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THE MOUNTAIN AS PATTERN-MAKER: SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS WITH LANDSCAPE IN RODNEY HALL'S[1] *JUST RELATIONS*

Peter Mitchell

> Criticism should prise open the multiple ways in which a work can be read rather than showing it to be ordered.
>
> *Reading the Country, 146.*

The all-knowing storyteller in *Just Relations* (Penguin Australia, 1982) advises that

> The interconnections are essential. You cannot take away a single hair, a single leaf (that is to say, subtract it somehow utterly) without the entire fabric of the world collapsing. Into that hair-sized, leaf-sized void in the molecular fabric of the universe all else must disappear, including Mount Everest and the Pacific Ocean (117).

This sage advice about 'the interconnections' in Hall's novel highlights the way that landscape has influenced and influences the histories of settler cultures in Australia. In interview, he has stated that 'Whether it's the city or the country, it's the big part of the environment that interests me, how that shapes us (Braun-Bau 101-102). He acknowledges the importance of Indigenous understandings of the national landscapes, articulating them as 'no hill is just a hill. It's a figure of a spirit ancestor who's just lying down having a break from his labours . . . it's not that he's turned into a hill. The hill doesn't exist. It is he. In the same way they feel they're related to trees or to grass or to stones or to the sea' (Richey 102).[2] In his fiction, Hall considers himself 'a pattern-maker, his imaginative inventions narrating correspondences and recurrences between the landscape and his fictional worlds (Davidson 317-18).[3] These connections are often represented in deeply mystical ways or by 'sacred words'. It is through these luminous moments, through the quality of the divine that is of paramount importance in Hall's writing (Plunkett 56).[4] He has described the notion of 'the sacred', in interview, as 'an experience we have when we are taken out of ourselves in such a way that we perceive ourselves as an integral, living part of something infinitely greater than [what] we are' (Williams 18).[5]

In this essay, I contend that 'the mountain' is the central narrative feature in the novel, acting as a pivot which sustains an economy of interactions or 'narrative zones'. The 'mountain['s]' narrative authority challenges the social practice of the monologic omniscient narrator being represented as a human being. As such, 'the mountain' is considered a fictional character, my argument emphasising how it is 'the pattern-maker', determining the variable and varying relations with the other characters (McDowell, 372, 374).[6] In each

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'narrative zone', I will illuminate a polyphony of interacting voices, these interactions highlighting how *reciprocity* constructs these fictional histories which, in turn, may lead a reader towards an understanding of the rhizomic-like patterns between people and place that we might term sustainable.

In this sprawling story of relations and relationships, the organisation of the title around the adjective 'Just' and the noun, 'Relations' functions around nodes of difference as the singular highlights the plural and vice versa in a series of dialogic manoeuvres. The *Macquarie Dictionary* (Second Revision, 1988) gives thirteen definitions for 'just', of which three are relevant to the explication of my argument: 'actuated by truth, justice, and lack of bias', 'in accordance with true principles' and 'equitable'. These meanings connote that social principles like equity and justice act as background in this re-imagining of Australian settler stories and, at the same time, hint at an 'even-handedness' in the historical relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is one of Halls' ways of 'accept[ing] a sense of responsibility, in the way I think the whole of white Australian society should' embrace the history of maltreatment towards Indigenous Australians (Davidson 306). The *Macquarie Dictionary* also defines 'relation' in eleven different ways of which three, 'an existing connection, a particular way of being related', 'connections between persons by blood or marriage' and 'the action of relating, narrating, or telling; narration' are useful to understanding the novel. George Seddon suggests that 'Every noun in our language takes meaning from a perceived likeness between differing objects' (113-114). It follows that *Just Relations* is a narration about different kinds of relationships evoked through reciprocal exchanges (Benterrak *et al* 71-2). The narration also represents a strand of Hall's political worldview. He has stated, in interview, that

> In the course of thinking, talking to myself, walking along beaches [and] waving my arms about [when considering the writing of the novel], I had been thinking about the concepts of human kind as a single organism: it is an idea which attracts me pretty strongly as a socialist (Davidson 315).

Hall's notion of 'human kind as a single organism' highlights his tendency to see how the 'interconnections' structure the social domain, his political beliefs connecting with these fictional representations (Williams 17, 19).

In Chapter Two of Book One, 'The Mountain Road', the village of Whitey's Fall, a brooding settlement of close and distant relatives, sits on the slopes

> halfway up a mountainside, the mountain the people created. Year by year they accumulated the knowledge, the experience. They have the words so they know how to live with it. By their toughness they survived to heap up its bluffs, by scepticism they etched its creekbeds. They've lived and spoken every part of this mountain, they've dreamed and cursed it, looked to it for salvation and penance (19).

The fictionalised residents speak 'the mountain' into material reality, their speech acts and imaginative projections constituting its subjective positions, history, spatial dimensions,

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economic and recreational functions. In *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, Keith H. Basso contends that 'If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of doing human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities' (7).[7] Through naming, the past, present and future of the village are all derived from 'the mountain' in complex ways. By creating it through speech and imagination, Hall shows the importance of language in constructing material worlds and the views to understand them (Davidson 319). In interview, he has stated that '[The residents of Whitey's Fall] . . . create the land they live on. They imagine [the mountain] . . . then [they] go and live on it' (Richey 102). It follows that 'the mountain' constitutes the patterns of interaction between it and the lives of the characters, the residents regarding it as a relative, as a part of their history, as the basis of their individual and collective worlds (Braun-Bau 104).

It is the very lack of differentiation between 'the mountain' and the remainder of this fictional world that highlights Indigenous understandings of landscape in Australia as historical background to the novel. In Indigenous understandings, a physical feature in the landscape signifies intimacy, deep feelings of attachment and place, knowledge and familiarity; the physical feature is a living entity. In acknowledgement of these understandings, the omniscient narrator states that 'In those times the Aborigines of the region, the Koories, had no knowledge of any such mountain. Neither did they know nor care about gold' (20).[8] Hall writes the fictional residents as 'the first white people who had gotten an inkling of what it means for the land to be a relative, one of their own relations.' (Richey 102). The residents replicate the practice of Indigenous understandings in their attachments and intimacy with 'the mountain'. 'Bill Swan', a significant young male character vividly exemplifies this lived condition of the novel. In Chapter Three of Book One, he stands in the main street of the village. The omniscient narrator describes his body posture, noting that 'Belonging imprinted itself on every aspect of his body's language; the way he wasn't looking about him, the bored shoulders, the one hitched-up hip bearing his whole weight' (24). In this 'zone' of reciprocity, language functions in other ways in the creation of 'the mountain', the residents have 'dreamed' and 'cursed' it. In interview, Hall argues that 'we have to extend the language, not the language itself but our use of it' (Richey 102). Thus, the language of the subconscious, the alphabets of the residents' dream-worlds contribute to the physical aspects of 'the mountain': 'the creekbeds', 'the bluffs', the flora and fauna living on its surface. This use of language also extends to individual words. The possessive plural pronoun, 'They' in this description is significant in this representation as it is the nominative plural of 'he', 'she' and 'it', pronouns indicating a singular status. 'They' is used in a collective way, encompassing all the residents of Whitey's Fall and reinforces a sense of place between 'the mountain' and the village.

The fictional inhabitants also work and socialise on the mountain as 'Its outcrops of granite are the very ones the people . . . quarried and picnicked on before you could really say there was a mountain in this place at all' (19). Their lives are entwined with the 'outcrops of granite'. Granite is a granular igneous rock composed chiefly of feldspar and quartz,

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often with one or more other minerals like mica and hornblende. Quartz is a building material, especially for monuments, and is also an indicator of gold in the ground. In the novel, gold mining was the main economic activity of Whitey's Falls, the fictional industry paralleling that of the nation (Pons 76). The residents worked 'the mountain', 'quarr[ying]' the ground for gold, thus forming the basis of their economic and working lives. It also sustains modes of sociality as the inhabitants 'picnicked' on it. Thus, the surface of the residents' relative provides a place for conviviality, the men, women and children carry the food ostensibly grown in the soil of 'the mountain' to another part on it where they eat, drink and be merry in the open air.

The built environment of Whitey's Fall is determined by 'the mountain' as the layout of the village is constructed in sympathy with the sinuous contours of it as 'all the houses [are] built on [the] steep hillside. In a gesture of respect to 'the mountain', the 'public house' is named the 'Mountain Hotel', overlooking 'the lesser structures of the new town [and is] a commodious two-story public house' (111). The height of the building signifies its importance to the town as in Australia, the local hotel is often the central feature in social and political life, thus the fictional local entwines with the national present. As a significant institution, the hotel or pub constructs feelings of attachment, simultaneously functioning as a place of sociality and friendship, of residence and a meeting place for local clubs and groups. The social roles of 'The Mountain Hotel' are contrary as it is 'the obvious place for intellectual pursuits, having the right atmosphere, the patrons the appropriate introspective tone' (21). Locals like Billy, Tony and Uncle are able to drink and socialise in 'the moderately-large bar-room' and discuss serious topics. The hotel is also a centre of religious ritual as 'Meetings are held in the public bar of the Mountain Hotel every day except Sunday. It's a religion of remembering, observed over pots of beer' (20). 'Remembering' is the religion of the village, the appropriate pious attitude for this religious practice enabled by the large proportions of the hotel, the inhabitants reliving 'their memories of other times' over a few ales. In a reversal of the conventional, the hotel imitates and parodies a church simultaneously, the religious rituals at it an alcohol-imbued recollection (Ratcliffe, 'An Unbecoming Paradise' 1). In a corresponding reversal, the services at 'The Mountain Hotel' are held from Monday to Saturday, making the religion of remembering a six-day-a-week festivity in a defiant flouting of the national Christian ideology while the one day it is *not* practiced is Sunday, the usual day of religious adoration. The services at 'the public house' are also characterised by the consumption of a psychotropic stimulant, the diametric opposite of the holy Eucharist.

As the residents of Whitey's Fall live in a complex of connections through blood and/or marriage, it follows that 'We're all more or less related by marriage' (49), the 'matriarch Collins' wryly observe at a regular social gathering of the village's older women in Chapter Five of Book One, 'The Mountain Road'. The focus of the occasion is a visit from Vivien Lang, a young English woman visiting the fictionalised village. In the 'matriarch Collins['s]' statement, 'We' represents the entire population of Whitey's Falls, reinforcing the feelings of attachment for the village. The third person pronoun, 'We' is the nominative plural of the first person pronoun 'I'. The binary between 'I' and 'We', between the first person and third

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person pronouns respectively, collapses the discreet boundaries between the private and the public, between the village and the nation. In Chapter Six of Book Two, 'The Golden Fleece', the young men of the village set out on a camping expedition, reconnoitering through the gold mines honeycombing 'the mountain'. Bill Swan embodies confidence and worldly competence. For a moment, he appraises his cousin, Tony, silently asking himself, 'Is that my cousin?' (163). His unspoken question shows the contradictory nature of social relations, even among close relatives. His question is more rhetorical than interrogative as he reaches no conclusion. Even though the respective cousins' mothers are sisters, feelings such as care and familiarity do not necessarily mitigate closeness in an ongoing way. In the following sentence, a reversal of feelings occurs with a partial resolution. Bill acknowledges to himself that he is 'closely related' to Tony, concluding that 'everybody was everybody else's cousin' (163). The contradictory relationship between the two cousins exemplifies the dialogic nature of filial relations. Even in the space of a minute, the density of blood relations does not allay feelings of uncertainty from one to the other. These filiations of blood, though contradictory, sustain Bill Swan's subjectivity and sense of place as a part of the history of the village and parallels the 'matriarch Collins' claim that all the inhabitants are related through marriage.

Length of residence in Whitey's Fall is also a constituting element in these networks of blood and marriage. In Chapter Three of Book Four, 'Tree-felling', Uncle, a significant older man and uncle to Bill Swan, talks to one of the workmen employed to bulldoze the mountain in preparation for the construction of a road. He says that 'My father . . . lies buried not far from here. And the grandfather too. I don't suppose many of yous young fellows would know who yer fathers was even, let alone where they were buried' (266). Uncle's claim that his family has lived in Whitey's Falls for several generations constitutes his sense of personal identity, his longevity of residence constructing a sense of integrity as a part of his history. In *Reading the Country*, Krim Benterrak *et al* contend that 'Place introduces specificity and difference' (13). The certainty of the lines of generational blood and family history tie Uncle specifically to 'the mountain' and his life in Whitey's Falls and differentiates him from the 'young fellows', their alleged lack of knowledge about where their fathers are buried, exemplifying the transitory social relations structuring progress and modernity. The material reality of the cemetery on the side of 'the mountain', of burial headstones following the contours of the steep incline reinforces a continuity of history as Uncle's speech remembering his 'father' and 'grandfather' memorialises their lives and history. Thus, the burial of Uncle's 'father' and 'grandfather' are acts of redemption, their decomposing bodies nurturing the mountain's soil though trace elements and minerals as if in a reversal of what they took from 'the mountain', thus reinforcing the principle of reciprocity. In Chapter Five of Book Six, 'Exodus', Uncle talks to Vivien Lang, asserting that 'You can't own anything, not even your own body. Most you can do is strike up an acquaintance' (479). Uncle's quote explicates the sustainable underpinnings of this fictional world, insisting that ownership of our own 'bod[ies]', of our own corporeality or elements in the built environment is a chimera.

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Interactions between 'the mountain' and the residents encompass the worlds of work as 'The digging of gardens is undertaken almost as furiously as the digging of claims, manure being collected by the cartload, and seeds ordered' (111). The simile, 'The digging of gardens . . . the digging of claims' shows that one domain of work under 'the mountain' has equal value to the production of vegetables, fruit and flowers on the surface of 'the mountain', the reference to different modes of work exemplifying that *all* parts of it are central to these fictional lives. The rate of production of both is described as 'furiously'. The adverb is the key word in this simile as it describes the unrestrained energy involved in both activities. The description of the second mode of work as this is doubly significant as 'the digging of claims' is the economic raison d'etre of the village, the adjective assigning equal value to 'the digging of gardens' in the lives of the residents. The simile collapses the economies of work and leisure as gardening combines employment, pleasure and aesthetic concerns. The simile also invokes history as the search for gold was the basis on which the town was established, again referring to national history (Pons 376). 'The digging of gardens' is accompanied by the collection and distribution of 'manure', the excrement of animals sustaining 'the mountain' in a chain of reciprocity as 'the mountain' sustains the lives of the residents by producing food for them as well as degrees of self-sufficiency. The distribution of the 'manure' is also an act of faith, a littoral returning to the soil of 'the mountain'.

These acts of faith for the soil of 'the mountain' extend to individual residents as Mr Ian McTaggart digs gardens, the touch of the feather-soft soil with the skin of his hands and fingers signifying a sacred experience. The 'gardens' constitute a core in his fictional representation as he 'devotes his life in recluse to designing a garden of concentric circles so as to be in harmony with the celestial bodies and draw on their power, the last of all gardens, the very antipodes of Eden' (111). The 'garden of concentric circles . . . in harmony with the celestial bodies' exemplifies the dialogic interaction between the earth and the sky, one element in nature paralleling a second. The fragment is also replete with religious connotations. The gardens parallel 'the celestial bodies', the circular structure of both entities signifying change and continuance. Mr Ian McTaggart's life as a 'recluse' replicates the way orders of nuns, priests and monks from different religions search for contemplative insights. The 'last of all gardens' invokes the world of history and religion as it acts as a counter, as a reciprocal looping back to the first garden, that is, the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Mr McTaggart's garden moves out until it 'extended to include the surrounding bush, the continent, the whole earth' (191). In this world of relatedness, the garden and planet become one, interacting with and on each other, Mr McTaggart's work representing the value of reciprocity in the assemblages of relationships between human beings and the landscape. His endeavours also challenge the subject-object dualism of corporate capitalism where the natural environment is commodified, his 'gardens' a reversal to the agribusiness paradigm in the contemporary social formation.

In contrast to the fictional movements across the surface of 'the mountain', some of the narrative action takes place underground. Later in the camping trip, the young men search several abandoned gold mines. 'Billy Swan' descends into the first mine:

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> Utter dark clasped Billy in a suffocating mass. Something small moved through his hair. Sweating, he breathed the air of loss, the blackness with its forgotten odour. Gaps in the ladder to safety preyed on his imagination: even the rust of the rings smelled forlorn. He had to break out, move back into the dim spotlight of the shaft. Once there, raindrops baptised him. (160)

In this narrative zone, the interaction between the unknown and the known, between the 'utter dark' and the 'dim spotlight' have different emotional effects on the subjectivity of 'Billy Swan'. The darkness of the mineshaft signifies 'loss' and oblivion; the underground is a threat to him, invoking death and nothingness. 'Billy Swan' becomes a being-in-transformation (Ratcliffe, 'Terror Australis' 18). His experience is degrading, causing trepidation and fear. It challenges his subjectivity and strips him of his ontological certainty. He 'break[s] out' and 'moves'. The use of the verb, 'break out' is important as it denotes that the 'dark' functions as a prison to 'break out' from. There is a movement of his corporeal body and an accompanying shift in his subjectivity. 'Billy Swan' experiences a reversal of the previous experience and 'moves back into the dim spotlight' piercing the mineshaft. It is the dialogic opposite of the 'utter dark'. In the exchange, the light restores his sense-of-self. 'The 'spotlight' signifies a religious experience, a redemption as if the light from the sky originates from the Christian god, thus restoring Bill's faith to life and, in turn, in himself. Once in the light, he is 'baptised' by 'raindrops', by the water of life. The earth functions ambivalently as both grave and womb; in this narrative instance, the earth is a regenerative spirit (Ratcliffe, 'An Unbecoming' 3). It restores his life, his sense-of-self; he is made whole.

For Tony, the experience of the mineshaft also radically alters his identity, his sense-of-self:

> Tony remained among the warm black feather-shapes. He wished for nothing more. The place surprised him as a homecoming, earth gathered into itself, the mountain had something to share with him, he picked it as a beating sensation in the air, the slow regular vibration he dreamily accepted. Yes he opened his mouth. Tipping back his head so the shaft of darkness plunged right inside him, he was a shell of skin suspended in the darkness. The dark lay soft and glossy inside him. I have not been like this for a long time, his body said to him. (160)

By lowering his body into the darkness of the earth, Tony is metaphorically ingested by it, becoming a figure-in-transformation. 'The mountain' shares itself with him, making Tony a part of it (Ratcliffe, 'An Unbecoming' 3). It acts as a parent, guide, long-held warmth and comfort; he is at one with 'the black feather-shapes'; it is 'a homecoming'. Later in the novel, Tony goes 'feral', becoming 'Nobody'. He becomes a hybrid of his former self. His new nomination, 'Nobody' is a challenge to notions of identity, religion and national ideology. His experience in 'the mineshaft' corresponds with the Bakhtinian notion of reversal where the darkness and dankness are privileged over lightness and dryness. He attains a new centre, a changed identity: 'Nobody slept, woke, watched flowers open in the sun, shrimps close to the moon, frogs establishing nocturnal colonies, he breathed as the mountain breathed itself, transparent, unthinking, concealing the treasure within' (388).

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The 'loss' of his Christian name questions the relevance of Christianity in this fictional representation and, in turn, its value to the social world. The capitalisation of his new name affirms the 'loss' of his former name and identity and posits other possibilities of subjectivity and life in the national social formation (Ratcliffe, 'Terror Australia' 20-21). His underground transformation to a more competent and confident self loops back to the cousins' earlier interaction where 'Bill Swan' felt uncertainty about him. The power relations in this encounter pointed to 'Bill' embodying a figure of greater social value than his cousin. Through their underground transformations, the power valence changes. 'Bill' continues his fictional representation as a young man of personal competence and worldly confidence. Although he is shaken by the experience in 'the mineshaft', he closes himself down emotionally as he decides to 'confess none of what he felt' (160). He is threatened by the vulnerability in his own masculinity, reacting negatively and resuming the movement of his former self as if the experience had not occurred. In an inversion of their power relations, Tony becomes a new *man,* figuring other possibilities as a powerful vulnerability, a more vital femininity.

Through the use of Bakhtinian theory, Rodney Hall's *Just Relations* exemplifies a narration describing the rhizomic-like 'connections' between people and place, between 'the mountain' and the residents of the brooding village of 'Whitey's Falls'. These exchanges are characterised by reciprocity where 'the mountain' functions as the pivot in an economy of 'narrative zones': the creation of 'the mountain' by the residents and, in turn, it determining their lives and histories; through the layout of the village, centering on 'the Mountain Hotel'; through filial networks, revolving around blood and marriage; through the worlds of work: the extraction of gold and digging of gardens and through transformation to personal subjectivity in the fictional lives of 'Bill Swan' and his cousin, 'Tony' or 'Nobody'. In writing how the landscape 'shapes' these fictional lives, Hall posits other possibilities around identity, religion and national history. These representations make *Just Relations* a document for the future, a document of how settler cultures in contemporary Australia may potentially live in and with the landscape.

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Endnotes

[1] Rodney Hall is the author of the following novels - *The Ship on the Coin* (1972), *A Place among People* (1975), *Just Relations* (1982), *Kisses of the Enemy* (1987), *Captivity Captive* (1988), *The Second Bridegroom* (1991), *The Grisly Wife* (1993), *The Island in the Mind* (1996), *The Day We had Hitler Home* (2000), *The Last Love Story* (2004) and *Love Without Hope* (2007); collections of poetry – *The Climber* (1962), *Four Poets* (1962), *Penniless Till Doomsday* (1962), *Forty Heads on a Hangman's Rope* (1963), *Eyewitness* (1967), *The Autobiography of a Gorgon* (1968), *The Law of Karma* (1968), *Australia* (1970), *Heaven in a Way* (1970), *A Soapbox Omnibus* (1973), *Selected Poems* (1975), *Black Bagatelles* (1978), *The Most Beautiful World* (1981), *The Owner of My Face: New and Selected Poems* (2002); books on politics - *Abolish the States* (1998); and non-fiction – *Focus on Andrew Sibley* (1968), *J.S. Manifold: An Introduction to the Man and His Work* (1978), *Australia – Image of a Nation 1850-1950* (1983), *Home-Journey through Australia* (1988). He has edited the following anthologies – *New Impulses in Australian Poetry* (1968) with Thomas Shapcott, *Australian Poetry 1970* (1970), *Poems from Prison* (1973), *Australians Beware* (1975) (a collection of poems and paintings), *Voyage into Solitude* (1978) (a collection of Michael Dransfield), *The Second Month of Spring* (1980) (a collection of Michael Dransfield poetry), *The Collins Book of Australian Poetry* (1981), *Michael Dransfield Collected Poetry* (1987). Hall has won the following awards: Miles Franklin Award 1994 for *The Grisly Wife* and 1982 for *Just Relations,* Victorian Premier's Literary Award (Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction) 1989 for *Captivity Captive*, Australian Literature Society Gold Medal 2001 for *The Day We had Hitler Home* and 1992 for *The Second Bridegroom* and Grace Leven Prize for Poetry 1973 for *A Soapbox Omnibox* as well as being shortlisted for the above awards, including the NBC Banjo Awards. His books are published in the USA, UK, Australia and Canada and in translation into German, French, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, Norwegian, Spanish, Portuguese and Korean.

[2] See also, Davidson 305 and Williams 15, 17.

[3] See also, Plunkett 57.

[4] See also, Braun-Bau 99, Davidson 305, Koval 52, Richey 102 and Williams 17

[5] Hall feels 'the sacred' in everyday life, saying in interview that 'I experience the sacred frequently, in all parts of life – not just in nature, but in people, in society, in accepting social consequences of what happens in our country and other countries; we're all interdependent now' (Williams, 'Rodney Hall' 18). In a further elaboration of 'the sacred', he states, in another interview, that 'I'm very interested in creating energy out of the collisions of the miraculous and the documentary' (Plunkett, 'An Interview with Rodney Hall' 62).

[6] See also, Benterrak *et al* 23.

[7] See also, Benterrak *et al* 13.

[8] Later in the novel, the all-knowing story-teller represents Indigenous knowledge again, saying that 'No such mountain was known to the Koorie tribe who had long since passed in flight, dangerous shadows, leaving enough dead intruders to make known certain religious sentiments' (452).