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Choreographies of Collapse:

Located and Unlocated Catastrophe in Works by Lucy Guerin, Garry Stewart and Meryl Tankard

Country is engrossing, puzzling, active, reactive, systematic, potentially endless but also prone to collapse.
— Ross Gibson, "Changescapes"

The nexus between space and place is a nodal point in thinking through the Australian colonial project, and this thinking has profound implications for Australian dance. Historically, British invaders attempted to overwrite the Indigenous concept of Country with the legal fiction of *terra nullius* — land belonging to no-one — that conveniently rendered First Nations occupants invisible and hence served to legitimize the colonial occupation of the continent. Whereas *terra nullius* proclaims the continent as empty space, the notion of Country encapsulates the deep, ongoing connection between Indigenous peoples and place. The fiction of *terra nullius* was legally overturned by the Mabo judgement, formalized in the *Native Title Act 1993*, yet the uneasy co-existence of First Nations concepts of Country with settler structures of land ownership and tenure continues to trouble, not just the legal system, but also the cultural imaginary. This vexed history has played out in Australian dance in complex ways, from early works encoding the Assimilationist policy of racial absorption and *de facto* cultural erasure, to the more recent emergence of Blakdance as a powerful articulation of Indigenous notions of place and rewriting of hitherto dominant narratives of history.

In this paper, I am interested in how contemporary white-settler choreographers in Australia negotiate this fraught relation of space to place. To this end, I examine three white settler choreographies that depict various kinds of spatial or environmental collapse: Lucy Guerin's *Structure and Sadness* (2006), Garry Stewart's *South* (2019*)*, and Meryl Tankard's *Inuk/Inuk 2* (1997/2008). All three works encode catastrophe in spatial

terms: *Structure and Sadness* memorializes the Westgate Bridge disaster in Melbourne in 1970; Stewart's *South* allegorizes the disastrous Mawson expedition to Antarctica in 1912-13 as a foreshadowing of contemporary environmental collapse, and Tankard's *Inuk* and the revised *Inuk 2* depict the intrinsic relation between climate collapse and social breakdown. I read these works as explorations of a specifically Australian settler anxiety about place that is predicated on a sense of our precariousness on this continent, both environmentally and ethically, but also as attempts to address what theorist Paul Carter has termed "the politics of the ground" (Carter 1996, 302).

In *The Lie of the Land*, Carter's seminal work on place in the Australian imaginary, he speaks of the "vocabularies of place" that are improvised in the process of suburban development as land is cleared, homes are built, families grow up and personal associations to locality are formed (Carter 1996, 1). This erasure of the features of the ground we build on results in a conception of the ground as "an ideally, flat space, whose billiard-table surface can be skated over in any direction without hindrance" (Carter 1996, 2). According to Carter, settler Australians have a precarious relation to land stemming from their cultural disposition to subjugate it:

> Our relationship to the land is, culturally speaking, paradoxical: for we appreciate it only in so far as it bows down to our will. Let the ground rise up to resist us, let it prove porous, spongey, rough, irregular — let it assert its native title, its right to maintain its traditional surfaces — and instantly our engineering instinct is to wipe it out; to lay our foundations on rationally-apprehensible level ground. … The monumentality of the places we create — our cities, harbours, highways, even our provincial cottages — is an attempt to arrest the ground, to prevent it slipping away from under our feet. We build in order to stabilize the ground, to provide ourselves with a secure place where we can stand and watch. But this suggestion that the ground is treacherous, unstable, inclined to give way, is the consequence of our own cultural dispositions to fly over the earth rather than to walk with it. (Carter 1996, 2)

He adds that our constructions invite a brittle conception of place; we fetishize our built environment because we "sense our ungroundedness, the fragility of our claim on the soil"; our constructed places are "in this sense, non-places" (Carter 1996, 2). The settler imperative to erase the particularities of the ground, to render it billiard table flat, so that we can "fly over" it and build upon it, results in a subjectivity without attachment to land. According to Carter, Indigenous peoples see colonialism as the result of Westerners having lost their dreaming, of having become a "people without a dreaming, without an attachment to land", who thereby become "machines for free movement" (Carter 1996, 364). Why else would they have left their own countries and invaded the lands of others?

In the Australian context, the rootlessness of the colonizers stands in stark contrast to the Indigenous attachment to place expressed in the concept of Country. This is a

complex philosophy that is only partially accessible to the non-Indigenous person but is outlined by Gumbaynggirr and Wiradjuri woman Margo Neale thus: "Country is central to everything Aboriginal: it is a continuum, without beginning or ending. In this worldview, everything is living — people, animals, plants, rocks, earth, water, stars, air and all else. There is no division between animate and inanimate" (Neale 2020, 1). She adds that "For us it is not land, but Country. Country is a worldview that encompasses our relationship to the physical, ancestral and spiritual dimensions" (Neale 2020, 5). Country is imbued with meaning: with the memories, histories and stories of all the beings who have ever traversed it. Furthermore, it has agency; according to the Gay'Wu Group of women:

> Country has awareness, it is not just a backdrop. It knows and is part of us. Country is our home land, but it is more than that. It is the seas and the waters, the rocks and the soils, the animals and winds and people too. It is the connections between those beings, and their dreams and emotions, their languages and their Law. ... It is all the feelings, the songs and ceremonies, the things we cannot understand and cannot touch, the things that go beyond us, that anchor us in eternity, in the infinite cycles of kinship, sharing and responsibility. (Gay'Wu Group of Women 2019, xxii)

As Rachel Swain, settler choreographer and co-artistic director of Australian intercultural dance company Marrageku, points out in her monograph *Dance in Contested Land,* the settler conception of land and the Indigenous conception of Country are radically incommensurate, presenting "fundamentally conflicting values underlying the conception of land as property and commodity versus land as an area under custodianship containing waterways and atmospheres and multiple living presences and events across time" (Swain 2020, 4).

What has all this to do with contemporary choreography? Dance scholar André Lepecki develops Carter's point when he asserts that in order to start an anti-colonialist discussion of the politics of the ground, we are required to identify discursive and kinetic practices that highlight "the body in motion as an extension of the terrain that sustains it" (Lepecki 2006, 100). He contends that "any politics of the ground is not only a political topography, but it is also a political kinesis" (Lepecki 2006, 100). That is to say, the body dances in dynamic relation to place, and to the specific structures of power in that place. Lepecki's call for an anti-colonialist discussion of the politics of the ground is taken up in the work of Australian dance scholar Rachel Fensham. Writing about white settler theatrical and choreographic representations and invocations of the Australian desert — the trope of the so-called "dead heart" (defined by the OED as "the largely uninhabited inland area of Australia"), Fensham has posited a poetics of falling, claiming, tripping and stumbling as characteristic of the subject in the Australian landscape. Fensham argues for a specifically local theorization of the subject's relation to space and place, claiming that "in order to perform the poetics of Australian space we need to consider spatial practices and bodily movement associated with a less certain trajectory" than

those advanced by European theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Gaston Bachelard. She argues that "it is through falling that a subject can experience the trajectory, not in a horizontal pathway, but through being a terrestrial, and belonging to the earth with all the responsibility that implies" (Fensham 2010, 209). Furthermore, "falling thus represents both a rupture and a shifting of perspective that re-establishes, an almost involuntary, opening towards the ground" (Fensham 2010, 210).

I would like to expand Fensham's poetics of falling into a poetics of collapse, both bodily and discursive, that invokes the troubled relationship of the settler subject to place. In examining the politics of the ground in the three works under review, I respond not only to Carter's notion of the non-place, and to Lepecki's claim that the body dances in relation to located structures of power, but also to Swain's contention that an "ethics of relationship with place and other species" is not "restricted to the purview and responsibility of Indigenous art and dance" (Swain 2020, 10). Rather, she throws down the gauntlet to white settler choreographers to "understand that a subjectivity without an attachment to land in Australia should not be accepted as the status quo or something neutral", rather, it should be seen as "an active brutal stance, deeply informed by the white blindness and institutionalised national racism that sustain colonialism" (Swain 2020, 10-11). In the analysis that follows, I compare two works that are emphatically emplaced, Guerin's *Structure and Sadness* and Stewart's *South*, with Tankard's *Inuk/Inuk 2*, a work that explores the implications of placelessness, and examine their articulation of relationship to place. While the narrative structure of these works — with the exception of Tankard's — are atypical of the choreographers in question, they have been selected for analysis because of their engagement with the notion of place as storied, or non-storied. I watched each of these works in live performance initially, then repeatedly on archival footage supplied by the choreographers.

Structure and Sadness

Twice as long and much higher than the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Westgate Bridge is now part of the Melbourne landscape. Traversing the Yarra River, it facilitates travel between the CBD, the western suburbs of Melbourne and Geelong, and has become one of the busiest thoroughfares in Australia. The construction of the bridge started in 1968, but two years after building commenced a large span of the bridge collapsed, falling fifty metres into the water below and killing thirty-five construction workers. Eighteen others were critically injured. The huge mass of falling concrete and metal sparked a fire, which burned for several days, and the impact and explosion could be heard from miles away. The Royal Commission investigating the catastrophe unveiled many causative factors, as well as revealing that prior to the collapse, the construction workers had discovered that the construction firm had a history of industrial accidents, but their warnings were unheeded. The recommendations of the Royal Commission fundamentally changed the

Australian industrial landscape, creating new regulations around engineering oversight of construction, worker safety and worker inclusion in safety oversight committees.[1]

But for the dead and their families, and for the surviving workers, these were cold and belated comforts. Five days after the bridge collapsed the whole project was put on hold, and those workers who had survived were sacked and given a week's wages; they spent the next few months unemployed and attending the funerals of their workmates. Of the thirty-five that died, only thirty-two bodies were ever recovered. It's been remarked that every time we drive over the bridge, we drive over their unclaimed bodies.

To this day, the West Gate Bridge collapse remains the deadliest industrial accident in Australian history, so it is perhaps unsurprising that it has been memorialized, albeit in small ways. There is a small, dilapidated memorial park under one of the bridge pylons, with a burnished plaque listing the names of the men killed. Memorial services have been held here at irregular intervals. Several exhibitions have been mounted about the disaster, and it has been the subject of a play, Vicki Reynold's, *The Bridge*, and a novel, Enza Gandolfo's *The Bridge*, shortlisted for the Stella Prize 2019. The bridge itself has come to have something of a haunted afterlife: for decades it was a suicide hotspot, with numerous despairing souls climbing over its balustrades to leap to their deaths. The horrific murder of four-year old Darcy Freeman, thrown off the bridge on 29 January 2009 by her father in an act of revenge against his ex-wife, finally spurred the authorities to act, and high barriers were installed along the length of the bridge later that year. Yet, despite its terrible history and the small acts of memorialization noted above, the catastrophe of its construction is largely unremembered, fallen from national and even local consciousness.

An industrial accident seems an unlikely premise for a dance work, but for Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin, who had come back to establish her own company in Melbourne after a number of years dancing and choreographing in the U.S.A, the story of the bridge's collapse and its tragic human consequences was utterly compelling. Although she has her roots deep in the non-narrative dance scene of 1980-1990s New York and is often considered a postmodern choreographer, Guerin's work always refers to something "beyond the purely physical" (Rothfield 2014, 50). According to Philipa Rothfield:

> Guerin does not use movement to reflect reality, as such. Rather, she borrows from the real as a way of generating material. In other words, while Guerin does not aim to mirror the world, she does draw on aspects of reality in her work, so her movement creation has two sources of inspiration, the body and the world. … This allows Guerin to create work that has content (is about something) but is also non-literal. (Rothfield 2014, 50)

Her response to the 'real' of the Westgate Bridge collapse has a tripartite structure. The opening section represents the construction of the bridge, the middle section its collapse, and the final section its reconstruction.

The work opens in darkness, then light slowly picks out a male dancer lying on the floor manipulating a length of perforated cardboard. Upon standing, he makes a variety of shapes with it, draping himself over the arch of cardboard as if over a bridge. He then starts to build a house of cards from some sturdy V-shaped cards lying on the floor. He balances precariously on the first layer of cards, establishing a mood of danger and instability that resonates across the whole work. Other dancers join him, adding ever more cards of various sizes to create a large structure that stretches right across the stage. Initially it extends linearly across the floor, but eventually it grows vertically as larger cards are added by dancers mounted on a ladder so that it finally resembles a tower surrounded by outbuildings.

Meanwhile, the three male and three female dancers engage in a series of duets, trios and ensemble passages. These echo the motif of construction, with the dancers making geometric shapes, exploring weight and counterweight as they lean and press on each other, at other times swaying in unison or in counterpoint. Various props are brought into play: wooden sticks and elastic bands connect bodies, testing the limits of balance. The movement encompasses contemporary, contact improvisation and ballet, exploring the geometry of the body via planks, rigid arms and angular leans, which then collapse and dangle. A long flexible wooden plank is carried downstage and placed on a fulcrum in front of the now dimly lit structure. Four of the dancers place themselves in the centre, shifting their combined weight so that it see-saws slowly. When a male steps onto the end, they shift to the other end, and he swings his body over and under the plank. When only one dancer remains at each end, their shifting weigh presses the plank into his supine body. Finally, one steps off, triggering a domino effect that causes the house of cards to collapse thunderously. Blackout.
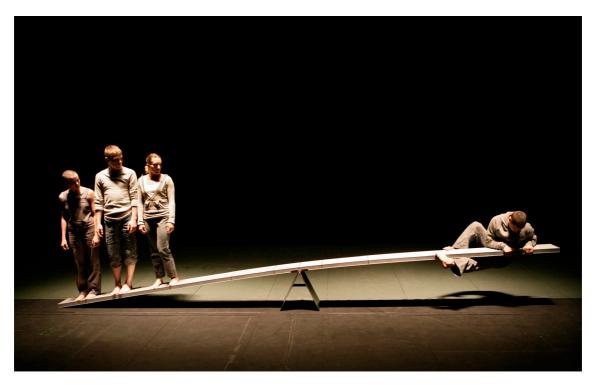
Figure 1. *Structure and Sadness.* Lucy Guerin. Photograph: Jeff Busby.

Figure 2. *Structure and Sadness.* Lucy Guerin. Photograph: Jeff Busby.

Neon light rods appear across the backdrop, then the stage lights fade up as we see two female dancers in long black skirts stepping onto the plank, now positioned upstage. Three male dancers roll under and over the plank. A woman is picked out by a downspot downstage washing dishes, singing along unselfconsciously to a tinny pop song on the radio. The two women on the plank wail and move their torsos like a Greek chorus when the radio broadcast is interrupted by the news announcement of the bridge's collapse. All six dancers move from stage left to stage right: the dishwashing woman, presumably partner to a worker on the bridge, expressing her grief in convulsive movements of arms and torso. In the detritus of the bridge's collapse — the cards scattered across the stage — the three couples duet slowly, the women lying passively on the ground as the men step over their bodies and manipulate them with their feet. The women arise, and the men move through them, swaying and teetering. The soundscape gathers pace as the women become more energized, while the men are now dangling ominously over pieces of bowed cardboard before collapsing onto the floor. The clean-up begins with all dancers shifting the cards upstage. Two male dancers are connected by an elastic, one dragging the other's passive body as if dredging it up from the water.

The final section has the dancers re-appear in street clothes. Percussive industrial "noises generate an upbeat mood as a male-female duet re-iterates the architectural motifs from the beginning of the piece, while the remaining cast creates the outline of a bridge across the backdrop using the light rods. Electric guitar introduces a plangent note, as pairs of dancers execute a complex canon. The implication of this mood change is that despite the tragedy, life goes on. However, the ending pushes us onto another emotional plane. The music is replaced by the sound of breathing, and the long plank is placed on top of the prone bodies of four of the dancers. As the light fades, a dancer walks slowly along the plank pressing down on their inert bodies.

This devastating final image lingers long in the memory. It makes explicit the need not only to rebuild but to remember. The final image of the living walking over the bodies of the dead brings the tragedy back into consciousness, dredging it up from the depths of collective memory. Just as the bodies of the dead are buried beneath the rubble of the collapsed bridge span, now deeply underwater, their stories too are buried by our collective forgetting. Nevertheless, their stories are, Guerin intimates, embedded in place. On one level, Guerin's choice to end the work with this image of the dead compressed under the weight of the living resonates with the Indigenous idea of Country as containing "multiple living presences and events across time" (Swain 2020, 4). Guerin made this work in 2006, thirty-six years after the bridge's collapse, by which time the inhabitants of Melbourne were well accustomed to driving over the Westgate Bridge without giving its history any thought. But the poignant interplay of structural and emotional collapse in her choreography re-asserts that the story, although buried, is still irrevocably located in place, despite the passing of time.

Guerin's insistence on 're-storying' place also resonates with Ross Gibson's formulation of the Australian badland. Gibson argues that the American trope of the 'Badlands' arose

"in response to a dreadful sense of insufficiency felt by Europeans forging into the more 'savage' parts of the New World" (Gibson 2002, 13). More latterly, the term has come to signify any location haunted by past events. 'Badlands', he argues, "are made by imaginations that are prompted by narratives. A badland is a narrative thing set in a natural location. A place you can actually visit; it is also laid out eerily by your mind before you get there" (Gibson 2002, 15). Although all cultures contain forbidden spaces, he claims that there is a specifically colonial subtext to the badland; the very designation of a badland allows citizens to admit "that a pre-colonial kind of 'savagery' lingers inside the colony even though most of the country has been tamed for husbandry and profit"' (Gibson 2002, 15). A badland does not eliminate savagery, but "encysts" it in order to persuade citizens that "unruliness can be simultaneously acknowledged and ignored" (Gibson 2002, 15).

While *Structure and Sadness* makes no mention of the dispossession of the Traditional Owners of Melbourne/Naarm, the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong/Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, in bringing the story of the bridge's collapse back into collective memory, it signals acknowledgment that all places have a history or histories. The erasure from official history of the dispossession of the Indigenous custodians is echoed in the subsequent erasure of the bridge's collapse from collective memory: if we think of it in Gibson's terms, the site of the Westgate Bridge is a badland where bad things are bound to happen. Moreover, in directing our attention to the ground and all that has taken place upon it, *Structure and Sadness* functions as a mnemonic for the notion that all ground is storied, despite the collective will to forget. The work underlines the precariousness of structures that can at any moment collapse beneath us: the ground does not so much "rise up to resist us" as in Carter's formulation, but rather asserts its 'native title' to forewarn us that stolen ground is "treacherous, unstable, inclined to give way" (Carter 1996, 2).

South

Garry Stewart's *South* similarly insists that all places are marked by story, but in this case, the work marks the trajectory from non-place to place. *South* was made towards the end of his tenure as Artistic Director of Australian Dance Theatre, premiering in 2019 as part of a double bill, *North/South.* Each of the works had a polar setting: Norwegian choreographer Ina Christel Johannsen's *North* depicts a diverse set of characters interacting in a bus station in the Polar Circle, whereas *South* is a narrative of Australian explorer Douglas Mawson's doomed expedition in Antarctica in 1912-13. Stewart draws heavily on Mawson's documentation of this expedition in his book, *The Home of The Blizzard* (1915), which was condensed into a single volume in its second edition (1930) and became a best-seller in the 1930s. Mawson was a geologist by training, based at Adelaide University, and recruited by Ernest Shackleton for his 1908 ascent of Mt Cerberus, the only active volcano in Antarctica, and for his 1909 expedition to the South Magnetic pole. Mawson's participation in this latter expedition, which covered a journey

of 1,260 miles across Antarctic terrain with no outside support, caused its leader Edgar David to describe him as "a man of infinite resources, splendid spirit, marvellous physique and an indifference to frost and cold that was astonishing — all the attributes of a great explorer" (Fiennes 2010, viii).

These attributes were sorely tested by the Australasian Antarctic expedition that Mawson led in 1912-13 to map and gather scientific data along a 2000 mile-long stretch of Antarctic coast due south of Australia, west of the region mapped by Scott and Shackleton on previous expeditions (Mawson 2010, 1). Further aims of the expedition included mapping the seabed between Australia and Antarctica, and gathering scientific data on Macquarie Island, which was visited on the way to the Southern continent. The area turned out to be among the most inhospitable places on earth, its sub-freezing temperatures made even more difficult to withstand because "year-long windstorms of unprecedented ferocity" rendered it a "uniquely hellish territory" (Fiennes 2010, viii). Mawson's team was comprised mainly of young men who had graduated from Commonwealth universities, with several exceptions, including Swiss expert skier and mountaineer Xavier Mertz, and British Army Officer Belgrave Edward Ninnis. After base camp had been established, and much scientific data collected, both men accompanied Mawson on the Far Eastern Party expedition which left base camp in November 1912 to survey the area known as King George V land. Although the trip went well at first, catastrophe struck when Ninnis and his pack of dogs fell to their deaths in a glacial crevasse, taking the tent and the bulk of the food with them. After this disaster, Mawson and Mertz aborted the trek and headed back to base camp; however, they were forced to kill the remaining dogs one by one to eat them. Both suffered terribly from cold, hunger and the effects of malnutrition. Mertz, apparently poisoned by eating the dogs' livers which were toxically high in Vitamin A, became seriously ill, then delirious, dying on the seventh of January. The starving Mawson was now forced to trek the 100 miles back to base camp alone, surviving several falls into crevasses and returning in an appallingly debilitated state. He got back to base to find the ship taking his party back to Australia had already left, forcing him to spend the remainder of the year in Antarctica with several others who had stayed behind in the hope of his return (Mawson 2010, 136-203).

With a running length of approximately forty minutes, *South* conveys the disastrous events of the Far Eastern Expedition in a highly condensed form. The propulsive score by Brendan Woithe, combined with Damien Cooper's white and blue lighting and designer Wendy Todd's moveable white cubes, create an abstract rendition of the merciless polar landscape. The work opens to the crashing sound of ice breaking, as side lighting picks out a solitary figure standing atop a platform. Dressed in blue pants and a white and pale blue knitted helmet that covers his shoulders, Mawson drags a sled behind him, dry ice and strobe lighting conveying the blizzard that envelops him. This opening scene of Mawson atop a plateau, peering ahead, shielding his face against the ferocious wind, gesturing futilely for help and finally crouching in defeat, foreshadows the narrative of disaster yet to unfold.

Mawson's solo segues into an ensemble passage in which he is joined by four dancers, all dressed in similar polar outfits. As the music shifts to a driving, percussive mode, gestural movements convey the hard daily work of pulling, dragging and lifting, of facing the onslaught of the weather, of tying things down and of surveying and mapping the landscape. Abstract renditions of boulders, plateaus, mountains and crevasses are created by the dancers, now joined by four others, who divide the platform into cubes that they push around the stage, with the motif of danger established as they swing from and jump between them. The movement vocabulary eschews Stewart's usual hyper-virtuosity and is largely comprised of angular staccato movements of the upper body to convey the physical effort of climbing over boulders, heaving oneself out of crevasses and pulling sleds, interspersed with moments of collapse to the ground.

Two dancers are atop a two-metre-high platform, when one abruptly falls backwards, signifying the harrowing moment when Ninnis falls to his death. The instability of the icy ground, illustrating Carter's notion of it as "treacherous, unstable, inclined to give way" (Carter 1996, 2), is brought home as his companion now repeatedly teeters, falls, then climbs back up as the cubes move unpredictably under his feet. Another dancer tumbles and thrashes on the ground; this motif of bodily collapse is echoed as the entire cast now throw themselves across a line of cubes upstage.

As menacing music gives way to the ambient soundscape of the Antarctic, Mawson and the other surviving member of the Far Eastern Party, Xavier Mertz, enact a duet of mutual aid as they attempt to return to base camp after the catastrophic death of Ninnis. The ensemble joins them in an extended rope sequence that depicts the tenuous hold of humans in such inhospitable terrain. The dancers ravel and unravel themselves in the rope, lean out at precarious angles, are dragged along and carried aloft, and repeatedly collapse to the ground, suggesting that a mere thread separates them from disaster.

Figure 3. *South*. Garry Stewart. Photograph: Daniel Boud.

The focus shifts to Mawson and Mertz together on a single moving cube, with an eery vocal soundtrack and dimmed lighting presaging coming events. As if mimicking the structure of snowflakes, cubes are twirled on their axes, while the ensemble creates an unfolding mosaic of geometric shapes with their arms. Mertz now becomes increasingly frail and delirious, with Mawson attempting to care for him. In almost total darkness, with just a side light illuminating the pair, we see Mawson dragging Mertz onto a sled as he suffers a series of seizures. Mawson cradles the now unconscious Mertz in his arms as the other dancers illuminate the pair with hand-held lights. When Mertz is buried in one of the cubes, Mawson is left alone in the icy wilderness. The cubes are forcefully thrust about the stage as the sound of crashing ice returns. At the end, a single cube is dragged onstage, from which the quivering, naked Mawson emerges. He curls up on top of it and is slowly drizzled with a black oily mist from above. As the stage darkens, he stands next to the cube, legs akimbo, while text is projected on the backcloth to the clacking of a manual typewriter:

> One is in the midst of infinities.
> The infinity of the dazzling white plateau,
> the infinity of the dome above,
> the infinity of the time past since these things had birth.
> We are in the midst of the illimitable.

Figure 4. *South*. Garry Stewart. Photograph: Daniel Boud.

How are we to read this final image in the light of the work as a whole? In his programme notes, Stewart writes that *South* depicts Mawson's journey as "an allegory for our times as humans contend with extreme forces of nature" and that his explorations "mark the commencement of the despoilation of this environment and situate Antarctica as a highly politicised and contested space in the 21st century" (Stewart 2019, 3). The projected text, extracted from Mawson's *The Home of the Blizzard*, depicts the Antarctic in terms of the Burkean sublime: dazzlingly infinite in time and space. But Mawson's mapping of the Antarctic, as Stewart suggests in his programme note, marks the beginning of human attempts to domesticate this infinitude, to render its endless space — a true *terra nullius*, inhabited only by seals, penguins and sea birds — into manageable place.

There are many lyrical passages in *The Home of the Blizzard* that extol the beauty of the natural environment, but these co-exist with speculations of a far more instrumental kind. Undoubtedly, Mawson perceived the expedition as a colonizing endeavor as much as a scientific one. He was adamant that the expedition be supported by Australia, and be overwhelmingly manned by Australians, writing:

> For many reasons, I was desirous that the Expedition be maintained by Australia. It seemed to me that here was an opportunity to prove that the young men of a young country could rise to those traditions which have made the history of British Polar exploration one of triumphant

endeavour, as well as of tragic sacrifice. And so I was privileged to rally
the "sons of the younger son." (Mawson 2010, xviii)

The newly independent nation of Australia, so recently a colony, he intimates, could now prove itself a colonizer in turn: it, too, could convert 'non-places' or unmapped space into exploitable place. Moreover, although he states that the main impetus for the Expedition was gathering scientific data and mapping, he foresees the economic benefits that may obtain in future, arguing:

> the advance of science is attended by a corresponding increase in the creature comforts of man. Again, from an economic aspect, the frozen south may not attract immediate attention. But who can say what a train of enterprise the future may bring? … Even now much can be said in regard to the possibilities offered by the Antarctic regions for economic development, but, year by year, the outlook will widen, since man is constantly resorting to subtler and more ingenious artifice in applying Nature's resources. (Mawson 2010, xxviii-xxix)

Whereas the work's narrative arc follows the heroic endeavor of the explorers, the final image enacts a dramatic shift in focus to reveal the political subtext of the expedition, and to foreshadow its ecological implications. Mawson may appear as naked and innocent as Adam in the Garden, but when bespattered with oil, he embodies the unavoidable truth that exploration is inextricable from despoilation. The Antarctic ground is treacherous and inclined to give way, as Ninnis found out, but its exploration and mapping is a political act by which 'illimitable' space is transformed into exploitable place. Stewart's work thereby reveals the politics of the ground underpinning one of Australia's most famed narratives of heroic survival, and the colonizing impulse that transmutes unmapped space into place.

Inuk 2

Meryl Tankard's full-length work, *Inuk* (explained in the programme as the word for "Human being" in Inuit language), was created for Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre (MTADT) in 1997, during her tenure as Artistic Director (1993-99). Whereas her previous works for the company such as *Furioso*, *Songs with Mara*, *Aurora*, and *Possessed* had been rapturously received by both press and public, *Inuk* met with a mixed response. On the one hand, Jill Sykes described it as "empty" despite "brilliant sparks of boldly theatrical choreography" (Sykes 1997), and Alan Brissenden criticized the work's length and repetitiveness (Brissenden 1997). On the other hand, writing in response to these criticisms, Noel Purdon argued that *Inuk* is a "gift", a "meditation on the state of the planet that would dazzle New York" but has been met in Adelaide with incomprehension because it "lacks narrative" (Purdon 1997). These polarised responses are reflected in the works' subsequent history. Tankard's application to tour it nationally

was turned down by the national *Playing Australia* programme; however, when she showed it at the prestigious Internationales Sommertheater Festival in Hamburg in August 1997, it was awarded the Mobil Pegasus Award for Best Production in the Festival. In the citation, the judges wrote that "Inuk was a finely crafted and artistically precise composition" that painted "a subtly multifaceted picture of our times" (cited in Bennie 1997). Tankard recreated the work on Sydney Dance Company in 2008, when asked to step in at short notice upon the sudden death of newly appointed Artistic Director, Tanja Liedtke. *Inuk 2* featured an enlarged cast of sixteen from the original eleven and differed in other notable ways. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on *Inuk 2*, because it articulates anxieties about place and placelessness most clearly.

Although *Inuk 2* runs as a continuous whole, there are three distinct sections. The work begins with a darkened stage, over which a mesh of projected white lines shows up as body markings on the dancers as they appear one by one. To the extraordinary sounds of female Inuit breath singing, several women cross the stage, making hunting gestures. A powerfully muscled woman stands centre stage, baring a votive light above her head, and is circled by another woman running. A series of men appear, each dancing alone, until a man grabs a woman by the feet and swings her around, her dress pulling up revealing her underwear in a manner that feels like a sexual violation.

Figure 5. *Inuk 2*. Meryl Tankard. Photograph: Régis Lansac.

The lights come up to reveal the stage marked like an airport runway, with a giant billboard depicting a blue sky traversed by clouds as backdrop. As the vocals increase in tempo, the mood abruptly shifts to one of playfulness. Sixteen dancers are seated in large circle around the stage. Successive pairs get up and run to the centre, where they

bang chests like bucks, play fight, throw each over their shoulders, or to the ground. Individuals run outside the circle, or leapfrog over those still sitting. It seems we are in a children's playground for adults, or a group ritual of one-up-man-ship, in which the sexes are combative but equal. When a male dancer throws a woman to the ground and poses over her prone body flexing his muscles, the woman is quick to jump up and flex hers in turn. The play-acted violence is comic book but frenetic, and eventually they fall to the floor exhausted, with a single woman left sitting cross legged centre stage.

Figure 6. *Inuk 2*. Meryl Tankard. Photograph: Régis Lansac.

The stage is now bathed in violet lighting and the pace slows. Forming couples, the men hold the women's bodies horizontally in front of their own bodies like planks, then the women reciprocate. There are moments of dominance and moments of submission, but the sexes are evenly balanced, with the women playfighting and posturing as aggressively as the men. The tempo speeds up, and alternating solos and ensemble passages feature much jumping and fast turns into the floor along with finely delineated flicking movements of the upper body. The section ends with two solos: the first by a female dancer is slow and languorous, with watery projections across the backdrop. The second is a more muscular and energetic, again accompanied by Inuit singing.

If, as Gabriele Klein asserts, choreography is a form of world making, the viewer of this first section is impelled to ask, *what world is this*? (Klein 2011). Literary theorist Brian McHale claims that the foregrounding of this question is a marker of postmodernity: the

postmodern work or text thrusts the viewer or reader into a world that unsettles preconceptions and broaches boundaries (McHale 1997). While Tankard is by no means a postmodern choreographer, her work speaks to the conditions of postmodernity here. This is evidenced by the jarring juxtaposition of the airport runway markings, signifying the hyper-mobility of postmodernity, with the projected body markings of the opening passage and the exuberant ritualized play that follows, which seem to indicate a pre-modern social structure of rootedness and stability. The costuming is unmarked, with the bare-chested men wearing tight pants and the women in short shifts or crop tops and miniskirts, thus providing no sense of temporal or geographic location. The eclectic score draws on both contemporary and traditional idioms; while it is heavily weighted to the vocal music of traditional societies, with pieces from the Inuit, from Brazil, Norway and Tuva, it also draws on the postmodern music of Meredith Monk. By way of introducing the imaginative world of the work, Tankard's short poem in the program reads:

> five hours in a bedroom of the transit hotel at Singapore airport
> a window overlooking
> the plane's parking area:
> "20th century concrete tribal hieroglyphs"
> an oil stained runway
> leaving home, coming home, what is home?
> a bill board with a painted sky courtesy of …

Are we to read this section as a postmodern ritual asserting connection to a hypothesized home, as the performative creation of a place of belonging in the face of the hyper-transience and mobility of postmodernity?

Figure 7. *Inuk 2*. Meryl Tankard. Photograph: Régis Lansac.

If this is the case, then the second section fractures this tenuous and constructed sense of emplacement. A line up of the eight men, now in stylized contemporary street clothes, advances forward while making accentuated grasping and flicking movements of the hands. A row of female dancers gyrates in front of them in a highly sexualized display, all dressed in high heeled boots, some in the costumes from the first section but one in a skimpy leopard-skin print bikini. An extended partnering passage between the heterosexual couples follows, alternating with displays of virtuosic machismo as the men perform acrobatics for each other and a male trio performs vignettes of oscillating homoerotic desire and violence. The development of a gendered power imbalance is further evidenced by a gut-wrenching interaction in which a teetering, drunken woman is verbally and physically dominated and abused by an aggressive man. She slips and falls repeatedly to the floor as he screams orders at her to get up. The blue sky on the billboard becomes increasingly disfigured, with projections of power station smokestacks and giant industrial machinery portending ecological collapse. Rubbish blows across the stage, driven by men wielding industrial leaf-blowers and the interactions between the ensemble become violent. Individuals dance or stand alone, atomized in a hellscape. The woman previously abused now dances an elegiac solo in which she repeatedly jumps, collapses to the floor and pulls herself up again to Nina Simone's "Ne me quitte pas" as another female dancer runs around the perimeter of the stage, taking us back to the opening section.

The unexpectedly comedic coda, after the dancers have taken their bows, has the Stage Manager walking onstage complaining to the dancers about the rubbish they have left

behind. An orange plastic sheet is spread across the stage as he berates them about leaving half-drunk water bottles in the wings and recites a public messaging jingle about not wasting water. The dancers return to the stage, the men now dressed in the women's costumes and vice versa, to the sounds of the Squirrel Nut Zippers' "Blue Angel" and "Hell", and a giant water fight ensues. The chorus of "Hell" — "In the afterlife you could be headed for some serious strife/ now you make the scene all day, but tomorrow there will be hell to pay", is projected on the backdrop while the dancers slip and slide across the wet floor with much hilarity.

How are we to read the second and third sections in relation to the first? Whereas the first invokes a social structure characterised by a sense of rootedness, mutuality and sexual equality, the second transitions to a world of extreme sexual differentiation, gendered violence and ecological destruction. Tankard's pairing of gendered oppression with ecological crisis resonates strongly with eco-feminist theory, most notably with the work of Australian philosopher Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, in which Plumwood argues that the dualistic 'logic of the master' which structures the world through binary oppositions between nature/culture, man/woman, master/slave, mind/body, and so forth, underpins the oppression of women, colonization and the destruction of the natural world. Western philosophy since Plato has aligned women with nature, slaves and non-rational others thereby naturalizing patriarchal domination and legitimizing imperial conquest (Plumwood 1993). *Inuk 2's* depiction of the devastation of the natural world — all that remains of the sky is its facsimile on a billboard — as simultaneous with the patriarchal domination of women, powerfully illustrates Plumwood's argument. The coda comments on the consequences, albeit comedically, of the inevitable end point of this logic of domination, as the natural world is destroyed and water scarce, with the words of the song "In the afterlife, you could be headed for some serious strife/ now you make the scene all day, but tomorrow there will be hell to pay", contrasting with the slapstick of the water fight.

But the work also depicts the transformation of place, or *topia*, in which there is a sense of kinship and connection, to a no-place, an *atopia* in which atomized individuals act out scenarios of loss and degradation. This accords with the critique of globalization as articulated by critics such as Arturo Escobar, who argue that "the development experience has meant for most people a sundering of local life from place" (Escobar 2001, 141) and that indeed, "placelessness has become the essential feature of the modern condition" (Escobar 2001, 140). While the first section depicts an integrated society surviving in a transitional place, as signified by the runway markings, in the second, even this transitional place has given way to a non-place in which social bonds have disintegrated. The dancers wander in a destroyed world, reminiscent of Carter's argument that Westerners have become a "people without a dreaming, without an attachment to land" (Carter 1996, 364).

Conclusion

As I have shown, these three works anatomize collapse variously in structural, bodily, psychological or topographical terms, but all articulate the need to explore Lepecki's politics of the ground in the Australian context. While none reference the history of colonial dispossession, all engage with a settler, or in the case of *South*, a settler colonizing, relationship to place and illustrate how precarious our claim on the land is. These works, I argue, speak to Swain's call for settler dance artists to develop an "ethics of relationships with place" in their work (Swain 2020, 10). The emphatically emplaced *Structure and Sadness* and *South* are both underpinned by a notion of place as storied, whereas Tankard's *Inuk/Inuk 2* presciently explores the devastating implications of the destruction or 'de-storying' of place, and of placelessness as the condition of postmodernity and the Anthropocene. As noted, Fensham has argued that falling represents "a shifting of perspective that re-establishes, an almost involuntary, opening towards the ground" (Fensham 2010, 210). I extend Fensham's claim in arguing that the trope of collapse — which is falling, writ large — articulated in these works represents an acknowledgement of the troubled nature of settler relationships to the ground and to place in the Australian imaginary.

Notes

1. For more on the West Gate Bridge collapse and the aftermath for Australian industrial relations, see the holdings of the National Film and Sound Archive (https://www.nfsa.gov.au/latest/west-gate-bridge-disaster-1970).

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