The White Death: Representations of salt affected landscapes in the Wheatbelt

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The White Death:
Representations of salt affected landscapes in the Wheatbelt

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ABSTRACT

This exegesis examines the significance of salt-affected landscapes in Western Australia’s Wheatbelt, particularly sites affected due to pastoral settlement. It explores ways in which landscape imagery has been constructed and controlled by cultures to represent a particular relationship between settlement and the land.

A focus on both American and Australian photographic practitioners and their understanding of landscape aesthetics will be incorporated to reveal how unconventional subject matter like dryland salinity can be re-presented to provide an alternative perspective of cultures relationship with nature in the Wheatbelt.

Finally, an enquiry into the impact of national identity on landscape will also explore how national fictions from the past affect the present representation of dryland salinity in Western Australia. A book of images representing salt affected landscapes of the Wheatbelt has been completed in conjunction with the exegesis.
Acknowledgements

I dedicate this project to Lesley Currall who passed away prior to its completion. To my family and friends I say thankyou for your support and financial sponsorship throughout.

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INTRODUCTION

For almost two months I travelled by car throughout the Wheatbelt region of Western Australia in an attempt to absorb the picturesque qualities of its saline-affected landscape. The journey was an expansive one fueled by Ross Gibson's (1992) declaration in *Camera Natura*: “the faster I move the more I can embrace.” Townships, some no more than a service station, and tourist sites shared their space with a variety of wonders, from the enormity of an ancient rock to the kitsch of a giant ram. It was a curious diaspora that offered relief from the lonely spaces trapped in-between.

In time I began to appreciate the rhythm of roads and the land area they covered. The unexpected nature of the weather proved fortuitous in helping depict both the stillness and aura of death pervading the landscape. Contingency and death are recurring motifs in the ‘lonely outback’ and the Wheatbelt is no exception. Poetry has frequently been written about land like this since early settlement, with the image of man and landscape at its forefront. For me, this excerpt from Barcroft Boake’s, *Where the dead men lie* (1971), best sums up the mood of the place:

> Where brown Summer and Death have mated –  
> That’s where the dead men lie!  
> Loving with fiery lust unsated –  
> That’s where the dead men lie!  
> Out where the grinning skulls bleach whitely  
> Under the saltbush sparkling brightly:  
> Out where the wild dogs chorus nightly –  
> That’s where the dead men lie!

(p. 20)

The land here seemed to emit no sound during daylight hours. There were few trees for the wind to howl through, cleared by machines of industry, and few birds or visible animals around to break the silence. Light was eerie, the land scarred, and with an occasion whiff of death the imagery invoked in me uncanny reactions: anxiety in isolation. The passing of my grandfather during this time seemed to heighten my emotional reactions to the imagery, perhaps igniting “the presence of desire for lack” (Bishop, 1997, p. 4) as I clicked away almost unconsciously within the landscape.
My intent was to allow these ‘in-between’ spaces the level of photographic exposure usually reserved for the pastoral picturesque. I wanted to frame their ‘terrible beauty’ (Green, 1984, p. 169) as a way of questioning what it is that emotionally connects a subject to certain representations. This aim concentrates on the effects of dryland salinity as a way of subverting the picturesque mode within the photographic genre of landscape. The desired result: to invoke an uncanny response from the viewer, confusing sites of death for scenes of the picturesque. There is an attempt to represent the landscape/screen metaphor, via shadow and reflection while allowing for a prospect that delves just beneath the surface. Where possible, the visual work also represents an interaction between landscapes capturing me, and my attempts to interpret that eerie space of realisation.

Photography’s role in representing the Wheatbelt landscape has generally been limited to sites containing a certain visual appeal, reinforcing culturally constructed views of working the land. Indeed, Richard Woldendorp and Steve Parish are two photographers whose imagery of the region falls in line with this. I will explore why the role of national fictions must be re-examined if the land is to become more valued in all areas, not just for resource. Recently, the likes of Brad Rimmer have shown there is room for new possibilities. His photographic work of the region seems to honour Juha Tolonen’s (2001, p. 9) statement: “Photography has an ability to increase our awareness of our environment and perhaps reveal to us the visual prejudices we carry when we view sites many consider banal, decayed and ruined.”

This exegesis explores long-held fears of place and the possible effects of a national persona revered for its constant struggle with the land. It also analyses how frontier landscapes have been represented by American and Australian photographers and what impact their work may have made on cultural relationships with nature. My visual component will not only focus on scenes of the Wheatbelt that evoke the uncanny, highlighting the impact of dryland salinity on nature and settlement, but also on the isolating distances inherent to the region. These landscape representations allow for a polysemic reading of how sites traditionally overlooked, due to their unconventional subject matter, can be valued both for aesthetic reasons and for investigating ongoing cultural interaction within nature.
THE SALT DILEMMA

The importance and value of salt throughout the ages has known few bounds. Like oil today, our past dependence on salt surged without respite until the twentieth century as societies searched frantically for the next reserve, hoarding it, trading it, and fighting for it. Longevity for the substance became assured with its inclusion into a multitude of society’s activities, from religious tradition and the pivotal preservation of food to the development of industry and settlement itself. Because of its increasingly essential value to the social order, it became a substance of great significance and even one worthy of obsession. As a result, salt’s long history has been paradoxical, knowing both the sanctity of protection and the inevitability of war.

“Almost no place on Earth is without salt,” writes Mark Kurlansky (2002, p.12) in the introduction to his book, Salt: A world history:

Salt is so common, so easy to obtain, and so inexpensive that we have forgotten that from the beginning of civilization until about 100 years ago, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities in human history.

(p. 6)

Kurlansky’s writing on the subject indicates salt’s social importance has been curbed somewhat since the heady days when it represented wealth and power. But despite the existence of a technological world that has superseded much of salt’s use and preservative might, our fascination for the world’s only edible rock continues to endure, if for vastly different reasons.

With the increased industry of the world becoming involved in extensive land clearing programs and agriculture, new meanings began to emerge for ‘Homer’s divine substance’ (Kurlansky, 2002, p. 3). As native vegetation continued to disappear, saline groundwater began to rise, bringing to the surface a new problem for pastoral industries and governments. In stark contrast to European farmers of the early middle ages who, according to Kurlansky (2002, p. 8), soaked their grain in salt brine to protect it from fungal infection, twentieth century equivalents began to cry foul of the substance. Nature’s seemingly uncanny response to mass land clearing revealed a flipside to salt’s power, effectively casting doubt on its traditional “ability to preserve and to protect
against decay, as well as to sustain life” (Kurlansky, 2002, p. 6). It comes as no coincidence that, having extolled the virtues of salt throughout history, Kurlansky (2002, p. 9) adds the sobering assertion that “salt is a potent and sometimes dangerous substance that has to be handled with care.”

Regrettably, forewarnings regarding the corrosive nature of salt on rural lands have fallen on deaf ears for decades. One such case is the Western Australian agricultural Wheatbelt region. “In terms of extent and severity, it is one of the worst examples of dryland salinity in the world,” writes Beresford et al. (2004, p. 11) in their essential study of the rural region and its wide spread problem:

Without native vegetation to control rising saline groundwater levels the remaining native plants and non-salt-tolerant crops and pastures die off or become waterlogged. At the soil surface the water evaporates leaving the salt residue to damage soils on-site before eventually draining off to later degrade wetland habitats and water resources.

(p. 7)

The severity of the problem is as substantial as the area in question, stretching approximately 400 kilometers north of Perth and 700 kilometers east, with Beresford et al. (2004, p. 11) claiming it contains “70 percent of the nation’s dryland salinity.”

Although scientists called attention to the salt problem as early as the 1920s, warnings continued to go unheeded until very recently. Beresford et al. attribute the major cause of dryland salinity in the Wheatbelt to the state government’s extensive land clearing programs of the 1950s and 1960s which ensured agricultural development, but changed “the hydrology of the landscape” (2004, p. 6). In recent times dryland salinity has become a hard sell for state governments due to divisions between their management of the problem and local perspectives, the possibility of a solution according to Beresford et al. (2004 p. 128) is seemingly caught between local concerns and state vote grabbing.

Of course, political indecision and continual agriculture has done nothing to halt increasing degradation of the Wheatbelt landscape. As expected, state and local governments’ views of salt-affected land are less than encouraging when it comes to the preservation of its aesthetic value. As such, a concentration on the pastoral picturesque within the region’s promotional imagery is notable. Vast distances and salt lands of the
Wheatbelt fail to be represented alongside the images of tourist attractions, town sites and vast golden wheat fields in promotional material coercing travellers to explore the region. Rod Giblett (n.d.) attributes the majority of these representations with being exploitative and for creating “unrealistic expectations of aesthetically pleasing or aesetheticised landscapes” that fail to uphold relationships between the land and the lifestyles of its inhabitants objectively. These portrayals offer visitors a romantic atmosphere the region can’t commonly replicate due to the process of government and tourism’s selective attention to the picturesque and nostalgia.

Although ubiquitous postcards, photography books and calendars continue to picture the Wheatbelt in a romantic light, regional saline-affected landscapes evoking the uncanny ultimately receive less attention or are ignored altogether. These prospects tend to clash with the social ideals of an aesthetically pleasing view of nature, and the preconceived romantic notions of beauty and leisure that go with it. Yet the meanings attributed to these unconventional views can be seen as equally important, perhaps even more so, for studying the process of settlement and its reckless custodianship of nature. Alternate representations of landscape in this case are not without mention or value as they can provide a necessary component for balancing cultural understanding of involvement with the land.
CHAPTER 1
Culture: Nature

The metaphor of the earth as a nurturing mother was gradually to vanish as a dominant image as the Scientific Revolution proceeded to mechanize and to rationalize the world view. The change in controlling imagery was directly related to changes in human attitudes and behaviour towards the earth.

(Merchant, 1980, p. 2)

Controlled and constructed environments inviting human mastery over nature have become fundamental in shaping cultural understanding and laying foundations for further settlement on frontier lands. In ‘Nature as female’ (1980), Carolyn Merchant explores the historical use of controlled imagery and how it seeks to regulate what requirements should be imposed on nature’s landscapes. Frameworks like controlled usage allow for a cultural change that manipulates how imagery and metaphorical descriptions of nature can be altered to justify vested interests. Merchant finds examples of this in traditional rural imagery where implications of a cultivated, ‘refined’ nature, manipulated for resources become accepted over those of an untamed and ‘unbeneficial’ wilderness. As a consequence, nature’s subsequent degradation becomes a standard, the ‘natural order of things’.

Such a concept is acceptable within cultural value systems because of the inherent need to define a role within nature. Judith Williamson (1994, p. 103) makes the connection that “in order for culture to make sense of its place it must do so through the representation of how it has transformed nature: from an incomprehensible wilderness into an idyllic place of order.” She suggests this ideology ensures a one way view of production that rarely gives but always takes from nature physical and moral needs, whilst justifying human agency in the process as ‘natural’, part of a timeless unchanging order and therefore desirable (Williamson, 1994, p. 136-137).

However, whilst Williamson, and Merchant, lean towards a Marxist reading of the controlled use of imagery for naturalizing production, it is also important to realise the influence of the human subject summoned by these ideologies. For Alexander Wilson (1992, p. 126), the foremost object of human scrutiny involving nature is the land itself:
“Western cultural history is full of examples of a desire to live in a world of nature uncontaminated by human presence.” The yearning for a rural ideal, were nature has survived the impacts of industrialisation, ties in with this theme. For Jacques Lacan (Sarup, 1992, p. 13), such desires are derived from a fundamental lack: “a hole in being.” His ‘mirror phase’ concept1 details the origin of the subject’s ego and the awakening of desire to control their surroundings. The general lack of this pastoral ideal, for both rural and urban areas, can be seen to fuel consumption for romantic representations of imagery that encourage this status. The representation becomes a substitute for the real thing, produced to fill the void of an unfulfilled ideal.

According to Lacan (Sturken & Cartwright, 2003, p. 74), the human subject forms an entity driven by “the unconscious, language, and desire”, which constructs what is ideal and what isn’t from the network of representations. For the subject/viewer the actual source of the image, or as Lacan refers to it, the real, is never fully realised. Instead, they see only a re-presentation of it, a photographic screen onto which their psyche projects its desires, in order to construct an image’s meaning. In effect, the representation reflects the source and the desires of the subject interpreting it, like a two-way mirror. Margaret Iverson (1994, p.459) eloquently explains: “this is the story consciousness tells itself about vision.” However, Lacan (Iverson, 1994, p. 457) believes reflective interpretation “is founded on a misrecognition,” that allows for the removal of a fact that is traumatic: “the subject is not just a subject of consciousness, but also a subject of desire.” Essentially, the subject misrecognises representations for the real without acknowledging the interpretation is based upon structures of consciousness shaped by desire. Williamson (1994, p. 136) explains that the concept of representation “invites us as subjects to look through it, so that we forget to look at it.” To admit the self-defining process of culture2 would undermine “its self-image of superiority and efficiency, ‘civilisation’” (Williamson, 1994, p. 123).

Comprehension of this alienating process is compounded further when we consider that nature has a history permeated with cultural involvement, not separate from it. Wilson (1992) explains:

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1 Sturken and Cartwright (2003, p. 75) believe this is “a useful framework to understand the investment of tremendous power that viewers place in images, and the reasons why we can so easily read images as a kind of ideal.”

2 How this process relates to dryland salinity will be covered in chapter three.
The whole idea of nature as something separate from human existence is a lie. Humans and nature construct one another. Ignoring that fact obscures the one way out of the current environmental crisis – living within and alongside of nature without dominating it.

(p. 13)

This idea is supported by others in the field who deal with the conflicting issues of understanding land development at large today (Beresford, et al, 2004; Giblett, 2004; Low, 2002). Tim Low (2002, p. 3) provides an example of how nature is “sold to us as something separate that lives far away from us in wild places”, by recalling the myth of a honey-guide bird leading a badger to a bee’s nest as a way of gaining entry to the sticky reward contained within. The story is based on an ancient relationship between the birds and people but as Low (2002, p. 18) points out, “the myth has prevailed because humans are taught not to think of themselves as part of ecosystems.”

This predicament corresponds with Merchant, Williamson, and Wilson’s beliefs that rhetorical constructs like aesthetics, industry and photography work alongside institutions like education, religion and tourism to continually shape cultural experiences of the natural world. Although culture seems intent to differ, there is evidence to suggest that nature is not a timeless unchanging essence as current ideologies suggest but maintains a history continually mediated by culture. For Wilson, the only way of changing cultural understanding is for an acceptance of its place within nature rather than, as Merchant and Williamson critique, defining itself through the attempted refinement of it.

Reflecting on the process of interpretation in Camera Natura (1992), the narrator declares that using “a way to see” allows us to find “a way to think.” The issues exploring how nature’s landscapes can be seen and understood are essential to understanding why photographic representations of the Wheatbelt in the past have been produced, and how they reinforce limited cultural perspectives. Representations of ‘refined nature’ and farmers working the land are common within the ‘cultural image repertoire’ (Iverson, 1994, p. 461) of the region but as I’ve discussed, reasons for this may be two fold. Although governments can control the use of imagery to legitimise work done to the land and shape cultural understanding, local communities may also cling to the same ideology as an attempt to define and justify their role within the
landscape. It is this process that provides a history, as Wilson suggests, for informing new ways of seeing and understanding that can intensify photographic accounts of this environmentally unstable landscape in the present.
The photographic landscape genre has its exceptions but is generally rectangular in
framing – "it is no accident that 'landscape format' has come to describe photographs
where the width is greater than the height" (Wells, 2004, p. 291) – as the arrangement
sits opposed to the vertical format of a traditional 'portrait'. The golden rules of one-
third/two-third horizontal proportions apply to composition along with standard rules of
perspective, both of which derive from the Romantic and Pictorial movements of
landscape painting. John Barrell (1972, p. 6) concedes that these conventions were so
ingrained within the periods that "it became impossible for anyone with an aesthetic
interest in landscape to look at the countryside without applying them," whether they
knew it or not. Traditional rules of composition and aesthetics, transferred from
landscape painting to photography, have meant picturesque representations continue to
dominate ways of constructing landscape.

Contemplation of the photographic landscape inevitably involves the study of aesthetics
and managing the picturesque appeal of a scene. According to Barrell (1972, p. 12), this
stems from the composition of ideal painted landscapes that "improved and selected
nature." Over time these models became standard and their rules of improvement and
selection, difficult to ignore. The idea of compositional landscapes becoming obligatory
is one shared by Rod Giblett (2004, p. 59), and Geoffrey Batchen (1997, p. 73) who
suggest subjects become so conditioned by this inherited tradition that they begin to
seek a similar picturesque aesthetic within the imagery of nature itself. Photographic
composition is affected when a subject projects a picturesque ideal of the cultural
landscape onto nature. Management of the scene allows them to edit what they find
challenging and reproduce only the pleasing aspects in picture form. Raymond Williams
(1973, p.120) believes this process is inevitable because the subject is critically self-
reflexive and "the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation," but
Gibson (1992) questions what is lost when something is caught in this fashion. A
solution may lie in a counter-aesthetic approach. Giblett (2004, p. 61-62) looks to halt
"the privileging of certain sights and scenes as more aesthetically pleasing than others"
by instead regarding everything within nature as valuable. It is this ideal that inspired
me to approach the subject matter of salt-affected landscapes with a certain regard for their aesthetic appeal and critical value.

The aesthetic responses of the sublime and the uncanny can be combined with the management of the picturesque to consider how the eye of the beholder transfers power between the “experience of a viewing ‘subject’ and the countryside as a desirable ‘object’ to behold, and own” (Giblett, 2004, p. 52). This framework is also efficient for examining how the landscape photographers selected for review construct their work. Giblett (1996, p. 30) believes the sublime and the uncanny “are not just mere aesthetic responses but modalities which set up and involve relations between subjects and objects, or abjects (neither subject nor object, but in between) in the case of the uncanny.” These modes relate to both Roland Barthes’ studium/punctum distinction and Jacques Lacan’s formulation of the Gaze in trying to assess what is consciously and unconsciously represented within the visual field.

The sublime mode is employed to construct an inspiring scene that elicits a response of awe and fear in the human subject. This emotion is usually conjured in regard to the magnitude of an object being represented. Examples of this mode can be found within the work of Ansel Adams, especially his 1940s images of American mountain ranges in national parks of the west. Within this work, his former assistant and editor, Andrea Grey Stillman (Adams, 2002), states her “sense of terror in the enormity” of Ansel’s chosen objects, like the granite ‘Half Dome’ at Yosemite National Park. It is this sensation of the sublime that is consistent with Giblett’s (1996, p. 30) reading which suggests, “a feeling of awe and fear in the face of gigantic objects, like mountains, stems from its representative nature as the ultimate symbolic object; the Phallus and the Law of the [spiritual] Father.”

Although Adams was not overtly religious, others saw his work as majestic and religious and appropriated it for agendas other than art to portray an American landscape, “as if touched by the hand of God” (Adams, 2002). Political and environmental agendas of the time sought to use the work of Adams to put into pictures a grand, heroic myth of beauty and freedom within the landscape that supported a nationalistic intent. Such active participation by governments and private enterprise to

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3 This will be elaborated further in the chapter.
select and construct images of the landscape, and reinforce a limited cultural perspective, finds Deborah Bright (1990, p. 126) questioning what ideologies photographs perpetuate, and "in whose interests they were conceived." Bright (1990, p. 128) believes this appropriated use of photography played a central role in "merchandising landscape for public consumption" and established the standards against which all future records were measured. Adams' work consistently represents a landscape decolonised and unaffected by the disruption of industry and human presence. These are the landscapes Western culture so desires, according to Wilson (2002), and considering the enduring popularity of Adams' work there's evidence to suggest he's right.

Invoking the sublime can afford spiritual power to certain objects within landscape, like the inert and terrifying magnitude of Adams' granite rock. The uncanny challenges this by representing that which is peculiar, strange, eerie or incomprehensible. In essence, it represents an abject or 'between' which Giblett (1996, p. 41) suggests is neither subject nor object and is therefore considered horrific, for not being but constantly becoming. The uncanny is invoked by what is felt rather than seen, a certain poignancy initiated by what Barthes (1984, p. 27) describes as punctum: the personal disturbance which "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me." This uncontrollable element disturbs the subject's conscious field of vision within the picture, the studium: a desired object, a cultural idyll, that which is pleasurable and can be understood or seen as the photographer's intention (Barthes, 1984, p. 28). The invoking of the uncanny seems invariably linked with the trauma of misrecognition and desire. For Iverson (1994; p. 459), "the unconscious also sees, throwing onto a screen its projected desires, fantasies and fears."

This mode moves outside of the traditional cultural constructs, which regard nature as ordered and unchanging, a timeless landscape. Salt-affected land in the Wheatbelt is one such example of a changing landscape that can evoke the uncanny. Salinity continues to challenge the pastoral industry and create sections of land unusable for resource. Because of imposed pastoral techniques, it's becoming something else, something uncontrollable and disturbing. The resulting alarm from this situation is comparable to what Max Kosloff (1994, p. 194) regards as a "fear of interference to the patterns of natural replenishment." It is this fear of nature being uncontrollable that invites Giblett's (1996, p. 42) quoting of Sartre, who laments the insidious "appropriation of the
possessor by the possessed."\(^5\) This type of horror can lead to rejection, or attempted rejection. Saline-affected lands are often ignored in representing the Wheatbelt and this may be, in part, because they don’t conform to the controlled perspectives of the mountainous sublime or picturesque pastoral.

Unlike Ansel Adams, who chose to look out from civilization toward the sublime grandeur of wilderness (Green, 1984, p.163), a fellow American photographer in Robert Adams sought to question the myths associated with sublime work and the separation of culture from nature. Adams began looking at the approach of settlement in the 1970s from open land, using the topographic style of early frontier photographers like Timothy H. O’Sullivan. He became fascinated by American culture’s impact upon the land, the change of wilderness into the urban and the relationship between the land’s past and present (Green, 1984, p. 164). For Jonathon Green (1984, p. 169), Adams’ concentration on scarred earth, from contemporary earthworks and half-finished buildings of settlement in America’s new western frontier, provide his images with a “terrible beauty.” His pictures consider unsympathetic political statements with the visually appealing to reveal an interconnectedness of nature and culture that differs from ‘postcard’ like representations, perpetually replicated since the idolisation of Ansel Adams.

Although Deborah Bright (1990, p. 135) questions if the social concerns of Robert Adams’ work are diminished when its status is reduced to an object of art,\(^6\) I believe his questioning of constructed landscapes has allowed for an alternative cultural perspective of nature that detracts from the myths perpetuated by romantic representations, reinforcing mastery over the land. For Adams (2006, p. 74), the key to representing the quiet beauty of vulnerable, degraded land is “not to be seduced into celebrating the power of men and machines, which can have a satanic beauty and heroism about it.” It is this reluctance to misrepresent culture’s daily working of the land that I have tried to follow by instead focusing on the imagery of after-effects caused by intrusion. This can be seen as an attempt to set up the conflict between touristic representations of the Wheatbelt which continue to reinforce a pastoral myth in the Australian west and current environmental concerns involving salinity. I have also attempted to link certain images within my project to explore the past and present, and even the present and

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\(^5\) This can also be seen as a pre-cursor to the metaphor of marking the land mentioned in chapter three
\(^6\) This critique is discussed with regard to Misrach later in the chapter. See also Bright 1990, p. 130-135.
possible futures of cultural intrusion to challenge the timeless unchanging order promoted by traditional representations. However, difficulty comes with trying to create pictures about a topic people may not wish to see.

Just as viewers have been taught to interpret a pictured landscape, Kosloff (1994, p. 203) questions whether they can accept a spectacle they reject; a landscape that puts them off because it’s a wilderness human settlement has done in. According to Kosloff (1994, p. 203), this kind of panorama in America’s west has been addressed by Richard Misrach with increasing vividness. Misrach’s Violent legacies: Three cantos (1992) incorporates both the sublime and the picturesque modes whilst exploring subject-matter that evokes the uncanny. For Misrach (1992, p. 90), “beauty can be a very powerful conveyor of difficult ideas. It engages people when they might otherwise look away.” Kosloff (1994, p. 193) agrees and considers work like Misrach’s to be a “post-pastoral version of the picturesque where images of nature now testify to the damage men have done to their environment.” In this case, the damage is represented by the social and environmental ramifications of desert bombing-sites in America’s west. By exploring this, Misrach is able to subvert certain modes within an ecological context and challenge the old landscape construct of the west.

It is this interest in subverting the modes that drew me to the idea of using dryland salinity as a subject worth developing, to challenge how the Wheatbelt is traditionally seen. However, for Sarup (1992), “we can never completely express what we want. There is always a gap between what we say and what we mean.” Within the photographic realm the idea of subverting aesthetic modes is a challenging one because it brings with it a dilemma associated with all language of polysemy and personal interpretation.

Misrach’s appropriation of the picturesque to subvert uncanny subject matter finds opposition from critics who claim his work is exploitative for aestheticising the horrific. Andrew Ross (1994) finds the same limitations in this photographer’s work that Deborah Bright (1990, p.130-135) finds with Robert Adams’ work and art photography in general. Both critics argue that historical background is stripped from art photography and thus explanations of ways in which they should be interpreted become misinformed. Although mindful of the power and purpose in Misrach’s work, Ross (1994) complains that the Cantos series leaves viewers with too broad a set of
interpretive choices, and holds no indictment on certain institutions responsible for the devastation of landscape. However, I would argue that Ross’ argument undervalues the intelligence of the viewer and selectively omits a main point of Misrach’s aim in his critique, even though on a previous occasion Ross (1994) raises an identical aim to validate one of his own arguments: “In short, images of ecology today are also produced, consumed, and used in way’s that can help to counteract the destruction of the natural world.” I can only assume this is what Misrach is trying to achieve with the Cantos series. Misrach (1992, p. 90) responds to these criticisms by implying “the impact of art may be more complex and far-reaching than theory is capable of assessing. To me, the work I do is a means of interpreting unsettling truths, of bearing witness, and of sounding an alarm.”

Although there is a long tradition of exploration and spirited debate concerning the subject of landscape in America’s west (Adams, 2006; Bright, 1990; Green, 1984; Kosloff 1994; Ross 1994; Misrach 1992), the same cannot be said for landscape in Western Australia. With regard to sublime representations, a local equivalent to Ansel Adams can be found in Richard Woldendorp who, like the American national hero, is highly regarded, having been named a state living treasure.

Within Australia’s West (1997) Woldendorp chooses to organise his landscapes according to the conventions of the picturesque, and seeks out elements of the sublime in indigenous rock formations as well as industrial mine sites. Unlike Adams, he often pictures human encroachment on the land, even the salt-affected Wheatbelt, but unlike Misrach, fails to explore the consequence and destruction of such intrusions. This may be due to his stylistic use of aerial landscape photography which in effect “disconnects the viewer from the actual hazards it describes, even as it uniquely situates them” (Kosloff, 1994, p.195). Further problems regarding the context of Woldendorp’s work relate to a focus on form that uses aerial composition to appropriate an indigenous ‘dot painting’ style. Although unique in composition, his unfortunate choice to not feature indigenous people within the book for reference means this style appears primarily as a form of cultural theft.

Steve Parish reinforces a pastoral image of the Wheatbelt that supports the picturesque sublime as well as ideologies pertaining to refining the land. In A Steve Parish souvenir of Western Australia (n.d.), the photographer highlights a relic homestead of pioneer
days, a farmer and sheep dogs working the land, and a wool wagon in Kojonup that
pays tribute to the sheep farmed on many Wheatbelt properties. There is no mention of
impacts to the land or town sites within these touristic representations other than
farmer’s being, “frustrated by massive granite outcrops called tors” (Parish, n.d, p. 36)
which inhibit their ability to clear more land for grazing. It was the land worked and left
behind, due to degradation and salt erosion, or simply forgotten due to its geographic
isolation between towns and tourist sites that interested me. My inclusion of some
tourist sites highlight the more kitsch nature of the Wheatbelt whilst selected town sites
show a more ‘cause and affect’ nature of working the land. Parish’s representation of
the Wheatbelt is a clear example that promotes the ideal of a cultivated nature and it is
one I adamantly steered clear of.

An exception to Woldendorp and Parish’s work in the Wheatbelt is Brad Rimmer’s
photography (Silence, 2005; Landlines, unpublished), which depicts a more personal
vision of the change and demise of rural expansion in the region. Silence (2005) in
particular, shows the after effects of settlement and the consequent well-being of these
communities since the introduction of modern transport. Rimmer shows an isolated
landscape which implies a sense of impermanence and “provides a metaphor for human
existence subsisting within it” (Anselmi, 2005). Apart from Silence (2005) and
Landlines (unpublished), there is a paucity of photographic inquiry into the changing
landscapes of rural Wheatbelt locations. This is an area of inquiry where further
research could be undertaken, especially in the context of indigenous well-being
following the pastoral take over of their land.

Rimmer’s exploration of human welfare in a difficult and isolating landscape follows
Giblett’s (2004, p. 51) observation that “the land becomes a surface (psychological,
cinematic and televisual) against which the self poses itself, and a screen against which
it projects fears and desires.” But what does culture fear from the idea of landscape that
it should cling to picturesque constructs in such a traditional sense. Bishop (1997, p. 4)
believes it is the refraction of representation itself, the “fear of the blank screen.”
Baudrillard (cited in Bishop, 1997, p. 3) explains: “Today, no performance is without its
control screen.” The anxiety of losing screen culture, and being left to understand the
source without it – a loss of definition of self and place - finds Bishop (1997, p. 1)

7 Illumination of the subject would benefit from an inquiry though indigenous eyes, as an understanding
of connection with the land is inherently beyond western vision.
ruminating over the limited perspectives constructing the genre. The refractive surface of salt-land absorbs and deflects personal projection and as such “the confessional, introspective literalisms of subjectivity associated with mirroring are avoided” forcing the subject to face the horrifying unknown of the real and acknowledge “the nothingness of the image” (Bishop, 1997, p 3). With the visual field disrupted, symbols and metaphors become difficult to interpret and the subject is instead forced to feel, to rely on the uncanny as a way of understanding.

This fear of the unknown, and the haunting idea that an “end of reflection signals the entry of death” (Bishop, 1997, p. 4), could go some way to fueling the relentless production of postcards, photography books and calendars that reinforce representations of the pastoral picturesque in the Wheatbelt. It may also have something to do with Giblett’s (2004, p. 49) begrudging admission that, unlike the superior forms that evoke the sublime, a landscape of uncanny form does “not constitute a nation’s view of itself and of its national territory suitable for display.” It would seem that people are not comfortable believing there is an ugly side to their country, especially one they’ve possibly contributed to themselves.
CHAPTER 3
Landscape and national identity

The depiction of the pastoral frontier in Western Australian landscape photography plays an important role in the formation and continuance of the state’s cultural identity. It is for this reason that images of ecological disaster on rural lands are seldom shown in popular culture. Such imagery could be seen to undermine, as Williamson (1994) would say, Australian culture’s self-definition as a nation of ‘battlers’. The basis for why representations of working rural lands are mostly seen lies in the development of the mateship myth. According to Giblett (2004), the myth stems from the landscape’s overwhelming monotony, which fatigued and alarmed early settlers and inspired a yearning for reciprocal support between men:

In order to provide that sympathy of fellow-feeling with one as well as to produce and maintain a bulwark against the threat of the bush and the fear of the loss of individual and collective identity it posed, the mythology of mateship was developed. The bush is the crucible of Australian national identity because it is here that mateship, that linchpin of Australian national identity, was forged. (p. 113)

The myth is interesting in Australian culture because it represents the origin of a nation’s solidarity in opposing the land. Paradoxically, it also implies its solidarity with it, as evidenced by the level of respect reluctantly afforded to the land by settlers. The language involved within the myth of mateship inevitably revolves around that of the military. For Giblett (2004, p. 114), “the ‘Aussie Battler’ was a fighter for survival not only against big government and squatters with large runs but also against ‘the bush’. Often the social and class struggle against the former was displaced into the struggle for survival against, and mastery over, the latter.” It is interesting to note how the myth was reappropriated as an ideological distraction to temper settler’s anxieties against governing powers. This diversionary tactic is still used today, as George Main (2004) attests, when the issue of dryland salinity finds itself displayed in the cultural consciousness.8

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8 This will be explored later in the chapter
Ironically, it is in developing this mythology of working together against the bush and creating rural areas, that the problem of dryland salinity has been formed. One of the major aspects of this male bonding against “the lonely immensities” (Giblett, 2004, p. 115) is the metaphor of marking the land. An inequitable part of possession comes in the form of leaving one’s mark on an object, to attest ownership over it. Within the context of the West Australian landscape, settlers went about giving names to the land by clearing and fencing off that which was ‘theirs’. Indeed, this was part of the government’s ‘you clear it, you keep it’ mentality at the time but Giblett (2004, p. 115) believes it was also a case of “write or be written on, leave your mark on the land with a fence, or road, or railway, or town, or lot, or be marked by the land, permanently scarred for life physically and mentally.”

Fear of the latter and government policies contributed heavily in clearing vast tracts of Wheatbelt land, the root of its current salt dilemma. It’s precisely because of this merger between metaphor and policy, that Sartre’s ‘possession of the possessor’ concept becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In an uncanny twist, land can appear to take back ownership by becoming uncontrollable in death, bringing its production as resource to an end and securing its salty freedom from possession. Sartre confesses this role reversal is “poisonous” (Giblett, 1994, p. 43) but in the case of the Wheatbelt, a local born poet debates whether the land is always disadvantaged. John Kinsella (2004, p. 15) brings a modern irony to Kurlansky’s (2002) reflection on salt’s power in medieval farming practices by declaring a benefit from the situation: “salt protects place in some ways, with less pesticide and herbicide spraying over salty lands.” However, for Beresford, et al. (2002, p. 220) there is no debating the fact that until the effort is made to address the tragic damage inflicted on regional biodiversity, “the potential for a catastrophic level of species loss remains a distinct possibility.”

Reasons why environmental warnings concerning the dangers of dryland salinity may have been ignored for so long could also relate to this dominant mythology of mateship. The ideal of being able to survive against the land at all costs is something Graeme Turner (1986, p. 83) sees as helping to form a state of solidarity where “ideals are to be tempered by contingency.” This state of mind can also include environmental ideals in my view. Just as American images by Ansel Adams were used to assert a national myth of triumph against all odds, so too the work of Steve Parish asserts the heroism of mateship forged in the struggle of surviving against and working on the land. In a sense,
the issue of dryland salinity could be seen as just another land challenge to struggle against. Similarly, Turner (1986, p. 52) believes the difficulty in surviving the land “becomes justification for failing to do more than that,” which may explain why the problem has failed to be dealt with in a timely fashion.

Ross Gibson (1992, p. 67) sees the paradoxical nature of Australian myth in which the grand yet “unreasonable” ways of the land can be grafted onto a society accepted for being equally flawed but marvellous. In essence, it provides the national psyche with an excuse that naturalises shortcomings by making these flaws “acceptable, indeed admirable” (Gibson, 1992, p. 67). It seems this inherent scepticism involving social progress in Australian culture must bear some relation to Turner’s admission of idealistic passions tempered by contingency. Turner (1986, p. 83) believes this denial stems from Australia’s “reluctance to enquire too closely into its structures, the experience of life itself.” This temperance could explain an unwillingness to probe beyond the romantic pastoral representations inundating popular culture and investigate other definitions and identities present within the Wheatbelt. A failure to not fully explore volatile changes in the landscape underlines a “complacency of imagination” (Gibson, 1992, p. 74) and a fear to undermine self-definition within Australian culture. This distinction stands in opposition to the American topographic movement concerned with continuing changes from past to present.

Since colonisation, people have often responded with “surprise and fear when natural forces and ecological constraints” have disturbed the mythical idyll (Main, 2004). George Main (2004) believes the media hyperbole over dryland salinity reached into this inherent fear in the late 1990s to depict salt as an enemy worth struggling against, an uncanny menace: the ‘White Death’. According to Main, few seemed to know why the salinity was occurring or how agriculture could induce such a thing. During the Wheatbelt’s history, colonists and state government (including policies up until recently) had been ignorant of local ecologies by ridding the land of its necessary foliage. But while picturesque rural landscape images of homesteads, wire fences and golden crops, like Parish’s, are familiar to most Australians, the links between ecological disaster and pastoral operation (Main, 2004) have not been explored within such work to allow for any recognition of the salinity problem.
Main (2004) sees how attempts to divert attention away from the pastoralist cause of problems, like salinity, often come in the form of a “dark relegitimation of the modern order of things” where industry science focuses on symptoms whilst shielding agricultural production from critique. By depicting salt as the enemy and not a by-product of rural settlement, he believes the Aussie battler myth against the land can be legitimately revived and reinforced: “The old battle for mastery over the natural forces is reinvigorated and relegitimised, the language of war reapplied” (Main, 2004). Like Giblett, Main (2004) sees the frequent use of war symbolism entwined with nationalistic beliefs to infuse “the fearful, emotive rhetoric of responses to dryland salinisation.”

Salt is revealing the detrimental effects of agricultural industry on the land. This is a volatile change that opposes romantic rural definitions of landscape popular in Australian culture. However, popular culture seems reluctant to undermine myths of national identity to understand why this dilemma may have emerged. Instead it chooses to accept salt’s projected role as a threat that needs to be battled against without probing beyond the machinations of the screen. Industry has sought to control imagery and naturalise salinity as a mysterious, acceptable flaw in an unreasonable land, promoting science-based technologies over intimate and indigenous solutions involving dialogue with rural places. Whilst environmental investigation continues to publish photographic representations of dryland salinity to query this response, stereotypical photographs of pastoral landscape like Parish’s (and to a certain extent Woldendorp’s) continue to romanticise in the majority. These images maintain a “theory and practice of land use, a way of seeing and doing” (Giblett, n.d.) that reinforces old myths of maintaining how “the natural resource base upon which our nation is built” (Main, 2004) can be seen, even though the process is increasingly understood as non-renewable for the environment.

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9 Main (2004) elaborates to insist: “awareness of the intricacies and details of rural places is required before agriculture can be drawn into natural systems. Attention to ecological detail requires rejection of monological positions of mastery over land and the initiation of respectful dialogue with place.” See also Giblett 2004, pp. 205-221.
CONCLUSION

The work of Beresford et al. (2004) shows that the dryland salinity dilemma in the Wheatbelt is very much a contemporary, and increasingly social, problem yet there is a paucity of photographic investigation into the subject that isn’t science based. In the introduction to Lying about the landscape (1997, p. 9) editor Geoff Levitus laments that while contemporary issues may make for good art, landscape in general is seen as a conservative subject. Perhaps this is also true for landscape photography in Western Australia which continues to value the romantic nostalgia of the pastoral picturesque, when constructing representations of the Wheatbelt region.

However, theories exploring the relationship between culture and nature indicate the medium has the power to control meaning through representation. The appreciation of a new aesthetics of salt lands could be used to re-present its worth to the cultural sphere, documenting our intervention with nature. Greater cultural approval of these ‘in-between’ places, long ignored and feared as wastelands, could provide for a more balanced visual appreciation of the Wheatbelt as well as a reference for exploring how and why the salinity dilemma affects Western Australia. Investigation of this region also provides a visual companion to why fundamentals involving history, identity and agriculture need rethinking.10

Although it’s inevitable that a selection of my work conforms to the traditional modes of the picturesque, and perhaps sublime, my intent is that the subject-matter of dry land salinity will subvert these modes in a manner similar to Richard Misrach’s work, to evoke an uncanny response. For Misrach (1992, p.90), “the beauty of formal representation both carries an affirmation of life and subversively brings us face to face with news from our besieged world.” By subverting modes commonly incorporated into the romantic pastoral construct I have allowed a space for my project to subtly challenge the culturally acceptable rhetoric of working the land as resource and ignoring the destruction that it leaves behind.

10 Main (2004) supplies an alternative source of understanding: “Historical, cultural, and economic processes shaping destructive activity and blocking dialogue between people and rural places are the primary causes of ecological disorder in agricultural regions, not the absence of sophisticated western scientific knowledge or technological capacity.”
Plenty can be learned from the exploration of changing landscapes by American photographers like Robert Adams and Richard Misrach, to present the Wheatbelt in a new light. Both reveal the potential for local photographers to grapple with the burden of European traditions in the genre and also provide a structure for investigating areas of national identity, such as they’ve done within the American west.

The historical construction of national fictions and how they continue to pervade the cultural consciousness today reveals the dangers of self-delusion, and detriment to landscape that comes with such limiting constructs. In *The Weekend Australian*, Bernard Salt (2006, p. 2) concludes an article on the Australian persona with this sobering insight: “while we’re navel-gazing about our national character, we might well consider whether our uniquely Australian traits and values must always be positive.” The continued rising of Homer’s divine substance in the Wheatbelt strongly suggests they are not.
References


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