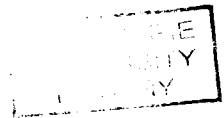


# **A Cultural Poetics of Contemporary Tasmanian Gothic**

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis seeks to map the contemporary cultural expressions of a Tasmanian gothic imaginary. Since the beginnings of convict transportation to Van Diemen's Land in 1803, Australia's only island state has been imagined as a dreaded hell-hole at the 'end of the world.' The historic legacies of convictism and Indigenous violence have weighed heavily on Tasmania, appearing to haunt the state incessantly, and meld with its dark, dramatic natural landscapes and its formidable weather.

This thesis avers that expressions of a Tasmanian gothic are to be found beyond the domain of literature and film in a broader cultural imaginary mobilised by a range of media and everyday cultural interactions. Tasmanian gothic is a shifting cultural mode that is practised and performed, felt and experienced in a range of cultural narratives and spaces. Yet despite the popularity of the label, the critical literature on contemporary Tasmanian gothic is small and sporadic. Little sustained scholarly work has been done on the topic since the period from the late 1980s through to the early 1990s, and the phrase is more likely to be delivered as a throwaway comment or as a piece of journalistic 'hype' than subject to sustained academic treatment. This thesis seeks to redress this lack of scholarly attention and thereby contribute to the academic fields of Australian cultural studies and, within that, Australian gothic studies and the embryonic field of Tasmanian cultural studies.

In negotiating the space between geographical terrain and cultural imaginaries, the thesis writes out of the gothic mode in order to mine the aesthetics of darkness that pervade the island state, with its accompanying affective states of fear and discomfort, melancholia and horror. In its performance of a 'cultural poetics' – a

term derived from Stephen Greenblatt and Kathleen Stewart – this thesis encounters the gothic in a range of seemingly trivial and overlooked aspects of culture, and provides a tour through the mysterious, the alien, the abject, the secret and forbidden, the subterranean, and the grotesquely humorous in the state. This thesis suggests that the Tasmanian gothic, as a cultural mode, reflects and shapes the complex ways in which myth and history meld in Tasmania, articulating the state's current anxieties about its shameful histories and geographic isolation. Through its exploration of the material and affective dimensions of the Tasmanian gothic, the thesis suggests that Tasmanian gothic performs a wider national duty of allowing mainland Australia to be figured as 'good' by dint of its othering of Tasmania as 'bad'.

## **Statement**

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled 'A Cultural Poetics of Contemporary Tasmanian Gothic' has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree to any other university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

The research presented in this thesis was approved by Macquarie University Ethics Review Committee, reference number, HE23NOV2007-D05560 on 19 December 2007.

Emily Bullock

August 2009

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There is the Tasmanian light, and then, all over the island, there are pockets of extraordinary darkness.

Nicholas Shakespeare, *In Tasmania*, 2004.

God's unevaporated tear,  
 Named for the Devil from the start,  
 The ineluctably sad isle,  
 Melancholic, alcoholic  
 From genocide and convict days  
 Contaminates my blood as song,  
 A bitter, soul-dark, harsh complaint.

Graeme Hetherington, 'West Coast, Tasmania (10)', *Life Given*, 2002.

We were taking this haunted house tour in tassie, and me and my cousin went in first, and we saw this figure standing there. we screamed and ran out then we both couldn't handle going back in there, even when the person with the lantern told us there was no one in there. another time we stopped over in the car while my dad made a call, and we stepped outside. we could see these strange lights off in the distance, hovering over the bush, flitting left and right. then dad turned the car on and they just disappeared.

Anonymous blog, NineMSN