

## What is Australian Gothic Theatre? Three playwrights enter the conversation

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### Abstract

There has been a popular resurgence of the Gothic sensibility in Australian drama in recent years, yet the term Australian Gothic is difficult to define in contemporary Australian performance and playwriting. From the perspective of three playwrights writing in the field, this paper analyses the gothic, suggesting that playwrights utilise the form as a way of opening up discourse about historical truths and about our contemporary relationship to the past, to each other and the land we supposedly share.

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### Introduction

The recent emergence of the Gothic style in Australian drama suggests that contemporary playwrights are embracing elements of European and Southern American Gothic traditions and adapting them to their immediate cultural context. Scholars such as Gelder (2007) and Farnell (2014) note that the Gothic has experienced a critical resurgence in many facets of contemporary culture and as such has established itself as a distinct 'area of academic research' (Farnell, 2014, p. 2).

This emergence has been accompanied by the addition of an exploration of Australian Gothic within secondary drama syllabus documents, including the Queensland Senior Drama Syllabus (2013). In addition, within university programs and other contemporary performance contexts, gothic plays are gaining a stronger presence. Two examples are performances at the Malthouse Theatre and Brisbane Festival of *King Lear - The Shadow King* (2014) and an Australian tour of the re-imagined Grimms' fairy-tale *Hoods* (2007) by Angela Betzien. In addition, an increasing amount of new Australian work is being identified as belonging to the gothic genre including: *The Dark Room* (2011) by Angela Betzien, *The Gate Crasher* (2010) by Stephen Carleton, and *Oedipus Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (2014) by Dan Evans. Other playwrights whose work has been identified as Australian Gothic include Hilary Bell, Andrew

Bovell, Mary Rachel Brown, Matt Cameron, Reg Cribb, Tom Holloway, Ross Mueller, Norman Price, Christios Tsiolkas and Alana Valentine.

In spite of this, for many who work in schools, universities and indeed as artists and scholars in contemporary Australia, there is limited understanding of what is meant by the term Australian Gothic. In response to this situation, this paper draws on scholarship from a range of relevant fields to offer a discussion that outlines key features of this genre. To support this discussion, the article makes use of material offered within a one-day conference on Australian Gothic held at Griffith University, specifically a panel presentation that involved two my playwright peers - Shaun Charles and Stephen Carleton<sup>9</sup>, and myself. Within this presentation a rich conversation was generated, with each of us offering our views about the genre and the social and artistic forces we each saw as fuelling the contemporary fascination with it.

We were chosen to participate in this panel discussion based on the fact that recent published works by each of us have been identified as “being gothic”. They include: *Constance Drinkwater and the Final Days of Somerset* (Carleton, 2006); *The White Earth* (Charles & McGahan, 2009); *Post Office Rose* (Hassall, 2008); and *Salvation* (Hassall, 2013). As such, the material that follows offers a unique insight into Australian Gothic within contemporary Australian playwriting. The paper begins by exploring attempts to define this genre, before moving on to offer a series of lenses through which to understand it.

### What is Australian Gothic?

Farnell (2014) notes that the gothic genre, though well established in many fields of scholarship, is a particularly contested term and suggests that there is much debate over precisely to what the term ‘gothic’ refers (p.1). While it is difficult to provide a singular definition, investigation of place and its effect on the Australian psyche are clearly central. Equally important is the idea that while Australian Gothic plays often explore the dictates of history, they also consider the volatile flux of present and future environmental and political contexts and events and how these events impact on contemporary life.

It could be argued then, that what is specific to this literary and dramatic form is how playwrights explore the ‘intersecting concerns of colonial history and contemporary trauma’ by investigating themes of family, place, culture and landscape to ‘extend the spatio-temporality of the present back into a colonial past’ (Cummins, 2014, p.258). It may therefore be surmised that the Australian space poses a ‘nervous duality’ (Baldacchino, 2005, p. 248) as it is a geo-mythic place that resonates the past and present while uncovering muted histories within contemporary contested events (Cummins, 2014, p. 260). Significant to an analysis of gothic drama scholarship then is the notion that Australian Gothic teases out tensions that pose alternatives to previous twentieth century definitions of Australian identity and relationship to place.

For this reason, an identifying feature of the Australian Gothic genre is that it attempts to voice that which has been left unsaid from socio-political and national perspectives. Blatantly contesting the established national sensibility that asserts behaviours of heroism associated with the ‘Bush or the Outback’ mythic mentality, Australian Gothic can be said to align with Foucault’s (1986) theories on heterotopic spaces wherein colonies such as Australia are formed as sites where ‘deviant or marginalised experiences can be contained’ (p. 24).

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Stephen Carleton’s excellent paper *Australian Gothic and the Northern Turn* published in 2012 extends the discussion points he makes here in conversation with Charles and Hassall. The paper discusses the gothic genre in historical contexts and also analyses aspects of Australian literary and cinematic traditions to address Gothic theatre from the Northern geographic perspective.

Within our dialogue, we discuss these aspects of the genre, with each of us having a different relationship to them. We agree however that Australian Gothic drama has been used as a way of addressing controversial and contested contemporary national issues. Shaun Charles begins the conversation:

- CHARLES: Australian Gothic is not just a genre but a *state of being*...it has a fundamental psychological connection to the places where we live and consequently this somewhat fraught connection impacts on the stories we tell.
- CARLETON: Why theatre? Why is theatre the most popular medium for expressing the Gothic at present?
- CHARLES: I think theatre has been expressing the gothic in this country long before Australian Gothic was acknowledged as a popular contemporary genre or style. Look at Stewart's isolating gothic landscape in *Ned Kelly* (1942)...and the strange atmospheres explored in the collective works of Patrick White.
- CARLETON: The recent theatrical thrust *is* though regionally-specific. It has been initiated from Queensland and The Northern Territory and I describe it as 'Northern Gothic Theatre'. Emerging over the last 10 years it's a unique sub-genre. The two States have produced more Gothic plays on their stages than the rest of the Nation combined.
- HASSALL: These spaces can be likened to the *Wild West* so to speak. Anything goes. Characters behave in unexpected ways – especially women.
- CARLETON: Figuratively it's frontier territory and the place where the Nations' collective repressions are brought to the forefront of contemporary political culture to expose the Nation's infamies, to explore the Nation's ghosts.

This discussion reveals that defining exactly how traditional Gothic elements are projected onto a contemporary Australian cultural landscape and what these elements *actually are* can be difficult. Others also discuss these challenges of definition in the field. For example, Putner and Byron (2004, p.viii), state that the gothic genre is 'notoriously difficult to define', while Stevens (2010) claims that it would be 'contrary to the spirit of the gothic to attempt to pin it down too absolutely' (p.5). It is also very difficult to separate Australian Gothic as a concept from conflicting cultural and environmental contexts of landscape and from post-colonial discourses that include race, class, gender and place (Hassall, 2012, p.101). Hage (2003) suggests that a racio-gothic sensibility emerged with criticism of the Howard government. Hage (2003, p.4) posits that Prime Minister Howard 'took a previously existing yet marginalised sub-culture of white paranoia and moved it to the centre of Australian culture'. If indeed, as scholars and theatre makers we respond to these suggestions and similar cultural criticism, Gothic theatre can be said to bear witness to contemporary cultures' attempt at coming to terms with misdeeds and the violence of the past.

In our discussion we move on to discuss these ideas, identifying how the brutality of Australian history is evoked in this genre:

- CHARLES: It's about [Europeans] in conflict with an alienating and isolating landscape.
- CARLETON: Yes and that sense of alienation becomes haunting when coupled with the country's brutal history – convict transportation - European invasion.
- HASSALL: It's about confronting the racial terrorism that resulted in Indigenous genocide. Underpinning all of the themes we explore are the spirits of the nation's unresolved racial anxieties flickering through a landscape that we claimed as our own.

In this way, Australian Gothic, it could be argued, utilises history and historical perspectives to expose the 'coloniser's struggle with his own limitations as he confronts his

own demise'. Here, according to Kantor (2007, p.7), 'ghosts and the unknowable spectres of our own beautiful yet blood-soaked landscape are evoked in the haunting atmospheric gothic worlds depicted.

## Beginnings

The first wave of British colonisation (1780s-1830s) coincided with the boom in Gothic literature and drama taking place in England and Western Europe and consequently Australian settlement may be viewed through a Gothic lens. Turcotte's early scholarship (1998) and the concepts he identifies in his seminal paper *Australian Gothic* are particularly significant in supporting our understanding of this idea.

Turcotte (2007) claims that the 'Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain...for all intents and purposes, Gothic *par excellence*, the dungeon of the world' (p. 12). In exploring historic gothic associations, Carleton (2012) agrees with Turcotte (1998, 2007) and goes on to claim that Australia was an abstract space that had Europe's terrors and fantasies projected onto its landscape centuries before white settlement. Once convict transportation began, this site became real, living up to the European imagination, resisting all known systems of European reason and or logic. The following dialogue includes some rich discussion around these ideas:

- CARLETON: The first generations moving here felt *estranged* from the land. The hostile indigenous population needed to be civilised or erased. Nothing made sense – the animals, plants, weather, seasons or climate.
- HASSALL: The 'grotesque carnival' of convict settlement, the abject deprivation and violence associated with colonisation and subsequent entrenched Indigenous genocide and disadvantage are signifiers of our cultural heritage.
- CHARLES: Read the *Fatal Shore* (1987) by Robert Hughes. It gives a brutal account of Australia's transition from penal colony to free society. It's based on factual accounts and testimonies yet reads like a gothic horror novel – murder, cannibalism, sodomy, rape. *That* is our history.
- HASSALL: As playwrights we attempt to come to terms with that violence - the brutality of our convict and racial history. As Stephen [Carleton] so beautifully states, 'Our history haunts us and the land we live upon. There's a continuing connection with the nation's ghosts...that has managed to survive 220 years of concerted white erasure (Carleton, 2006, p. 107).

This point in the discussion demonstrates how all three of us agree that the violence that is embedded in our nation's historical psyche is significant to the plays we write, for our colonial heritage was birthed in the contested space of a penal colony. Set in a brutal landscape ruled by rum, sodomy and the lash and colonised with no consideration for the traditional landowners, pain and punishment were synonymous with the white experiences of transportation and colonisation.

Hodge and Mishra (1991) discuss the contradictory nature of punishment and colonisation. Transportation, they suggest, was a public spectacle closely aligned with public execution – the transformation of the death sentence into a punishing alien space. The transformation was seen as lenient - transportation rather than hanging. Atrocities experienced by convicts and later by colonisers fed into the 'contradictory myth of convictism (heroes and criminal scum) that was based on the radical premise that State justice can not only be excessive but also unjust and that criminality can be a social construction on behalf of a venal ruling class' (Hodge and Mishra, 1991, pp. 118–120).

The double system of values, with underlying sub-textual elements of brutality, hostility and opposition has been influential on the Australian Gothic receptivity and Carleton notes that the European Gothic sensibility affected Antipodean writers' imaginative and creative responses to 'place'. Carleton (2012), Cummins (2014), Davidson (1989) and Turcotte (1998, 2007) agree that a lengthy period of Australian cultural life stretching from the convict past to the near-present impacts significantly on our gothic sensibilities as writers, and they all nominate Tasmania as the crucible for the nation's unsettled relationships.

The gothic sensibilities generated by Tasmania's convict history and the psychological impact of the seething melting pot of brutalities associated with place and behaviour are discussed below:

CARLETON: Port Arthur is perhaps Australia's most foremost example of Gothic architecture and atmosphere. Imagine approaching those ominous penal structures squatting in the landscape. What a mutation of the European Gothic!

HASSALL: It seems inevitable it mutated into the site for Australia's most horrific massacre in recent times when you consider its history.

Carleton further discusses how terror flourishes in alienating and estranging spaces such as these.

CARLETON: Themes of fear driven from both internal and external sources – flourish in this space - a space that dictated confinement not only in prison cells but on the island colony itself. There was no escape from the screaming wildlife. Species of insects could essentially kill. Brutal sex acts were commonplace in an atmosphere where 'natural' desire was corrupted by the absence of women.

Cummins (2014) believes that gothic sensibility is reflected through atmospheric manifestations, and if this is the case, then the Port Arthur site echoes with overlapping atmospheres of previous convict and contemporary criminal violence. Atmosphere, Cummins (2014) explains, is an evocative element in gothic modes, as it 'works to create a link between the past and the contemporary manifestations of history' (p. 259). If as writers we reflect on the terrifying atmospheric elements emanating from Port Arthur as a historic and contemporary gothic site, we begin to imagine the distance between past and present as nullified. The historical mutation from penal colony to massacre site reverberates strongly within the Australian gothic psyche<sup>10</sup>. Appealing to the Gothic sensibility this sense of historical mutation reveals ideological and psychological statements about our contemporary relationship to place, country and national landscape.

The landscape, with its many phenomena 'unnameable in the English language' impacted on colonial experiences and coupled with the experience of transportation 'the beginnings of white settlement in Australia [were seen as] brutal and dismal' (Goodwin, 1987, p. 37). Australia with its various penal settlements was an uncivilised 'little Britain'. Time and distance from the Mother country distorted and corrupted the parent culture to produce a facsimile in which the imposed version of Englishness was a warped (Gothic) copy of the original (Carleton, 2012, p.54). The conversion of transportation into colonisation transplanted social organisations throughout the heart of the natural Australian landscape.

Such themes give rise to 'white protagonists who are uprooted and transplanted, who are estranged and terrified' and 'almost always victimised by a powerful oppressor; their convict heritage or the indigenous population' (Turcotte, 2007, p.355). The white protagonists

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<sup>10</sup> The site is the setting of Tom Holloway's Gothic play *Beyond the Neck*.

enact their condition in what is understood as an exacerbated psychological landscape. Within the landscape, tensions exist between settlement and *un-settlement*. Geography, place and environment generate what is understood as the atmospheric gothic landscape that Gillis (2004) identifies as representing multiple conflicting themes including; fragmentation and vulnerability and as a place wherein we quarantine pestilence and exile the subversive (p.3).

### Gothic Landscapes and Atmospheres

As noted in the discussion above, Australian Gothic theatre identifies or investigates the power, the pull of the landscape – the actual, the imagined and the aesthetic. Landscape is therefore a principle motif that challenges the traditional obsessive mythic investment that has thematically defined Australian identity e.g. the noble cane-cutter, the stockman with his eyes firmly fixed on the horizon, the sun-bronzed Anzac or Life Saver. The Gothic landscape is sensory – it exposes the feelings associated with seething undercurrents of brutality and beauty and exerts a strange geographic [or sceneographic] pervasiveness that atmospherically reinforces a sense of dis-ease, un-settlement or estrangement.

In the following extract from our discussion, we respond to ideas of re-imagining and representing sensorial landscape in the genre:

HASSALL: Gothic plays may be read in terms of a broader frame of cultural analysis in their thematic exploration of *representations of landscape* - they challenge popular historical concepts of white Australian belonging and popular cultural identity.

CHARLES: Our landscapes re-imagine time – past, present and future. We evoke strong visual images, metaphors and symbols that are active and interact with the characters on some psychological level.

However landscape in gothic drama may also reference culture. Culture or ‘Culturescape’ (Fuchs & Chaudhuri, 2002) is identified by all or some of the geography, place, architecture, environment and social groupings contained within the theatrical world.

In my body of work and certainly in Charles’s *The White Earth* and Carleton’s *Constance Drinkwater and the final days of Somerset*, white displacement in the landscape is overtly heightened and presented as a dominant theme through pervasive and threatening atmospheric representations of ‘landscape’. The geographic environment enacts a specific interactive role within the socio-cultural milieu. Actual geography, place, environment and architecture are attributed with symbolic functions of status and power and therefore ‘landscape’ – actual or interpreted - may be considered as a protagonist. It exacerbates tension and drives action. From this position Australian Gothic playwriting and scholarship can explore psychological experiences of isolation in boundless space, depict distance as a pervasive and often brutal presence, investigate how geographical environment may impact directly on authentic social and cultural behaviour, suggest that culturescape impacts on experiences of identity in history, time and space and fuels tensions concerning ownership of land, belonging to land and cultural identity.

In this way, the creative and theoretical frameworks in our works investigate not just physical or geographical frontiers, but ‘those grey areas between cultural certainties and preconceptions about space and history’ (Carleton, 2006, p.3). Characters such as Constance in *Constance Drinkwater and the final days of Somerset* (Carleton, 2006), William in *The White Earth* (Charles & McGahan, 2009) and Charlie in *Post Office Rose* (Hassall, 2006) are depicted as moving through atmospheric landscapes wherein a sense of *unbelonging* (Collingwood-Whittick, 2007) is evoked through feelings of displacement and confusion.



During our discussion then, we attempt to analyse the atmospheric contexts of landscape in our work:

CHARLES: The plays can make little attempt to represent landscape from an empirical reality. For example Linda explores dominant characteristics *of and in* landscape through sub-textual aesthetics. She symbolically and metaphorically layers a landscape psychology within the more functional geographic representation.

HASSALL: I write in worlds that enact a 'landscape imaginary' – the wasteland in 'A Contemporary Hymn' (2011), the remains of a service station in 'Salvation Roses' (2012), and The Post Office Hotel in 'Post Office Rose' (2006). Shaun (Charles) does it also - Kuran Station in 'The White Earth' (Charles & McGahan, 2009), while The Government Resident's House in 'Constance Drinkwater and the final days of Somerset' (Carleton, 2006) and Three Ways in 'Surviving Jonah Salt' (Ash, Carleton, Evans & Harris, 2004) are other examples. Place, architecture and environment become something other – symbols of atmospheric worlds which exert a distinctive and powerful influence over the characters – compelling them to behave in certain uncharacteristic or unexpected ways.

This discussion suggests then that the gothic land/culturescape reimagines portions of natural reality as pervading atmosphere wherein time and place are malleable. The sceneographic landscapes are complex – The Post Office Hotel, Kuran Station, Somerset House – are places, but are also equally dominant symbols *and* atmospheric worlds that drive and enact tension. In 'Post Office Rose' for example, the public bar has a pervasive atmosphere that blends the smells and screams of dying pigs from the adjacent abattoir with the lyrical poetry of Patsy Cline ballads. Here place and environment are rendered both familiar and unfamiliar – it is a place where youthful dreams were dreamt and enacted but it is also the present environment where surreal nightmarish circumstances are unfolding. Here time is manipulated by the ghost of Patsy Cline, the past and present overlap, and a story of betrayal, revenge and butchery is enacted in time and out of time, in place and out of place simultaneously. Characters feel displaced and dispossessed of a time they are desperately trying to recapture.

These juxtaposing dramatic elements emphasise what Freud (1919) discusses as the 'uncanny' experience. The uncanny, when applied to the dramatic form of Australian Gothic, refutes contested theories of Australia as a settler nation by implying that a condition of *unsettledness* folds into the colonial experience. Constance's actions, for example, are directly linked to the impact the landscape has on her mental stability, its pervasive atmosphere while the history of place disrupts her psychological equilibrium. Due to the exacerbated nature of the environment, geography and circumstance, atmospheres are heightened and character behaviour is often extreme. The characters' experiences of alienation are expressed through the stripping away of social and/or cultural conventions as the characters' authority over their own lives is disrupted by intensified circumstances in the land/culturescape experience.

White displacement is therefore a common thematic thread that weaves the plays into a confronting genre of work. Landscape *displaces* or *dislocates*, becoming theatrically active and symbolically or metaphorically antagonistic. Characters often believe it responsible for their exacerbated circumstances. They struggle against their sense of displacement within the landscape in patterns of behaviour that are unusual. Gothic playwrights dislocate human-geographic relationships from intellectual social and politically correct constructs of behaviour to question notions of white inheritance of landscape. As Cavallaro (2002) claims, historically Gothicism has been associated with tastelessness and tastelessness, may

traditionally be seen in negative ways from social and aesthetic positions. Charles and I discuss this below:

HASSALL: The blood spilt on the bar room floor in *Post Office Rose* (2008) or into the red desert dirt in *Salvation* (2013) may be considered as overtly violent and even tasteless but I prefer to think of in these circumstances as *not usual* – strange.

CHARLES: It's interesting because I believe it is these elements which fuel Gothic representations in Australiana playwriting. Gothic deals with violence, characters exert violence over each other and the landscapes exert violence over the characters.

HASSALL: Lucashenko<sup>11</sup> states, 'we know that the blood has stained the wattle, Henry [Lawson]<sup>12</sup>, and the bleeding hasn't stopped yet' and collectively it may be suggested that the Australian Gothic dramas are drawing attention to the sources of the wound.

In addition, the characters' in Gothic plays often have an obsessive attachment to place that is explored through shifting realities. In *The White Earth* (2009), Charles and McGahan utilise Gothic architecture as a means of housing the dark dreams and desires of a white Nation as 'the monsters, ghosts and madmen reign' (McGahan, 2009, p.5). Kuran House is a colonial symbol, linked to the historical and contested ownership of 'place'. Hauntingly echoing white invasion, Kuran House is described as 'a great broken shipwreck, thrown up on the rocks from the dry ocean of the plains below' (p. 12), an image that suggests the fragility of Euro-centric constructs of colonisation and a symbol that heightens themes of white displacement. Further John McIvor's maniacal obsession with the legacy of Kuran House suggests 'that colonisation is not an historical event but an ongoing process' (Maddison, 2011, p. 49). The *spirits* of history, time, circumstance, place and people are as tangible as the flesh and blood characters.

Prior to the emergence of Australian Gothic, our dramatic culture offered rare opportunities to investigate the impact of history on the *psyche* of the Australian character, especially from an alternative gendered perspective<sup>13</sup>. The gothic emergence extends the struggle identified by McCallum (2009) from a sophisticated psychological perspective, questioning the Nation's self-image through theatrical lenses wherein landscape is etched with the convict/colonial stain and themes of racial deprivation, inherent violence and land theft are vehemently investigated within alienating geo-imaginary (Arnold 2006; Betzien 2011; Carleton 2004, 2006, 2012; Charles & McGahan 2009; Duncan 2003; Gelder 2007; Hassall 2008, 2012, 2013; and Turcotte, 2007). The repressed history of colonisation is catapulted into the contemporary landscape.

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<sup>11</sup>Lucashenko's scholarship includes discussion on environmental and land rights issues and examines the conflicts between historical Indigenous land practices and white use of the land as a commodity.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Lawson (1867-1922) is one of the best known Australian poets and fiction writers of the early twentieth century. Some of his poems such as *Ballad of the Drover* and *A Drovers Wife* have become anthems in Australian literary and cultural history.

<sup>13</sup> Farnell (2014) claims that the gothic revival has developed significantly in recent decades beginning with the feminist revisionism of the 1970s (p. 1). In Aus. drama we can see the form evolving with the works of Australian female playwrights Johanna Murray Smith (2000, *Rapture*), Hilary Bell (1997, *Wolf Lullaby*), Beatrix Christians (1994, *Blue Murder*).



## Gothic in the Contemporary Landscape

Farnell (2014) notes that ‘critics suggest that the gothic returns at moments of particular cultural crisis’ and that the form therefore explores themes that are ‘telling us about more than simply ourselves and the world we live in’ (p. 3). The gothic mode, Farnell (2014) continues, is continually evolving, ‘moving beyond representational forms and into the realms of cultural practice’ (p.3). For example, rather than attempting to define a collective national identity that is uniquely popular, Australian Gothic playwrights offer a sophisticated theatricality that recognises the horrors that contemporary life can still provide. Consequently gothic playwrights explore the tension between landscape and culturescape, myth and history, character and legend and white settlement and experiences of *unsettlement* - to expose the seething underbelly of the contemporary Australian psyche (Hassall, 2012).

In terms of this idea, Charles states that he first began flirting with the Gothic style in the early drafts of *Last Drinks* (2007), an adaptation of an Andrew McGahan’s (2000) novel of the same name. The novel explores police corruption as exposed by the Fitzgerald Inquiry, in an *almost* non-fictional retelling of Queensland’s political underbelly during the ‘reign’ of Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen.<sup>14</sup> The story, as commensurate with the Gothic style, manipulates time while it also flips back and forth between a whodunit and a history lesson. At the time of writing, Charles was struggling with the structure of the play and believed that trying to duplicate the original novel’s structure was not suitable for theatrical rendition. He thought about the nature of the characters he was adapting and considered exploring the American Southern Gothic form in an Australian context as he explains in the following statement:

CHARLES: I concluded that a theatrical adaptation would work very well in a modern Gothic form, modelled on Anne Rice’s *Interview with a Vampire* (1976). We can draw strong parallels between Rice’s and McGahan’s atmospheric worlds. In *Last Drinks* (2006), the novel, there is a particular environment that illustrates the similarities between Rice’s decaying New Orleans architecture and Brisbane suburbia. The scene is set in a decaying, vine covered house in Highgate Hill, Brisbane. Buried within the house, a dying, vampiric-like Jeremy is encamped in the ruins.

This description reveals that in his adaptation, Charles links McGahan’s depiction of the iconic Queenslander to the Gothic architecture entombing Rice’s Vampire Lestat and suggests that Australian Gothic incorporates ‘place’ as being strongly linked with the sense of identity and self. Like the thirsting Lestat, the cancerous deterioration of Jeremy’s life is symbolised through his inability to leave the crumbling ruins of the decaying house. There is an inexplicable attachment and psychological connection to place and environment which Charles connects to the gothic identity:

HASSALL: The gothic perspective investigates place as encompassing an internal psychology and an external aesthetic identity. Both concepts impact on the state of being of the character.

In *The White Earth*, co-written by Charles and McGahan (2009), the co-dependent bond between place and identity is explored more fully, this time through the character of John McIvor whose psychological deterioration and moral corruption is inexplicably linked to the gothic atmosphere that embraces a rural property called Kuran Station. McIvor macabrely intones how the Station *suffered* (Charles and McGahan, 2009, p. 41) without him and consequently the land lays claim to him and he is physically and psychologically unable to leave.

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<sup>14</sup> Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen was a right wing conservative politician who was the longest serving Premier of Queensland (1968-87). His leadership in the later years was revealed to be institutionally corrupt as exposed by The Fitzgerald Inquiry.

Also within *The White Earth*, dread and racial terror are inverted and experienced from a white perspective. John McIvor is a slave to his racial perceptions. This perception is inexorably linked to his tenuous ownership of Kuran Station - symbolic of a white Australian Nation - and his fear of losing it to the original landowners. The play therefore argues a broader political statement about perception of white inheritance of landscape and Native Title. However, unlike the monstrous embodiments explored in the popular and contemporary American Southern Gothic, Australian Gothic is secular; its ghosts and demons are human. In addition, within Australian Gothic plays, 'monstrous' thematic explorations are often represented from a gendered perspective.

According to Miles (1994, p.131), 'Gender is an unwritten law of the traditional gothic genre', wherein female representation has a tendency to 'oscillate around issues of victimisation, responsibility and autonomy' or alternatively, to focus on the lives of women who have been 'subject to patriarchal conditioning' (Miles, 1994). Commonly in Australian Gothic, the characters undergo physical and psychological trauma linked to post-colonial conflicts with Australian history. Gothic narratives occur as postcolonial nations 'reanimate the traumas of their colonial pasts' (Gelder, 2007 in Mulvey-Roberts, 2009, p. 306), with the female characters being positioned in relation to these traumas. For example, Carleton's anti-heroine Constance Drinkwater (2006) is a character aligned with the commonly held colonial belief that Australian women were in monstrous moral and physical danger if they attempted to settle in the more tropical parts of the continent. Delicate sensibilities would degenerate, nervous instability would ensue and the discerning intellect would be prone to unspeakable decay (Walker, 1999). By contrast, *Post Office Rose* (2008) is acknowledged for female representations that reject stereotypes, with the play being labelled as gothic due to the controversial behaviours of the women characters that work against these more established genre characteristics. In discussing this apparent contradiction we note:

HASSALL: I don't write to a genre. I was called a Gothic playwright by a critic who reviewed a production of *Post Office Rose* (2006) directed by Shaun Charles<sup>15</sup>. The critic described the play as a 'truly dark tale of gothic proportions - gripping, visceral, shocking and twisted. A disturbing play full of disturbing themes that will haunt you long after you've left the theatre' (Munroe-Wallace, 2008, ABC Radio review). However, I believe it generated such a strong reaction because it is female-centric. It's brutal and the women are 'rough as guts'. It unashamedly depicts the women as products of their environment. Their extreme behaviour is justified within their particular socio-cultural landscape. Explosive violence is directed at each other. Knives are pulled. A woman is disembowelled. This isn't really common on Australian stages.

CHARLES: Linda's work is unique to the genre. It's gritty, tough, regional. She dissects notions of femininity against stark settler landscapes. It's beyond feminist.

HASSALL: My characters acknowledge their dissatisfaction with gendered roles yet they do not contest them in ordinary ways. I believe this is what aligns them to an atypical Australian sensibility. I explore white female characters in almost anti-[traditional] gothic representations. I believe certain types of Australian female characters have been under-written, under-analysed and under-theorised in a national canon that historically doesn't address certain socio-environmental conditions from which unusual or *not-usual* female behaviours may naturally emerge.

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<sup>15</sup>. Shaun Charles directed productions of *Post Office Rose* at the Sue Benner Theatre, Metro Arts and at La Boite Roundhouse Theatre, Brisbane.

Perhaps in response to such contradictions and shifts in the genre, Brabon and Genz (2007) suggest that 'a new critical category termed "post-feminist" Gothic may address the corresponding relationship between and intersections of gothic and feminism' (p. 5).

As our discussion moves on, I take up this idea, but also insist once again upon the importance of making links to landscape:

HASSALL: In my work in particular the intersections between Gothic, feminism, the Australian landscape and the relationship with place, identity, race, geography, culture and sexuality are exacerbated. The plays investigate the distinctions between traditional and contemporary gendered character representations and explore characters that are embedded in psychological, cultural and physical landscapes. To these women, violence is normal.

CHARLES: Linda's characters battle with the 'ghosts' of their past in spaces that are recognised as predominantly male settings e.g. the public bar in *Post Office Rose* (2008), an isolated outback service station in *Salvation Roses* (2012).

HASSALL: I deliberately reject the nostalgic investment in or the domestic stereotyping of female identity that has previously been definitional in Australian dramatic culture – I am referring to the twentieth century representation of female characters in this country.

Carleton (2012, p.60) describes contemporary settings, such as those used within my plays, as spatial reinventions of the traditional European Gothic castle or manor house (p. 60). The physical place in the contemporary Gothic world represents an evocative cultural relationship to space and geography that impacts on and determines to some extent character psychology and behaviour and as I note below:

HASSALL: My female characters are written as *aggressors* or *co-aggressors* and equal to their male counterparts in terms of moral stature, value judgements, spiritual malaise, strength, will and voice. Both genders find themselves in untenable positions as the hierarchal role is nominated as belonging to the landscape and their exacerbated violent behaviour is written as being inherent to class, place and environment.

Representation, as Ben-Messahel (2006) claims, is a discursive meditation that occurs between the event and the culture that contributes to the construction of national ideologies (p. 171) and in the case of Gothic plays, certain dominant modes of social behaviour. Female psychology is compatible with the harsh environmental, cultural and psychological conditions of 'place'. Charles comments on my choices relating to *place* below:

CHARLES: Though the public bar of an isolated pub 'in the middle of nowhere' is culturally accepted as a male environment, the female characters in *Post Office Rose* are historically embedded in it as both public place and yet intimately personal space. It is in the conflict between place and space from which Linda's drama evolves.

## Conclusion

In closing the original discussion at the heart of this paper, Stephen Carleton directs us back to where we began by asking:

CARLETON: So what is the general consensus? What is Australian Gothic and why theatre and why now?

This paper has been written in an attempt to address these questions. Clearly the consensus that Carleton was seeking has not been offered here. Instead, several lenses through which to view this complex genre have been presented. Some of these lenses may emerge as being more useful than others in supporting the understanding and practice of those who work in, teach or study contemporary theatre, but based as they are on dialogue between three Australian playwrights whose work is considered to be contributing to its development, they are hopefully worth considering.

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