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Ob-scene Spaces
in Australian Narrative

An Account of the Socio-topographic Construction of Space in Australian Literature

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Pablo Armellino

1 Introduction:
Obscene Settings

'Obscene' is a word that evokes repugnance and is generally associated with deviance, violence and perverse sexuality. The unpleasantness of such material suggests an inherent difficulty in dealing with the subject: talking about obscenity implies voicing the unspeakable and uncovering undesirable truths. Using the *MLA International Bibliography* to run a search for the term 'obscene' (as 'subject' and using the wildcard '*') returns a large number of entries (347 as of the 23 of August 2006) ranging in topic from censorship to the linguistic use of coarse language and from violence to pornography. Yet, most of these studies are concerned with the mechanisms leading to the suppression of obscenity (censorship), not the obscene material itself. This suggests that obscenity has an intrinsic place in our culture: due to its alleged offensiveness, it is ostracized as far as possible beyond the reach of our daily life. Using simple logical inference, one might assume that if obscenity is actively displaced, it must also have a place. This is a very appealing idea, and only recently the *Oxford English Dictionary* proceeded to clarify the possible etymology and the meaning of 'obscene.' The second edition of the *OED* (1989) states:

> obscene, a.
> […] [ad. L. *obscēnus*, *obscænus* adverse, inauspicious, ill-omened; transf. abominable, disgusting, filthy, indecent: of doubtful etymology. Perh. immed. after F. *obscène* (1560 in Godef. *Compl.*).]
> 1. Offensive to the senses, or to taste or refinement; disgusting, repulsive, filthy, foul, abominable, loathsome. […]
> 2. Offensive to modesty or decency; expressing or suggesting unchaste or lustful ideas; impure, indecent, lewd. †*obscene parts*, privy parts (*obs*.). […]
> 3. Ill-omened, inauspicious. (A Latinism.) *Obs*. […] (*The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed.*, 656)

Although the definitions of the word do not suggest it has any relationship to spatiality, its doubtful etymology does not prevent the reader from assuming that it has a close relationship with the word 'scene' and, therefore, is a derivative of the Latin word *scaena*. This word, although unchanged in the 1993 and 1997 Additions Series, is given a new definition in the *OED online*, which offers a preview of the draft entries for the forthcoming third edition.

> obscene, a.
> [<Middle French, French *obscène* indecent, offensive (1534; a1592 as *obscœne* (Montaigne)) and its etymon classical Latin *obscēnus*, *obscaenus* inauspicious, ill-omened, filthy, disgusting, indecent, lewd < ob- OB- + a second element of uncertain origin (see note). Cf. slightly earlier OBSCENITY n., OBSCENOUS a.
> Classical Latin *obscēnus*, *obscaenus* has been variously associated, by scholars ancient and modern, with *scaevus* left-sided, inauspicious (see SCÆVITY n.) and with *caenum* mud, filth (see CŒNOSE a.). The derivation from *scaena* SCENE n., one of several suggested by the Latin grammarian Varro, prob. represents a folk etymology.]
> 1. Offensively or grossly indecent, lewd; (*Law*) (of a publication) tending to deprave and corrupt those who are likely to read, see, or hear the contents. […]
> †**parts obscene** [after classical Latin *parts obscēnae*], the genitals; also in *sing.* (*obs.*).
> 2. Offending against moral principles, repugnant; repulsive, foul, loathsome. Now (also): *spec.* (of a price, sum of money, etc.) ridiculously or offensively high. […]
> †3. Ill-omened, inauspicious. *Obs. rare*. […] (*OED Online* Mar. 2004)

The difference is striking. In this new draft, the etymology of 'obscene,' although remaining uncertain, is precisely indicated as having two plausible origins: *ob-scaevus*, meaning 'of / pertaining to the inauspicious'; or *ob-caenum*, meaning 'of / pertaining to filth.' Most notably, the derivation from *scaena* is now included but clearly discounted as a folk etymology. This rules out an etymological origin of the connection between obscenity and space but, at the same time, it stresses the cultural significance of this relationship. Another signifi-

cant change between editions is the first meaning of the word. In the online draft entry we find that obscene is now defined in the context of "a publication," and that an obscene text can deprave and corrupt those who are likely to read, see or hear the content. The significance of this choice might be gleaned from what is perhaps only a coincidental comment. In 2003 J. M. Coetzee (South African but an Australian resident) published *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*, a collection of inter-related meta-fictional short stories about an imaginary Australian author. That same year Coetzee won the Nobel Prize. Very significantly, one of *Elizabeth Costello*'s lessons – the reading of which inspired this study – is dedicated to the Problem of Evil and directly confronts the theme of obscenity in literature:

> *Obscene*. That is the word, a word, a word of contested etymology, that she must hold on to as talisman. She chooses to believe that *obscene* means *off-stage*. To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!*) must remain off-stage. (Italics in original. Coetzee 2003, 168)

Coetzee, by making this fictional author embrace the spatial meaning of the word, effectively demonstrates the manner in which obscenity has been fashioned and has reciprocally fashioned our society. As Elizabeth Costello suggests, the word 'obscene' indicates a space beyond the "theatrical scene" of our society, used to ensure that those obscenities that "must remain off-stage" do in fact remain off-scene. The popularization of this meaning by a world famous author in a novel published just prior to his nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature may have influenced the drafting of the new entry of the *OED Online*. Another clue indicating this possibility is the fact that Coetzee's elderly author explicitly indicates the possibility that the obscene may "deprave and corrupt" (*OED Online*) either the reader or the author himself: "I do not think one can come away unscathed, as a writer, from conjuring up such scenes. I think writing like that can harm one" (Coetzee 2003, 172). Although the influence of Coetzee's work on the redrafting of the *OED Online* is difficult to establish, both

texts suggest the existence of a contemporary preoccupation with obscenity and its spatial relevance to post-modern society.

Coetzee did not enter the debate uninformed. One of his critical works, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), is entirely dedicated to the topic of censorship and, concomitantly, to its off-scene settings. Once we acknowledge this fact, it is easier to understand that Elizabeth Costello's ideas are not Coetzee's own; more specifically, the South African author uses the fictional Australian female author to voice ideas intended to stir a debate, to create self-conscious awareness and to disclose where the problem lies. Indeed, the present study has been inspired by Elizabeth Costello's words and therefore, although incidentally, Coetzee's role has been crucial to the initial framing of obscenity in this study. His definition of obscenity in *Giving Offense* is particularly useful for introducing the socio-cultural implication of obscenity:

> the obscene and the pornographic are not conferential. Scenes of evisceration, for instance, may be obscene but not pornographic. […] Obscenity has a particular kind of impact on the offended subject: it produces repugnance, shock, or disgust (though, as Feinberg points out, the offending materials can paradoxically be alluring at the same time). (Coetzee 1996, 20)

As Elizabeth Costello points out, "*because we are human*," we may want to see things that are both repulsive and alluring at the same time (cf. also Pease 2000, 34). For this reason, the relative/subjective nature of obscenity must be examined. It can be argued that obscenity, by appealing to the dignity of the offended, calls into question an entire construct of moral values. The most shocking thing about it is the possible intentionality of the act. The offender voluntarily infringes the law and therefore, in the personal relationship between offender and offended, calls into question the legitimacy of morality. Coetzee notes that "the infringements are real; what is infringed, however, is not our essence but a foundational fiction to which we more or less whole heartedly subscribe" (Coetzee 1996, 14). In short, the fact that

we are capable of committing obscene acts indicates that the rules infringed are neither innate nor "our essence." On the contrary, they are a set of rules imposed by the all-encompassing discourse which stage-manages our society. This implies that obscenity and transgression are mere tools of that same discourse that so outspokenly banishes them. It is for this reason that so much critical attention has been dedicated to censorship and, also, why the many studies on censorship deal specifically with obscenity.

The implementation of this discursive construction of obscenity has been thoroughly studied by Michel Foucault, who, in the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, tries to establish whether "the workings of power, and in particular those mechanisms that are brought into play in societies such as ours, really belong primarily to the category of repression" (Foucault 1984, 10). His study demonstrates that repression is not always what it seems. For instance, in the case of sexuality, repression was strategically used to induce the dialogization of sex, which then was aptly utilized as an instrument of power over society. Sex was never censored at all; on the contrary, through its supposed banishment, an immense attention was devoted to it: "Rather than a massive censorship, beginning with the verbal proprieties of the Age of Reason, what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse" (Foucault 1984, 34). Through the flourishing of both text-writing and every-day speech on and around the topic, the general perception of sexuality was reshaped and fashioned according to the need to structuring society: women first became sensual, later hysterics and afterwards fit only for caring jobs; men were entrusted with rationality; and, finally, any kind of deviation from the previous categories was to be repressed and punished. By simply engendering its subjects, the discourse thus managed to seize each individual and firmly locate him/her in his/her assigned role. The ontological importance of deviance should now be clear: deviance is imagined, produced, cornered and suppressed, not only in order to validate the authenticity of the norm but also to structure it.

Foucault's theory envisions discourse not as a simple ideology presiding over a certain period of time. Rather, discourse can be more properly envisioned as the battlefield of the self-perpetrating struggle between power and knowledge. As the French philosopher clearly states, "power and knowledge directly imply one another" because "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Foucault 1979, 27). These fields of knowledge stretch across society and, by meticulously discerning and differentiating it, they classify it. In so doing they effectively exert power over society as a whole. For this reason the power-technology regulating society "cannot be localized in a particular type of institution or state apparatus," but rather, "this technology is diffuse, […] it is often made up of bits and pieces [and] it implements different tools and methods" (Foucault 1979, 26). As a result, "its effects of domination are attributed […] to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques [and] functionings" which add up to "a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege one might possess" (Foucault 1979, 26). Power does not reside in a person or institution but in the discourse that defines, validates and invests such entities with authority. The existence of such technology is ultimately justified by the exertion of power. The Discourse[1] becomes an all-encompassing entity that traverses innumerable centres of micro-power carefully disseminated throughout society: a network lacking a centre but held together by its intrinsic tension.

Foucault exemplified the functioning of the regulatory use of power focusing on – as previously mentioned – sexuality, clinics, asylums and prisons. Even though never directly confronting geography as a major theme (cf. Foucault 1980, 65-66), Foucault's work introduces concepts and ideas hinting at the domains of spatiality and topography. The disciplinary system used in each of the institutions analysed by the philosopher is rooted in, or at least related to, specific lo-

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[1] From now on, 'Discourse' will be used with capitalized D to indicate Foucault's use of the term.

cations: the cell, the prison, the classroom, the asylum. Foucault's Discourse seems, therefore, to be implicitly quartering micro-powers in specific locations. More precisely, the consequence of micro-powers is the designation of functional locations upon the territory – the concept of territory itself being an instrument of the discursive control over space (cf. Foucault 1980, 68). The provocative argument at the base of *Discipline and Punish* finally clarifies the relationship between obscenity, spatiality and Foucault's theory: "the penalty of detention seems to fabricate […] an enclosed, separated and useful illegality" (Foucault 1979, 278). The ultimate individuation, distinction and seclusion of deviance result in the creation of both a social group identifiable as criminal and of a space belonging to these people. The overcrowded city, the slum, the prison and the cell – in an inverse gradient of importance – are all spaces belonging to this "class" and ideally contributing to its manifestation and reproduction. However, the place of reclusion (an ob-scene space par excellence), which is supposed to reform the delinquent, is also, as Foucault says, a breeding ground for "an enclosed, separated and useful illegality". Useful, because the Discourse justifies the necessity of its regulatory function by showcasing the deviance contained within the cell.

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White grasped the importance of deviance and, in a study predominantly based on Bakhtinian theory, charted transgression in British culture. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) posits that "by tracking the 'grotesque body' and the 'low-Other' […] we can attain an unusual perspective upon [the] inner dynamics [of bourgeois society]" in Victorian times. What they discovered is that "[w]hat is socially peripheral is often symbolically central" (Babcock, B., "The Reversible World"; qtd. in Stallybrass and White 1986, 20) and therefore "the carnival, the circus, the gipsy, the lumpenproletariat, play a symbolic role […] out of all proportion to their actual social importance" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 20). The study of the slums, the sewerage and all that became symbolically connected to the "perverse," the "scatological" and the "low" exposes the hidden truth about Victorian society. Fixations such as

concealing the legs of tables and the nudity of angels in ancient frescoes, reveal the way the scene, whilst trying to carefully drive the obscene other to the margins of society, in fact harboured it at its heart. With *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White demonstrated why it is necessary to study the obscene side of a society in order to fully understand it. Deviance, although carefully removed, is not only effectively produced by the Discourse but is also an integrating part of it. Hence the importance of documenting its place in society.

The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, in his seminal text *The Production of Space* (1974), studied and theorized the process that leads to the creation of what we simply experience as the environment of our daily life. For Lefebvre, space is a complex sociological construct that, although intangible and transparent, determines the everyday understanding of our place in society. One of the fundamental ideas explored in this study is the idea that "any determined and hence demarcated space necessarily embraces some things and excludes others; what it rejects may be relegated to some nostalgia or it may be simply forbidden" (Lefebvre 1991, 99). For Lefebvre, one way of understanding the way space is constructed is to imagine that "walls, enclosures and façades serve to define both a *scene* (where something takes place) and an *obscene* area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated" (Lefebvre 1991, 36). Hence, the obscene space is a space where the rules regulating the scene do not apply.

Although spawning from different theoretical backgrounds and trying to prove different things, Coetzee's take on obscenity and its off-scene "place" in society, Foucault's theory of disciplinary control, Stallybrass and White's conceptualization of Victorian space, and Lefebvre's notion of space, seem to agree on the fact that "whatever is inadmissible, be it malefic or forbidden, […] has its own hidden space on the near or far side of a frontier" (Lefebvre 1991, 36).

Obscenity, in spite of its etymology, seems to be consistently related to space and so, for the purpose of this study, the word 'obscene'

is henceforth used to imply the dual meaning immoral/off-scene, while the hyphenated variant 'ob-scene' further stresses its spatial connotation. This study proceeds to use Lefebvre's definition of ob-scene space, postulating the existence of a scene and an obscene space, to explore the furthest reaches of the British empire. Hence, Australian literature provides the raw material for the in-depth analysis of the socio-spatial construction of the colonial/antipodean space.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre explains that a "façade admits certain acts to the level of what is visible" and "condemns [many other] to obscenity". However, the façade is not solely made of material walls "balconies, window ledges, etc." (Lefebvre 1991, 99) it also becomes a new level of signification that transcends the material referents. In a theorization that is reminiscent of Roland Barthes' analysis of the process of myth creation (Barthes 1957), Lefebvre posits the existence of a monumental space hovering over, and giving meaning to, space as perceived in everyday life:

> The indispensable opposition between inside and outside, as indicated by thresholds, doors and frames, though often underestimated, simply does not suffice when it comes to defining monumental space. Such a space is determined by what may take place there, and consequently by what may not take place there (prescribed/proscribed, scene/obscene). […]
>
> Any object – a vase, a chair a garment – may be extracted from everyday practice and suffer displacement which will transform it by transferring it into monumental space: the vase will become holy, the garment ceremonial, the chair the seat of authority. The famous bar which, according to the followers of Saussure, separates signifier from signified and desire from its object, is in fact transportable hither and thither at the whim of society […] as a means of banishing the ob-scene. (Lefebvre 1991, 224-226)

The arbitrariness implied in the creation of monumental space resonates right through the human experience of natural environment. Space is imperceptibly constructed in the very same way Foucault suggests power structures are erected around distinctions, rationaliza-

tions and distributions of deviance. Moreover, space is implicitly entrenched in the power relations expressed through functional allocations, suggestive connotations and explicit banishments of territories. The construction of space is fundamentally an exercise of power upon the spatial dimension of our world:

> The illusory clarity of *space* is in the last analysis the illusory clarity of *power* that may be glimpsed in the reality that it governs, but which at the same time uses that reality as a veil. Such is the action of political power, which creates fragmentation and then controls it – which creates it indeed in order to control it. But fragmented reality […] depends for sustenance on continual reinforcement. […] This is the form under which state-political power becomes omnipresent: it is everywhere, but its presence varies in intensity; in some places it is diffuse, in others concentrated. (Lefebvre 1991, 320-321)

Hence, although distinctly Marxist, Lefebvre's analysis closely parallels the basic assumptions of Foucault's theory on Discourse. Space, as one of the several fields of knowledge (further subdivided in geography, topography, etc.), is a critical site of power/knowledge relations. It thus becomes a diffuse, transparent and immanent presence governing everyday reality. Hence, a Discourse, in order to maintain and reinforce its control over the lands it governs, continually restructures legal and socio-imaginative status of these spaces.

Australia's case is exemplary and, having clarified the strategic importance of spatial control and the ensuing distinction between scene and obscene space, it is now possible to present the underlying theme of this research. That is, the way the spatial organization of this island-continent has changed over time. In the course of the following chapters, this topic will be chronologically and thematically examined as presented in Australian literature. Emblematically, Australia is a land that has long been fantasized about and subconsciously desired even before Europeans discovered it. As a result, although Aboriginal people had lived there for several thousands of years, Australia became *Terra Nullius* much before the British set foot on its shores to

lay claim on it. An antipodean landmass was supposedly required in order to balance the overall equilibrium between seas and continents. As Simon Ryan argues in *The Cartographic Eye*, such a remote and mysterious place was made the make-believe vessel of all human eccentricity; a place of wonders that, in the most heightened "orientalist" fashion, was annexed to the Western Discourse prior to its first sighting (cf. Ryan 1996). In Lefebvre's terms, the antipodes were thus elevated to the status of monumental space and became a regulatory instrument of power over space. In fact, the annexation of Australia to the Western Discourse is not casual. In line with the repression-control strategy, the antipodes became the imaginative obscene space of the European scene, so that control could be reinforced on the scene and the obscene area could later be dealt with and placed under control.

Ryan demonstrates the manner in which Australia was caught in a discursive construction that filled the still imaginary continent with descriptions of an eccentric nature and perverse inhabitants. The othering of the still unknown continent and its inhabitants was caused by Europe's need to dispose of its unacceptable urges and confine them to a remote and secure region. In other words, "out of sight, out of mind." Thus, it is not surprising that, when Australia was actually "discovered," Great Britain immediately began transporting its convicts there. For in Australia, the British now had a real place to which they could export not just their fears and obscene impulses but the actual "refuse" of society itself. This process condemned Australia and its inhabitants to become unwilling protagonists of a story that denied them any agency.

The newly-settled antipodean continent could not forever endure such an infamous reputation. Although it came into being as the land of convicts and savages beyond salvation, once the colony grew in population and importance, social order was imported to Australia and the obscene was once again displaced to another off-scene setting. In keeping with this legacy, the image of the outback was later constructed according to European Societies' innate need to seclude the

obscene in an ob-scene scenario. It is thus that the wide empty spaces of the Australian interior were filled with an imagery of absolute freedom and autonomy from the Law. Such a space was fit to contain all the human depravity with which the city, as the bulwark of human civilization, was not supposed to be acquainted. In addition, the discursive construction of this obscene setting "eased" white Australians into a socio-topographic space where their subconscious was allowed to materialize. The outback, with its remoteness and inaccessibility, became the preferred scenario. The Aborigines had retreated there, but more importantly it was the outback's vastness and sparseness of population that made it an ideal setting for obscene urges to be acted out.

Elizabeth Povinelli argues persuasively that Britain's claim on Australia, under the concept of Terra Nullius, was largely based upon a late eighteenth century scheme aimed at reorganizing society through sexual regulation:

> In England during the mid- to late 1700s discussions of class and sexual irregularity and of race and criminality were critically informing government plans to settle Australia as a penal colony. The British social elite's discussions of class sexuality were concentrated on theorizing and institutionalizing capitally productive "marriage relations" among the emerging social classes. (Povinelli 1994, 125)

While England was trying to regulate the unclear sexual relations typical of its local village life (which even included deporting the supposed perverts), in order to establish a basis for the coming into being of the proletariat (an economic force which was increasingly required), the Australian colony was established on the mandates of this same social policy. According to Povinelli, Australia was declared *Terra Nullius* because the Aborigines were portrayed as being "sexually irregular and socially disordered" (Povinelli 1994, 126). Hence, the regulation of their "disorderly" socio-economic structure was deemed absolutely necessary.

Sexual preoccupations lasted for over a century and remained entrenched in the socio-spatial configurations of the land. In a fashion reminiscent of Foucault's analysis of the development and control of sexual Discourse, obscenity, locked in a safeguard, became a material that again was continuously talked about but seemingly never handled in the first person. Sexuality and miscegenation, in particular, soon became a favoured topic of discussion. This is because while supposedly nobody was having sex with Aboriginal women, the "half-caste" was growing steadily in numbers. By the 1920s, it had became a major national preoccupation. Once again, the remote rural areas were singled out as the principal setting for the problem. These ob-scene areas thus came into contrast with the scene of major coastal cities.

This marked socio-topographic distinction – between an urbanized and civilized coast versus an untamed and disorderly interior populated by savages – reminds one of the socio-psychological split that Stallybrass and White observed in Victorian bourgeois society. At that time, everything that had anything to do with the lower parts of the body, with the discarded (defecation) and the censored (sexuality), was ideologically transposed to the "city's low" (Stallybrass and White 1986, 145). Via negative projective identification, the bodily low became associated with the slum, the sewerage, the prostitute and the "dirt down there" – here it is important to note that Australia was also a region "down under". As a result, the bourgeois unconscious was displaced in an ob-scene setting. Stallybrass and White conclude that:

> the city's low becomes a site of obsessive preoccupation, a preoccupation which is in itself intimately conceptualized in terms of discourses of the body. But this means that the obsessional neurosis or hysterical symptom can never be immediately traced back through the psychic domain. To deconstruct the symptomatic language of the bourgeois body, it is necessary to reconstruct the mediating topography of the city which always reflects the relations of class, gender and race. (Stallybrass and White 1986, 145)

Therefore, in order to analyse the dissociative disorder of Victorian society, Stallybrass and White use a wide range of primary sources – helping themselves from literature, sociology and psychoanalysis – which contextualize it in space. To decipher the "symptomatic language" of these texts, it is necessary to outline the map of the displacement of deviance. After doing this, we can then observe the Discourse as a whole (with its scene and obscene spaces) and, hopefully, gain access to the "psychic domain" which originated the "fracture" and its "language." Similarly, this research sets out to map the gradual displacement of Australian obscenity – both in time and space – in the hope of gaining access to a vantage point from which to comprehensively examine its contemporary society. To do so, this study will focus its attention on a selection of literary texts – for the most part novels – representative of Australian literature, from its outset to the present.

The novel is an especially appropriate instrument/subject of analysis because, as John Vernon argues in *The Garden and the Map*, it "arose in the great age of classical physics, when the earth was perceived as a map and therefore was being transformed into one" (Vernon 1973, 40). As a consequence, particularly in "realism and naturalism" (Vernon 1973, 40), and with the novelist as a (now inconceivably) omniscient author of a text, the novel emulates the "classical Newtonian and Cartesian consciousness of the world" (Vernon 1973, 41). From this perspective, the world, being observed from a fixed point in space, is reduced to a bi-dimensional and static image of itself. Vernon, quoting Edward Morgan Forster, goes on to explain that "[t]he novelist look[ing] down from a distance upon his materials" (Vernon 1973, 40), and the "ideal spectator," "sitting up on a hill at the end [of the novel]," viewing all the "cross-correspondences (145)" (Forster, Aspects of the Novel 1927. In Vernon 1973, 40) are the embodiment of this school of thought in literature. Hence, according to Vernon, the plot can be regarded as "the pattern of the world of the novel" (Vernon 1973, 40) and, therefore, as a map of itself.

It is important to evaluate the pretence of self-contained objectivity of the novel in relation to its being – either consciously or unconsciously – an instrument of the Discourse in the transformation of space into a consumable commodity (cf. Vernon 1973, 10-11). As Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-Colonialism and Textuality*, explain, "[i]mperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality, both institutionally […] and informally" (Tiffin and Lawson 1994, 3). Novels, with their mimetic pretence to objectivity, shaped and consolidated the spatial organization produced by the Discourse. However, this is only one level of integration of spatiality into the written medium. Johan Jacobs, in an essay which provides an informative summary of the dynamics and inter-relations between spatial construction and creative writing, formulates an important interpretation of J. Hillis Miller's *Topographies* (1995). As Miller puts it:

> Place names make a site already the product of a virtual writing, a topography, or, since the names are often figures, a "topography"' (3-4). Every narrative, therefore, in the way it constructs an arrangement of specific places, provides 'an exercise in spatial mapping' (10). The novel itself may also be seen in a larger sense as providing 'a figurative mapping' (19). (J Hillis Miller, *Topographies*, 1995; qtd. in Jacobs 2000, 209)

This means that the topography of the novel, as a would-be topography of the physical space it refers to, can be used to gain access to the strategic intention of the Discourse. Therefore, novels can be analysed by searching for the spatial referents that, according to the spatial disposition enforced at the time, contributed to the fashioning of their contemporary reality.

Starting from this assumption, this research uses a range of novels, to present and corroborate the way in which deviance and obscenity, have been gradually displaced in Australia. Different spatial configurations will be addressed in separate chapters respectively dealing

with: chapter 2, the configuring of Australia as an obscene space *par excellence*; chapter 3, the shaping of the outback as Australia's principal obscene setting; chapter 4, the reflux of obscenity and subsequent corruption of the city; chapter 5, a contemporary perspective on the resurgent obscenity of the outback. As a character from a novel later analysed says, "Words are maps" (Turner Hospital 1996, 63). It is in this fashion that the present study uses words and texts. Novels in particular, apart from being independent textual/cartographic entities, also establish inter-textual bonds. They indirectly or directly talk to each other and create an even more complex structure mapping our cultural space. Therefore, the first novel considered in this study is Marcus Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874); a colonial novel that actively enforces Australia's strategic configuration as England's obscene Other, in the tangible form of a penal colony. The second text, Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), is a post-colonial novel that clearly responds not only to the early portrayal of Irish people and emancipists as degraded people belonging to marginal and obscene spaces, but also to the misconstructions subsequently generated by the elaboration of myth. Although the literary chronology might at first seem disjointed and syncopated, it must be considered that, in order to second and interpret the dialogue between the texts, fictional chronology had to be privileged over the former. Furthermore, it must be stressed that that the intention of this study was never to present itself as an anthology of obscenity in Australian literature; rather, it is meant to be a study of the socio-topographic construction of obscenity in Australian literature. Although the case of chapter 2, "The Establishment of the Antipodes," with the coupling of Clarke's and Carey's novels is the most striking – 126 years separate them – other cases of deliberate inconsistency in chronological arrangement of the texts can also be found in the subsequent chapters.

Short stories and ballads by Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson and Barbara Baynton are used in the first section of chapter 3, "Nineteenth Century Idealizations," to introduce the stereotyping of the bush as either an arcadian or as an earthly inferno. In the following sub-section,

Lady Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) is used to unravel the ambiguity of this space and to explore its construction as a predominantly masculine area. From here, section 3.2, titled "White Man in the Outback," uses Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993), Catherine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) to examine the process of spatial construction and the effect of the displacement of deviance and obscenity. *Voss* is particularly apt for this purpose. Not solely it is an exploration narrative that addresses the vital role played by explorers and cartographers in making space available for general fruition (in the form of diaries and Maps) but also because it clearly delineates the ambiguous contrast between the city and the bush. In this novel, the outback – along with the explorer who disappears into it – can be seen as a space both relegated to the realm of treacherous obscenity, and appropriated by the prudish Sydney bourgeoisie. *Remembering Babylon* examines the challenge posed by having to transform the space imaginatively produced by cartographers and politicians (on maps and allotments) into a "civilized space." The serenity of an isolated Queensland settlement is disrupted by the arrival of a white man "gone native." His presence questions the most basic moral constructs embodied in the fences enclosing the ploughed fields. The fences represent the boundary separating the scene from the impenetrable "darkness" of the territory and perceived hostility of the natives. The next step into the evolution of the Australian space is presented with *Coonardoo* where, on a station managed by white people but run with native labour, the problem of miscegenation and the immoral behaviour of white males is addressed for the first time in Australian literature. The outback is again an obscene space threatening to corrupt white heroes or providing refuge to those seeking immoral pleasures. Concluding the section "White Men in the Outback", Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* is a celebration of the outback. The newly settled territory of Capricornia (a thinly disguised Northern Territory) is not a place to be feared but a land of opportunities. The novel therefore exposes the working of the power structure governing

the outback and slowly transforming Capricornia into a redeemed space. Remarkably, the novel attempts to give a voice to the Aborigines, however, this results in a perhaps unconscious exploitation of their role in the novel. Section 3.3, "An Aboriginal Perspective," is dedicated to redressing all the cultural tropes which have so far victimized the natives and their space. Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1987) contests the vilification of the Tasmanian natives as savages from an historical point of view. The novel, proposing itself as an alternative history, unsettles the founding myths that justified colonization and rescues Aboriginal culture from the obscene status with which it has so long struggled. Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999) similarly contextualizes white history, but also actively reframes space by revisiting the sites where the silenced Aboriginal history was made. The last novel examined in this section, and also in this chapter, is Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997), a novel that offers a compendium of the institutionalisation of the natives. With each policy, obscenity is discursively created and bureaucratically enforced by the successive institutions governing the life of the Australian natives.

Chapter 4, "The City: A Crumbling Bulwark," is a chiastic match to the previous sections. Five novels are used to contrast the initially idealized image of the city as a site of rationality and civilized purity against contemporary reality. For this reason, the first section (4.1) in this chapter, "The Ubiquitous Closet," is dedicated to Christos Tsiolkas' *Loaded* (1995), which provides an exhaustive portrayal of the dispersal of deviance into the complex structure of Melbourne's social scene. With this novel, Tsiolkas questions not only the positioning of the line dividing scene and obscene spaces, he also intrinsically questions the validity of such definitions. Homosexuality, transvestism and a scathing social critique are the weapons used to strike against a social order that has lost its grip on reality. Section 4.2, "The Vanishing of the Scene," uses Peter Robb's short story "Pig's Blood" (*Pig's Blood and Other Fluids*, 1999) to investigate the otherwise silent retrocession of the scene behind the dazzling façades of Sydney's sky-

scrapers. Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* (1997) draws attention to racial discrimination as induced by the spatial configuration of suburbia. "From the Periphery to the Centre" (4.3) retraces the path followed by a young Murri girl through Queensland's areas of social segregation. In her quest for a position of self-empowerment, the protagonist has to first abandon her disadvantaged community, only to later flee domestic violence triggered by a socially degraded suburban environment. With her arrival in Brisbane and enrolment at university, what initially appears to be a reinstatement of the centre/periphery stereotype, actually is actually a sharp criticism of the government's failure to handle the situation. Section 4.4, "Ostracized From Society," similarly addresses the problem of Aboriginal marginalization. However, the protagonist in Archie Weller's *The Day of the Dog* (1981) fails to disengage himself from the path of self destruction imposed on him by Perth's racist society. In the end, he is literally expelled from society through a symbolic police chase ending in a fatal car accident. However, marginalization does not affect natives alone. The relatively unknown *A Bunch of Ratbags* (1965) by William Dick offers an alternative perspective on Melbourne's cityscape as viewed by an Anglo-Celtic youth growing up in the 1950s. In this novel, under the pressure of social disadvantage and marginalisation, the protagonist is driven to rage and despair. As a consequence, suburbia is turned into an obscene space where the unconscious overflows into the real world and fills this space with anger, violence and psychosomatic illness.

The final chapter "Back to the Outback," returns to the themes of chapter 3 but from a more contemporary perspective. Jeanette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* (1996) and Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* (2002) represent the bush as a space condemned to remain obscene as long as it remains saturated with secrets and guilt from the past. In *Oyster*, the silence clutching Outer Maroo is a self-imposed regimen of mutual protection from the indiscreet gaze of the scene. In this town, ob-scenity is sought in order to enjoy ultimate freedom from the corruption of the scene, the intransigence of the law and from the skeletons of the past. The result is catastrophic. In *Her Sister's Eye*,

Vivienne Cleven, who is of Aboriginal ancestry, counters this perspective by portraying the past as an ob-scene space needing to be freed from the clutch of silenced grief. The price to be paid when failing to do so is to be haunted by the ghosts of the past and to be uprooted from one's own country.

These four chapters of textual analysis provide a framework for understanding obscene spaces in Australia. Numerous texts could not be included in this study. For each chapter there are at least two books that, at one point in time, were temporarily part of the list of texts to be analysed. The most important of these novels were: Hal Porter's *The Tilted Cross* (1961) and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) in chapter 2; Kate Greenville's *Secret River* (2005) and Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978) in chapter 3; Elliot Perlman's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (2004) and Christos Tsiolkas *The Jesus Man* (1999) in chapter 4; and, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (1986) and Gerald Murnane's *The Plains* in chapter 5. In the end, these novels, in spite of their relevance and value, were excluded either because their contribution would have been marginal or, as in the case of *Secret River*, because at the time of this research they were yet to be published. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, this research does not have an anthological intent. On the contrary, the texts work independently as single analytical units but also, and most importantly, as a group – almost like a team – united in the purpose of exploring the "obscene spaces in Australian literature."

2 The Establishment of the Antipodes

Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* (1987), with its imposing 600 pages, is one of the most well-known and exhaustive studies of the Australian penal past. In spite of the criticism it drew for its "gorification of convict hardship" (Turcotte 1998, 15), the book provides a vivid and informative picture of the dawn of white settlement in the antipodean continent. In addition to describing the way class segregation served to rule the young colony, Hughes' study also endeavours to illustrate the socio-cultural conditions that willed into being such a highly structured system of control. The frightening portrait it paints of the reality created in the penal colony – an outpost of civilization but also, being a continent-prison, its intrinsic negation – reflects the internal politics of the culture that produced this space. In the very first page of this study the author unveils the deep and dark allegiance binding Australia with its mother country; the image sketched is one of Manichean contrast and, most importantly, of utterly obscene resonance:

> The late eighteenth century abounded in schemes of social goodness thrown off by its burgeoning sense of revolution. But here, the process was to be reversed: not Utopia, but Dystopia; Not Rousseau's Natural Man moving in moral grace amid free social contacts, but man coerced, exiled, deracinated, in chains. […] [T]he intellectual patrons of Australia, in its first colonial years, were Hobbes and Sade.
>
> In their sanguine moments, the authorities hoped that it would eventually swallow an entire class – the "criminal class" […]. Australia was settled to defend English property […] from the marauder within. English lawmakers wished not only to get rid of the "criminal class", but if possible to forget about it. Australia was a cloaca, invisible, its contents filthy and unamendable. (Hughes 2003, 1-2)

The driving forces of the social project ruling the foundation of Australia were displacement and forgetting. The terms used by the author brings to mind the subject of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), where the London sewerage and its connected underworld are said to become the dark