election of a government much more implicitly and patently inclusive of Aboriginal participation in civic processes.

Whether there is an equal and opposite reaction to such Aboriginal engagement in the political process in the Territory, and the inevitable conservative counter claim of the pendulum having swung "too far" in favour of indigenous interests remains to be seen. As Deborah Rose Bird argues in relation to the Act and its impact on interracial relations in the Territory:

I do not resile from my view that the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* [...] is an instrument of colonial domination, but I am now required to state that contemporary colonial domination is far more complex than I had then imagined, offering zones of empowerment and synergistic accommodation within the structure of restriction and coercion, as well as seeking more fully to incorporate Aboriginal people within structures of government. Nowhere are the contradictory, complicit, and mutually embedded double binds of relations between indigenous people and the colonising power more evident than in a land claim. (36)

Certainly the Howard government's "intervention" into Northern Territory communities in 2007, which was ostensibly instigated to address child health and sexual abuse complaints, also has a spatial politics inasmuch as it incorporates the abolition of the permit system which dictates who can enter Aboriginal land and under what circumstances. The intervention also includes legislation that provides for the establishment of 99 year private freehold leases by Aboriginal people of land in their communities that was previously considered communal. Not only has this

legislation inflamed Black-White spatial political tensions, it has created divisions within the indigenous community in the Northern Territory. Deputy Chief Minister Marion Scrymgour, the highest ranking indigenous politician in Australia, and member for the northern electorate of Arafura, referred to the legislation in the annual Charles Perkins Oration at the University of Sydney in 2007 as “a vicious new McCarthyism” that constituted a “second intervention” akin to the controversial practice of removing children from parents inherent in the Stolen Generations phenomenon (qtd in Gibson “Labor”). Central Australian indigenous Labor representative for the seat of MacDonnell, Alison Anderson, vehemently repudiated Scrymgour’s reference to the intervention as a “black kids’ Tampa.”⁵⁴ Joel Gibson reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Anderson accused her colleague of

knowing nothing about living among the poverty and abuse in remote communities and calling the intervention a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity [...] My people need real protection, not motherhood statements from urbanised saviours,” she told *The Australian*. “I live my law and culture and I will represent my people regardless of what's fashionable. My people need the help and want the help from this intervention.” (“One Policy”)

The controversy between Scrymgour and Anderson can be seen as neatly summarising the wider Aboriginal debate on the issue, and indicates the extent to which racial-spatial politics in Australia have the capacity to divide and inflame debate both between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and within the indigenous community itself.

⁵⁴ The reference here is to the Tampa, a Norwegian vessel that rescued asylum seekers travelling from Indonesia to Australia during the 2001 federal election campaign. It became known as the “children overboard affair,” which refers to the fact that Prime Minister Howard purportedly received defence force advice that parents deliberately threw their children into the water to garner sympathy from the Australian Navy. It was instead left to the captain of the Tampa to rescue the refugees when the Navy was ordered not to intervene. Howard won the election partly on the basis of the public sympathy for his “stern” repudiation of asylum seekers. The claims of children being thrown overboard were later argued to be untrue, and controversy exists over the extent to which the Prime Minister was complicit in the false public representation of the refugees as people who would willingly endanger the lives of their children in order to gain entry to Australia.

In anticipating national anxieties of the “uncanny” condition that Gelder and Jacobs describe, I reiterate my case here for the North’s – certainly the Northern Territory’s – special status as “über Australian” cultural space in the realm of complex Black-White relations, and turn now to the outlined theatre texts by way of illustration of this point.

Reading Race Relations in the North through Theatre: Stained Pieces and God’s Best Country

Frederick Bert Vickers’ 1949 play *Stained Pieces*, enjoying only a three-day season at Perth’s Assembly Hall, takes up in many ways where *Men Without Wives* and *Brumby Innes* left off. Western Australia is divided into two broad metonymic zones: the Black North and the White South, with the Native Reserves on the peripheries of the country towns in between being troped as liminal zones, or a kind of cultural/racial purgatory. Freddie Adams and his girlfriend Nona are the eponymous “stained pieces”: they are “half-castes” sent packing from their jobs on Oakover Station “somewhere in the North of Australia” (1) after Freddie’s aspirations to Whiteness transgress rigid station racial codes of conduct and social order. Freddie has assumed a White subject identity and internalised an anti-Aboriginal self-loathing. He romanticises the South and its neat range of binary alternatives to the entrapment, heat, social constriction, discomfort and Blackness of the North. “I’ll get there one day,” he declares. “Must be real white man’s country. No black fellas. The old man reckoned you could smell things down there – trees and flowers. Up here there’s only stinks[....]” The (White) cook concurs, stating “[t]his country stinks of niggers” (2).

The irony, of course, is that Freddie’s half-caste status means he registers as Black according to punitive White colour-coding. He is sacked for insubordination by

the redneck White boss, who assigns him the “stained pieces” inscription, a reference to the tainted wool that loses its market value due to its impurity. The boss declares:

Half castes are like those stained pieces. They’re thirteen pence a pound. This year I’ve got to put them in the creek. That’s the way it is with Freddie. He’s good now, but if I put him in charge he’d be finished. They haven’t got the balance. A white man is born to be boss, but anybody with a bit of dark blood in them, loses their head. (8)

This is the play’s theme articulated in a nutshell, and the rest of the drama unfolds in a predictable enough series of “caught between two worlds” binaried scenarios as Freddie and Nona head South in pursuit of White middle-class upward mobility and material aspiration. They repudiate their indigeneity in the process, despite being reified as Black within putative White social and economic schema. They are too Black for the South; too White for the North. They become entrapped in the literal and figurative limbo of the fringe-dwelling Native Reserves where they are befriended by well-meaning but essentially defeated “full bloods” and, despite some token assistance of an assimilationist nature, they are invariably abused and taken advantage of by unscrupulous Whites. When Nona gives birth to Freddie’s son at play’s end, she smothers him in a dry creek hole rather than accede to Freddie’s by now fatalistic acceptance of his Aboriginality and his wish that the child be raised as an “authentic” bush Aborigine. “There ain’t never been any white in you!” she tells Freddie. “You’s all nigger. You wanted the kid to be a black fella. Well he is now. He died in the creek like you wanted him to” (47).

Death is constructed metaphorically as a cleansing of the stain the “half caste” characters are imbued with. Freddie stabs Nona to death in an ersatz ritual cleansing. “I had to make you clean,” he says. “You’re not stained now. Not Freddie [Junior] nor you. We’ll all be clean black when we meet again, Nona. You and me and little Freddie” (49). Vickers’ call here appears to be one for the possibility of an

articulation of “authentic” Bush Aboriginality. Whilst certainly damning of White racial intolerance and outwardly assimilationist in its sympathetic portrayal of Aboriginal characters and their cultural estrangement and marginalisation in a rigidly stratified Western Australian racial hegemony, Vickers creates a clear sense of outrage at the thwarting of “half caste” aspirations to White material and economic security. The play ultimately suggests that the characters are better off repudiating White (Southern) value systems altogether and retreating – even if only on a metaphysical or quasi-spiritual level after death – to an idealised authentic Blackness only attainable in the North.

The North is again troped as the Black Man’s Zone, where authentic or unpolluted Blackness is only attainable in an Aboriginal spiritual afterlife, or at least, after the ritual cleansing of death has burnished White cultural hegemonies and impediments to what would otherwise be an assimilationist idyll. Through the rubric of early postwar Australian political life, it is clearly not viable to imagine a North, or indeed any other topographical Australian space, in which indigenous access to land, country or culture is possible in any feasible or meaningful sense. The North is thus rendered metaphorically more as an anxious “uncanny” space for the Aboriginal, rather than the White characters, whose cultural hegemonies successfully displace and supersede Aboriginal ways of imagining or occupying space at this period in (North Western) Australian fictive renderings of social history.

By the time of Gordon Francis’s *God’s Best Country*, forty years later, this cultural anxiety has been inverted, and it is the White pastoralists’ turn to feel as though their cultural/spatial practice – their taxonomy for owning, occupying and using – North Australian space and place is under threat from a perceived hostile and, finally, legally-armed and powerful, racial Other. If Vickers’ text is guilty of a

politically earnest and, for the times essentialising (yet nonetheless progressivist) range of racial and geo-cultural binaried types, then Francis's text ultimately updates and upturns such geo-specific tensions, and problematises them in a more contemporary fashion rather than detonating them altogether in what one might describe as a strategic postcolonial manner. It is an ideal text in which to witness the Gelder /Jacobs uncanny articulation of simultaneous spatial occupation of country at play in the Australian North, and to explore the concomitant "unsettlement" that takes place when Black and White claims to physical space – to "home" – compete directly.

It is a play *about* conflicting land claims, in all of the "contradictory, complicit, and mutually embedded double binds of relations between indigenous people and the colonising power" (36) that Rose describes. It consciously sets itself up as such an interrogation of a local microcosm functioning metonymically for a broader national – even international – postcolonial tension during a period of cultural and political flux. As the Director of the play's original season, Aarne Neeme, states in the programme notes:

God's Best Country captures accurately the peoples and ambience of life on our "last frontier," where the radio receiver is the only link with the outside world. The scene is described as "an outpost of European society in an essentially hostile and alien environment," and the play is at once about Australia and a reflection on colonies world-wide. (programme 42)

Neeme also argues in favour of the text's iconoclastic approach to race and gender stereotyping when he claims, "[s]avages of every colour, sex and persuasion battle to retain what is most precious to them; and every character is illuminated in a manner *contrary to expectation. Even the notion of paternalism is ultimately reversed*" (emphasis added). I emphasise this notion of the text upturning notions of paternalism and racial expectation, because I am not convinced the play actually manages to achieve what Neeme feels it strives to do. Rather, the text ultimately

reinforces “popular” cultural fears and anxieties surrounding native title and land claims in the Northern Territory in the 1980s; and, in its (admittedly frank, and arguably accurate) portrayal of “savages of every colour, sex and persuasion” manages to perpetuate, rather than challenge or unpack, racial stereotyping and community bias in the uncanny Australia as emblematised by the pastoral Red Lily Station in the nation’s far North. This is not to say that Francis does not hit upon real community prejudices and anxieties, or portray these fears in a convincing realist manner. My query here is whether the play ultimately upturns notions of paternalism and stereotyping in the manner in which Neeme describes.

To summarise the plot briefly, Red Lily cattle station has been in the hands of the Lancaster family for several generations. Upon the death of the family patriarch, the property has fallen into disrepair. It has been the recent site of industrial action, with an ultimately doomed walk-off on the part of the largely Aboriginal workforce. The property has passed to the hands of brother and sister team “Horse” and “Tweetie,” the former of whom is a hardline redneck whose anti-Aboriginal vituperation fuels what remaining energy he has to salvage the property and convert it to a safari wilderness lodge for wealthy Europeans, Asians and Americans. Tweetie wants to return the property to a period of genteel “benevolent” paternalism where the Blacks’ loyalty is bought by “tins of bully beef and handfuls of boiled lollies on ration days” (48).

At the play’s outset, Red Lily has come under land claim. In an Aboriginal version of what might be viewed as the “from battlefield to marketplace” transference of Japanese/White hostilities explored in *Shimada*, the Aboriginal Development Corporation (ADC) is making Horse and Tweetie an offer to buy their property. The deal is being brokered by “Part,” an ex-worker at the station who headed to Canberra

after the landmark walk-off dispute and quickly educated himself and escalated within the ranks of “Black bureaucracy.” Tweetie’s husband Boyer (“Boy”) is a White bureaucrat whose dramatic function is to remind the play’s White protagonists of the ineluctability of changing Black-White relations and to highlight the characters’ fatal (tragic) resistance to such change.

Red Lily has become the spatial microcosm upon which Gelder and Jacobs’ uncanny anxiety is being played out. The land itself is depicted as hostile and brutalising. Boy, as the White outsider, sees the country as being malignant, and possessing transformative powers over those who claim attachment to it. “It’s got Horse,” he claims, “twisted him...brutalised him...turned him into a white savage” (22). As well as being a literal site of Black-White contest – country to which each claims a genealogical connection – the inference is that there is a refusal on the bigoted White characters’ part to comprehend Aboriginal associations with land and country. Horse refuses to cede the land to a group of people he views as primitive and terminally indolent, despite the fact the property has fallen into ruin since he expelled the Aboriginal workforce. He doesn’t see the point in selling a cattle property to the ADC just because “it’s the dreaming place of the sunset serpent or whatever” (10). Horse outlines the transition from assimilation to the land rights era in a diatribe that articulates his incredulity at the Aboriginal workers having abjured seventy years of protectionism. He views the land claim as a monumental act of ingratitude and abstract revenge. Boy best summarises the play’s erstwhile thesis regarding the refusal of a particular White generation to comprehend and accommodate Aboriginality *qua* Aboriginality. He tells Tweetie:

You’ve lived with prejudice for so long it’s become a normal part of your life. You’re colliding head on with eighty years of bigotry and racism and paternalism [...] Eighty years of frontier ethics. There wouldn’t be one redneck around here, who has accepted the fact that Aborigines are *people* –

not savages, not animals, not some superior species of fauna that can be useful around the farm – but human beings, Territorians, members of our community[...] (21)

Indeed, the Black characters are dis-anthropomorphised by Horse, aligned with nature in its crudest and most inhuman form. Part reveals how the Aboriginal workforce was attacked during the industrial dispute and forcibly removed from the land. They were rounded up like cattle by helicopters and Toyota “bull catchers,” “like something out of Vietnam” (38), before being cornered at the lagoon, loaded onto cattle trucks, then herded into confinement by having “an electric cattle prod [rammed] up a stinking blackfella’s arse” and “made to stand there ankle deep in cowshit and watch while Horse’s bully boys brought in the bulldozers and flattened the whole camp” (38). Part goes on to articulate (or, perhaps, Francis goes on to articulate through his Aboriginal antagonist’s viewpoint) the competing relationship to space and place held by the Aboriginal constituency he represents, summarising the “uncanny” paradox:

Red Lily is their spirit well, their life force, the very essence of their being. They draw all their power from it.

[Part crosses to the lattice and looks out over the broad expanse of the lagoon.]

Whatever it is about this place, this country, I can feel it too. Perhaps not so strongly as the Gungunnu, but I can feel it. That’s why I joined the walk-off, I suppose. One day I suddenly realised that *they* were my real kin, that I belonged with them in the filth and squalor at Leaning Tree, not here in the homestead with the Holy Family. (39; original emphasis)

The irony to which Part is referring is the fact that he had actually had prior opportunity to lay claim to the property through the White cultural practice of patrilinearity and inheritance. He was going to marry Tweetie and join the “Holy Family,” being co-opted into an ostensibly racist dynasty as a part-Aboriginal because, as he explains, “[i]n this part of the world it’s your *allegiance* that counts, not the colour of your skin” (37).

In embracing his Aboriginality as a (Southern) bureaucrat and Black activist, Part has formally declared his allegiance. His liminal status (crudely iterated by his nickname) means he has a foot in both Black and White worlds, and yet belongs entirely to neither. He fights on behalf of the Gungunnu, but he doesn't belong to them. He has a wife, children and home in Canberra, yet he views that city as a "cemetery with lights" (36). Part is an embodiment, in this sense, not only of a North-South political divide, and of a Black-White cultural divide, but of the uncanny condition itself. He is the personification of the "battlefield to marketplace" generational transition, and of the competing claims to Northern space made possible by the 1976 Land Rights Act. Certainly, Horse views the political transition as a war and considers Part to be the corporeal manifestation of the Black enemy. "It's *war*," he exclaims. "Only they're not fighting with spears any more. They're using *our* weapons. That's what makes them so bloody dangerous. That mongrel half-breed out there was the brains behind the walk-off. *He* torpedoed that shipment" (48; original emphasis).

It is this final lingering construction of Part as turncoat and as Machiavellian Black schemer – as Iago, perhaps, rather than Othello – that the text moves into problematic territory. Having set an unsympathetic White racist protagonist whose pig-headedness and bigotry makes him fatally resistant to change (Horse shoots himself rather than see the property fall into Black hands, even though it is he who concedes and brokers the deal with Part in the end); and having gone to the effort of at least upturning racialised binaries by constructing Part as a successful and articulate product of White legal systems and bureaucracy, Francis fails to subvert racial stereotyping altogether. At the end of the play, Part reveals himself to be a trenchant, militant Black activist who will stop at nothing to get his hands on Red Lily and other

“White” properties like it. Tweetie refuses to sell out to him after Horse’s death, and he threatens to fight her to the end and ruin her. He articulates an uncompromising postcolonial politics: a desire to be “rid of all your patronising, domineering balanda ways – for as long as it takes to raise our consciousness – to learn who we were before you got here, and what we’re going to do about it in the *next* two hundred years” (78; original emphasis). In one sense, Francis succeeds in highlighting the fraught and highly charged nature of Gelder and Jacobs’s uncanny Australia with its conflicting aspirations to occupancy and usage of space. Moreover, the play certainly re-echoes Rose’s warning of the “mutually embedded double binds” of Black-White relations inherent in a land claim.

And yet, residing somewhere within Francis’s “no-one wins” configuration of land claim politics is a lingering sense that in fact no-one wins because the Blacks ultimately win, which may also make the play’s subtext an “unsettling” one from Tompkins’s perspective. Tweetie is enshrouded in an aural pall of Aboriginal mysticism as the lights fade and the offstage camp dwellers perform the funeral rites on her dead brother. She “sags limply against the fridge door” while the didgeridu and the “*alien* chant of the Aboriginal songman” are heard in the background” (81; emphasis added). She is inundated by the hostile, unseen and alien voices of aboriginality (Rutherford’s colonial intruders emanating from the Lacanian “gap,” perhaps), that perform a theatrical function no different to that of the exotic omnipresent and alien Other in *Brumby Innes* or *Men Without Wives*; or singing the White man to his death at the end of Esson’s “The Drovers.” Only in this instance, the Black voices are those of a postcolonial indigenous usurper coming back to claim what the White coloniser has spent the previous eighty years of White imperial and theatrical history establishing. The Northern frontier has effectively turned in on itself

here. It has reached an outward-most Northern front, and found itself subject to an indigenous counter-offensive.

Towards an Uncanny Multiracial North: David Malouf's Blood Relations

In David Malouf's *Blood Relations*, the far North West is troped as heterotopic space: as a latter day Prospero's island, replete with hybrid subjects poised perilously on the brink of real Australian spaces, in a dreamlike fantasia that may or may not be the product of one character's febrile imagining. Malouf recalibrates Shakespeare's *The Tempest* narrative in a kaleidoscopic Northern fantasy space. Whereas Francis ultimately views this nascent "uncanny Australia" as one wherein Black and White claims to land and interest in contested spaces appear to be at irreconcilable loggerheads; or where Black interests threaten to prevail over and subsume White interests, Malouf's text opens up the possibility of a fragmented and uncomfortable co-habitation that seems much closer to the postcolonial narrative of dynamic simultaneity that Gelder and Jacobs describe.

The shift in broad Australian nationhood narratives after the Mabo decision tends, as these plays demonstrate, to unfold prophetically within the Northern Territory prior to this period in the wake of the 1976 Land Rights Act, and again, it is theatre depicting the North that is at the vanguard of this political engagement. As Bain Attwood explains, one of the key changes in public self-perception Mabo prompted was to profoundly challenge "a traditional notion of Australian nationhood and national identity" (100). In eradicating the foundational White *terra nullius* nation-myth, the Mabo decision, Attwood claims, "is considered revolutionary because, inasmuch as it questions a long established and once dominant history, it threatens many Australians with the loss of their customary narrative and thus the loss

of identity and nationhood” (7). Plays such as *God’s Best Country* and *Blood Relations* precede the boom in Aboriginal representation in film in the first decade of the twenty-first century, including *The Tracker* (2002), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), *Ten Canoes* (2006), and *Yolngu Boy* (2001), and television programs such as *The Circuit* (2007), which depict the contested nature of Black-White spatial politics in North-Western Australia especially, in a similar way to the plays discussed in this chapter. It is evidence of theatre’s ability to respond in a relatively immediate sense to national racial-spatial issues that suggests that even if theatre’s reach is not as all-pervasive as it was during earlier periods of the twentieth-century that precede the popularity of film and television, its currency remains intact.

God’s Best Country ably performs the dramatic function of mourning a loss of identity, nationhood and traditional settler-society narrative. Tweetie is mourning that loss as she slides to the floor holding the fridge door at the end of the play, subsumed within the symbolic (aural) effect of Aboriginal spirituality; and Horse has mourned that loss and relinquished it when he shoots himself. The play is an exposé of fear of Black supremacy upon the battleground of contested Northern spaces – and of Whites being beaten at their “own game.” Francis articulates White apprehension at the prospect of an “uncanny Australia,” and constructs a *mise en scène* that can only view postcolonial Australia in terms of loss of White access to country. As Attwood concludes about the Mabo decision, but which might equally apply to the Land Rights era in the North, it “forms part of a new historical narrative which portends for conservatives the end of (Australian) history as they have conceived it and therefore, the end of their Australia” (100). It is this “new” Australia that the theatre of the 1980s (and the film of the 1990s and 2000s arguably belatedly) engages with.

In Malouf's text, however, (North) Australia already always was hybrid: it has always been contested space; and as such is/was a site of conflict, coalescence, difference and simultaneous uniqueness as a consequence. Willy is the play's Prospero. Originally Greek, he is now "[i]f anything, aggressively Australian" (15). Upon leaving his native island home, he has searched for an exoticised replacement and settled upon "the biggest God-damned island there is" (19). In the far North-Western corner of the island continent, he has constructed metaphoric island space – a pocket of racially, sexually and ethnically hybridised misfits fashioned in his own image, *à la* Prospero's isle, where the storms he conjures up are largely fusions of temper and delusion. He has hewn his coastal home out of the rock to allow a channel in from the sea, creating a symbolic double order here of an island within an island; and of a colonial act of creation, or imposition of imperial will upon the (indigenous, "virgin") land itself. The overall impression Malouf creates is of the North in its frontier remoteness being able to act as fantasy space: it is at once the frontier of Australian national imagining; and also discrete heterotopic space within which colonial fantasy and identity is still able to be acted out as a result of its relative distance from the scrutiny of culture and civilisation.

The North is also configured simultaneously as "authentic" Aboriginal space, where the play's interlopers – Dash and McClusky (Stephano and Trinculo) – come to encounter the "real" Australia in the form of the land's "traditional owners" (32). Willy has a part-Aboriginal son (Dinny/Caliban) who resists the family's aspirations to Europhilia, and whose recitation of Caliban's dispossession speech during a Christmas pageant acts as a ritual postcolonial reclamation of Willy's (fantasy) island world. The speech transmogrifies into a contemporary allegory as Dinny begins chanting Aboriginal place names, superimposing them upon Shakespeare's original

(colonial) text, while he describes his sense of exile and homesickness in the Southern boarding schools Willy sent him to. As Willy moves closer to death, he articulates his overarching colonialist agenda, telling Dinny:

[i]f you listened to some people you'd think I should be ashamed of my life. We're given the world so we can do something with it. That's how we got chucked out of Eden: by doing something instead of sitting on our arses eating paw paw salad! That's history! (80)

Attwood's point may well be here that it is this coloniser's version of history and nationhood that is being rewritten and superseded by late twentieth-century land rights legislation. Certainly, this seems to be the play's thesis. Willy dies, his ashes are scattered over the ocean, and Dinny sees off the Southern interlopers in an act of symbolic reclamation of the house/island as *postcolonial* hybrid space. The final sense one is left with here is of Dinny and the other offspring acting as multi-racial, co-gendered, co-habitators of the White "island" fashioned from forty thousand years of Black geo-critical history. The image falls neatly within Gelder and Jacobs's postcolonial narrative strategy of dynamic simultaneity. The effect is of there being one multi-pronged hybrid co-tenancy of space, rather than two separate and "authentically" Black or White polar opposites imposing their order at the other's expense, as is ultimately the case in *God's Best Country*.

Taken in tandem, the two plays offer interesting theatrical contrasts of ways in which Black, White and other racial cultures negotiate the uncanny postcolonial divide as it manifests idiosyncratically and paradigmatically in the nation's far North. As such, they continue to offer revealing insights into ways in which the North functions metonymically and psychologically as a reflection of on-going tensions – as the site of Tompkins's unsettlement – in the broad Australian cultural imaginary. It is my continuing contention that these "uncanny" and "unsettling" national tensions that

Gelder/Jacobs and Tompkins describe manifest especially potently in the North. Recent political events, like the 2004 Mulrunji Doomadgee murder case on Palm Island (in which grieving relatives of the deceased felt they had to take their appeal “South” to Brisbane in 2006, rather than locally in Townsville in order to receive a fair judicial hearing); and also the Federal Government’s military intervention in 2007 into remote communities of the Northern Territory in order to tackle the problem of childhood sexual abuse, would seem to reiterate the point that the North continues to act as the fulcrum for the nation’s problematic and unresolved relationship with Black Australia. The North is still the nation’s “Black Man’s Zone” in a sense. It is still the site of the oscillating Black-White frontier. And theatre continues to be of critical importance in articulating and contesting myths that are central to this debate. The plays in this chapter thus help open up a framework with which to interpret the emergence of distinctive theatrical (indigenous, White and other multi-racial) voices that hail from the North in the 1990s and early twenty first century, which is explored in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four

Darwin as the Frontier Capital: Theatrical Representations of City Space in the North

In a 2003 series of profiles of each of the eight Australian state and territory capitals, the *Weekend Australian Magazine* began with Darwin, summarising it as the “Capital of the Second Chance.” Nicolas Rothwell identifies the city’s allure as residing in its contradictions, and his opening description of the city is worth quoting at length:

It is paradise and Inferno cohabiting; grand hotels, plaques and war memorials at every turn, a marble parliament big enough for a superpower; and, close by, corrugated iron shacks, musty backpackers’ markets, wrecking cranes, an endless empire of second-hand car yards[...] It is the lure of the North; it is grand hopes, and scams and schemes, and yearnings for the future; but it is also irony, hopelessness, hotel bars with TAB radios blaring and rake-thin old-timers slumped, staring into the rear-view mirrors of their lives. It is the highway’s end, the point where choice runs out; it is the frontier, with all its peculiar duties[...] Darwin is these physical, visible things, of course, but above all else it is a mental place – the city Australians come to for their great stab at self-reinvention[...] For all its harshness, it is the kindest, most welcoming of cities, home to a rich array of drifters, rolling stones, unrealistic dreamers – the capital of the second chance. (“Darwin” 12-13)

According to Rothwell, the city’s psyche, as well as its geophysical reality, is founded on a series of dichotomies that create a beguiling – even “unsettling” – friction unique to the Top End. The danger, of course, in setting up a series of binary opposites to describe an entire community is that the diversity being celebrated (or romanticised) in the first place becomes reduced to essentialist generalisations: the city is either harsh or welcoming; it is either redneck or multicultural; wet or dry, and so forth. Rothwell’s point, however, seems to be that the city is simultaneously a range of contradictory things, and is peopled accordingly by a social demographic unique to the frontier-like environment that Darwin hosts. Its characters, Rothwell argues, include:

the eccentric Barra Man at Frances Bay, the bohemians thronging Nightcliff Sunday markets, the Reiki therapists and head-massagers, the Tiwi Islander cross-dressers at Throb nightclub. But also [Darwin is comprised of] conformism, the press of shared identity: neat, concentric suburbs, new-planned

satellite communities, each with its school and safety house, and streets that run off optimistically into the mangroves. (“Darwin” 12)

Writing in 2005 in *The Monthly*, Tony Clifton takes a harshly critical view of Rothwell’s infatuation with Darwin and its neo-frontier allure, arguing that the city has long since lost its anarchic charm, and is fast becoming a garrison town and bureaucratic bastion of Canberra-like architectural and social conformity. He agrees, in other words, with the latter half of Rothwell’s equation, but not with the first. Clifton first visited the city in 1973, when he claims:

I wrote about legendary fighters and drinkers and about hippies nesting in the casuarina trees along Lameroo Beach, and about how they had just raffled five hookers on a sex cruise around Darwin Harbour to raise money for charity. I wrote about famous drifters[...] “The city itself,” I wrote “is populated by a colourful collection of picaresque characters, some of whom seemed to have stepped out of the 19th-century American west.” (53-54)

By 2005, Clifton claims:

Darwin today is not the city I saw such a long time ago. Physically, it has changed utterly; a year after my first visit the town I saw was blown away by Cyclone Tracy, and like the three little pigs, the inhabitants had built a much more solid city in anticipation of the next big blow. It is also a duller place, a white-bread, nature-stripped, inward-looking, neat and clean haven for southern white immigrants, who labour mainly in the coalmines of the NT administration and its sub-branches. The old hell-raisers have been supplanted by a strain of largely self-satisfied people kidding themselves that in their air-conditioned, wire-fenced and gated towers they are still somehow part of the Australian frontier, when in fact they now live what is an aberrant lifestyle in a vast, still-wild frontier stretching away to the east, west and south. (54)

The frontier, for Clifton, has shifted away from Darwin’s uniform urban sprawl, and headed down the Stuart Highway into the bush. The city⁵⁵ is instead transforming into a racist, sanitised American military base and Australian government public service town.

Interestingly, by 2007 Rothwell changes his position in respect to Darwin’s architecture and a “develop at all costs” ethos he has been relatively reluctant to

⁵⁵ Clifton estimates Darwin’s population incorrectly by almost half. He cites the population as 70 000. ABS figures for 2005 put the figure closer to 110 000.

identify. Writing in the *Australian Literary Review* he takes the reader on a flaneur's stroll through the city's compact Central Business District lamenting the erasure of "old" idiosyncratically tropical Darwin and its brutal air conditioned and Lego-like refurbishment to conclude:

Individually, these projects might be mere eyesores or self-advertising exclamation marks. Collectively, their impact has proved overwhelming. Inner Darwin's look, feel and character were pleasant, variegated and local: if the tone was low-rent, it was never exactly vulgar. But the centre of gravity is different now and long-time residents have come, with heavy hearts, to realise that there is nothing to be done. The old city, and what it stood for – its aimlessness and its abrupt energies, its secret charms and half-formed ghosts, its sense, above all, of distance from the norms and pressures of the south – these have gone. A new order is being born. ("Down")

One could argue here that Rothwell's initial infatuation with the city blinded him to the physical change that had already begun taking place many years before he made Darwin his home, and that, by 2007, he has been living there long enough to be able to assess the place with an insider's sense of ownership and context. For Rothwell, the "rape of Darwin is not about economics. Nor is it about individual politicians[...] No, the issue is the state itself, its structure and its ruling ethos. The territory is too small and stratified to operate a conventional democratic government; it functions more as a patronage system" in which a "self-perpetuating system" of development operates as an imperative core ideology ("Down" np).

And yet, it is Rothwell's point (and the observation of many of the playwrights and theatre-makers quoted in this chapter) that Darwin has always been a garrison town with a White bureaucracy; and that, even if it is true that it is becoming increasingly sanitised, it has always been a town where racism sits alongside a certain kind of multi-racial ethic of acceptance of individuality and difference. There is, in other words, a constant friction between the city's development ethos and its inherent "city of the second chance" charm, in which the former – despite its brutal ugliness and its inherent

momentum and might – is never entirely able to vanquish the latter. By 2007 Rothwell and Clifton come to share a similar position in regards to the face of Darwin; but Clifton is more convinced than Rothwell that the city’s anarchic underbelly and frontier status has been permanently burnished. “It is not only the hippies who were missing when I returned,” Clifton observes, “[s]o it seemed were the Aborigines” (58). Clifton is referring here to the apparent absence of itinerant populations – long grassers⁵⁶ and town campers – and accuses those he asked of their whereabouts of giving essentially racist responses “as if they are telling you where to find a rare colony of northern hairy-nosed wombats” (58). That Clifton appears to be enquiring after a rare colony of northern hairy-nosed wombats is evidently beside the point. The simple answer to Clifton’s question as to the Aboriginal community’s presence is that “they” are where “they” have always been: living in houses in Darwin’s suburbs alongside everyone else; or in fact taking up positions in the Northern Territory government ministry now as well as occupying long grass camps and living on beaches (to satisfy the hankerings of this particular visiting war correspondent’s Wild West fantasy of the town).

Rothwell, despite coming under attack by Clifton for his sentimental estimation of the city’s contemporary cultural politics, appears aware of the complexities of the ways in which race is played out in the city, now and historically. Rothwell describes the Old Darwin (the subject of plays later in this chapter) as being stratified into two broad swathes: white officialdom and the unruly “mestizo” underbelly, which he argues is (or was) comprised of:

⁵⁶ “Long Grass” is a non-pejorative generic term employed by transient indigenous populations from across the NT to describe themselves while occupying temporary camping space in Darwin. A Long-Grasser then, is someone (of any race, actually) who sleeps in the long grass in the city’s fringes rather than seeking permanent or costly temporary accommodation in the city. The term is occasionally co-opted by mainstream culture to describe ‘problem’ itinerants and their perceived “anti-social” (that is, drunken and disorderly) behaviour in public city spaces, but is (or was) essentially non-offensive and indigenous in its etymology.

Japanese, Filipino and Torres Strait pearl divers in their hundreds, [and] Larrakia Aboriginal families. Underneath the formal public Darwin of administrators and officials, this second culture flourished, with its music, traditions, club houses and opium dens – and sometimes, even now, it comes back to life. (“Darwin” 13)

Rothwell is referring here to the (2002) Darwin Festival, and this chapter elaborates upon some of the social functions of the Festival as they appertain to the spatial critical emphasis of this thesis.

There seems to be a debate between utopic and dystopic constructions of the city taking place here, but along subjectively divergent paths. For Rothwell, the city was until quite recently some kind of multicultural utopia along the lines of a little Havana, where people of all races could come to find a sense of place and belonging – a second chance - outside of the totalising rigours of mainstream conservative Australia. For Clifton, Darwin was a masculinist utopia in the 1960s and early 1970s – a lawless kind of Wild Western frontier town where hippies, blackfellas and rednecks raffling prostitutes all commingled in an anti-authoritarian state of finely balanced anarchy. For both writers, utopia has recently turned to dystopia as a Southern White styled bureaucracy outweighs and absorbs diversity in the name of progress, and a development boom destroys what architectural as well as cultural charm the city once held.

This chapter argues instead that both men are correct at the same time, and that Darwin has always housed seemingly contradictory versions of itself alongside one another. This friction between “old” and “new” Darwin, or “multicultural” and “White bureaucratic” Darwin is the subject of many of the plays discussed in this chapter, and it is my argument instead that Darwin houses a number of heterotopic “other” sites, spaces and cultures within a broader, more conservative and “mainstream” culture. In spatial critical terms, this is also a key example of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny at play:

Darwin is simultaneously a world of White bureaucracy and hegemony even as it is a city of mestizo diversity and counter-resistance; it is simultaneously a city of conservative redneck zeal and of intercultural public performance and Aboriginal administration at the highest levels of local government; it is simultaneously dull and suburban military garrison and bohemian arts town – plus many other imaginary demographics. This, surely, is Rothwell’s original point. And as romantic as Rothwell’s view of the city in 2003 appears, in Clifton’s analysis, his own post-frontier disappointment with twenty-first century Darwin suggests he could have explored a little further to produce detailed counter-arguments. The frontier of which Darwin is presently the Northern capital may not be an American-styled Wild West; but perhaps this is because the character and demographic of the Australian frontier itself are changing.

Understanding Darwin Through Theatre

This study has referred throughout to the oscillating nature of the Australian frontier. It has argued that the point of contact in the frontier’s broad ellipse shifts according to the sites of friction – the points of “unsettlement” – operating in the broader cultural imaginary at the time: that is, the frontier tends to straddle either White and Black Australia; or Australia and a perceived hostile and acquisitive Asia. This chapter interrogates the complex ways in which Darwin can be seen to operate as a microcosm or locus for these broad national anxieties; and will take this argument a step further by asserting that the city’s cultural politics actually challenge the dichotomous nature of the frontier narratives detailed in this study thus far. Rather, it is argued through an analysis of theatrical representations of the city over the past quarter century that Darwin is frequently constructed instead as either an idealised or a problematic multicultural hybrid space that straddles the Black-White and Austral-Asian

frontier(s). It is frequently troped either utopically or dystopically, when it is, in fact, comprised of a series of heterotopic “other” spaces.

Included in this focussed discussion of Darwin is an analysis of city spaces within the field of spatial critical inquiry (as articulated by Soja, Gregory, de Certeau and others); and a redoubled engagement with Foucault’s notion of heterotopic spaces, with an emphasis specifically on the ways in which racial subcultures occupy specialised or marginalised spaces within this iconic tropical Northern Australian city. Attention is focussed here on town camps, hotels, joss houses, nightclubs, picture theatres, even the University campus, as they are depicted in Louis Nowra’s *Crow* (1994); Gail Evans and Tania Lieman’s *Tin Hotel* (2004); Philip Dean’s *First Asylum* (1999); Betchay Mondragon’s *Inday: Mail Order Bride* (1995); Gary Lee’s *Keep Him My Heart* (1993), Reg Cribb and David Gulpilil’s *Gulpilil* (2004), and Graham Pitts’ *Eyewitness* (1998).

The second half of the chapter returns to an examination of Darwin as “new” frontier space within what one might like to refer to as “traditional” (White) frontier discourse. It looks at the ways in which Darwin is constructed both romantically and ironically as the New Frontier, or euphemistically as the utopic hub of the Northern Territory as New Frontier in contemporary government advertising literature. The chapter outlines the direct continuum existing between early pioneering literature in which Darwin was configured as a kind of anachronistic outpost or garrison town possessing a range of tropes traditionally associated with the sort of Wild Western frontier discussed in detail in Chapter Two; and marks the connection and development of this traditional representation of Darwin with its contemporary theatrical depiction as *neo* frontier capital. Plays discussed here include: John Romeril’s *Top End* (1988); Janis Balodis’s *Wet and Dry* (1991); and Suzanne Spinner’s *Dragged Screaming to Paradise* (1994).

The chapter illustrates that Darwin is configured as an interesting melange of Australian anxieties and fantasies. Whilst playwrights, like journalists Rothwell and Clifton (as discussed earlier), are tempted to construct Darwin as either utopia or dystopia, it is ultimately neither. It instead houses heterotopic discursive sites and counter-cultures within an over-arching dominant culture. It can thus be read in Foucauldian heterotopic terms, or according to the Gelder/Jacobs “uncanny,” or indeed as being internally “unsettled” in the way that Tompkins uses the term. The chapter consequently provides useful examples of the ways in which the separate strands of spatial, psychoanalytic and cultural criticism utilised throughout this thesis can coalesce and overlap. Darwin can thus be seen to operate metonymically as a nexus not only for a range of divergent cultures and the theatrical representations thereof; but it also operates similarly as a site that helps illustrate the ways in which a range of critical theories interrogating Australian cultural spaces might connect and collide, functioning as microcosmic exemplar of critical and cultural debates taking place within the nation at present, and indeed throughout the previous century.

Theorising the Postmodern City

Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall and Iain Borden summarise the various constituent parts that make up the postmodern city, reminding us eloquently that a city is more than a certain *place* with a name. It is also a *space*, with all of the symbolic and practical phenomena the concept of space (as articulated by de Certeau, Gregory, Lefebvre, Shields and Soja) implies. That is, city space is also, according to Miles *et al.*: a set of objects; a set of beliefs; an “invisible” space in which “money, ideas and data” (1) are exchanged; a collection of urban professionals; temporal space; historical space; a “place of the spectacular” where “major historic events take place, grand architecture is constructed” (2), and so on. Most crucially, as it applies to this study, each city is also a unique collection and arrangement of all of the

above and as such becomes a set of particular practices that are performed daily – constantly – and become the way in which the city is regarded, defined and presented, either to and by itself, or by others. As Miles *et al.* explain:

It is a place where things happen and people act. It is the place of making and consuming, driving and walking, teaching and learning, jostling and sleeping. It is a place where doing occurs. A city is not a singular text, nor indeed a text at all. It would be the worst kind of illusion to read the city only as objects, for it is a living, social entity. (1)

As Miles *et al.* elaborate, cities are thus “sites of constant flux” wherein a particular individual or group’s experience of the city is “affected by social factors such as gender, class and ethnicity for different groups in society at different times, the city is a different space” (2). I would also argue that other factors like age, ability and sexuality influence the individual’s experience of the city in the way that Miles *et al.* expound. Power hierarchies thus occur inevitably, and dominant cultures come to occupy and experience the city in ways markedly different from that of those forced into marginal spaces on the basis of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability or age. Subcultural occupations of city spaces can thus occur via the heterotopic means Foucault refers to (discussed below), evidence of which occurs according to Miles *et al.* through counter-discursive manifestations such as graffiti, fly-posting or squatting (3).

Edward Soja elaborates upon these subcultural occupations of city spaces in his analysis of Los Angeles as post-modern city *par excellence*. He refers to the racial/ethnic boroughs that occur there as “ethni-cities,” and claims that economic imperatives combine with forces of cultural kinship and identity in such large cities so as to disrupt town planners’ neat geometrical schema, “punching holes into the monocentric gradients and wedges as a result of the territorial segregation of races and ethnicities” (242). Los Angeles’ ethni-cities are comprised of Latino *barrios*, “Vietnamese Shops and Hong Kong housing” (239) in Chinatown, and Japanese and South Korean quadrants. As Soja explains:

Through a historic act of preservation and renewal, there now exists downtown a deceptively harmonised showcase of ethni-cities and specialised economic enclaves which play key roles, albeit somewhat noisily at times, in the contemporary redevelopment and internationalisation of Los Angeles. (239)

Whilst I am not suggesting that Darwin compares to Los Angeles in scale or temperament, or that ethnic subcultures exist in specialised boroughs in Darwin even in the way that they do in, say, Sydney or Melbourne, the concept of the manufactured nature of the ethni-city is useful to this discussion inasmuch as it reminds us of how ethnicity and cultural identity can be co-opted into a city's "personality" and marketed and produced as an intrinsic part of the city's identity – its charm or danger, as the case may be. Darwin's Asian markets, for instance, whilst springing reasonably unselfconsciously from the city's Southeast Asian communities, have become co-opted by the city's tourism advertising institutions and used to sell the city's "utopic" cosmopolitan harmony. And yet Aboriginal enclaves in the form of the aforementioned town camps are as frequently regarded as temporary sites of anti-social behaviour that need to be "cleaned up" in order to restore a sense of community safety and security.

Lesley Delmenico provides a useful synthesis of this strand of spatial analysis and applies it in specific detail to Darwin and its racialised occupation and usage of city space. Delmenico's study of intercultural performance that takes place within Darwin as a result of the constituent sum of its ethnically constituted parts sits alongside my own study, to be discussed in further detail in Chapter Five. For Delmenico, Darwin is a "border city" that straddles the tectonic cusp between Australia and Asia. As a result of this geopolitical proximity, Darwin has become home to relatively large numbers of immigrant communities from Southeast Asia, frequently escaping political instability in their countries of origin. Contact between Black, White and Asian populations thus occurs more "naturally" – if frequently in more complex ways – ensuring unavoidable negotiations between the putative "Australian" self and its Other:

Darwin's multivocal urban complexity and its small size allow comparative transparency in these negotiations. Its composition is strongly influenced by its border/marginal geography within Australia and by Australia's position as both a postcolonial nation and an internal coloniser of Aborigines. ("Dramas" 66)

Drawing primarily on the work of Lefebvre, Barthes and de Certeau, Delmenico breaks down her analysis of Darwin's politically charged engagement with racial-spatial practice into "contested" and "conceded" uses of city space. This aligns also with Foucault's analysis of "other spaces," as will be discussed shortly. Delmenico evokes Lefebvre's conceptual triad (discussed in Chapter One), to arrive at her own discussion of "First Spaces" ("Conceded" Spaces) and "Third Spaces" ("Contested" Spaces). According to Delmenico's interpretation of Lefebvre's triad, the first category includes the "perceived, encountered space of daily routine and urban reality" (83), and incorporates the "official" way in which the city was designed to be used within dominant political, architectural and cultural discourse. Contested spaces, on the other hand, are those that occur when conceded spaces are used subversively or counter-culturally. She provides numerous examples of both types of space, including Darwin's famous Mindil Beach Asian night market, which ostensibly offers itself as an idealised multicultural contested space which has naturally and spontaneously sprung from Darwin's vast Asian subcultures. Delmenico argues, however, that it is in reality a conceded space, because of the regulation of the site and its containment – or even performance – of "Asian-ness" wherein the customers are essentially White denizens (both local and tourist) whose occupation of the beachfront at the markets on Thursday nights displaces the itinerant Aboriginal groups who use the space casually throughout the remainder of the week ("Dramas" 92-94).

For Delmenico, Aboriginal spatial practice in Darwin is frequently marginalised in the manner referred to above, but "[i]nformal oppositional performances may contest such official uses" of space ("Dramas" 110). She is essentially describing the same city

as Rothwell when she discusses the way in which richly divergent cultural groups occupy similar spaces in competing ways. The Gelder/Jacobs uncanny is in full operation in this performance of complex and often uncomfortable simultaneity. Delmenico here summarises her thesis of Darwin's racialised spatial politics and practice:

In Darwin, the most evident transgressive tactical variations on the city's official orderly uses are by indigenous people, whose responses to public space vary from those of immigrants who have adapted to the city's normative, conceded structures and spatial uses. Greeks, Italians and Eastern Europeans who arrived during the postwar period of large-scale immigration are now nearly invisible in the city. Although Asian immigrants are more visible, they also share in the city's suburban orderliness, and have created respected cultural features in Darwin like the markets used by a cross-section of the entire community, except for the most part, Aborigines. Indigenous people use the "empty centre" and other open city spaces differently from other groups, in spatial contestations that are created by stories that supplement or counter official histories, by different modes of sociability, and by their discomfort with the normative built environment. (110-111)

For Delmenico, live theatrical or cultural productions can comprise one of the myriad ways in which this oppositional spatial practice might be voiced/performed, as will shortly be discussed. The focus of Delmenico's own thesis is on "Darwin styled" intercultural performance. Her focus on this particular form of community-driven performance is useful in the context of this analysis of oppositional ways of "using" the postmodern city, and of interrogating its premises and elisions. This chapter engages with Delmenico's community performance interests, but also broadens the scope of theatrical representations of the city to include those by "White" playwrights, in order to provide a more comprehensive exploration of Darwin as postmodern frontier capital.

In order to proceed with my own discussion of the ways in which Foucault's concept of heterotopia might be applied to an understanding of certain Darwin spaces that exist in contra-distinction to dominant cultural hegemonies, it might be useful to return for a moment to Foucault's seminal article, "Of Other Spaces." In that article, Foucault breaks his

definition of heterotopic spaces into six separate principles, any combination of which may be in operation at one time, to help better understand not only what a heterotopia might be, but also how it functions and how its counter-discursive relationship to the dominant culture might be defined. Of these six guiding principles or traits, three (the First, Fourth and Fifth principles specifically) are particularly relevant to this investigation as it applies to Darwin.

Foucault's first principle describes what he refers to as "crisis heterotopias." In their original form, these included "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (24). He includes in this category adolescents reaching puberty, menstruating and pregnant women, and the elderly, and describes as an increasingly obsolete form the type of sacred space still very much active in Australian Aboriginal culture throughout the Northern Territory – and indeed, throughout the nation. In urbanised spaces, however, Foucault argues that these sacred spaces are being replaced instead by what he terms "heterotopias of deviation" in which those "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25). In this regard, I might argue that Darwin's now defunct joss houses and still thriving Aboriginal or Long Grass town camps can be seen to fall under this category. Certainly the latter example would be included in Delmenico's discussion of contested city spaces.

The joss houses and opium dens of Chinatown in pre-war Darwin that figure in Bedford's *White Australia* and Nowra's *Capricornia* are constructed in those texts as illicit grottoes of sloth and subversion. According to Bedford, they are sinister spaces where anti-Australian plots of conflated Chinese and Japanese espionage are hatched; or more evocatively in Nowra's reading of Herbert's master text, they are sites of intercultural collusion, occlusion and identity-soldering. Similarly, in both of his Darwin-based plays Nowra constructs the Aboriginal town camps and internment compounds as constructed sites

of deviance in which interracial sexual liaisons occur and dominant codes of cultural protocol are flouted, echoes of which recur in Darwin Theatre Company's 2004 production, *Tin Hotel*.

Foucault's fifth principle refers to the way in which some heterotopias "presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (26). He argues that some heterotopic sites are "not freely accessible like a public space" and require specific permission to enter or exit. Obvious examples here are barracks⁵⁷ or prisons. More subtle and beguiling are "the others, on the contrary, that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. Everyone can enter into these heterotopic spaces, but in fact that is only an illusion" (26). These spaces pose as sites of inclusion, but actually operate in reverse. No doubt many Aboriginal people might argue that *most* Australian public spaces operate in this way at some time or another, but the most popular example are the (eponymous) hotels that serve as *mises en scène* for all three theatre texts referred to above – *Capricornia*, *Crow* and *Tin Hotel* – where Aboriginal people are either excluded entry, or relegated to marginal space within the so-called public space, or utilised as workers, rather than as patrons. Other spaces that operate similarly here might include Darwin's (now cyclone-destroyed) Star Cinema, or the verandahs of White pastoral homesteads beyond which Blacks were (some would argue, still are) forbidden to transgress.⁵⁸

The last of Foucault's principles about heterotopic spaces that proves illuminating for the ensuing discussion of Darwin cultural space(s) as they manifest in contemporary theatrical representations is his fourth. Here he notes that heterotopias

⁵⁷ And indeed Darwin's Army, Naval and Air Force barracks all figure as key examples here, operating as closed communities littered throughout the city, including the very edges of the CBD and Darwin Harbour itself. They remain strangely underwritten and under-performed – unexplored – in contemporary performance praxis.

⁵⁸ NT Aboriginal Activist Tracker Tilmouth famously referred to Darwin's Parliament House as being metonymic for the Pastoral homestead in the lead-up to the 1997 NT general election, commenting that the (ostensibly Aboriginal-friendly) ALP was happy to have Aboriginal politicians invited to the proverbial verandah but wouldn't entrust them with real power or responsibility by inviting them into the House.

can operate in a kind of frozen time (a “heterochrony”) outside of the regular or real time of the surrounding culture. The key examples he gives here are museums and libraries, where history is stored such that it can be 1974, say, inside the Cyclone Tracy exhibit in the NT Museum and Art Gallery while outside it is the twenty-first century. More intriguingly, Foucault describes country fairs or festivals in this light; and the so-called “vacation villages, such as those Polynesian villages that offer a compact three weeks of primitive and eternal nudity to the inhabitants of the cities” (26). The Darwin Festival itself operates as such a heterochronic cultural “other space” in which, for three weeks of the year, multiculturalism is produced, packaged and performed for popular consumption and “Old Darwin”⁵⁹ (in the case of the 2002 Festival) is momentarily invoked. Indeed, the Cultural Village, erected and dismantled for the duration of the festival, has been a popular outdoor space at several Darwin Festivals; and I conclude this analysis of unique Darwin heterotopic spaces with a discussion of the popular and important annual Festival, questioning romantic assumptions of the ways in which it celebrates Darwin’s multiculturalism as year-round spectacle.

Theatrical Representations of Darwin’s Contested Sites from White perspectives: Crow and Tin Hotel

My theatrical analysis of Louis Nowra’s *Crow* and Gail Evans and Tania Lieman’s *Tin Hotel* opens up a specialised White reading of space in the hybrid Northern capital. Both plays cover intriguingly similar terrain, both literally and figuratively, in their depiction of “Old Darwin.” Both plays are set in Darwin during the Second World War, and are populated by racially complementary casts; each play stages the 1942 Japanese bombing of the town and

⁵⁹ This is a term frequently used by long term residents of the city to refer to the Darwin of the early twentieth-century through to the period culminating in Cyclone Tracy (1974), when much of the town’s original infrastructure was destroyed, and, many argue, its unique “frontier” port town atmosphere with it.

utilises the chaos of the event to throw the social order momentarily off-balance; and each depicts key racially contested sites within the city to develop its themes of racial hierarchy and hypocrisy. The Kahlin (“half-castes”) compound, the Star Cinema, the Hotel Darwin, and Chinatown are all specifically cited in *Tin Hotel*, and represented generically in *Crow*. *Crow* also utilises the law courts, Government House and police prison cells to develop its central dichotomous theme of distinguishing “civilised” White spaces from “natural” Black open spaces (or as Delmenico would have it, conceded and contested city spaces). Both plays demonstrate strong debts to Xavier Herbert by way of *oeuvre* and *milieu*; and, unconsciously, to Bedford and the melodramatic tradition before Herbert. *Crow* obviously owes a direct debt to Nowra’s work in adapting *Capricornia* to the stage, and can be viewed in some ways as a kind of coda to its primary text.

If *Capricornia* was adapted in the Bicentennial year with a particular range of national tropes in mind as they applied to Aboriginal politics of identity at that time, then *Crow* can be read very much as a Mabo era play (1994) that happens to be set in the 1940s. There are opaque themes of land rights and the stolen generation that held potent currency at the time that the play was first produced (which obviously remain current), and which have been superimposed upon an earlier historical period. If miscegenation and racial prejudice provided the grist for Herbert’s mill, for Nowra in *Crow* the Aboriginal themes and subplots referred to above have become central to the dramatic action. The familiar (Northern dramatic) terrain of Aboriginal imprisonment and rough justice, lawlessness, and interracial sexual taboo and tension that Herbert opened up is all covered here again (and, to a certain extent, in *Tin Hotel* as well); only this time an Aboriginal woman, the eponymous Crow, is the central character, and her *raison d’être* is to gain ownership of the tin mine her dead white lover left her in his will. The Territory, thus at that time, Federal Government has confiscated the land on the basis of her race. Patrick has remained her lover rather than her

husband because it is illegal for Blacks and Whites to marry. The law courts thus represent White (in)justice. Crow works as a housemaid in one of the city's hotels, which is also configured as racially divided space. The Government Residence is the seat of White power and apex of the local racial hierarchy. Not only is it a space Governor Morrison wants to keep racially pure, his desire to keep it free of contamination extends as far as refusing White men who have "gone Combo" from violating its sanctity. He explains, "[I]t's so easy in a place like this to go troppo. Never allowed anyone who had gone combo to put a foot in the Residence. You see, to go combo is to breed mongrels... A gin is white ruin, though" (31).

"Man-made" space, then, is consistently configured as "civilised" space, which equates to Whiteness and all of the inherent range of tropes of superiority this entails. It is the "conceded" space that Delmenico describes in her contemporary reading of Darwin as post-modern city. The Residence and Law Courts are über White spaces, with the prison acting as a Black corollary, aligning "civilised" spaces with incarceration when experienced through a Black cultural rubric. The city's Compound is unnamed in Nowra's text, but is obviously either the same Kahlin Compound referred to in *Tin Hotel*, or the Rhetta Dixon children's compound. It extends the equation of "civilising" space with incarceration and racial hierarchy. It is the site in which "half-caste" children are housed and "educated" by missionaries. It also represents the crux of Black/White sexual relations and hypocrisy. In this sense, it might be described by Tompkins as a key point of unsettlement for the drama. As Crow declares, "[t]hat Compound is filled with kids white fellas created" (12). It is a liminal space – a heterotopic space (like the prison and the Residence) – that functions according to its own internal code of conduct and logic, operating metonymically for the entire White community's assimilationist yearnings. As Morrison states, "[d]o you know that eventually there will be no Aborigines? They'll be bred out. Conquered by assimilation. I used to look at those girls in the half-caste Compound and some looks as white to me" (31).

Blackness is represented in the text by open spaces (“contested” spaces) on the city’s fringe. The mangroves that surround the peninsula Darwin is built on are sites of Black-Black (rather than Black-White) sexual liaison; or as sites of concealment and escape for Black fugitives from White injustice. Nature is thus aligned with Aboriginality (and *vice versa*) in a deft strategy that is as essentialising, ironically, as the racial stereotyping the play is ostensibly aiming to satirise. At the end of the play, after the Japanese bombing has temporarily destroyed the vestiges of White authority and power, Crow and her family escape to the coastal fringes and watch the city burn.

In this colour-coded schema, Chinatown is also configured as a liminal heterotopic space. It is a discrete urban enclave housing the city’s Asian population, and as such is neither Black nor White, but is frequented by all races in a furtive or illicit way. It is less surveilled and scrutinised than other constructed spaces within the city. Crow, for instance, instructs her son Boofhead to take the bag of contraband chickens home via Chinatown because there are “[l]ess nosy parkers there” (24). The association of Chinatown with illicit social activity can be drawn back to Bedford, where the city’s joss houses and opium dens are also the sites of counter-espionage, and the portals through which not only Asian contamination but also invasion of White Australia might be planned and launched.

In a sense *Tin Hotel* draws more strongly from a melodramatic template in its staging of Chinatown, and in its theatrical depiction of race and place generally. In that play, we see more of the subversive activity that takes place in the city’s Asian ghetto. Madam Lin (who, along with Aboriginal elder Harry, narrates the play) operates a brothel in Chinatown. Along with the drinking and gambling that take place in the enclave, then, Chinatown becomes an illicit space associated with deviant or unsanctioned desire – it becomes heterotopic, contested space. This is complicated further by the way in which it houses members of the city’s (predominantly male) polarised social and racial hierarchy. It is a place not only where

interracial sexual liaisons occur, but also where different strata within the city's White class hierarchy engage socially. The gambling den, for instance, houses not only Wally the jeweller and Bert the Irish drunk, but also Rusty – the “rusted on” Trade Union hothead. The heterotopic immunity from regular social marshalling that Chinatown affords means a socialist can participate furtively in quintessentially capitalistic activity, adding a further layer of social transgression to the marginal zone.

As with *Crow*, *Tin Hotel* establishes Darwin as a cultural melting pot in the first instance. Madam Lin and Harry open the narrative in a Brechtian framing device that allows them to comment upon War-era Darwin from a vaguely contemporary – or perhaps “extemporal” – external remove. Madam Lin casts yarrow stalks over (Harry's?) waterhole, fusing Chinese and Aboriginal metaphysical constructions to grant both characters special powers to “see” and “know” the city's history in a privileged, uncanny way. Madam Lin declares:

I've seen the changes. In the smoke, the fire, the roll of the dice. Many things will try to destroy Darwin, to beat her down, but she will rise up like the phoenix from the ashes, reborn with all her beauty and her ugliness[...] This water been stirred so long, it's muddy to the core. (1)

To which Harry responds, “Yep. Just like all this mob here. Got a hint of this, a tinge of that. Chinky, blackfella, islander, balanda all mixed up together” (1).

The play is thus essentially a romantic narrative of multicultural Darwin in which the city itself is anthropomorphised into a hybrid community elder. Harry refers to Darwin and Madam Lin as “two cranky old bitches” (1). In the stage directions, the cast “slowly enters as animals and gather around the waterhole” (1) before gradually transforming into human characters as the prologue progresses. The piece's melodramatic roots are at their most evident in the play's characterisation. One of the effects of utilising this form when trying to say so much about race and multiculturalism over the span of history is that it skims over complexity and reduces everyone to a cultural stereotype, whether pejorative or affirmative

in intent. The cast list thus reads like vintage melodrama (and is not entirely dissimilar to *Capricornia* and *Crow* in this regard) containing an evil, corrupt White racist Administrator; mystic and industrious Chinese; Aboriginal tricksters (aligned with nature); a drunken Irishman; a union hothead; money-making, hard-working Greeks; a chorus of female town gossips; and a spiritual Aboriginal forefather. In appropriating melodramatic archetypes and form, there is clearly a conscious attempt to challenge the inherent racism implicit in the genre, though the unintended side-effect can be a perpetuation of exactly the sort of structuring one is trying to lampoon. Certainly Suzanne Spinner felt the 2004 Darwin Festival production veered toward this dangerous territory. She writes:

The concept and writing were problematic; it was uncertain where to pitch its tent. Was it a feel good musical about multiracial Darwin, like *Bran Nue Dae*? Or a searing racially driven tragedy with wild comic overtones, like[...] *Capricornia*? If it wasn't either of these, then what and where was it? Its grasp of history politics and race relations was sentimental and naïve[...] It felt as if it was constantly about to go deeper, develop an idea, a character, a conflict, and shied away every time. (*RealTime* 15)

Spinner is claiming that the play essentialises along standard stereotypical lines quite consistently, and doesn't necessarily complicate widely-held theatrical or historical perceptions of the city and its past.

More successful, though, is its interrogation and depiction of key cultural *spaces*. Evans and Lieman are more successful than Nowra in dramatising cultural specificity and representation of cultural sites of contest. In depicting Kahlin Compound, Chinatown, the Star Cinema, the Hotel Darwin, and the Rhetta Dixon Children's Home, *Tin Hotel* doesn't suffer the outsider's self-conscious slightly too-well-researched cartoon representation of key dramatic locations. The play actually enters Chinatown, the Kahlin Compound and the racially stratified cinema and hotel. If Nowra reduces Darwin to a simplistic White/Civilised versus Black/Natural spatial dichotomy, *Tin Hotel* establishes similar initial constructions of city space, but attempts to subvert them from within and claim that really, despite the best

efforts of assimilationist government policy and White social practice, the town is inherently multiracial; and even those (heterotopic) spaces designated as bastions of White privilege can be challenged and their laws of regulation flouted in small ways from within. The Aboriginal girls, Frances and Hannah, for instance, eventually achieve their aim of violating the Star Cinema's racial seating hierarchy by infiltrating the dress circle and throwing propriety into chaos. The Country Women's Association (CWA) ladies sing about restoring social order and redeeming Darwin from social chaos, opining that "the world will be much better when everyone is white" (51), suggesting a deep-seated anxiety about the "true" underlying transgressive nature of the town's racial relations.

The action is regularly interrupted by didactic contemporary scenes where town camps are raided by uniformed police attempting to "monster and stomp on"⁶⁰ Aboriginal "anti-social" behaviour in the city's urban fringes. The reminder here is that pockets of social transgression still exist in the present time and, like Old Darwin (exemplified by the Hotel Darwin itself),⁶¹ are being removed or "modernised" in an attempt to reconfigure the contemporary city as a sanitised tourist-brochure version of cosmopolitan harmony and allure. When Madam Lin packs up her possessions and moves on with Harry at the play's end, she aligns herself with the city's narrative trajectory. She declares:

How many times I been packed up moved on, had my house pulled down around me[?] Chinatown survived the bombing, but not the bulldozers. Darwin destiny to be destroy, abandoned, rebuilt. Over and over. Either way. Old Darwin will soon be gone forever. Like me. (64)

The suggestion here is that the city's Chinese and Aboriginal forebears, like the eponymous Hotel itself, house the city's soul. As with Nowra's text, sites of White

⁶⁰ Shane Stone's 1997 Country Liberal Party election campaign utilised this slogan to reassure voters in Darwin's northern suburbs that "anti-social" itinerant Aboriginal behaviour would be violently marshalled should the CLP be returned to government. It was, with a landslide majority.

⁶¹ The Hotel Darwin was demolished in 1999, in the wee hours of the morning, to much (futile) public outcry. The CLP government refused to heritage list the building, even though it was the sole extant example of Art Nouveau architecture remaining in the city, having survived both WWII bombing and Cyclone Tracy.

privilege are loci within which the city's racial and class hierarchies operate in paradigmatic ways: they are bastions of the dominant social order. Transgressive "other spaces" in the Foucauldian sense, occur in the city's margins and grottoes: in Chinatown; in the long grass and foreshore; in the mixed race compounds and town camps. Resistance to White power relations of the kind that Gregory feels Soja overlooks in his spatial analysis of Los Angeles's racial ethni-cities, takes place via class or racial subversion of the town's White institutions of propriety, through interracial love affairs, or disruption of the usual social order in public space.

Delmenico's counter-argument to this theatrical construction of contested spaces might well be that, whilst Darwin's multi-(if not inter-)culturalism is being depicted here, along with the city's range of contested and conceded borders and spaces, it is still ultimately a White hegemonic depiction of those spaces and race relations. It is not intercultural performance in the sense that it is work being generated by and narrated according to Aboriginal or Asian artists from their unique voices and cultural perspectives. And as such, despite good intentions, these plays still fall within a category of reified representation. It is, in a sense, conceded rather than contested performance.⁶²

Darwin's "Other Spaces" From an Aboriginal Theatrical Perspective: Keep Him My Heart

The instances of Aboriginal-generated theatrical representations of Darwin's "pockets of resistance" are disappointingly rare, compared with indigenous cultural expression taking place in dance, live music and especially visual art in the Top End. Whilst Aboriginal actors,

⁶² I am less inclined than Delmenico to criticise the work on this basis, or to instate one form of theatrical representation as being somehow more valid or important than another, when it comes to creating theatre in the Top End. And certainly, despite its textual or structural shortcomings, the team behind *Tin Hotel* employed local indigenous arts worker Sam Chalmers as cultural advisor and sometime co-devisor of Evans and Lieman's text.

dancers and artists frequently appear in intercultural collaborative performances in the Top End, Gary Lee's 1993 play *Keep Him My Heart*, a large-scale community work celebrating the historic connections between the Larrakia and Filipino populations of Darwin through one family's love story, stands out as a rare local example of full-length text-based professionally-funded indigenous theatre work. Lee's epic narrative spans the twentieth century, and offers the influential Cubillo⁶³ family's history in Darwin as a palimpsest for the town's under-written and under-acknowledged indigenous and Asian seminal narrative. For Delmenico,

[s]everal issues weave through a history that is told from the viewpoints of socially regulated and spatially controlled people. The play's multiple concerns fall into two recurring patterns. The first is the governmental taxonomising of racial identities and efforts to control non-white Darwinites. The second theme is the Cubillos' changing place in Darwin and their attempts to reclaim Larrakia land. ("Dramas" 219)

All of the heterotopic sites discussed earlier in relation to White theatrical representations of Old Darwin are present in Lee's text, and more are added. In addition to Chinatown, Kahlin Compound, the Star Cinema and the city's popular watering holes, the Vic Hotel chief amongst them, Lee's narrative also depicts homes within the city's CBD; Frances Bay wharves; a Chinese tomb and Garden's Hill Cemetery; Vestey's Meatworks; St Mary's Cathedral; the Buff [Social] Club; and a range of outdoor spaces including the city's parks, Police Paddocks and town camps.

Rather than depicting these spaces in the first instance as either White or Black, Lee's Larrakia, Filipino and Chinese characters transgress all spaces because it is their town. Whilst remaining acutely aware of racial power relations in the city, particularly of the injustice of land and home ownership for non-White populations, and the pre-eminent claim Larrakia people have to Darwin spaces which drives the play's overarching political thrust, Lee reminds contemporary audiences that, as much as successive Federal and local

⁶³ The Cubillo clan are an actual, as against fictional, Darwin family hailing originally from the Philippines, and inter-marrying with Lee's own Larrakia and Chinese clans.

governments over the years have striven to impose White cultural supremacy over Darwin via its institutions and meeting places, it has really always been a multiracial hybrid town in which Whites have enjoyed political advantage at (predominantly) Aboriginal expense. The twist here is that the town's racially fraught heterotopic spaces, as articulated in earlier discussions of other texts, have, according to Lee's play, been freely infiltrated and transgressed by non-White characters from the town's inception. It is thus similar narrative terrain to that covered in *Capricornia*, *Crow* and *Tin Hotel*, but it is a depiction of multiracial Darwin written from within rather than from without.

The text begins with an ostensibly taboo cross-cultural love affair: (White) George McKeddie has children with (Larrakia) Annie Duwun. But it is only White law that militates against the relationship. There is no suggestion of the relationship being in any way socially taboo. Indeed, it is offered as a standard – even typical – sort of Darwin arrangement. If it causes any kind of pique or ire within the conservative White establishment, we never hear about it because it is narratively, and probably politically, irrelevant to Lee and the world he creates onstage. By law, Annie is forbidden to cohabit with the “White” family and, rather than live with them in their central Darwin Mitchell Street home and store, she must visit secretly from her Lameroo Camp home. This is a reflection of the city administration's official historic practice of colour-coding its spaces along racial lines. Delmenico quotes Alec Fong Lim – Darwin's first Chinese mayor⁶⁴ – recalling the street-by-street separation of the races: “Anglo-Celtic Australians on Smith and Mitchell streets and the Esplanade; Chinatown on Cavenagh Street; “coloureds” at the Police Paddock Compound and Aborigines at Kahlin Compound, on the coastal outskirts” (“Dramas” 78).

As the inter-generational family saga continues, the interracial grafting becomes more complex as Annie's daughter Lily marries a member of the Filipino Cubillo clan. Half of the

⁶⁴ Fong Lim (not Fong Linn, as Delmenico refers to him) was actually Lord Mayor from 1984-1992, not in the 1960s as Delmenico states. The quotation she provides from Powell is Lim's recollection of the 1960s, before the time in which he was Lord Mayor.

extended family becomes regarded as Asian, and therefore allowed to settle relatively freely in the township; the other half are regarded as Aboriginal and are therefore interned in the Kahlin Compound, and denied home and land ownership. The farcical nature of this seemingly arbitrary colour-coding administrative practice comes during the evacuations of Darwin under the Japanese attack in World War Two. The “Aboriginal” families are evacuated to Katherine, and from there to Adelaide where:

we were put in an old grandstand at the Balaklava showgrounds. No beds no nothing, we had to live in between those seats in that open grandstand there. Old wooden one it was, with big gaps, there was no privacy, white people with nothing better to do used to come and stare at us like we was in a zoo – until I complained. (36)

White families – or those deemed “White” – were presumably housed and billeted.

Throughout the assimilationist era of the 1950s and 1960s, the situation becomes more absurd for Aboriginal and mixed race families. Having once been central to the town’s cultural life – a literal majority, in the case of the town’s Asian community – the Cubillo clan and others like them become more actively relegated to second-class citizen status. They begin looking to the Philippines as a freer and more autonomous alternative to the city in which they possess ancestral precedence:

CATHIE: Oh it was just terrific aunty. We met all the relations and it was so good to finally get to know them. I’m so proud of our Filipino family. They have a really different life to what we’ve got here in Parap Camp. They’re SO rich...at least compared to us!

AUNTY BERTHA: Aboriginal people like us have a far harder go of things than most of our relations back in the Philippines. That’s how it’s been for all blacks in Darwin, no matter you might have white, Filipino, Malay, Chinese, Japanese or even Irish ancestry along the ways. (50)

Keep Him My Heart is thus a morality tale of sorts. It traces a linear narrative of the twentieth century in which indigenous and Asian people begin as being culturally central to Darwin’s own narrative, to being increasingly sidelined, to having to fight for their claim to the land in the nation’s courts by century’s end. The play ends during the massive Kenbi land claim of the 1980s and 1990s, which was won by the Larrakia after the play was written and

performed. The play's genre shifts from family saga and historical melodrama to didactic Brechtian political tract. In a suitably "uncanny" or "unsettling" mobilisation of theatrical space, Lily's ghost appears and reminds the contemporary audience sitting in the open grounds of what is now Darwin High School, but was originally the Vestey's Meatworks in which many of the Cubillo clan worked, that they are all visitors here and need to be more consciously mindful of the city's Aboriginal and Asian cultural heritage. She reminds the audience of the Larrakia people's resilience, and their continued spiritual and manifest connection to the land:

In short, despite over two hundred years the white man will never be rid of us because Aboriginal people are the world's longest survivors having come from the oldest continuing culture in the world. And links between Aboriginal and Asian peoples is a history which should be emphasised – and more acknowledged. As the story of Antonio and myself has shown, Aboriginal and Asian links still continue as it has with our family for over one hundred years. When will you all start to recognise the link you have with Larrakia people? With any Aboriginal people? With the people on whose very land you all now call YOUR home? All you have to do is talk to us. (62; original emphasis)

While not exactly subtle in its dramaturgical strategy, the play powerfully re-situates White audiences as cultural outsiders, upturning (even lampooning) spatial relations embedded in the city's history and cultural practice. As Delmenico states, quoting Lee from personal interview:

Beyond the scope of the Darwin production, Lee stated that he hoped that the play would serve as an example for other communities. He wanted to open up the processes of historical research to enable residents to tell their stories through theatre or other artistic means, hoping that this project would serve as an example both locally and nationally. ("Dramas" 225)

For Delmenico, this deployment of "believed-in theatre: placing 'real histories' onstage with little mediation" ("Dramas" 225) is political activism, aimed at celebrating cultural survival and reasserting indigenous and Asian claims to authenticity and centrality in Darwin's narrative history.

A Collaborative Black and White Exploration of Darwin's Other Spaces: Gulpilil

Whilst Reg Cribb and David Gulpilil's one-man show, *Gulpilil*, does not fall wholly within the category of "plays about Darwin," the play's cursory references to Darwin long grass camps and the city's social function for itinerant Aboriginal people make for interesting consideration for the present analysis of the city's "other spaces" and their capacity to operate as sites of resistance to White power hegemonies. In describing what he sees as a disheartening intergenerational dilution of Aboriginal culture and identity, Gulpilil talks of the dual-edged sword involved in sending young Yolngu people to "Balanda"⁶⁵ schools in Darwin "to learn Balanda language and their law" (16) in order to provide them with the best possible resources needed to operate successfully in both cultures. Unfortunately, Gulpilil's observation is that:

when [most of] the kids come out their heads are full of whitefellas ways. They're confused so they just sit down again around the campfire with their family like they did before they went to school. Or if they're real confused, they go and hang out in the long grass in Darwin and start drinkin'. (16)

Gulpilil's own narrative traverses this inter-cultural territory, as he describes in great detail the difficulties inherent in negotiating both a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle, and the lifestyle not just of an "urbanised" Aborigine within White culture, but of a famous indigenous actor provided with much of the advantages of fame, including short periods of relative wealth. Darwin represents the nexus between these worlds. In Gulpilil's estimation, the urban long grass camps are sites of cultural dissipation and dissolution, rather than the sites of subversive contestation other (White) playwrights in this chapter depict them as. They are a kind of limbo attracting young people caught between worlds, much as they attracted – and continue to attract – him, but providing them with the advantages of neither world. Instead, these fringe spaces serve to reinscribe fractured Aboriginal self-perceptions and to perpetuate

⁶⁵ "Balanda" is a common Arnhem area description for Whitefellas, stemming etymologically from the Dutch for "white" which transferred to the region with the Macassan traders, who engaged with North Australian communities during the period of Dutch colonial occupation of present day Indonesia.

broader community prejudices about blackfellas, alcohol and “anti-social behaviour”.

Ironically, though, Gulpilil’s own experience of Darwin is as a site of “White corroboree.”

He first uses this term to describe the binge drinking he felt obliged to indulge in in order to keep up with hard-living White actors like Dennis Hopper and John Meillon.

In describing the events leading up to his notorious imprisonment for drink-driving in Darwin, he explains, “in Darwin there’s always temptation you know. On my land there’s no grog but on this land... [*David straightens out his tuxedo.*] ... you gotta join in on the big white corroboree. What choice do you have?” (19). He describes his arrest with characteristic self-deprecating humour and concedes that his sentence is an appropriate one that anyone caught drink-driving should expect. “There’s plenty of room out there in the long grass with the other blackfellas,” he says, “but a comfy bed might be good for a change. So I done my time in Berrimah jail” (20). By way of conclusion, he states:

And what did I learn? I learn that I was a fucking idiot. I also learn that on my land I’m safe, but on your land, the bad spirits are tapping me on my shoulder. And they tap me pretty hard ’cause I’m not sure what world I belong to anymore. The same story with a lot of my people. (20)

For Black Australians, then, from a particular cultural background and perspective, the entirety of Darwin becomes symbolic space representing fractured identity. It is configured in this regard as liminal space: a convergence point for a range of cultures, which itself is still ostensibly White because of its dominant social and political hierarchies. Its dominant social practices are effectively White, but it is situated on the cusp of Black and White (and, I would argue, Asian) Australia. It is the cusp. And within the city itself there are spaces within spaces, as described earlier, which operate iconically as either bastions of White privilege; as sites of counter-cultural subversion and resistance; or as seductive pockets of dispossession, dissolution, danger or dislocation. This is a powerful invocation both of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny and Tompkins’s concept of unsettlement, in which Black and White taxonomies surrounding specific spaces and their cultural practice collide and result in a

friction that ignites personal as well as broader cultural tensions operating more broadly throughout the national imaginary.

Darwin as Contemporary Austral-Asian Frontier: Inday: Mail Order Bride, “Top End,” Eyewitness and First Asylum

I deal now with the imaginary space of Darwin as a metonymical representation of the Australian Frontier. If the North generally operates as metonymy for the nexus (and point of friction) between Black and White Australia on the one hand, and Australia and Asia on the other, then Darwin can be seen as the Frontier capital. Just as the Cribb/Gulpilil text indicates how Darwin can be used in performance to exemplify the points of contact between Black and White Australia, there is also a body of other contemporary theatre texts that return time and again to the notion of Darwin as the nexus between Australia and the nations/cultures immediately to the country’s north.

Betchay Mondragon’s 1995 play *Inday: Mail Order Bride* was commissioned and produced by Darwin Theatre Company, aimed to engage with the city’s large Filipino community and entice that audience into the city’s mainstage theatre spaces. The company had earlier met with some success in staging outdoor intercultural performance events, including the ambitious *Diablo!* in 1991, in which Mondragon was centrally involved. The company was keen not only to capitalise upon her growing stature as a writer and performer, but to induct a cosmopolitan local audience into what was viewed in some quarters as a predominantly middle-class Anglo-centric performance space: the (then) new Studio Theatre at the Darwin Performing Arts Centre (DPAC). The production was, then, trying to negotiate exactly the sort of cultural interface in its audience as it was in its content, and achieved it only part of the way, according to opinions of reviewers at the time. Dennis Schultz of the *Bulletin* states that “Mondragon does poke fun at some of the problems inherent in cross-

cultural marriages, but in the end, instead of exploring a fascinating side of Australian multiculturalism *Inday* succeeds only in perpetuating the stereotypes it tries to dispel” (87). Certainly there was anecdotal box office evidence at the time that suggested that after attending in droves to the opening night performance, Filipino support tapered off drastically as the season progressed. Whether this was because of the reasons alluded to in Schultz’s review, or because a comedy about the maltreatment meted out to women by their husbands upon arriving in Darwin as mail order brides was simply too confronting remains a point of conjecture.

Mondragon plays around with cultural stereotypes in her construction of *Inday*, the play’s eponymous heroine, played by Mondragon herself. Her first encounter with an Aboriginal woman, Arjibuk, derives great humour from the Filipina’s flagrant disregard for social niceties and her brazen transgression of personal body space and social custom. The women meet in abstract space that “looks like a barren expanse of land[...] the sound of clapsticks creep in with the chanting voice of the Aboriginal woman[....] Suddenly, the mystic air is broken by the sound of stiletto shoes walking toward centre stage” (1). *Inday* enters with a tin can of dry ice, and reminds the theatre technician about the importance of the smoke effect to create “mystic” atmosphere. When she confronts Arjibuk, *Inday*’s voice is “extraordinarily loud for the space as well as the distance separating the two of them” (2). *Inday* smiles and extends her hand, and declares, “O, that’s good. You know handshake. The white man they teach you to be cibilays also. Like us. But they did not teach you now to wear shoes and pretty dress like me, O!” (3).

Her first “cultural exchange” on Australian soil, other than meeting her husband Bill, is with a Black woman. It is a hesitant, humorous clashing of cultures, but serves to establish each woman as somehow alien to the other, and to locate Darwin as the physical nexus between non-White subjects within a broader Australian context. Bill’s suburban housing

commission home is the representation of White male culture. It is parodied as such, but is also constructed as a kind of prison for Inday – a heterotopic space, perhaps, in which she is disconnected not only from her “home” culture in the rural Philippines, but also from the broader Australian culture surrounding her in Darwin. It is a site strictly marshalled by the (similarly stereotypical) fat, White beer-and-steak-loving Bill, who rules with an autocratic fist, and closely monitors Inday’s financial and social independence. As the marriage descends into systemic violence, Inday seeks refuge in part-time work making food in the city’s iconic Asian markets, and cleaning houses for White middle-class Darwin; and later by stealing off to the casino to dance to Madonna in the nightclub, with her friend Ester. Ester is equally as maltreated by her husband, but articulates the play’s central thesis when she explains:

What is important Inday is we’re here. We have left the hardships of life back home and we are living in the land of promise and opportunity. We speak English and we live in concrete houses. We can eat meat anytime and chocolates are cheap[...] [D]on’t tell me you miss walking for one hour to the river to fetch a pail of water and sweat like your pet pig...and you miss the smell of flowers... and the sticky mud on the carabao’s back...don’t tell me you miss how your mother used to nag you about how to be a good housewife when all you dream of was to get a university degree and be a nurse[...] You want to go back to that? You must be out of your mind! (28)

Inday decides to leave Bill. She tells the technician to turn up the lights, takes off her bandages and cast, and resumes her friendship with Arjibuk. There is a sense here that this romanticised cultural union is what Darwin uniquely has to offer, away from the “civilising” violence of White patriarchy. She finds a kind of inter-racial female comradeship that subverts oppressive masculinist narratives popular in constructions of the Deep North.

If Darwin is the difficult liminal space to which Asian near-neighbours retreat by way of sanctuary in *Inday*, then it is also the portal through which those neighbours might enter, or the site on which such regional anxieties and tensions might be acted out in contemporary

reworkings of the invasion narrative in John Romeril's "Top End," Graham Pitts' *Eyewitness* and Philip Dean's *First Asylum*.

Written in 1988 and given a public reading that year by Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC), "Top End" is yet to receive a full-scale professional production. As with Pitts' *Eyewitness*, extensive didactic passages of dense political exposition impede the narrative flow. And in both cases, a decision to privilege conscientious engagement with Indonesian military atrocities in East Timor tips the temper of the narrative toward polemic at the expense of a certain lightness of dramatic touch: they are, put simply, political plays. Each strives to locate its narrative, though, in a grounded fictional social and Darwin-based temporal and spatial reality, with differing degrees of success. Pitts refrains from naming the city in specific detail, though its university campus setting and explicit proximity to Indonesia make it impossible to be located in any other "tropical North Australian city." Romeril names the city's bars, beaches, suburbs, sites and enclaves and in so doing manages to achieve a more intimate and uncontrived engagement with the emotional lives, not only of the characters, but of the town itself.

Set in 1975, twelve months after Cyclone Tracy, and immediately following the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, Romeril configures Darwin in "Top End" as a kind of small-scale model of the national response to the international atrocity. In this context, it is much more that frontier version of Darwin that Clifton, rather than Rothwell, might be recalling. Darwin's proximity to East Timor amplifies exponentially the city's sensitivity to the crisis, making it the prime setting for a play interrogating the aptness of the nation's engagement with the invasion. Darwin effectively becomes the liminus between Australia and Asia, and is peopled accordingly. The play's characters are a ragtag assortment of misfits and renegades attracted to the city's anarchic masculinist frontier ethos. Men and women alike are hard-bitten, unsentimental crusaders or survivors attracted to the city's informal

social codes and its distinctly post-Tracy atmosphere of dissemblance and lawlessness. Romeril politicises the city, reminding audiences of Darwin's strong history of militant trade unionism on the wharves. Writing in 1988 when the notion of a left-wing past (or present) in the Northern Territory was very difficult to imagine, given the seemingly permanently entrenched nature of the Country Liberal Party's (CLP) tenure, "Top End" champions the argument that this perception of the Northern Territory as a conservative bastion of White male privilege was, in some ways, successful political window dressing that belied its underlying diversity.⁶⁶

As well as utilising the wharf setting, other sites used to represent Darwin as frontier space include the Hotel Darwin; a Chinese restaurant; a betting shop; the Sailing Club; a boat in the harbour; and Dolly's cyclone-devastated backyard in suburban Nightcliff. The coastal settings all suggest Darwin's proximity to Asia. As Suzanne Spinner's heroine declares in *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, "Timor is so close you should be able to see it from the beach at Fannie Bay" (23). Romeril inverts the traditional invasion narrative motif of Darwin's porous borders – its beaches and shanty towns – and reinscribes them in a post-colonial sense as sites of resistance to domestic conservatism, and spaces through (or from)

⁶⁶ Certainly this is the thrust of Paul Toohey's argument in his post-election analysis in *The Australian* of the Labor Party's shock victory in August 2001. The victory ended 27 years of conservative rule, but Toohey argues that the result helped jolt Darwin especially out of a misguided self-perception (of redneck cultural pre-eminence), and that it reminded the city's denizens of what it had really been all along. His analysis is worth quoting at length here. He states:

The territory – Darwin in particular – is not a brand-new place under Labor. It's just the way it was. Darwin is now finding out what it always was. The town has always called itself proudly "multicultural," but living alongside this was a contradiction called the Country Liberal Party. Everyone believed they were living in Redneck Central, because there was no evidence to the contrary. Guided by rednecks, citizens came to believe that majority government represented majority view. Despite the multicultural feel, people continued to vote CLP[....] As for Darwin, it can now be what it is supposed to be: a young place, full of ideas. It is a sophisticated town, set to become more so if Clare Martin holds good to her promise to use another word: inclusion. (8)

More recent articles in *The Bulletin* would seem to indicate that Toohey feels Martin has failed to live up to this promise, especially as it applies to addressing problems in indigenous health, and particularly, sexual abuse in remote communities. Given that she was effectively forced to stand down as Chief Minister in December 2007 in the wake of her purported delayed response to childhood abuse in Aboriginal communities in the Territory (contrasted starkly by the Howard Government's radical intervention into the NT, discussed in fuller detail in Chapter Three), Toohey's position gains some political traction.

which support to East Timor might be hatched and plotted. By play's end, Dolly Dyer and Dight, a retired transport operator, plan to use Dight's boat to run a secret gun shipment to the Timorese. Disillusioned by the massive swing to the Right Australia has taken in the 1975 Federal election, the pair decide this contraband shipment is the best way to repay the nation's World War II debt to the Timorese.

Eyewitness is set a generation later, just after the Santa Cruz massacre of 1991,⁶⁷ but it is the same debate surrounding Australia's refusal to step in and openly declare support for the East Timorese that fuels the drama. This time, the action is played out on a (presumably Darwin) university campus, where an East Timorese political poet has been invited to speak as part of a cultural exchange. The exchange has been organised by Martin, the son of a senior academic, who advises the young "gun" against politicising the campus and thus jeopardising his academic career. This local decision – to support or not to support the poet – is a microcosmic version of the broader national dilemma.

Darwin's proximity to East Timor and the visiting Indonesian delegation make it the ideal setting to represent the cultural fault line operating between Australia and its troubled near neighbour. The city effectively plays host to the broader moral and political debate, re-echoing the post-colonial reinscription of the invasion narrative that traditionally utilised the North Australian coast as its chief theatrical *mise en scène* in early twentieth-century melodrama. In this sense, Darwin itself becomes the point of unsettlement, as Tompkins would have it, between Australia and Timor's complex political relationship; and also the

⁶⁷ According to the East Timor Action Network's website: "On November 12, 1991, Indonesian troops fired upon a peaceful memorial procession to a cemetery in Dili, East Timor that had turned into a pro-independence demonstration. More than 271 East Timorese were killed that day at the Santa Cruz cemetery or in hospitals soon after. An equal number were disappeared and are believed dead. . . . The Santa Cruz Massacre sparked the international solidarity movement for East Timor, including the founding of the East Timor Action Network, and was the catalyst for congressional action to stem the flow of U.S. weapons and other military assistance for Indonesia's brutal security forces. Ali Alatas, former foreign minister of Indonesia, called the massacre a "turning point," which set in motion the events leading to East Timor's coming independence. (<http://www.etan.org/timor/SntaCRUZ.htm>)

unsettling locus in which the drama itself (the fictional representation *of* the political tension) is performed.

For Philip Dean in *First Asylum* (1996), the invasion anxiety continues in contemporary Australian cultural consciousness, this time manifesting as a fear of Australia being inundated by Asia in the guise of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in boats upon Northern shores. Again, Darwin operates as a kind of über Northern nexus or specific point of unsettlement – the frontier capital, or the “gateway to Asia,” as it is frequently referred to by the Northern Territory Tourism Commission.

Clare is the play’s *arriviste*, freshly hailing from the South to begin a career in the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) in Darwin, away from the oppressive influence of family. She has thus arrived in Darwin replete with a range of motivations that serve as frontier tropes: she is escaping Southern social codes representing law, authority, patriarchy, and social conformity; and thinks she might reinvent herself as a fully individuated adult in the frontier capital. Darwin, she observes, is “[h]ot, wet, smaller than I thought. Full of odd people” (7). It is also poised on the very lip of the continent, facing Asia. The division between continents is blurred figuratively by the tropical deluge heralding the onset of the Wet. “You can’t see where the ocean stops and the rain begins” (5), she declares. She is also assailed with the routine newcomer’s orientation spiel that locates Darwin as the physical crossroads between Australia and Asia. “Jakarta is closer than Brisbane. Manilla’s closer than Melbourne. Bali’s closer than Townsville” (5), her future housemate Peter points out. Inherent in this proximity, however, is an active articulation of invasion anxiety. Alex, her boss at DIMA, reminds us that she is there to administer any infiltration of Northern shores by boat people:

ALEX: Clare, have a look at a bloody map. What’s above us? Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and then China. Half the population of the world. Crowded, strife-torn, and looking in our direction.

CLARE: The yellow peril.
ALEX: I didn't say that.
CLARE: I suppose you're nostalgic for the White Australia Policy too?
ALEX: No, I'm not. Now there's work to be done. I suggest you get on with it. (11)

Inevitably, a boat of asylum seekers does arrive, and one of the passengers, Wei, escapes via the city's mangrove-woven littoral fringe, and is taken into concealed custody by Peter in the group share household to which Clare happens to have attached herself. Her dilemma is whether to inform or not: like Martin in *Eyewitness*, the choice is between career and personal ethics. She decides she can best help Wei by informing, and then aiding her in the process with insider coaching about how best to frame her application for residency. Wei loses the case and is sent back to Vietnam. She articulates the reason she wanted to come to Australia (Darwin representing, in synecdochic terms, the whole of Australia for her), recounting a conversation she had with her cousin:

WEI: I told him, it is a wonderful place where they have freedom and every other thing. He told me your thoughts are foolish and mixed up[....]
ALEX: Why did you come to this country?
WEI: Because I have been in persecution. I have come to find protection in Australia. (41)

Ironically, then, her reasons (whilst exponentially more desperate in real terms) for coming to Darwin are not that basically different to the range of reasons that bring the White characters in the play to the Top End. Escape from social constrictions and conventions can be read as a diluted version of the asylum seeker's dilemma – a privileged, middle-class variation on a theme that works as long as one is young and in possession of sufficient hope and idealism. After that, the romance fades and the frontier itself becomes a snare from which there is increasingly little escape:

ALEX: I hate Darwin. I hate the weather, I hate the people, I hate the job. And I hate myself for staying here. My wife was right. She stayed three years. One day she said, "I've balanced how much I hate Darwin against how much I love you and I'm going to Melbourne tomorrow."
CLARE: It's a frontier town. Full of adventurous people.
ALEX: It's a town full of losers with nowhere else to go[....] And people who start things and then run away. (56)

The play is ultimately undecided in which depiction of the city is the “true” Darwin: a terminus for losers with nowhere else to go, or the frontier that draws anarchic and adventurous individuals in search of iconoclastic models of Australian identity. The final section of this chapter focuses on the notion of Darwin as frontier space that explores both of these seemingly contradictory possibilities.

Darwin as End of the Line: A Frontier for White Australians Escaping the South in Wet and Dry and Dragged Screaming to Paradise

I return here to an interrogation of the Northern frontier with Darwin as its erstwhile capital, not only as the domestic racial frontier, or the portal through which Asia might enter or be resisted; but also as the furthest outpost of the domestic White imagination.

Janis Balodis’s 1986 play *Wet and Dry* is founded on the range of binaries Rothwell outlined (at the start of this chapter) to describe Darwin as a city of reinvention and second chances. The “Wet” and “Dry” mentioned in its title refer to the city’s two predominant weather cycles, but relate figuratively to the fertility (or infertility) and the concomitant life circumstances of the two couples around whom the drama is based.

In the play, Pam is nearing the end of her years of fertility and wants a child. Her husband George is impotent (though he won’t acknowledge the fact) and she approaches his brother, “Troppo” to inseminate her. Troppo is infatuated with her and flees to the Northern Territory when he realises she does not reciprocate his feelings for her. Months later, George and Pam visit Troppo in Darwin, where he is buying a flat with his new girlfriend, Laura; and it is here that the belated sexual transgression takes place. Pam and Troppo have an impulsive one night stand – inspired in no small part by the steamy surrounds and the drama and abandon of the thunderstorms that heralds the onset of the encroaching Wet. The tropical

environment is sexualised throughout this passage of the text. As the group waits for the New Year's storm to hit, Troppo promises George it will be "like coming":

GEORGE: And it's wham bam the tropical blow job[?]

TROPPO: Just wait and see.

GEORGE: I thought only masochists and displaced public servants live up here. But it's really a colony of cosmic thrill seekers in pursuit of the monsoonal orgasm. (25)

Within this broad psychosexual schema in which the tropics represent a suspension – or perhaps even violation – of propriety and the regular social order, Troppo also configures Darwin as the city of the second chance. It is his opening gambit, in a sense, in his foray with Pam; and the justification he uses for a rekindling of their romance. More broadly, however, he theorises that Cyclone Tracy operates as being somehow representative of Darwin's forgiving nature. It demolished the city and "gave Darwin a second chance. Presented Australia with the opportunity to really build something" (29). Rather than this being a one-off event, though, Troppo – like Rothwell, perhaps, in his article on Darwin – surmises that (like the storms that represent upheaval and renewal) "every couple of days you get another chance. To ask yourself, 'What am I doing here? And 'If I had my time over again, would I ever choose this?'" (29).

There are three Australian settings depicted within the text: Pam and George's urban Sydney *milieu*, suburban Darwin, and the Northern Territory bush. The bush setting frames the narrative, being depicted in the first and penultimate scenes of the play. It is Troppo's work space, in one sense, as he is sent there to fix fences that "horny" camels have destroyed in an effort to reach each other for breeding purposes. It is also the location of Troppo's final showdown with George after the truth of Pam's impregnation has been revealed, and subsequently acts both as the site of fraternal reconciliation, but also of banishment and exile as Troppo promises to remain in the Territory and "not stick my nose in" to George and Pam's fragile attempt to rebuild

their marriage (53). This tripartite schema of Australian bush and urban spaces thus configures Sydney as the site of “real” life, with all of its regular domestic and professional preoccupations. The bush is configured as the site of masculine confrontation, contest and exile – an extension perhaps of the Australian Bush Legend, discussed in the introduction to this thesis. George even arrives in this landscape claiming to be “Ned Kelly. Outlaw. I arrest you in the name of Sidney Nolan” (49). Darwin, then, is the liminal zone between these worlds of domesticity and the outback. It is a site of sexual and moral transgression which offers temporary opportunities or solutions that can’t be sustained in the “real” world of the city/South. The fertility it offers is ephemeral, encapsulated by the passing thunderstorm and the illicit sexual liaison that takes place within it. Read in this context, Darwin itself, or perhaps the wild weather it produces, can be viewed as a heterotopic zone that permits transitory suspension of “the rules” that constitute culturally sanctioned behaviour between heterosexual men and women. As well as being a geographic frontier, it becomes the frontier in gender relations.

Darwin is thus, to return to Rothwell’s thesis of the city of the second chance, configured as frontier capital, although the text goes on to argue that the frontier has, in fact, moved further West than Darwin. For the acclimatised and acculturated and now local girl, Laura, for whom Darwin was once the frontier, it is now tame. “I ran [to Darwin to escape the South],” she tells George, “[b]ut I’ve stopped” (47). For Laura, perhaps articulating Tony Clifton’s thesis of Darwin as a former Wild West garrison that has since been tamed and sterilised, “[t]he ways of the Cage Bar⁶⁸ are gone and the animals have mostly moved on to wilder frontiers. If you want to disappear, you’ll have

⁶⁸ The Cage Bar was a notorious local watering hole in Darwin where live bands were protected by a wire fence to prevent the drinkers from throwing cans of beer at them. The Cage Bar was housed in Lim’s on Nightcliff’s foreshore and was also referred to by locals as “Church” because it’s where everybody went on Sundays. It has since been refurbished and is now a family bar and bistro.

to head for some outpost west of Broome” (47). The play thus ultimately canvasses both Rothwell’s and Clifton’s opposing views of Darwin as neo- and former frontiers, respectively. Either way, it is constructed within the play’s symbolic and spatial *topoi* as a liminal zone – Delmenico’s (in this case White) border city – in which reinvention and renewal can take place outside of the regulatory surveillance of the “real” Southern metropolitan zone.

If *Wet and Dry* presents Darwin as a gendered frontier in heterosexual relations between men and women, Suzanne Spinner’s *Dragged Screaming to Paradise* presents the city as a modern masculine frontier to which women are hauled, as the play’s title suggests, against their wills and according to the dictates of their husbands’ careers. The one-woman monologue examines the city’s contradictions in forensic detail and its frontier characteristics circa 1988 (with a 1994 update), and can be read as a late twentieth-century reworking of the White pioneer-themed texts depicting the North that were popular at the beginning of that century. In fact, read alongside Elsie R Masson’s 1915 observations of “A Woman’s Life in Darwin,”⁶⁹ *Dragged Screaming to Paradise* emerges as something of a feminist pioneering text *par excellence*.

Masson and Spinner both begin their studies of Darwin with recollections of the observations, both dire and utopic, of friends who are postulating on what a woman – *the woman*, “She,” in Spinner’s play – can expect upon arrival in the frontier capital.

Masson warns:

The woman who leaves the south for Darwin has a very confused idea of what lies before her. She has heard many and varied accounts of the Northern Territory, most of them founded on little real knowledge and nearly all discouraging. “Surely you are not going to take the children to that awful hole?” most of her women friends exclaim, with a look which expresses plainly what a heartless mother they think her. Then follows a description of her future home as a burning land, full of fevers and insect pests, where food is bad and health

⁶⁹ This article is the second Chapter in her book, *An Untamed Territory: the Northern Territory of Australia*.

lost after a few years' stay. Darwin itself is represented as a shadeless sun-blistered township, baking all day on a bare rock. While she is summoning up her courage to meet these conditions, another says to her: "Darwin? Oh, but it is a Paradise," and she is left in bewilderment. (25-26)

The "She" in Spinner's text, written some seventy years later, receives a disarmingly similar range of warnings and promises. She is informed of everything from the heat, the weather, the insect life, the dangers lurking beneath the water, to the isolation (both geographical and psychological), the romanticised encounter with Aboriginality, the architecture and the proximity to wilderness and Asia. Ostensibly heading North on the lure of adventure and on the back of her husband's mounting mid-life crisis, the heroine does not want to go, but "[l]ike a true pioneer, he blazed the trail and I followed a month later with the kids" (25).

Her first impressions are, like Masson's, a sense of shock at the heat, the city's informality, and of the full extent of the community's cosmopolitanism. At the airport, She observes, "[e]veryone is wearing shorts and talking loudly, black faces, overhead fans, no air-conditioning, the smell of sweat and dankness – it's a shed, tiny and packed with people, you trip over luggage on the floor. It's like Brisbane airport twenty years ago" (18).

Masson is expecting heat as she arrives by steamer, but finds an unexpected "fresh, cool breeze" (28) and discovers on land that Darwin "is a small township with a few buildings of solid stone and more of wood or galvanised iron, but saved from ugliness by the verandahs enclosed with plaited bamboo and with bright shrubs showing through open shutters" (29). She is surprised by the extent of the Chinese influence,⁷⁰ finding Chinatown a curiosity. The Aboriginal shanties on the edge of Chinatown, however, are described as "a blight of small hovels" (31). Of the town's unavoidable and inherent multiracialism, Masson observes:

⁷⁰ The Chinese were still a majority population in 1915.

Even in her first rapid drive the newcomer sees people of every colour, until she feels as if she were turning the leaves of a book of patterns ranging from deepest chocolate to pale cream. Black Aboriginals throw spears on open grass spaces between the houses; dusky Malays, short and sturdy, sit smoking by the roadway; children of all shades of brown peer with bright curious eyes round the tin walls of their homes; yellow, wrinkled Chinese, in blue silk trousers, carrying baskets slung on poles, pass as a shuffling trot. Before long she is in her own dwelling and life as a woman of Darwin has begun. (31-32)

For the *arriviste* in *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, Darwin, even as urban space, “is Frontier Land, serious four-wheel-drive country – even family sedans have bull bars and long-distance headlights” (21). The city relies upon industrialisation to overcome privation (“massive airconditioners and pool pumps” 21); and is a military zone and stopover point – a garrison and terminus rolled into one. As with most texts discussed in this chapter, the play’s protagonist cannot help but observe and be affected by the city’s proximity to Asia, and everyone seems to be from somewhere else, wanting to “talk about where they’ve come from – to expose their southern branches like the aerial roots of a Banyan Tree” (23).

Interestingly here, Spinner’s heroine as a reluctant Southern expat is keen to dispel clichés that romanticise Darwin. As she asserts:

I thought I knew what I was coming to. I had no illusions. I was expecting a cross between Denpasar and Frankston - an ugly seaside business centre grafted onto the remnants of a charming Asian port. But I was not prepared for the northern suburbs, flattened by the cyclone and rebuilt with miles and miles of kerbing, landscaped in wider and wider circles, courts, crescents and cul-de-sacs. Canberra with palms. A public service town with well-made roads, architect designed schools, and children’s playgrounds on every corner. (25)

Tony Clifton quotes Spinner in his excoriating analysis of Darwin as fading frontier.

She tells him (presumably in 2005):

What I don’t like about Darwin today is the Australianisation of the place[...] It seems the leadership wants to make it just another Australian city. In the late ‘80s it had a touch of Jakarta, of Asia. But it’s losing its tropical distinctiveness, it’s become a closed-in city of glass and concrete and air-conditioning. It’s *becoming a Canberra with palms*. (54; emphasis added)

Spinner describes the city in similar terms eighteen years earlier, so perhaps this notion of a nostalgic view of Darwin and its fading iconoclasm has something to do, for both Spinner and Clifton, with having had something to compare it to over time. And perhaps this lack of prior knowledge is what permits Rothwell initially to sidestep the mounting disappointment and disaffection with which Clifton and Spinner regard the contemporary city, though his disaffection by 2007 has become apparent.

Certainly Spinner's heroine's first encounter with the Australian frontier (as she calls it) – with Darwin as the frontier capital – is one of disaffection. And She notes, with some chariness, that if She was initially armed with a range of North-South binaried observations of the frontier by southern friends and family; upon arrival, she realises a similar range of tropes exist in diametric opposition in the North. If Darwin is the city of the second chance or the last stop; and if it operates metonymically as the focal point for a range of Southern fears and projections about invasion, infiltration and inundation by the Black or Asian cultural Other; it is the Woman's observation that in Darwin, the South has a reciprocal psychological and cultural function. "The South" comes to represent a swathe of frontier-held fears and anxieties about social constriction, over-governance, inhospitable climates, and cultural and intellectual elitism. The Woman declares:

They have constructed the other place as the source of their fears[...] Without even realising what is happening, I find myself agreeing with them, as if I'd really wanted to get away from the terrible southern city – and just like them I'd wake up ten years later and find I've forgotten to go back. (24)

This is, of course, precisely what happens. "Civilisation as we call it," She continues, "is constantly mocked" (44). And poised on the very brink of the continent, the Woman feels:

acutely that I am standing on the topmost edge of Australia[...] with only the azure Arafura Sea and the vast diversity of Asia in front of me. Everything else is behind. The rest of the country, the Great Southland, my past – like a

weakening magnet trying to exert influence over such a distance, across such a blank field. (44)

Patrick White and Jennifer Rutherford's *Great Australian Emptiness* is invoked here, but instead of representing a psychological abyss against which to project metropolitan anxieties about "The Bush" or "The Never-Never" or any of the other tranche of classic Australian urban apprehensions about space and country and emptiness, for the Woman in Spinner's play, this nothingness serves to assuage her homesickness and cultural vertigo as she feels more strongly connected to Darwin and its location on the cusp of the Australian frontier. Like Norman Shillingsworth in Nowra's adaptation of *Capricornia*, She increasingly feels as though she might be living at the top of the country, in the centre of another Australia, one in which Melbourne and Sydney are essentially irrelevant. She is aware of the artifice, in one sense, of such a construction: that it is just a matter of perspective. "I don't know which is crueller," she concludes, "the frustration, or the illusion that the tyranny [of distance] has been overcome. But like everything here, you learn to live with it" (45).

Spinner's heroine displays echoes here of classic women's pioneer writing fortitude. She is like Kit Carson, say, in Drake-Brockman's *Men Without Wives*: the fragile, whiter-than-white city girl dragged North on the lure of romance and by her husband's job only to find those illusions shattered by loneliness, isolation, grinding boredom and cultural dislocation. She ultimately finds her place in the frontier – "this earthly paradise" only once "I've taken to it, entered into the spirit of it" (45) rather than resisting it and resenting it for all the things it is not. Masson's conclusion might equally as well be Spinner's – or Drake-Brockman's, for that matter – when she declares:

So the months slip by, the rain suddenly stops, the dry season begins again, and, with a start, she realises that a whole year has passed since, full of misgiving and apprehension, she first gazed on the white roofs of Darwin from the steamer

deck. During that year she has experienced some discomforts and many small worries; she has had moments of homesickness and loneliness when she longed to take the first boat south; but in the end she has not been daunted. She realises with a thrill of pride that she may now call herself a woman of the Northern Territory. (41)

It is interesting to see Darwin being consistently troped as the capital of Australian Frontier Land so many years after the representations in theatre and literature first occurred. Bedford's *White Australia*, Masson's *An Untamed Territory*, and Herbert's *Capricornia* can all be seen as part of a continuum of mythologisation of the northern capital. Their legacy, or at least their cultural imprint, can be identified in patent ways in texts like *Crow* or *Dragged Screaming to Paradise*, or in *Tin Hotel*. Even Inday is a Darwin woman pioneer in this sense, and the world invoked by Lee in *Keep Him My Heart* might be a postcolonial counter-volley to Herbert and Bedford. The city's vibrant and at times problematic, politically charged multiracial present can be viewed as a palimpsest for the romanticised recollection of Old Darwin. In contemporary performance praxis, Festival time is the period in which this over-dubbing of past and present is most frequently – or self-consciously – invoked.

“Old Darwin” was the theme of the 2002 Festival, and according to Rothwell, there were evenings when:

you could see it all in its lovely softness: string bands played, with musicians descended from the old Filipino masters; distinguished “aunties” from the best Darwin Aboriginal families danced together in their frocks and pearls; and one night at the Parap Railway Institute, the Mills Family performed their famous Creole version of *Waltzing Matilda* and brought the house down. It was Buena Vista in the Australian tropics: how sweet, how full of pain, the bite of nostalgia was. (14)

The superlative-driven sentiment inherent in Rothwell's description perhaps indicates an author as enamoured with a particular notion of Darwin here as Clifton later is stridently opposed to one. And there is a sense of a “He” falling in love with Darwin here, just as there was of a “She” doing the same thing in Spinner's play. But Rothwell

is not alone in painting Darwin at Festival time in such rose-coloured hues. The Festival currently (at time of writing) curated by Malcolm Blaylock, as with the one championed by Fabrizio Calafura in the decade or so before him, self-consciously highlights and celebrates Darwin's multicultural nature.

Then Darwin-based *Australian* journalist Ashleigh Wilson writes in 2005 that, “[t]he eighteen day Darwin Festival[...] has a unique flavour. For a city that prides itself on its proximity to Jakarta rather than Sydney, much of the focus is on performers from the Asia-Pacific region and on local indigenous cultures” (16). Wilson refers to this idealised cosmopolitan setting as “the splendour of the season” being on show. For visiting southern arts critic Miriam Cosic,

Darwin still has the edgy restlessness of a frontier town with a variegated culture of its own. It is a gateway south into the desert and north into the Indonesian archipelago[...] The [2005] Darwin Festival, celebrating 400 years of contact with Macassan traders in this 60th year of Indonesian independence from the Dutch, is in full swing[...] Culture is the Northern Territory's greatest asset. (18)

The Festival consistently serves a function, then, of highlighting cultural relationships in a specific spatial and temporal context. To return to Foucault's notion of heterotopic space, the festival is an example of his fourth principle in which discrete cultural worlds are constructed or organised for a specific period of time “in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect” and linked “to time in the mode of the festival” (26).

These “temporal heterotopias” are designed to self-consciously accumulate culture for public remembrance, celebration and consumption. There is a sense not just of organic emergence and celebration of cultural diversity here, but of its manufacture as well.

There is a sense of contrivance inherent in the Festival – in any festival – that need not be equated with disingenuous motivation, but which needs to be acknowledged as transitory in nature. As Delmenico states, “[t]he best way to view the city's vibrant

diversity is through the *temporary* structures of festival” (“Dramas” 100; emphasis added).

The question that begs to be asked here is: if this is the “splendour of the season” being celebrated, what is the city like for the rest of the year? Monocultural? White? And is “White” culture a part of this idealised “multicultural” tapestry when it is celebrated? Curiously, there is no mention of Anglo-oriented performance practice at all in either Wilson’s or Cosic’s reviews (though, admittedly, Cosic was there to review the Telstra Aboriginal Art Award), or in Rothwell’s summary of Darwin as Buena Vista Social Club.

In 2003 the then first-term Martin Labor government embarked upon a population drive, placing large expensive advertisements in all the major national and daily newspapers and running concomitant television advertisements across the country, inviting opportunity-minded pioneers who are after a fresh start away from peak-hour traffic and the cold to come up and help build “Australia’s New Frontier.” In this ambitious and strangely beguiling media initiative, the whole of the Territory is constructed as undifferentiated frontier space, with Darwin as its capital, and in which images of multiracial harmony, proximity to Asia, open spaces, national parks, abundant natural resources, youth, indigenous authenticity, and metropolitan savviness are all sewn optimistically into the one commercial package, underscored by the summary by-line: “The difference is opportunity” (“Australia’s New Frontier” 13). The question here, of course, is difference from what? From the rest of the country, presumably. Ever since its inception, the Northern Territory has mythologised itself according to its renegade alterity in relation to national metanarratives – and been excluded from them, in terms of historiographical representation. This particular media

blitz can be seen as one of a contiguous stream of larrikin Territory narratives aimed at reclaiming alterity and relishing in an imagined cultural and geographical difference to the rest of the nation.

There are elements of both cringe and strut present in the Northern Territory government's New Frontier posturing. What is a new frontier anyway? When does a frontier that invites one to enjoy "a glass of wine watching the sunset" as well as the "excellent facilities for education, health, culture and sport" cease being a frontier in the strict pioneering sense, and become "civilised" urban (or as Clifton would have it, military) space? When, in other words, does the Australian frontier close as America's West purportedly did in 1890? There are those, like Clifton, who argue the frontier and its capital are moving out and further east or west, or Laura declares in *Wet and Dry*, beyond "some outpost west of Broome" (47). The only thing west of Broome is the Indian Ocean.

There is a sense in the New Frontier advertising in which those troping the Northern Territory generally, and Darwin specifically, want to have their cake and eat it too. According to all the summary tropes, visions, and versions of the Northern frontier capital outlined in this chapter, Darwin is simultaneously urban and frontier space; simultaneously cultural North and Centre; simultaneously alterior and integral to Australian metanarratives; simultaneously Old and New; simultaneously threshold (to Asia) and melting pot (in Australia); redneck and progressive. It wants its liminal and cultural edge to be a cutting one. Perhaps that is what a "New" – certainly an Uncanny or Unsettling – Frontier is: a postmodern pastiche in which contradictory cultural images, spatialities and metaphors commingle, bubble and reduce according to political imperative or public relations spin. Either way, this is how Territorians like to view themselves, and the way in which they are constructed time and time again by obliging

playwrights, as the landmark texts outlined in this chapter would appear overwhelmingly to indicate. Theatre, again, operates as a vital medium in articulating and performing definitions of the Northern “Self” in relation to a distant Southern “Other.” Theatre is an immediate and powerful outlet of public expression and debate in most times and places, but is much more vitally so in a city as under-represented in the national imaginary as Darwin has traditionally been. In this chapter, and in the remainder of this thesis, I seek to outline ways in which theatre is central to the articulation of a discreet Australian North which is written, imagined and performed increasingly, at the end of the twentieth-century and the early years of the twenty-first, from within.

Chapter Five

Seen From Up Here: The Multiracial North

The North Writes Back: Examining the State of Play

With the exception of those discussed in specific relation to Darwin in Chapter Four, one of the key factors unifying all of the disparate texts discussed so far throughout this thesis has been the fact that they have all been written by playwrights from regions of Australia other than the North itself.⁷¹ Certainly writers like Drake-Brockman and Prichard spent considerable amounts of time in the region of Western Australia about which they wrote; and no doubt this is also true of many of the other writers, such as Xavier Herbert. Whilst I am not questioning the authenticity or validity of these Southern or Eastern or Western writers' voices or the merit or accuracy of their observations of Northern life and its symbolic functions and associations for the rest of the country – indeed, the outsider's eye is often crucial in identifying patterns in representation that the insider fails to see – it is important to acknowledge the difference between external and internal modes of representation. Not only are most of the writers examined in this thesis from regions of Australia other than the North, but similarly the overwhelming number of productions of the plays about the North (from *White Australia* in Chapter One all the way to *Blood Relations* at the end of Chapter Three⁷²) were also “built” in the South.

Following on from the specific analysis of Darwin as Northern city space, I turn now to a cycle of plays written in the past two decades representing the North and produced in it from within. This is, in a sense, a post-colonial writing back of the

⁷¹ Jill Shearer and Janis Balodis spring to mind as the exceptions here.

⁷² The one exception I can think of here, outside of the plays discussed in Chapter Four, is the production of *God's Best Country*, which, despite involving actors from the Northern Territory, and certainly touring there, was still primarily built in Perth.

margin to the centre, in which practitioners of the many cultural hues, with which Southern playwrights, audiences and commentators of late have been so fascinated, claim responsibility for the troping of the North and of determining its symbolic function for the national imaginary. The results further elaborate upon the case I have made throughout this thesis for a multivalent North that continues to operate as canvas for the nation's fears, anxieties and fantasies – its points of unsettlement, in Tompkins's schema, about race and space.

This chapter, then, examines the “state of play” in theatrical praxis in the Australian North stretching from the mid-late 1980s to the present. The first section of the chapter focuses on work being generated by Aboriginal playwrights and performers (sometimes in collaboration with non-indigenous writers and/or producers) or work by White playwrights that engages with their direct experience with Aboriginal culture as a result of living in the North. This trend is most evident in Western Australia, where the generation of indigenous-themed work appears to be strongest at the moment.⁷³ Top End artists like David Gulpilil and George Rrurrambu have made recent inroads into national theatre circuits through their collaborations with White arts workers and companies; and certainly multi-racial theatrical collaborations that involve indigenous arts workers are common in Darwin. Work explored here includes *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) by Jimmy Chi and Kuckles; *Windmill*

⁷³ There is, of course, a wealth of indigenous-generated and themed work occurring across much of the country at the moment, with the flagship indigenous theatre companies (Yirra Yaakin in Perth, Kooemba Jdarra in Brisbane, and Ilbijerri in Melbourne) acting as central conduits for the production of new work. As far as the terms of this study are concerned, however, theatre by and for indigenous people in the nation's far North clearly possesses a Western Australian bias at the moment. The Kimberley region has a much stronger track record in the generation of new indigenous text-based performance praxis than either the Top End of the Northern Territory or Far North Queensland in the 1990s and the first decade of the this century, though there are certainly signs of increased activity in the latter two regions beginning to emerge, as I discuss later in this Chapter.

Baby (2005) by David Milroy;⁷⁴ *Ningali* (1994) by Angela Chapman, Robyn Archer and Ningali Lawford; and *Welcome to Broome* (1998) by Richard Mellick. Passing reference will also be made to *Solid* (2000) by Phil Thomson, Kelton Pell and Ningali Lawford. Space does not permit an engagement with every such collaboration or new work. The conclusions demonstrated however could be applied to, or questioned by, *Corrugation Road* (1996) by Jimmy Chi, *Gulpilil* (2004) by Reg Cribb and David Gulpilil, *Nerrpu* (2004) by Carmel Young and George Rurrumbu; or even Louis Nowra's *Radiance* (2000) and John Romeril's puppetry-based interpretation of Xavier Herbert's Kimberley short story *Miss Tanaka* (2001). Nowra's work is analysed in depth elsewhere in this thesis, and *Gulpilil* discussed in Chapter Four.

The second section of this chapter focuses on multiracial theatre taking place in the North over the past two decades. It includes a discussion of the work of William Yang, with an especial focus on his groundbreaking performance text *Sadness* (1996); Janis Balodis' *The Ghosts Trilogy*, focussing primarily on the first in the series, *Too Young For Ghosts* (1985); an acknowledgement of the work that Lesley Delmenico refers to as Darwin-style intercultural performance praxis, including the work produced by Darwin's East Timorese community, and Andrish St Clare's *Trepang* (1996); and brief overviews of predominantly women's intercultural performance praxis identified by Jacqueline Lo as emerging from the North (*The Heart of the Journey* [2000] by Lucy Dann and Mayu Kanamori) and Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins (the Top End Girls' *Salt Fire Water* [1994]). This discussion segues into a summary overview of the multicultural emphasis of work being produced and toured independently in the North, including current attempts by

⁷⁴ *Windmill Baby* was initially referred to as a collaborative project between David Milroy and Ningali Lawford. The pair now acknowledge Milroy as the writer of the script, and Lawford as consultant and performer.

resident companies in the North to secure an “across the top” touring circuit whose creative aegis embraces, but is not restricted to, multicultural theatre product.

The work cited in this chapter (as with that throughout the thesis) is not intended to be comprehensive. It is not my aim to identify and analyse every theatre performance text that deals with, say, race and has had a professional season in the North. Rather, I seek to identify key performance texts and to outline the extent to which they are emblematic of current trends and concerns taking place in Northern theatre praxis. Professionally produced text-based theatre has formed the backbone of this study, for a variety of largely practical reasons, since printed and published texts have been the most convenient resources to access and discuss. The late twentieth century explosion of non-text based performance styles has broadened the definition of theatre considerably, but it has not been possible in every case to gain access to recorded footage of productions that have taken place once or twice in disparate locations (Carmel Young and George Rurrumbu’s *Nerrpu* and Andrish Saint-Clare’s *Trepang* are two examples). Some of this work also simply belongs to different genres than are the concern of this thesis (dance theatre, musical theatre, youth theatre, community theatre); and it is also the case that much of the wonderful work that is the focus of Lesley Delmenico’s study – particularly with Darwin’s East Timorese community, and that community’s relationship with other cultural communities in the Top End – takes place *in* Darwin, but is not necessarily work *about* Darwin or the Top End, and so falls outside of a study of representations of the Australian North. Some of Darwin Theatre Company’s more recent cross-cultural collaborations under Tania Lieman’s stewardship fall under this category: *To the Inland Sea* by Tania Lieman, Gail Evans and Shellie Morris is one popular example. Holledge and Tompkins focus on women’s intercultural performance taking place within the Northern Territory, but

the indigenous women concerned are Warlpiri from the Red Centre rather than the Top End, and so fall outside the parameters of this study's discursive cartography. This sub-section of my thesis, then, is something of a survey and acknowledgement of this exciting field of performance studies explored by Lesley Delmenico; Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo; and Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins.

The final section identifies other trends taking place in theatre produced in, or theatre representative of, the Australian North, in which I seek to glimpse at future pathways for theatre in the North. These include the work of Darwin Theatre Company, Knock-em-Down Theatre, and Just Us Theatre Ensemble (JUTE) and the exciting Regional Wave Cohort initiative – a new collaborative venture emanating out of JUTE's annual Playwrights' Conference in Cairns, and which aims to establish regional touring and co-producing networks throughout the *whole* of Australia, using the work of artists in the North as its central engine.

Indigenous Theatre Articulating an Uncanny North-West

Jimmy Chi and his band Kuckles' *Bran Nue Dae* exploded onto the national theatre scene via the 1990 Festival of Perth. Deriving much of its energy from Broome's thriving indigenous country music scene, and supported and developed under the aegis of Andrew Ross's tenure at Black Swan Theatre, the show was essentially a fusion of live musical theatre tropes and unique local (frequently humorous) indigenous commentary. It somehow succeeded in blending Black and White musical performance forms without subjugating the voice of the former to the template of the latter, and signalled the "arrival" of the Kimberley on the national theatre touring circuit. It also introduced a range of talent including Ernie Dingo, Josie Ningali

Lawford and Leah Purcell to Southern metropolitan audiences hungry for the sort of charismatic performance styles that the piece exemplified.

Structurally, as the play's subtitle suggests, the narrative is "a musical journey" that tracks the passage of the central protagonists, Willie and Tadpole, both geographic and cultural, from Perth to Broome. They are escaping a sense of cultural placelessness stemming from missionary institutionalisation in the Rossmoyne boarding school, and are in search of "home" in the Roebuck Plains in the state's far North. The play follows their road trip North, as they collect an assortment of hippies and backpackers searching for a romantic essentialised Black North along the way. As Helen Gilbert describes it, "Chi keeps the whole flexible enough to become a combination of Aboriginal road movie, romantic comedy, family farce, agitprop revue, and a bid for a new, consciously hybridised, notion of Australian identity" (*Postcolonial* 321). Paul Makeham concurs, arguing that this transmigration from city to bush "resists stereotypical representations which align the 'primitive' indigene directly with nature" ("Singing" 118). He quotes Gilbert to point out that:

Willie and Tadpole's movement from the city to the country activates myths-of-origins thematics, but their journey is more picaresque than pastoral and the text carefully avoids linking the bush to a pre-invasion ideal of Aboriginal essence." Indeed throughout the play the very notion of "origin" as a pure, essential site or condition is problematised. ("Singing" 118)

The hybridised narrative form, then, matches its eclectic musical style, which in turn mirrors the play's central theme of hybridised cultural identity. As Gilbert explains,

[i]n his upbeat denouement, Chi, who claims Aboriginal, Chinese, Japanese and Scottish ancestry, celebrates miscegenation as a form of connection between cultures rather than a shameful secret to remain hidden at all costs[...]while the multi-racial town of Broome becomes emblematic of a reconceived nation where cultural identity is immensely fluid and eclectic. (*Postcolonial* 322)

Of more specific relevance to this thesis, then, is the argument that the picaresque journey for Willie and Tadpole is one from the predominantly White cultural and

institutional saturation of Perth to the idealised multiracial North. As Makeham concludes:

whilst Willie and Tadpole are accustomed to contemporary urban culture, they are also alienated by it, chiefly because the city is the domain of white society and white institutions. Action set in the more open landscapes of the north-west, on the other hand, as the protagonists approach their home, shows a predominantly Aboriginal and socially cohesive dramatic world. As a consequence, the play does construct an opposition between the city and the bush. (“Singing” 118)

There is a Black/North/Bush versus White/South/City schema being articulated here that reflects other Western Australian theatre texts discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, including Vickers’ *Stained Pieces*, Drake-Brockman’s *Men Without Wives* and Prichard’s *Brumby Innes*. Unlike those pieces, however, the racial construction taking place in *Bran Nue Dae* is doing so at the hands of indigenous theatre-makers; and the colour-coded binary that is ostensibly being set up is ultimately subverted, as Makeham and Gilbert indicate, by a celebration of cultural hybridity, metonymically embodied in the text by the community of Broome itself. Rather than heading into the alien North, into the “Black Man’s Country,” Willie and Tadpole are heading *home*: into a world where everyone – literally, comically – is related somehow to everyone else. “Home” is best emblematised here by arrival at the Branding Iron Bar, in which the play’s manifold musical styles fuse and mesh in harmony with the township’s racial hybridity. Makeham argues that the Bar is:

a happy place in which a particular hybrid form of Country and Western culture becomes the medium and expression of celebration – of romance and sex, of community, and for Willie and Rosie, of reunion. And while the pub is a built location in a large town, its country music and ambience explicitly resist any alignment of the space with urban culture. (“Singing” 128)

The same could be said of the Sun Picture Theatre, where the play opens, before shifting quickly across time to the Rossmoyne Pallottine Aboriginal Hostel and the city parks of Perth. Like the Star Cinema in Darwin, as depicted in Gary Lee’s *Keep*

Him My Heart and Tania Lieman and Gail Evans' *Tin Hotel*, the outdoor cinema is a racially hybrid space, but unlike its Darwin counterpart, Sun Pictures is not stratified and coded according to civic social hegemonies along race and class lines. The cinema in Broome is what Jacqueline Lo describes as a "carnavalesque" space, where the children's irreverent misbehaviour during "God Save the Queen" can be read as "youthful irreverence and preoccupation with an embodied sexuality [which] signals a resistance to the oppressive and alien imperialist discourse" (Lo qtd. in Makeham 124).

Despite arguing that the play resists stereotyped alignment of the Black body with nature, Makeham does point out that outdoor spaces in the North are equated with a freedom of expression and open sexuality that built spaces prohibit and preclude:

The unembarrassed, often humorous presentation of this aspect of human relations in *Bran Nue Dae* tellingly counterpoints those modes of discourse predominant in Western cultures in which sex and sexuality are fetishised and restricted to the personal and private[...] The mangroves by the bay are presented as a site of liberated sexuality. ("Singing" 129)

There is a striking similarity here to depictions of the mangroves in Darwin in Nowra's *Crow*, as discussed in Chapter Four, where alignment of Darwin's littoral fringe with open (Black) expressions of sexuality much more perilously teeters on essentialist connotations of race with nature. *Bran Nue Dae* is perhaps saved here by its irreverent humour, and, as discussed earlier, by the unbridled celebration of cultural and geographic hybridity in its denouement.

Its indigenous reinscription of the North/Black/Bush versus South/White/City dialectic in Western Australian theatre also marks a turning point from colonial to postcolonial articulations of spatial politics in that state, and in that sense has created a template that other Aboriginal writers and performers have continued to explore in

the ensuing decade and a half since *Bran Nue Dae*'s inception. There is an invocation of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny here – or of Tompkins's unsettling – in which Black/White binaries in relation to Australian landscapes and historiographies are being reappropriated and reinscribed from an indigenous perspective to argue instead for hybridised thematics of race, place and space that challenge the simplicity of the North/South binary, as articulated above. Aside from the fact that it is basically incorrect to suggest that Perth has ever been a purely White city space,⁷⁵ Chi's satirical celebration of interracial fusion in Broome and the Kimberley region also argues the case that the North is not Black in any simplistic, purist or totalising kind of way. It may be *home* for the Aboriginal characters, but the notion of "home" is one that accommodates and embraces the complexity of race relations in Northern spatialities. There is a sense here that even orthodox or traditional space myths from an Aboriginal perspective about the North – as well as a totalising White view – as a purist Black Man's Zone are being exploded by Chi's text. The text's celebration of miscegenation is incendiary in a double sense here, unsettling (in Tompkins's use of the term) both Black and White claims to a discrete or purist sense of Aboriginal racial identity as it manifests in the North. The Kimberley region is inherently uncanny in this equation, and uncanny beyond the terms of a simple Black-White dialectic. It is Aboriginal *and* Chinese *and* Japanese *and* English *and* Irish *and* Scottish *and* German even at the same time as it is having to define itself as discreetly one thing or the other (Aboriginal, say, in terms of land rights politics) according to the requirements of the politics of the day.

⁷⁵ The successful September 2006 Justice Murray Wilcox native title ruling in Western Australia's High Court in which significant tracts of Perth parkland have been deemed to be continuously occupied by Noongar communities puts the official lie to this space-myth.

In David Milroy's *Windmill Baby*, the entire action is set in the Kimberley region. Unlike Phil Thomson, Kelton Pell and Ningali Lawford's *Solid*, where the narrative focus operates on a City-Black/Bush-Black dialectic, *Windmill Baby* is a station story told retrospectively by Maymay Starr about her youth and courtship on a Kimberly station. Maymay's own romance is with Malvern, an Aboriginal man; but interracial sexual practice and desire are explored through the play's taboo affair between the White station owner's wife (the "Missus") and Wunman, a crippled Aboriginal man who tends the veggie patch underneath the windmill, close to the homestead.

Aside from its intrinsic value as a piece of award-winning Australian drama,⁷⁶ the piece is of especial interest to this study for its intriguing inversion of racial stereotypes and stock characters unique to the North, as they were initially depicted in the colonial era drama of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. The piece immediately conjures up memories of Drake Brockman's *Men Without Wives*, seen instead through the eyes of the indigenous characters, who are so silent and marginalised in that play. It is Maymay who observes that "[t]he missus weren't made for this country" (4), just like Drake Brockman's fragile ingénue Kitty in *Men Without Wives*. Only in *Windmill*, it is the Missus who remains a faint sketch, rather than the housemaid Channa, glimpsed at in passing through the highly racially charged portal of the pastoral verandah.

By way of illustration of the verandah politics of the time (and it is essentially the assimilation era of the 1950s and 1960s being conjured up through memory in the play), Old May tells of the time when the Boss found Wunman talking with the Missus on this threshold of the Black/White spatial divide. She says:

Only the house girls were allowed on the verandah so his blood boiled over when he saw them [Wunman and the Missus]. Next minute all hell broke

⁷⁶ The play won the 2003 Patrick White Playwrights' Award.

loose. The boss grabbed Wunman by the scruff of the neck, dragged him off the verandah, threw him on the ground and gave him the flogging of his life. Made me proper sorry. (19)

This incident sums up the violence of the North-Western frontier as it is encapsulated metonymically through the pastoral homestead, and conjures up the images depicted in such confronting realist detail by Prichard in *Brumby Innes*. In that play, it is the Boss who engages in illegitimate (and socially unsanctioned) interracial sexual congress, to the abhorrence of the Aboriginal station hands he employs. In *Windmill Baby*, the Boss's violence is still vividly represented, but he is the unwitting cuckold in a taboo sexual tryst occurring on "his" property.

Both the Boss and the Missus remain unnamed stock characters in Milroy's text, while the Aboriginal characters are not only named, but evoked and narrated in three-dimensional if frequently comic detail. We never actually gain an insight into the White characters' perspectives or internal lives: they exist primarily as foils or catalysts for the richer emotional journeys of the central Black protagonists. The Missus does eventually fall pregnant to Wunman, and gives birth to the eponymous Windmill Baby, but in a presumably conscious inversion of the heartbreaking stolen generation narrative of so much indigenous theatre, Maymay takes the child away to save it from the ignominy and certain catastrophe that illegitimate miscegenation would have triggered in that situation. The baby dies in a flood as she escapes, and this visit back to the homestead after so many decades in exile is an act of remembrance not only of the Windmill baby, but of the loss of her own daughter, Ruby, who didn't survive birth.

Windmill Baby, then, like Chi's text, situates Black characters at the centre of the drama, and at the heart of the Northern "frontier." Like *Bran Nue Dae*, Milroy's text also challenges the notion of the "Black Man's country" being reducible to racial

essences by complicating the interracial tensions through, in this case, illicit sexual relations on the homestead, an ostensibly White (arguably heterotopic) enclave in the depth of the state's far North.

Thompson, Pell and Lawford's text, *Solid*, on the other hand subverts the White/City/South-Black/Bush/North dialectic not as Chi, and to a certain extent, Milroy have done it by accentuating hybridity as an alternative to binaried spatial equations, but by offering *both* urban/city and bush/North spaces as Black "zones." The tension in this case centres on the issue of authenticity, and who gets to lay claim to being the "real" Aborigine. In that play, the drama centres on the relationship between Carol, from the Wankatjunka community in the Kimberley, and Graham, a Noongar man. Carol has come to Perth to escape a (traditional) arranged marriage and finds a job as an administrator in an Aboriginal support agency. Graham struggles with a sense of cultural unauthenticity in relation to Carol because he is an urban Aborigine. He heads North with Carol on a personal journey of sorts that ironically takes him further and further away from the heart of his own country, and the source of his own identity. The textual comment that Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company extracted from the play for promotional purposes states: "It's alright for you with your land up North and your job Down South. I'd like to see how your mob would've handled it if whitefellas had come along and built a bloody big city in the Kimberley" (Yirra Yaakin website). The cultural fault line being examined here is one within the state's Aboriginal communities, in which urban Aborigines wrestle with the notion that they are insufficiently "Black" or authentic when compared to the indigenous communities of the state's Northern and other remote regions. The conclusion here is, as with the other indigenous works cited thus far, that whilst the North may be constructed time and time again as an idealised cultural hybrid zone, the notion that

Perth is – or has ever been – an exclusively White zone is also clearly ludicrous, and that in fact the whole of Western Australia is home to active and robust Aboriginal communities who have survived and, indeed, are flourishing alongside the non-Aboriginal majority population.

Ningali is an idiosyncratic performance text. Part stand-up comedy routine, part first person testimonial, part political tract, it is a highly theatrical hybrid of performance styles that embraces indigenous and non-indigenous story-telling tropes, fusing them into a compelling one-woman show that set the precedent for what has become a popular form of Black theatre in the early twenty-first century. Leah Purcell, Deborah Cheetham, Deborah Mailman (in collaboration with Wesley Enoch), David Gulpilil and George Rrurrambu have all employed hybridised one-person show performance styles in the years since *Ningali*. Lawford uses the first person narrative style to yarn, sing, dance, and act (out) her personal journey from a childhood in Fitzroy Crossing/Wankatjunka in the Kimberley region, to a post-adolescent life of adventure in the wide world beyond, including stints in Sydney and Alaska. She connects this articulation of personal subject identity with space by constantly linking geography and the body – often literally. The performance space itself is comprised of a floorcloth representing the desert landscape, upon which she sits, walks, talks and dances. Her own face is lit up within the design. Helena Grehan argues that the narrative form of the piece – its inherent theatrical structure, including design elements – reflects the journey of its content:

across vast distances and many landscapes[...] It is a journey that has no singular ending and no singular beginning. As a performance work, *Ningali* is woven in a circular movement that changes while remaining grounded – grounded in the name, the stories, the person, Ningali Lawford, who uses the anchor of tradition to inform her nomadic wandering in, out, and around place. (75)

Joanne Tompkins concurs and argues that the fusion of form and content here “also documents the importance of the desert landscape to her people” (*Unsettling* 70). For Tompkins, Lawford’s discursive engagement with the politics of geography and landscapes represents an engagement with the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny. She states:

Ningali proposes the non-standard monuments of dance, language, and bodies to memorialise and replace the land that her family has lost, but none quite makes up for the significance of the land itself. Nevertheless, the play establishes a counter-monument that takes issue with white settlement that has literally unsettled Ningali’s family. She initiates representational space with whatever means she has left. (*Unsettling* 72)

According to Tompkins, Lawford is reminding us of the complexity of interracial occupations of space in this country, and of the constant reminder of loss – not just of territory, but of culture – that any engagement with the land always represents for Aboriginal people. Here, the performance itself becomes the monument that marks the loss. Grehan agrees and argues that the performance “manages to challenge the spectator to think and re-think the concept of place and how it works in terms of both and landscape and *our* ‘implacement’ within it” (95; original emphasis). There is an invitation to acknowledge the tension created by cohabitation of contested spaces here: to see things from the “Other’s” side.

This articulation of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny can be linked more specifically with this study’s own area of investigation by arguing that, yet again, this notion of Australian Black/White relations and contestations surrounding space are being fought out in theatrical terms in the Australian North. Ningali, of course, comes from the North, and the testing ground for the argument about native title and acts of abrogation and appropriation of indigenous culture, identity and land thus happens conveniently to take place here within a Northern setting. Ningali herself articulates no North-South binary in identity or spatial practices in the play. There is just “Home” (in Fitzroy Crossing) and “Away” (Sydney, Alaska).

My point here is that it is while Ningali is away from Home – in this case, the far North of Western Australia – that she begins to feel most acutely the loss of her own sense of place and belonging. It is, ironically, while she is an exchange student in Alaska that she discovers a sense of connection with indigenous people of another country, while finding the White American girls culturally alien. When encountering “make-up and boyfriend” politics in the girls’ toilets, for instance, Ningali states “I’d never seen so many women go to a toilet not to piss. And *they’d* never even heard of black people living in Australia” (15; original emphasis). With indigenous people and landscapes in Alaska, however, Ningali’s connection is less comic:

At the mouth of the Yukon,
On a clear day you could see Russia
Sheets of ice everywhere
All I could think of is
“how can these people survive in nothing but ice?”
The same as they’d think if they saw my people
In nothing but desert.
My friend Mike took me to Cotlik
It was the best time I ever had
I really wanted to make contact with Native Americans
Not because of the cowboy and indian thing
But because they were indigenous people – like me, I spose. (15)

It is in the far North of America, then, that Ningali encounters “Other” indigeneity, and in it finds a sense of connection and of self.

In Sydney, on the other hand, in the metropolitan Australian Centre, where she lives and trains with other Aboriginal students at the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre (AIDT), Ningali has fun, but ultimately becomes aware of her sense of cultural alienation in the city. She articulates a fear here of having lost contact with language, culture and identity. Her family come down from Fitzroy Crossing/Wankatjunka to watch her graduating dance performance, and her jabbi (grandfather) jumps up on the stage and joins in the dance:

He just did it.

I was in the middle of this dance, and I started crying,
I was crying for my Jabbi. He joined in and did a big solo.
I was very proud of him.
I was proud of being from Wankatjunka
And I realised, completely now, what he was talking about
I hadn't lost my language
And I was proud of my background.
When I graduated from AIDT I went back to Wankatjunka. (23)

Ningali returns home, to the North, to immerse herself in her own culture again, at which point it becomes tempting to reinscribe essentialising notions of the North being the site of “real” or “true” Blackness, as against the South/City’s Whiteness. But it is Ningali’s point that Blackness is something that is carried with her wherever she goes, and that heading home is vital from time to time to connect and draw strength from one’s origins, family and land; but also that this sense of identity and connection does not dissipate and dissolve in other Australian spaces. Like Chi’s Western Australian North, simplistic binaries equating race with place are complicated by the reality of life in that part of the country. In a postmodern intertextual irony here, Ningali returns to Broome and wins a role in *Bran Nue Dae*. She falls in love with Anglo-Lebanese actor/writer/director Richard Mellick, and has a baby, Jaden. She embraces her ability to move effortlessly between worlds by this stage in her life, and wishes the same freedom and strength of Aboriginal identity upon her son – though her parting words here contain the residual, abiding political irony of conflicting land practices inherent in the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny:

My boy can be anything – I leave it to him
He will get the language – he’s three,
He’s got it already.
Maybe the oldest culture in the world.
At the same time his mum can do things
In the newest culture in the world –
It can take me anywhere
And I *can* tread anywhere on the earth
Except my own land
Except the tree where my mum gave birth
And my grandma delivered me. (26; original emphasis)

Richard Mellick's play *Welcome to Broome* operates as a companion piece of sorts to Lawford's text – or at least as a White coda to the indigenous texts all springing from the Kimberley region in the 1990s. First produced by Black Swan Theatre Company before transferring to Company B Belvoir in 1998, the play satirises the local truism of the “fucked up White bloke” who arrives in the Kimberley (and it could equally be as true of Darwin) to “find himself” in a Northern multiracial utopia. The central romantic relationship in the play is between a White man (Rob) and a Black woman (Chrissy), symbolising Broome's culturally hybrid reality. Ferris is the anarchic interloper whose life is falling apart at the seams, and for whom Broome represents the final frontier, or the furthest point on the Australian land mass from his “real” life and its attendant range of problems. It is actually Rob who provides the White perspective to this syndrome:

Yeah, middle class white boy goes walkabout. I remember standing at Central with one little brown suitcase. Got to Melbourne, just another big city, jumped on a bus to Perth, curled up on the back of a seat for three days...still didn't know where I was going. Did shit jobs, scraped together enough money for a bus fare north[...] but when I stepped off the bus in Broome, I felt like I'd come home. (10)

Rob has engaged with his artistic leanings through his connection with Broome, and Ferris obviously hopes he'll do the same thing. The interracial connection and exploration is sincere for both men, but the cross-cultural divide symbolised by Rob and Chrissy's relationship is ultimately too great. Their relationship could in fact be argued to be metonymic for the Black/White friction in broader Australian cultural/political life when it dissolves in a heated argument. Rob doesn't understand Chrissy's self-destructive behaviour after a family funeral and accuses her of abandoning their child while she's off drinking with the mob:

CHRISSEY: And you made me get in the back, made me sit in the back of the ute the rest of the way home like I was a dog, *like I was a fucking dog*. I should tell my brothers, they'd fix you up. You deserve a good flogging!

ROB: Well, you're just a bunch of fuckin' savages anyway!

[Silence.]

CHRISSEY: You hate us, don't you?

ROB: I didn't mean to say that –

CHRISSEY: You're just the same as any other kartiya who says he wants to help us, wants to understand us, but deep down you still actually hate us. (34; original emphasis)

Chrissy articulates the play's crux and central thesis, and her speech is worth quoting at length by way of summary of the national disdain in which White Australia holds Aboriginal culture (in Mellick's view), even when disguised as philanthropic middle class paternalism:

And that's why you made me get in the back. You hate me for being a black woman, that's why, that's the real truth. Too demanding, wants too much from you, too much that you can't give! You can't deal with me, you can't deal with any of us. It's too messy, we can't organise anything, we don't talk properly, we like football and loud cars and country and western, we don't clean up like you do, we don't wash the nappies like you do, we like being outside, in a big mob, we like sittin' on the dirt and sleepin' on the ground, we have too many kids and waste our money on grog – that's what you think, isn't it? And there's always someone dying or getting killed or getting thrown in jail. There's too many relations, too many people to deal with, there's no peace and quiet, no quiet little corner to go off and sit in and write some stupid fuckin' song that *no-one will ever hear!* You're just like the rest of them, secretly thinking '*There's no real hope for 'em, which is a pity, cos some of their art work is really good.*' You don't want us. You don't want me. God, I got a kid to a man that just doesn't love me anymore. You've had enough of me, it's time to chuck me out, I'm just another hopeless blackfella. (35; original emphasis)

The scene – the play itself – could arguably be seen to teeter dangerously on the brink of appropriation of indigenous voice. The piece's thesis, however, is powerful and the playwright's connection with the community he's writing about (and the basis upon which the play's semi-autobiographical material is built) is palpable and sincere.

Community elder Barney perhaps summarises the author's parting view of the

Kimberley region when says he says, “You still part of us mob. You still my nephew. From that baby now... You know? He always be with you. *[taps his chest]* In here... You family... Chrissy bin take off go, you bin go... doesn’t matter. Family...it’s all we got... (43).”

Mellick’s conclusion is that the chasm between Black and White cultures, as examined through the prism of the far North, is too vast for sustainable relationships based on mutual understanding to take place – but that there is a sense of mutual belonging nonetheless that exists as a palpable and unalterable (even in this case, blood) fact. It is the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny in practice, essentially: two mutually incompatible Australias living simultaneously in uncomfortable but undeniable proximity; and as such it is as apt a theatrical summary as any of the central concerns of this thesis. Rob, of course, leaves the Kimberley; but the phenomenon of sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes wonderful intercultural cohabitation is an abiding one for the towns, remote communities and pastoral homesteads of the North in contemporary Australian political life.

Multiracial North Queensland Writes Back

If Aboriginal theatre in the North in the final decade of the twentieth century emanated primarily from Western Australia, the paucity of multicultural themed work emanating out of Queensland was addressed in the first instance by two practitioners of vastly different theatrical temperaments and racial backgrounds. William Yang’s *Sadness* “opened up” the North for the Chinese in a cultural sense that is not an altogether inappropriate metaphor, given the manner in which Chinese labourers and entrepreneurs “opened up” the North itself. And Janis Balodis’s *The Ghosts Trilogy* placed a group of Latvian immigrants in the Far North Queensland canefields, placing

them alongside Barney and Roo (even if only figuratively) in the national theatrical imaginary, and reminding us of that region's multiracial workforce for the first time on the stage since Sydney Tomholt warned of suspicious Italian Mafiosi residing there in his 1913 short play "Anoli: the Blind."⁷⁷

Yang's performance text⁷⁸ is disarmingly simple, in theatrical terms. He screens photographic slide images, and describes them to the audience. As John McCallum asks of Yang's later work, *Bloodlinks*, "How does Yang do it? How has he managed to take this traditionally stupefying form of domestic entertainment and change it into something so absorbing? It's not even people we know" (Review, "Bloodlinks" 18). McCallum argues the answer lies in Yang's mesmerising stage presence and narration style, and with his ability to link the narrative stylistically with the arresting photographic images, by using candour and a confronting kind of first person intimacy to invite the audience into the lives of the "family" Yang talks about. "Family" is an elastic term here, because in *Sadness* Yang refers to the gay community in Sydney (the performance's initial focus) as being equally considered family to the blood relations he moves his focus to in the North as the performance

⁷⁷ Errol O'Neill's *Popular Front*, a political drama written in 1988, just a few years after Balodis's text, sets certain scenes in Townsville and the Far North and depicts characters from the Italian community as they interact with the Communist Party of Australia, which at one time, as O'Neill argues, had its healthiest membership up there, as evidenced by Communist Party member Fred Paterson's election to Town Council in Townsville in 1939. He was later elected to Queensland Parliament in the seat of Bowen in 1944, and as such was – and is – the first (and only) Communist elected to an Australian parliament.

Adam Grossetti's 2005 play *Mano Nera* also deals with the Italian "Black Hand Gang" referred to in Yang's text as being somehow implicated in his Uncle's murder, and is another text that time and space do not permit me to focus on in depth in this thesis, but to which I direct the reader interested in further understanding of the North Queensland Italian community's long, colourful and contentious (if the mythology is to be believed) presence in the region.

⁷⁸ Its multimedia performance style – it is essentially a photographic slide show with accompanying spoken word commentary – strictly speaking places it outside the parameters of this study. As stated from the outset, this thesis is focussing primarily on text based theatre praxis for reasons of focus and access, and from which its basic principles can be applied to other forms (such as dance theatre and multimedia-styled devised performance praxis) as appropriate. Yang's text has, however, been published, allowing analytical access to the text in his work (unlike his follow-up show, *The North*, which might be argued to be of even greater relevance to this thesis). *Sadness* is also seminal in its depiction of Chinese North Queensland, and as such cannot be ignored in this thesis.

progresses. It is because Yang articulates a sense of disconnectedness with his Chinese heritage in the first place that he feels he has to head North to reclaim this identity. Yang places an image of his ageing mother on screen and states:

My mother didn't tell me much about the family, but there's one thing she told me that I've never forgotten – Aunt Bessie's husband, William Fang Yuen, was murdered at Mourilyan in the 1920s. That's where I'm going. I'm travelling north, *into the past*, and I want to look into my uncle's murder. (21; emphasis added)

For Yang, the North still exists as a petrified ornament inside which some fossilised remnant of his family history – and of the Chinese community itself – still exists largely intact awaiting discovery and reconnection. Joanne Tompkins connects this searching with the melancholia referred to in the performance's title, arguing that:

[t]he geographical and temporal distance between what he calls “the brighter lights of Sydney” and the more languid Queensland of his assimilated Australian upbringing forces him to acknowledge another “sadness:” “the sad part of this process was that the Chinese side was lost and denied, and for most of my adult life I've felt uncomfortable about being Chinese.” For years, the cultural associations Yang made with “family” were best left in the “past” that north Queensland represented to him. (“Homescapes” 50)

In one sense, Yang's familial trajectory into the past, and into the North specifically, aligns with the nation's conceptions of the North going back as far as the federation era (discussed in detail in Chapters One and Two of this thesis) when the Chinese labour force was viewed by predominantly White Trade Unions as competition for “Australian” jobs, fuelling other xenophobic tensions in the country at the time surrounding Asian invasion anxieties. The North at that time, as I have argued in Chapters One, Two and Three, was seen as the portal through which this cultural inundation might take place, and the (predominantly, though not solely) Chinese Australian racial “Other” was demonised and discouraged from continuing to settle in the North in the same large numbers.

The interesting thing about Yang's perspective, though, is that this Chinese diaspora whose connections with the North stretch as far back as the pre-Federation era of the 1880s, still exists intact within his personal dreaming; and the interracial violence he alludes to as being part and parcel of the Chinese experience in the North sheds intriguing light on romantic notions of the North being some kind of multiracial utopia during the early part of the twentieth century. In attempting to investigate his Uncle's murder seventy years after the fact, Yang comes to the conclusion that there was an institutional kind of lawlessness that was premised on a shared community contempt for Chinese business people that resulted in a legitimised perpetration of violence against them – not only on the part of the majority Anglo-Celtic population, but also between Aborigines and the Chinese, where it was the latter who were performing much of the physical land clearing (on behalf of the whole settler community) that displaced the indigenous population. Yang refers to his paternal grandfather, Ah Young, who was “hit on the head with a stone axe and lost his left eye” (39) in a skirmish with Aborigines in the Atherton Tablelands. Atherton's Chinese Joss House remains as one of the best preserved monuments – or testaments – to the strong Chinese presence on the Northern frontier at the turn of the previous century; but Yang reminds us that race relations were complex. Monuments such as these and the Chinese museum he photographs in Cooktown, where there “are no Chinese left[...] the last shop run by Chinese closed in 1954” (40), corroborate Yang's perceptions of the North as a place in which the past is preserved romantically intact.

For Yang visiting in the 1990s, even increasingly urbane and contemporary Cairns with its at that time only burgeoning but now arguably flourishing gay community, leads him to conclude that “I still think the north is a lonely place and

things like the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras seem far away” (44). There are many from within the gay community who will no doubt dispute this view today with some relief – a regional gay identity away from the major urban enclaves and their proscriptive range of queer identities is the point of living in places like Cairns.

But the notion of the North as cultural museum is ultimately brought undone by Yang’s reconnection with the large family numbers who still live in the region. His Innisfail relations, for instance, “all married Australians[...] Here are my first cousins twice removed. [There are nine of them in the photograph.] Or I could call them my grand nieces and nephews. Each of these kids is a quarter Chinese, and on their Chinese side they’re all fifth-generation Australian. It takes a hundred years to get a blend like this” (29). The North becomes a *living* space rather than a fossilised memory; and its reality is one (much like Chi’s Broome) of hybridised and relatively humdrum regularity. As Tompkins concludes,

it is not a matter of living between cultures [either for Yang himself – living between gay Sydney and the Chinese North – or for his racially blended relatives living within the North] or being trapped by one or even by the combination: instead, it is a modification of a range of cultural contexts to suit the situation. (*Unsettling* 149)

The uncanny North is here reconfigured as an Anglo-Chinese assimilationist model, in which a century of inter-cultural commingling of Australian and Asian heritage has created what Yang refers to as a generation of “Austasians” who represent the hybridised reality of the nation – using the North as a fulcrum upon which to base the theory – heading into the twenty-first century.

For Balodis, the North is a fulcrum too: but it is one where a young nation’s ghosts converge at a formative stage to point toward the sort of nation it is we might become when we’re old enough to have a certain kind of culturally mappable history. As the

founding work within the trilogy, and the one whose topography and *mise en scène* (and therefore themes) reside most strongly within Far North Queensland, I base my discussion here on *Too Young for Ghosts*, rather than the ensuing pieces, *No Going Back* and *My Father's Father*.

Like the others in the trilogy, *Too Young for Ghosts* is a complex multi-tiered work. Three narratives set in three different time periods interweave and inform one another thematically, and in some instances, directly (as far as plot is concerned): a group of Latvian exiles arrive in the Far North Queensland canefields directly after World War II; we see them also negotiating and fighting for survival in Stuttgart in the dying days of the war; and explorer Ludwig Leichhardt and his survey team are wandering the Far North Queensland bush a century earlier. They are mapping the region, and searching for a land route to Port Essington on the Northern Territory coast, near present day Darwin. Their ghosts essentially haunt the contrapuntal twentieth-century narratives.

There is a sense being established here then that, Aboriginal inhabitants aside, Australia is a nation of immigrants and *arrivistes* who need to find their way in a new landscape – both topographical and cultural. Leichhardt's survey work is a metaphorical representation of the rudderless cultural mapping that takes place when one culture attempts to superimpose its own taxonomies for understanding the land upon that of an indigenous population and their more intimate and instinctive understanding of native topographies and land uses. Helen Gilbert posits that, from a postcolonial critical perspective, such cartographical themes operating in theatre (and in this play specifically) remind us that maps “are a form of spatial knowledge that naturalise conquest and empire” and are thus of particular interest to a reading of a

play that in itself “seeks to identify potential sites of discursive rupture in imperial history” (*Sightlines* 125).

In a key scene, Leichhardt’s botanical surveyor, Gilbert, points out the European surveyors’ two competing taxonomies for understanding land. The botanist, he argues, surveys the land in forensic detail, building up an understanding of small parcels of land in patchwork quilt-like segments in order to understand how the flora and fauna co-exists and what the land’s secrets have to reveal. It is a microcosmic appreciation of the land that contrasts to the explorer’s macrocosmic relationship to Australian spaces, in which one piece of land is just a marker on the way to the next, designed to produce a broad cartographical summary that helps ensuing settlers get from point A to point B. As Helen Gilbert points out,

[w]hile they share a strong need to feel oriented in the face of a continuing dislocation [they are lost, after all], Leichhardt is aligned more obviously with the imperialist. His is the panoptic gaze which appropriates and totalises as he urges Gilbert to “look to the horizon [and] have some vision.” (*Ghosts* 442)

Neither taxonomy resembles an Aboriginal understanding of the land, which remains a ghostly and faintly menacing ‘Other’ practice.

This is another articulation of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny – though in this case a tripartite one, or even quadra-partite one where nineteenth-century European relationships to space sit uncomfortably alongside indigenous land practices; both of which in turn haunt White Australian farming practices and the Latvian characters’ cultural discombobulation in the same space one hundred years later. As Tompkins argues,

The Ghosts Trilogy questions not only the ways in which Australia has been historicised and spatialised, but how the nation has been “reduced” by the anxiety associated with constructing traditional fixed monuments[....] While Leichhardt keeps making his mark on the landscape, the Latvians keep trying to find a way to live in/with the land, generating a presence in the face of what is perceived to be absence. (*Unsettling* 82)

It is the Latvians' arrival in the Far North Queensland canefields that is of most immediate interest to this thesis, and what perhaps differentiates the focus of this study from those that view the trilogy (rightly) as a commentary on national Australian mythologies and tensions. Whilst I appreciate the national significance and focus of the play's themes, I am especially interested in what the play has to say specifically about the North.

The North, I would argue, operates as a kind of weighing station – or, as the play's symbolism recurrently returns to – an internment camp between Old Europe and New Australia. It is a fundamentally alien zone in which the migrants arrive. Ilse sums up the immigrants' withering observation of what passes for civilisation in the postwar Far North:

This is our new home. Our ducks and chickens lived in more comfort. I thought these people came from Europe with knowledge that was hundreds of years old. There's not evidence of it. Perhaps we've fallen amongst exiles who have been sent as far from civilisation as possible. Is this the best they can do in a hundred and fifty years? (22)

The cane barracks are indeed not dissimilar to a war camp; and they function figuratively to remind us that the immigrants' experience is one of perpetual dislocation and arrival – but not yet one of having found “home.” The North, then, is a depot between “civilisations:” in Europe; and in the Australian metropolitan Centre of the south-eastern sea board. Again, it is Ilse who states:

I'm no more at home here than you [other migrant women] are[...] I don't understand this country and it doesn't understand me[...] But I can live in an iron shed and eat off an iron plate because it won't always be that way. I'll go back to a city and crystal and china. I don't fight it like you do. (38)

Ironically, it is Ilse who ultimately succumbs to the North once the choice becomes possible. It is where she feels she has the greatest chance of becoming “authentically” and “naturally” Australian. She believes that Lydia, Karl and Otto will “go to Sydney

and collect in pockets with other Latvians. You'll be a crutch to each other and dream for ever of returning home" (79) and deny themselves the assimilation into an (Uncanny) Australia that she has come to believe the North, in all of its "uncivilised" and unrealised potential, represents for her.

Leichhardt's ghost watches over them and feels that what Tompkins might refer to as his monument-making, or Helen Gilbert as his imperialising cartography, has been worthwhile after all. They discover his marker tree, and he declares, "[t]heir dreams are troubled by the horrors of Europe. But they have escaped and they will forget. They are young and strong, the treasure of this country, the nucleus of a nation. At the centre, my tree" (74). The contemporary characters fail to recognise the tree for its monumental status and proceed to chop it down to use it as a lifeline in the flooding river. Leichhardt's optimism may in some senses prevail, but according to Tompkins, it seems to be Balodis's contention that,

Leichhardt misinterprets what type of monuments are appropriate to the Australian landscape; [the trilogy] thus offers a number of alternatives to generate usefully "fluid" memorials to the landscape and the past, including the somewhat paradoxical focus on absence and the monumentalising of ghosts. (*Unsettling* 78)

From my own perspective here, it is interesting to note that this act of "monumental" erasure eradicates one kind of European spatial land practice in the North – a "de-mapping", in a sense, of imperial cartographic myth-making – at the same point in the dramatic action as Ilse and Karl feel they can make the North their home. It is when one grand attempt at European pioneering practice fails and disappears that the ghosts are released, and the North can become home in the (postwar) present. The lesson seems to be that it is through acquiescence to unique local conditions that one might find the "real" or "authentic" Australian experience, rather than through the cloistered Australia of urban ethnic enclaves in the major cities. Like a number of playwrights

who write from the lived experience of having been born and raised in the North, Balodis comes close here to upturning the traditional theatrical view that the cities are the centre of the “real” Australia and the North is a mythical space in which one temporarily undertakes adventure before returning to the authenticity of home in the cultural “Centre.”

To turn the focus of this chapter now to the Northern Territory, the Top End (as previous chapters of this thesis have argued) has a long history of representation in the national theatrical imaginary. It was only as recently, though, as the 1970s that the focus within Darwin’s burgeoning pro-am theatre community turned its attention to development of new work, manifesting as political revue in the early 1970s, and then flourishing as new full-length text-based works under Simon Hopkinson’s tenure as guest director and eventually co-Artistic Director with Ken Conway in the late 1970s and early 1980s of the Darwin Theatre Group. Hopkinson’s play *Buffaloes Can’t Fly* (1981) was the most accomplished of this tranche of new Territory-themed works and the only one to have a life outside of the Northern Territory. Other of Hopkinson’s titles dealing with life in the Top End include *White Ants and Green Cans* (1983), *Moving On, Moving On* (1981), and *Occupied* (1983), the latter of which dealt with the mop-up of Darwin after Cyclone Tracy devastated the city in 1974. Much of this work was community theatre, in essence. One or two actors would be paid to perform as a professional core, and the rest of the cast would be made up of the city’s volunteer base – a varied assortment of enthusiasts comprised largely of lawyers,

public servants, media and communications workers, educators and free lance arts workers.⁷⁹

By the late 1980s, and certainly into the 1990s, as the Darwin Theatre Group became the Darwin Theatre Company, professional funding and a shifting range of concerns saw the flagship company broaden its base to incorporate engagement with Darwin's multicultural communities, in turn affecting the sort of work that began emanating from the Top End. Lesley Delmenico refers to a genre of large scale (often site-specific) multicultural community shows as "Darwin-style performances" and describes their properties in the following manner:

Darwin-style plays tend to be both strongly political and to score at the high end of intercultural engagement. They also reflect the recent development of a more complex, second-generation postcolonialism, one that is informed more by the hybridisation and blurred boundaries of globalisation than by the dualities examined by postcolonialism's foundational theorists. ("Dramas" 44)

As a result of their response to local communities' strong connections to cultural and political life in a range of South-East Asian nations (predominantly including, but not restricted to, East Timor, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines) and frequently involving Larrakia and other indigenous groups, the performances tend to draw on the range of skills as well as the particular performance preferences and styles of the members of those communities. Rather than operate as traditional "well made plays" in the text-based tradition, these large outdoor works according to Delmenico, whether bi- or multi- cultural share common characteristics:

They emphasise music and dance, ritual and image, a strong emotional content and the use of traditional performance elements to address contemporary issues. Plays created by speakers of different native languages may not be textually-oriented, but may instead stress physicality and images which translate across language barriers[...] Productions use both Western and non-Western theatrical techniques and scripting processes ranging from group-devised to playwright-generated. They frequently are created with the aid of

⁷⁹ The history of the Darwin Theatre Company (DTC) itself is a fascinating one and well worthy of separate investigation. Plans are currently underfoot for a publication summarising the company's performance history timed to coincide with the company's fiftieth anniversary in 2009.

theatre-workers drawn from the participating ethnic groups rather than from the Anglo-Celtic community. (45)

The number of works that Delmenico investigates thus comprises a range of ambitious and exciting works, some of which connect with the bounds of this thesis for the reasons cited earlier in the chapter, and some of which fall outside this thesis's own range of concerns. Landmark local productions such as *Death at Balibo* (1988), which deals amongst other things with the killing of the five Australian journalists in Balibo in East Timor in 1975; and *Diablo!* (1992), which is a large scale work dealing allegorically with "commonality and solidarity between the people of neighbouring islands – Filipinos/as, Torres Strait Islanders and East Timorese – based on common experiences of colonialism" ("Historiography" 18), are the first of this cycle of projects. Rather than being depictions of the Australian North, they are vital political projects that have emanated from the North because of Darwin's geographical proximity to South-East Asia, and the nature of the communities living there, a large number of whom are exiles from political regimes residing very close to Australia's northern shores. Engagement with this notion of Darwin as a liminal zone, or a cusp between Australia and Asia, is the focus of Delmenico's comprehensive and excellent study. In some ways, a lot of the most exciting inter-cultural work to emanate from Darwin and the Top End falls within Delmenico's area of study rather than my own.

Other performances Delmenico examines include: *Ngapa: Two Cultures, One Country*, created by the Lajamanu community with Tracks Dance Theatre; *Keep Him My Heart* (by Gary Lee); *Tuba-Rai Metin* (by Darwin's East Timorese community); *Trepang* (by Andrish Saint-Clare); and *Breath of the Wind* (by Salt Fire Water).⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Interestingly, Delmenico observes that many of these performances sit outside and alongside the mainstage theatre community in Darwin – in the form of the city's only professional theatre company, DTC (and also, by association, one assumes the city's only professional dance theatre company, Tracks Dance Theatre). Delmenico mentions that DTC is "resented as 'not open' by some ethnic members of the Darwin performance community, despite the color-blind casting of [Hamlet]" ("Dramas" 109).

Lee's play is discussed in Chapter Four; and *Ngapa* and *Tuba-Rai Metin* fall beyond the scope of this thesis. *Breath of the Wind* similarly deals with individual women's migrant journey narratives and cultural identity rather than being a specific interrogation of Northern spatialities and practices. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins analyse this performance in their book *Women's Intercultural Performance*, providing a closer analysis of the complexities of multi- and inter-cultural performance politics.⁸¹ *Trepang* deals thematically with the Top End even though it is often described as musical, dance – or even, in the case of Gilbert and Lo, a 'multilingual opera' (*Cosmopolitics* 210), and thus straddles a blurry line in relation to my own study. But I would like to comment briefly on *Trepang* as a Top End performance *phenomenon* before moving on to the final section of this chapter.

Trepang was first performed on Elcho Island in 1996 with members of the Macassan and Yolngu communities. It is essentially a historiographical piece that pays homage to the four hundred year trade relationship existing between Macassans and Aboriginal communities on the Top End coast, which only became obsolete during the early decades of the twentieth century – in curiously close proximity to the advent of the White Australia Policy in the Federation era. As Delmenico points out,

Delmenico's observation here is well-made, and is no doubt based on a legitimate community perception and concern. I should point out, though, that of the seven productions that comprise the spine of Delmenico's study, two – *Death at Balibo* and *Diablo!* – were co-produced by DTC, and a third, *Ngapa*, was co-produced with Tracks.

⁸¹ It is Holledge and Tompkins's assertion, based on discussions with Salt Fire Water founding member Venetia Gillot, that the performance was "a multicultural as opposed to an inter- or intra- cultural work[...] because the performers 'still remain[ed] enclosed within our own culture and our own performance piece[s][...]. We just sat our work side by side" (Gillot qtd in Holledge and Tompkins 117). Delmenico takes exception to this assertion, feeling for some reason that it is Holledge and Tompkins's conclusion rather than Gillot's; or rather, that Holledge and Tompkins go further by asserting that the show "failed" because "it did not extend interculturalism beyond cliché" ("Dramas" 62). Delmenico concludes that "while Holledge and Tompkins believe that it did not push the boundaries of intercultural performance, its efficacy also derives from its community-related aspects as 'believed-in theatre'" ("Dramas" 63). I am not convinced that Holledge and Tompkins are going as far as Delmenico asserts here in writing off the entire venture as a "failed" work that does not rise above racial cliché, and would argue that they are in essence agreeing with Gillot and Delmenico herself when they point out that some aspects of the venture simply met the performance group's own goals less successfully than others did, and that the overall project was merit-worthy and exciting.

the project was “planned to imagine in performance the contact negotiations between the Yolngu and Muslim Macassan traders who journeyed to Arnhem Land from the late seventeenth century to the 1920s in search of the trepang or sea cucumber, which was considered a delicacy in China” (“Dramas” 212). In seeking to re-enact a history of sorts, Saint-Clare needed to find shared performance lexicons – physical and linguistic – to enable a coherent cross-cultural understanding of the production’s style and form. Gilbert and Lo point out that it was subsequently “based on a traditional indigenous ceremonial song cycle and included Macassan and Yolngu performers, many of whom were related by a kinship system established from their early contact” (*Cosmopolitics* 210). Delmenico adds that “St-Clare’s desire in this project was to rework not only the ‘all-but-lost Creole of ‘Macassan’ language’ but also of the Aboriginal languages, in which ‘texts’ of early contact still exist in the form of song and dance performances, as well as in artistic representations” (“Dramas” 213).

The project then toured to Ujung Pandang, the former city of Macassar and the capital of current-day Sulawesi – a region with which the Northern Territory government signed a formal economic Memorandum of Understanding in 1999 – and then back to Darwin for a Festival season there. The work is important for its sheer scale and audacity, in one sense, but also for its staging of North Australian histories that pre-date European contact in the region. It is a rare example of the Gelder/Jacobs uncanny that precludes European spatial practices competing with those of indigenous Australians, and highlights a Northern intercultural relationship – and shared spatial/land/resource usage – that is based on mutual participation and invitation. As such it is probably judicious to argue that it is not in fact an example of the uncanny in practice at all: there are no competing taxonomies regarding land usage or occupation here. It is a trading relationship being re-enacted, based on visitation rather than

occupation, in which the identities of both cultures being depicted is altered – the creole *lingua franca* that St Clare sought to recapture – as a result of a shared relationship with the Northern Austral-Asian cusp.

Just as Saint-Clare’s performance text reminds us of pre-European interracial relations in the Australian North, Jacqueline Lo, writing of mixed-race performance on the Australian stage observes that:

[i]t is[...] not coincidental that many of the works by/about “AborAsians” hail from the Northern Territory and the northern regions of Western Australia. The Aboriginal communities there have had significant contact with Asia prior to European occupation, and the multicultural and multiracial communities in towns like Broome and Darwin are proof of a history of both forced and voluntary miscegenation. (178)

The specific production Lo goes on to discuss in this context is *Heart of the Journey*, an Aboriginal-Japanese work set in Broome. The show’s performance style is not entirely dissimilar to William Yang’s slide show and first-person narration model - though this time the first person is *two* people, (in the guise of collaborators Lucy Dann and Mayu Kanamori) and is pre-recorded and “played” in absentia.⁸² *Heart of the Journey* traces Dann’s trip to Japan in search of her biological father. Kanamori joins her for the journey. Lo describes the piece as a form of “autoethnography” which “seeks to challenge the scopic regime of ethnography by reconfiguring its modes of representation through a process of dialogisation” (179). According to Lo, this process can be viewed as a postcolonial strategy in which certain Western “metropolitan visual” tropes are appropriated (“the holiday slide show, the Hollywood road movie, and ethnographic documentary” [179]), and reinscribed from the colonised subject’s perspective to re-present ostensibly colonised identities back to

⁸² Kanamori introduced the show in person at the performance I attended at Brown’s Mart in the 2003 Festival of Darwin.

the Western gaze in a form metropolitan audiences *think* they recognise, but which are ultimately under the control of the writer/subject herself.

The show begins with Dann establishing her Aboriginal identity. We see photographic images of her surrounded by her family – constructing her, in fact, *as* Aboriginal – before revealing the “surprise” of her Japanese patrilineage. As Lo points out:

[t]he effect of this section of the text forces the spectator to do a double-take – we assume that the images we see are of Aboriginal people but as Dann’s narration unfolds, we start to look for Japanese features in the face of Aboriginality. Yet there is no generic formula, no racial math to decode the degree of mixedness[...] This sequence in the show effectively challenges the notion of race (and hence mixed race) as a visible and infallible system of phenotypical inscriptions, and reinforces the absurdity of nineteenth century attempts to categorise racial hybridity. (180)

Lo’s conclusion about the performance’s achievement here is that, aside from challenging “the continuing disavowal of the role of White men in the miscegenation of Aboriginal communities” (182), *Heart of the Journey* ultimately “challenges the stereotype of the racial hybrid as being without history or community” (182). It is tempting at this point to conclude (as it is also tempting to conclude with Chi or Lawford’s texts), that Broome becomes the centre of a utopian hybrid North here where interracial blending is accepted and embraced as a “natural,” even “normal,” category on the basis of the region’s history and geography. Certainly Lo is not going this far – and neither am I. Lo points out that part of the history and community that Dann discovers here is in fact in Japan. There was an element of her identity that remained subaltern in Broome until she made the connection with her father overseas.

The key point of interest for me here, as with *Trepang*, is that the North becomes the site of this inter-cultural (to reference Delmenico, Holledge and Tompkins) rather than multi-cultural investigation. North Australia is, of course, by no means the only section of the country where cross- or inter-racial performance and

relations take place. But as Lo points out in the statement quoted earlier, “AborAsian” collaboration (as she terms it) takes place most frequently and naturally in the North because that is where the commingling of cultures takes place in the strongest numbers *despite* two centuries of European occupation. As Yang says of his “Austasian” family in Far North Queensland, “it takes a hundred years to get a blend like this” (29).

While cross-cultural representations and collaborations have formed the large part of this final chapter dealing with the “state of play” of theatre praxis in the North, I want to conclude now by acknowledging – albeit summarily – other types of collaborations taking place across the top of the country at the moment. As I have sought to uncover throughout this thesis, the North is troped in a number of widely diverging ways, not all of which centre on race (though race frequently becomes the prism through which the North is viewed for a number of broad and complex reasons, as discussed in earlier chapters).

Since the late 1970s, Darwin Theatre Company has consistently commissioned, developed and increasingly, recently, co-produced new work that is designed to interrogate the Top End for a broad range of its foundational and ongoing myths and self-perceptions. Since the mid 1990s, Just Us Theatre Ensemble (JUTE) has provided Cairns and the Far North Queensland region with a similar professional theatre infrastructure and aegis dedicated to the development of original text-based theatre that engages with that region. JUTE’s website refers to the company as “the evocative voice of the North.” Increasingly – finally – the two regions are beginning to “speak to” each other and to co-commission and co-produce work that has a shared broad thematic appeal. In collaboration with smaller independent professional theatre

production houses in the region (such as Knock-em-Down Theatre and Business Unusual⁸³ in Darwin and Red Dust Theatre in Alice Springs – though the latter, admittedly, does not qualify as a “Northern” company for the purposes of this study), a number of benchmark productions have taken place over recent years aimed at providing an “across-the-top” style touring circuit aimed to provide not only permanent and sustainable lives for new work that represents the North, but for professional arts workers themselves who might otherwise spend a number of years serving in the trenches of pro-am theatre in Darwin, Cairns and Townsville before having to head “South” to make a sustainable living.

Surviving Jonah Salt was the first such collaboration between JUTE and Knock-em-Down Theatre. The production premiered in Cairns in July 2004 before transferring to the Festival of Darwin in August of that year. The piece was a text-based collaboration between four writers (Kathryn Ash in Cairns, Gail Evans in Darwin, Anne Harris in Alice Springs and Stephen Carleton in Brisbane), and undertook specifically to explore the ways in which each of the four writers felt the Australian North was mythologised – both from “within,” and from the perspective of “the South.”

Knock-em-Down Theatre have covered similar thematic terrain from within the Northern Territory with their productions *BLOCK* in 1999, which involved interrogating Darwin as contemporary urban space by getting four local writers to set a play each in a public housing tenement in the city’s northern suburbs, and

⁸³ While their non-text based aegis falls beyond the scope of this study, physical theatre company Business Unusual adds a vital link along with Tracks Dance Theatre to cross-cultural and other thematic representations of the Top End. Deviser/Performer Nicky Fearn’s *The Pearler* was a hugely successful 2004 depiction of the cross-cultural complexity of the North Australian pearling industry. As Joanna Barrkman’s *RealTime* review enthusiastically avows:

Sarah Cathcart’s direction seamlessly harnessed all the elements of story, physical performance, design, music and montage to create a sophisticated production which adeptly revealed personal and social aspects of north Australia’s rich racial and labour history. Congratulations to Darwin’s independent production house Business Unusual Theatre for bringing this highly theatrical and socially relevant production to fruition.

Roadhouse in 2001, which again involved commissioning four local writers to create short plays, this time exploring mythic representations of the Top End outback using the ubiquitous and iconic Roadhouse, as the title suggests, as the project's central governing locus and trope. Suzanne Spinner writes that "[t]here are no wimpy half measures here, no ersatz Southern sophistication; they rework the Frontier Myth into a new genre, Territory Gothic" ("Darwin" 10).

It could be argued that the Gothic genre is finding renewed and idiosyncratic voice in a number of the works emanating from or depicting the North at the moment. Kathryn Ash's *Flutter* (2003), *Crackle, Snap, Pop* (Kathryn Ash, Michael Beresford and Susan Prince, 2005) and this writer's *Constance Drinkwater and the Final Days of Somerset* (2006) spring to mind as enough recent professional (and touring) examples as to constitute a trend in this regard. The forthcoming (2009) collaboration between Knock-em-Down Theatre, Red Dust, JUTE and Darwin Theatre Company, Mary Ann Butler's *Half Way There*, promises to cover similar gothic thematic terrain. Artistic Director of Knock-em-Down Theatre, Gail Evans, may provide the through line here in terms of theatrical voice. It is the foreword from the Playlab Press publication of *Surviving Jonah Salt* that perhaps best sums up the basis of the mythological exploration of the North that underpins all these collaborations – relying as they do on the writing and direction of a key nucleus of Darwin and Cairns practitioners who have now worked together over a five-year period, and as such it is worth quoting at length. Writing of the "exhaustive list of tropes" the team identified as being central to the way in which the Australian North is mythologised from within and without, Carleton writes:

[s]pecific themes we identified include: physical and psychological isolation; failure (both of personal dreams and of broad visions of "settlement" and "development" of the North); notions of the North as a space in which to escape, disappear and reinvent oneself; "Wild West" myths of lawlessness and

frontiership, which includes constructions of the North as a masculinised site of violent testing and endeavour; seemingly conflicting notions of the North as harsh, cruel, hot and inhospitable desert space on the one hand, and languid, lush, verdant tropical leisure space on the other; conceptions of the North (by the South) as being foul-mouthed, racist and redneck, and of it being “empty,” uncultivated and uncivilised; and notions of the North being the End of the Line – the farthest space one can go in which to retreat or escape from all the things that the South represents in the Australian imagination (ie. culture, reality, civilisation, law, industry, propriety, social progressiveness, etc). (“Foreword” 129-130)⁸⁴

Out of this shared energy and commitment to the development of new theatre in the North, the Regional Wave Cohort has emerged as an informal alliance between all the flagship and independent theatre companies residing in the North. Driven primarily by the indefatigable energy of JUTE’s Artistic Director Suellen Maunder, the Cohort also involves Darwin Theatre Company, Tropic Sun Theatre (Townsville), and Crossroads Arts (Mackay) as its formal spine, but (to allow the mixed metaphor) includes independent companies such as Knock-em-Down Theatre, Business Unusual and Red Dust under its umbrella. *Melek mo Hani* (2006), a physical theatre piece tracing the history of South Sea Islanders living in the Mackay region, whose relatives originally came to Queensland as cheap labour in the nineteenth century to work in the sugar industry, was generated by Crossroads Arts in Mackay under Steve Mayer-Miller’s Artistic Direction. Andrew Satinie and Donnielle Fatnowna devised and performed the piece and presented it Mackay, before it was picked up by the companies comprising the Regional Wave, and toured across North Queensland and the Northern Territory in 2006. Whilst the majority of the work – and arts workers – involved in the companies have urban regional text-based biases, the sorts of projects being seeded and developed by the alliance is thus certainly not restricted to text, or to

⁸⁴ At the risk of being seen to push my own barrow here – and I have assiduously avoided reference to productions I’ve been involved in in Darwin and Cairns throughout this thesis despite more than ten years of professional commitment to the development of new work in that region of the country – I think it is worth quoting from the published text’s foreword here to summarise the project’s themes as they pertain to this study; and as they can be read as emblematic of the type of work being generated in and about the region right now.

“White” thematic concerns if *Melek mo Hani* is any indication. There is a kick in the step of the companies associated with the Regional Wave, as evidenced by their promotional blurb for their (successful) 2006 Australia Council application for development of three new collaborative works. The Cohort states:

There is a very real feeling that something exciting is happening in the north in professional, original theatre praxis at the moment; and the cohort has decided it is high time to harness this energy into a well-organised touring circuit that allows new work to tour beyond its home company’s span of influence, and to become increasingly national in scope and ambition. (“Regional Wave”)

While it might be fitting to conclude this chapter on such an optimistic note of ambition, looking into the future beyond the scope of this thesis, I am inclined to finish with a touch of irony. Certainly there is an over-riding sense of optimism amongst companies resident in the North who seem to be discovering strength and momentum in shared resources, biases and commitment to the development of a sustainable professional theatre industry across the top of the country. National funding bodies are recognising the energy there at the moment and are supporting applications for the development of new work, as evidenced by the Australia Council Theatre Board’s decision to grant funding to the projects included in the application referred to above; and also its support of Butler’s *Half Way There* in 2008-2009.

JUTE’s popular 2005 production *The Impossible Dream* by Philip Witts, fictionalises the tale of local Catalan eccentric and entrepreneur Jose Paronella, who built a pink Spanish “castle” in Mena Creek, just south of Cairns in the early twentieth century, which now operates as local tourist attraction, Paronella Park. The production was well-received by local audiences and reviewed accordingly by *The Australian’s* Martin Buzacott. It was one of the rare occasions in which a JUTE production based in Cairns received critical coverage in that newspaper, and the analysis of the performance was thorough enough, and the praise fittingly positive. Of especial

interest to me is the framework within which the review was cased. It begins, “[a]s evening falls on downtown Cairns, the trees near the beautiful, colonial-style public library are filled with flying foxes, their harsh squawks and squabbling penetrating the humidity like foghorns in a tropical pea-souper” (8). Buzacott describes the architecture of the (then) new Centre of Contemporary Arts which houses the company before going on to describe the opening night festivities:

Here, the custom is for dignitaries to make their opening-night speeches before rather than after the event, a welcome device that creates a sense of heightened anticipation about the premiere ahead. Not that the good burghers of Cairns, *in their elegantly flesh-revealing couture*, need much geeing up[...] [T]here’s a true local tale about to unfold and everyone in north Queensland knows about it. (8; emphasis added)

It is as though Brisbane-based Buzacott (and Brisbane must count as the Southern metropolitan centre in this context) is reviewing not only the production, but the audience and the tropical North itself. There is an automatic unconscious alignment here with the exotic sensuality and fecundity of the flora and fauna (audience included) here that harkens directly back to Jon Stratton’s thesis outlined in the Introduction that the North – and particularly North Queensland in this context – is never *real* space in the eyes of Metropolitan spectators. It is tourist space, or leisure space, or lazy, indolent, romantic tropical space that never equates with the production of serious work undertaken by “real” Australian labour. It is a revealing unconscious association that reminds one of the work yet to do to overcome two centuries of ingrained representation of the North as the South’s cultural playground, even if, as Buzacott concludes, “[j]ust as the flying foxes down the road demonstrate every evening, there’s something in the theatre up here worth making a noise about” (8).

Conclusion

The Continuing Function of the North

To tell the story of the North is to tell the story of Australia. As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this thesis, the idea of the North is a spectre that looms over most of our grand national narratives. Our troubled, unsettling – and ultimately still *unsettled* – relationship with indigenous Australia is at the core of our contentious relationship with space. Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs expound the ongoing tensions inherent in this contest, and of how deeply psychological this primal, foundational displacement is. For Jennifer Rutherford, our psychological relationship with race and landscape in this country manifests as a Lacanian projection of anxiety onto a perceived core of national emptiness. And Rob Shields reminds us of how we construct national myths around these psychological projections, based as they all too often are on a need to actively disavow certain painful and shameful truths that emerge as a result of complex occupations of contested spaces. For Tompkins, these spatial tensions manifest most actively and patently as narratives on the Australian stage, where the performance of nationhood and of self is most effectively and, of course, dramatically acted and re-enacted.

It is my contention that in all of these cases, it is possible to see these national anxieties played out most starkly in the North, as seen in the 2006 riots on Palm Island, and the 2007 Federal Government intervention into indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The North is still the tinderbox for spatial-racial tensions in this country. And it is still, if outgoing Minister for Northern Australia Bill

Heffernan's comments indicate during the 2007 federal election campaign,⁸⁵ viewed by many as the portal through which Asian invasion might occur. At the turn of the last century this "yellow peril" was thought to exist because of Asian hordes wanting the nation's gold, offering cheap labour and bringing with it vices like opium addiction, gambling and smallpox. By mid-century, it was an expansionist and aggressive Japanese military that many Australians imagined might invade, enter and occupy the North. Soon after it was a line of Communist dominoes tumbling through Asia that successive governments – especially, though not exclusively, the Conservative governments of the Menzies era – feared would expose the North to a "red" infiltration. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the *Northern Territory News* claims that the threat from Asia is posed by religious extremists in Indonesia wanting to annex the North as part of a Muslim superstate.⁸⁶ And, if Senator Heffernan's comments to the *Bulletin* in October 2007 are any indication, there are those within the highest levels of government who remained firmly convinced heading into this century that Asia will inevitably invade due this time to water shortages brought about as a result of climate change. The external conditions may vary but the threat, it would seem, remains constant.

This thesis demonstrates that the North is under-analysed discrete space within national metanarratives. One of the key things I hope to have achieved with this study is to indicate that it is not possible to view the Australian outback as undifferentiated "bush" space, as heavily loaded and encoded as the bush is in national historiography, literature, theatre, visual art, film and politics. There is, moreover, an *oeuvre* of theatrical work depicting this differentiated Northern space. I would like theatre historians to think differently about the national canon as a result of this study: to

⁸⁵ See Chapter Three, in which Senator Heffernan's assertion that the North faces invasion by Asians running out of water as a result of climate change is discussed.

⁸⁶ See Camden Smith.

view seminal Australian texts such as *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *Rusty Bugles*, *Men Without Wives*, “The Drovers,” and *Brumby Innes* not just as plays that explore “the Bush Legend” or the gendered nature of Australia’s contested spatial relations, but as plays that are uniquely inflected because of their engagement with a symbolic and topographical Australian North. Of the seventy one plays Tompkins discusses or refers to in her national theatrical canon that she sees as best exemplifying our unsettling relationship with space, seventeen (24%) deal explicitly with landscapes or settings in the North. A further nine (12.5%) deal with refugees’ stories in which their “illegal” maritime entry into Australia has presumably taken place through the portal of the North, or islands off the Northern coast. The North – or again, at least, the *idea* of the North – serves a deeply psychological collective function for the nation. It becomes *über*-space, in a sense: the national scrim onto which we project our manifold anxieties and fantasies about race and landscape, and our emplacement of the self and its concomitant shadow side, the Other.

Naturally, it is not the only space onto which we project our personal and national fears and longings. But it is certainly one of the nation’s most distinctive and hitherto under-written and under-theorised spatial phenomena; and one of the most consistently and uniquely troped. This critical and theoretical omission is arguably a reflection of just how deeply psychological the nation’s relationship with the North is: there is a certain extent to which the general population must wish that these fears, fantasies and anxieties would all just go away. The North effectively becomes the fulcrum upon which the national relationship with race swings: it is the point of convergence. There is, in other words, a Northern frontier. It shifts and changes as “mainstream” Australia’s relationship with indigenous Australia and the cultures further to its own North shift and change.

Theatre constantly marks the manner in which this frontier is troped, historicised, mythologised and, most importantly, enacted. Aside from demonstrating the popular power of theatre to influence national opinion during the first half of the twentieth-century, when it was not competing with film and television by way of entertainment, this thesis also argues that theatre continues into the twenty-first century to respond with an immediacy that other entertainment media do not have the resources to do so when it comes to critical debate surrounding issues of race, space and place. As other theatre studies (such as Tompkins's and Gilbert and Lo's) have demonstrated, there is a plethora of plays that have responded, for example, to the human tragedy of asylum seeking in the first decade of the twenty-first century in Australia. There is very little film or television drama depicting the same subject. Australian theatre continues to place racially encoded bodies in Australian spaces on stage at a time when the casts of popular television programmes like *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* would have audiences both here and abroad believe that we are an almost exclusively Anglo-Celtic nation – though there is, of course, a strong argument for increased diversity amongst players on the nation's theatrical mainstage. As this study reveals, there is a wave of new work coming out of the North depicting that area of the country that metropolitan audiences never see. It consolidates the case for the importance of the Festival of Darwin, which is increasingly being regarded as one of this nation's "best kept secrets" in community cultural terms. Northern audiences do not get to see their spaces, characters or dramas – their streets, beaches, homes and haunts – depicted on television drama or cop shows, like audiences in other cities do.⁸⁷ Theatre is where this representation takes place. Theatre, in other words, matters

⁸⁷ Audiences in Tasmania, the ACT, South Australia and Perth might like to lay the same claim. Brisbane is beginning to be "mapped" in film representation, and North Queensland audiences do at least get to see their reef or rainforests depicted from time to time in international film collaborations

in a way to Northern audiences that “Australian” theatre mattered to metropolitan audiences during the New Wave era. The explosion in self-representation of “native” – and I use that term in the broadest sense – idiom, space, place and character is only just gaining momentum in the North. And theatre is not the only place in which enthrallment with the North is currently rife.

Crucially, in terms of arguing a case for the fascination with the North in current intellectual, historiographical and artistic endeavour and debate, the very nature of the Black-White frontier is being interrogated and disputed. In late 2007, two books challenging preconceived notions of the porousness of the Australian Frontier were published, and intellectual responses to them fall along predictable lines of political allegiance. For right-wing commentator Christopher Pearson, Philip Jones’s book about frontier contact, *Ochre and Dust*, and its central thesis of inter-racial co-operation and accommodation, provides evidence to repudiate the putative left-wing “conspiracy” of violence and massacre – the so-called “black armband” view of history led by Henry Reynolds. Pearson does concede, however that “Jones is at pains to point out, acknowledging the social fact of accommodation ‘is not to imply that the frontier was an even ground’(12),” or that violence did not occur. For Pearson, Jones’s text is part of a recovery mission in which the “gratitude at the arrival of Christianity” among certain Aboriginal women in Central Australia, for instance, is also acknowledged. In reviewing Robert Kenny’s frontier biography of nineteenth-century missionary Nathanael Pepper, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming*, Nicolas Rothwell also feels “a new conception of Australian frontier history” is dawning:

where substitute Pacific Islands are required. *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1996), *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Fool’s Gold* (2008) spring to mind as immediate examples.

He offers up not so much a continuous narrative as a set of mediations and reflections on the experiences of men and women in ambiguous times: figures who have left little more than archival references and memories and tombstones behind. (“Chimeras” 12)

It is this ambiguity residing in the micro-historical nature of Kenny’s survey that Rothwell applauds, though he is less inclined than Pearson to conclude that such revision of recent assumptions about frontier history therefore debunk the agenda of historians like Reynolds altogether. The focus for both of these studies homes in on Central Australian frontier history, but the principles hold true as the frontier oscillates outward or upward and back again throughout the twentieth-century period covered by this thesis.

Interestingly, it is Rothwell again who makes a similar claim in favour of micro-cosmic regionalism, this time not in relation to frontier history, but to the future of Australian literature. In a lecture delivered to James Cook University audiences in Townsville and Cairns in July and August 2007 (reprinted in the *Australian Literary Review*), Rothwell argues that “place-bound writings” emerging from the nation’s remote regions and which “thrive in remote conditions, away from influence and fashion” have been overlooked by national audiences and critics alike, and signal the way forward for Australian literature (“Continental” 10). “Such writings,” Rothwell concludes, “need to be re-examined, much as an exploration geologist sifts the evidence of deep structure unfolding before him with each new batch of cores and samples that emerge into the light” (10). One might argue that this is in part the achievement of the literature of twentieth-century writers like Xavier Herbert, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Randolph Stow, to name but a few.

My own study is in part such a recuperative venture on the part of regional theatre as it concatenates in communities across the Australian North. I would go on to argue that regional cultural specificity is in fact inherent in the very nature of

theatre. Articulating and recreating a spatially specific Australian drama is the point of theatre, and this articulation is what it does best in the absence of other representations of – in this case, the North – in other popular cultural fields like television and cinema, though the latter’s omission is currently being redressed. Playwrights like Prichard, Drake-Brockman and Esson, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, were as much the pioneers in a literary sense as the characters whose lives they were depicting in their theatre. They were amongst the first to “open up” the North in all its specific complexity in their realist dramatic *milieu*. Contemporary performance writers depicting the North in the 1990s like William Yang, Suzanne Spinner, Janis Balodis and Jimmy Chi follow in their footsteps and provide us with a sense of the North’s culture, geography, politics and psychology in a contemporary context. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, women playwrights living and working in the North today like Kathryn Ash, Mary Ann Butler and Gail Evans, or theatre devisers like Nicky Fearn and Tania Lieman, may well be this century’s female “bush realists” whose tough gritty language and uncompromising engagement with gender and violence in Northern landscapes begs for national exposure, credit and analysis. This body of work has not been studied or acknowledged as a coherent Northern – or women’s – *oeuvre*, and I hope that this study opens up fresh investigations into their important work that sits alongside such parallel academic projects as those that have taken place by Holledge, Tompkins, Gilbert and Lo into women’s intercultural performance.

Aside from being under-acknowledged as specialised space in cultural theory and national historiography, and despite its long history of re-creation on the national stage, the North remains under-acknowledged in theatre studies. Yet many of our key – indeed our seminal – theatrical texts engage with a symbolic and manifest North:

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, *Rusty Bugles*, *Men Without Wives*, *Brumby Innes*, “The Drovers,” and via literary adaptation, *Capricornia* are all seminal texts in the national canon. Currently there is strong evidence of recurrent interest in the North. Four recent winners of the Patrick White Playwrights’ Award – the nation’s pre-eminent source for excavation, identification and acknowledgement of new writing for the stage – deal either implicitly or explicitly with the North: Reg Cribb’s *Last Cab to Darwin* (2003),⁸⁸ David Milroy’s *Windmill Baby* (2005), Stephen Carleton’s *Constance Drinkwater and the Final Days of Somerset* (2006) and Wesley Enoch’s *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie’s Table* (2007)⁸⁹ all have settings or projected imaginings of spaces North of the Brisbane Line.

There is thus exciting evidence of a renewed national preoccupation with the North and its complex symbolic associations and meanings, and the trend is not necessarily restricted to theatre. Theatre’s immediacy and currency compared with film and television (and their respective funding/production bureaucracies) is what makes it such an apt barometer of thematic trends in national drama. *Ten Canoes* (2006), *Japanese Story* (2003), *Yolngu Boy* (2001) and *Lucky Miles* (2007) all deal with themes of intercultural contact (or in the case of *Ten Canoes*, pre-contact indigenous culture) in the Australian North. Baz Luhrman’s latest film epic will be set in Darwin during the World War Two bombing, and will feature Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman in a pastoral romance.⁹⁰ Of especial interest to this study is the fact that – at the time of writing – the project has been given the working title of “Australia.” The North, in other words, in Luhrman’s configuration becomes

⁸⁸ Cribb drew that year’s Award with fellow Western Australian Ian Wilding and his play *Even Amongst Dogs*.

⁸⁹ Wesley Enoch’s play is set on an island off the Queensland coast – Stradbroke Island, near Brisbane which, while not “North enough” for this thesis arguably constitutes a symbolic North, or a North of the imagination for Southern audiences. The text was premiered in a 2007 production with Griffin Theatre Company in Sydney.

⁹⁰ This film is *literally* pastoral – it will be set partly on a pastoral lease.

metonymic for the entire nation; and I thus return to my original contention that to tell the story of the North is to tell the story of the nation.

Aside from uncovering a theatrical *oeuvre* that pertains specifically to an Australian North, and creating a critical framework around it that borrows from current spatial inquiry within the area of cultural studies, this thesis has a concomitant application to other fields of study: to cinema studies (as the above examples may indicate), literature, dance, anthropology and frontier studies, visual art and other hybrid forms of performance praxis. It is my intention that the critical findings in this thesis be transportable to other genres. The principles remain the same. Intercultural spatial politics can be equally at play in the cross-cultural work that Tracks Dance Theatre in the Northern Territory, say, have engaged in for the past fifteen years. And certainly, Australian literature's infatuation and connection with the North as a symbolic realm is every bit as rich and tenacious as Australian theatre's relationship with the region, if Rothwell's argument in favour of regional recuperation in the field of literary writing holds true.

I hope also that this thesis opens up other forms of investigation into trends taking place within contemporary Australian theatre praxis. As mentioned in the conclusion to the final chapter, there has been a spate of plays emanating from the North over the past five years that deal with gothic tropes in a specifically Northern landscape. It may be that there is a revival of interest in this genre by way of reinvestigating themes of the country's haunted relationship with (again) race and place, though not all of these texts necessarily deal with race.

There is, however, no reason that investigations of the North and the theatre taking place within it should be reduced solely to racial thematics. An exciting body

of work emanating from Darwin and Cairns since 2000 has a distinctly urban and urbane temperament that has been shamefully neglected by national theatre reviewing. Broome's landmark indigenous and multiracial theatre texts have received national attention because they have toured nationally. Only *RealTime* makes the effort to keep a critical eye on the work being produced by Darwin Theatre Company, Business Unusual, Knock-em-Down Theatre and Tracks Dance Theatre in Darwin, or Just Us Theatre Company in Cairns (JUTE). The national newspaper the *Australian* will occasionally send a reviewer to Darwin during Festival time to provide some kind of summary round-up of events, which ultimately means no individual show receives the attention it deserves. And again, race inevitably becomes the focus of interest in these round-ups. "White" projects in the North are of little apparent interest to Southern critics. JUTE has received the *Australian's* attention when they have co-produced in or toured to Brisbane. Martin Buzacott's review of *Impossible Dream* is a rare exception, though as I argued in the previous chapter, it was Cairns itself (and the theatre audience) that was reviewed on that occasion, indicating perhaps just how exotic a creature a theatre review in the national press still remains.

There is a rich recent history of excellent, complex original performance work emanating from the North – from West to East – as the final chapter of this thesis demonstrates, and this chapter's scope is by no means conclusive or comprehensive. There is much work to be done beyond the scope of this thesis, and a rich tradition of other kinds of plays and performances (much of it Australia Council funded) emanating from the region that has yet to be embraced by the academy. These comprise queer performance in the North, or Darwin's rich – and hugely popular – history of political revue and cabaret, or women and the North, or community and

site-based performance praxis. There is too the North's place within the present (national) regional theatre push and issues of region and language.

I trust this thesis goes some way to sparking an interest in this contemporary work, as much as it does in articulating a Northern theatrical *oeuvre* over the past one hundred years. The North will continue to be the chimerical beast that stalks the nation's psyche, quietly haunting our grand narratives for years to come, even as our demographers and futurists hint that the North will be the answer to, and dare one say, the focus of, a great number of the nation's spatial woes as Australia heads into a rapidly changing twenty-first century. The Northern frontier looks set to take on increasing national – and international – import as climate change and international security concerns signal this will be a century of massive population resettlement and (to borrow one final time from Tompkins) *unsettlement*. In this vision of the future, one can only see the Northern frontier taking on heightened focus for a fresh articulation of national phobias and tensions. It will, perhaps, be a period in which the North, and its band of story tellers and myth-makers, finally takes centre stage.

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