

*Snapshots from a West Coast Death Trip*¹

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Abstract: Tasmania's west coast carries the memory of multiple colonial traumas – traumas associated with the violence and uprooting of an indigenous population and the punishment of convicts on the carceral Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour. This paper performs a 'death trip' through the west coast, a term borrowed from Michael Lesy's classic country noir book, *Wisconsin Death Trip*, providing a psychogeographic tour through the material traces of what Peter Read calls 'lost places'. Presenting an eclectic and fragmented collection of quotations, images, and impressions recorded of these places so as to communicate something of their broken texture, this paper also charts the multitude of affective encounters with these bad and lost places and traumatised ecologies. By tracking, in Kathleen Stewart's words, 'the traces of impacts', this paper demonstrates not only the powerful material form that traumatic pasts take but also their displaced effects in a marginalised region which is continually overlooked in mainstream historical narratives.

Strange that these places so devastated by history retain the marks and memories of the past ... Strange how things seem to proliferate and amass themselves in the margins. – Kathleen Stewart

Tasmania's west coast carries the memory of multiple colonial traumas – traumas associated with the violence and uprooting of an indigenous population and the punishment of convicts on the carceral Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour. The mining ventures that followed from the 1880s were seemingly a path out of the murk of colonialism, a forgetting of the past in its modern industrialism. But this linear trajectory doesn't follow; on the west coast, a tract of land remembers and repeats and endures badness, releasing it, nervously, in fits and starts. This rough country constitutes one of the state's most convincing 'badlands'. Like Ross Gibson's account of the stretch of land in southern Queensland,

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Tasmania's west coast is 'an immense, historical crime scene', where the clues to a ravaged history everywhere continue to disturb the present.

In this place, this 'aftermath culture', the effects of traumatic pasts are ongoing. It is in the encounter with the derelict country grotesquely disfigured by mining, with places that are subject to the full, violent forces of history, that this badness is most palpable. Plundered for its natural wealth, this desolate, semi-evacuated region is defined by topographies of strangeness forged through industrialism. Here, narratives and memories of furious booms and dismal busts, of violence, of treachery and crime – materialise in, cling to and resonate through a desolate and habitually wet country. In every sense a *moving* terrain, the blighted region shifts with the cadences of roving populations of itinerant workers, of fugitives running from the law, of landscapes of ruin – all of which pull on, trigger, and mobilise dense networks of affects.

Driving the notoriously winding Lyell Highway to the west coast from Hobart, my mobile phone reception drops out and the car radio searches for a frequency. It picks up a station broadcasting in a foreign language, and this glossolalia soundtracks my journey through a landscape that becomes increasingly desolate. The wilderness landscape starts to peter out to dry moon rock as the highway passes by the remains of the subsidiary mining towns of Gormanston and Linda, where only a few derelict houses remain, and continues up Mount Lyell. The spectacular devastation of Queenstown's wasted ecology is just around the corner. Then, after more twists and turns, there is Zeehan, its streets silent and empty. Amidst the abandoned buildings that line the main street here, one houses ghostly mannequins made up in dated attire, making it difficult to ascertain whether it's a museum of dead styles or another charity clothes shop which would add to the town's strange surplus of op-shops displaying colourful knitted jumpers and stuffed toys. Then, passing through the back streets where front yards resemble backyards – littered with empty inflatable pools at the end of summer – you get the feeling that you're 'somewhere else'. And in this open valley, the satellite dishes and aerials that attach themselves to every house somehow appear more prominent, and more prodigious, acting as portentous bowls serving up encounters with the otherworldly.

Tasmania's west presents a disquieting picture, with its abundance of decrepit drive-by places. Once the pioneering province of mining and Hydro development in the midst of an intractable wilderness, it is now crowded with ghost towns and graveyards, and you're left with a sense of abiding emptiness. For me, as for many Tasmanians, the west is a part of the state rarely visited, ghosted, as it is, by the sunny east coast. As a child, family holidays were almost always spent on the east coast, and perhaps because of this I always had a hankering for the west. Popularly cast as a weird aberration, the west sits in contrast to the calm, pastoral scenes in most of the remainder of the state, with its wild, rugged terrain and relentless harsh weather, which is increasingly packaged for tourists as 'pure wilderness'. But this touristic experience is a strange one, for in order to get to those places deemed

'pure', one must pass through at least one of the many of the west's derelict mining towns, places contaminated with and corrupted by the wastes of history.

Known locally and colloquially as the 'Wild West', the west is Tasmania's frontier territory. The tract of land west of the central highlands carries the memory of colonial traumas – traumas associated with the violence and uprooting of an indigenous population and the punishment of convicts on the carceral Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour. The mining ventures that followed from the 1880s were seemingly a path out of the murk of colonialism, a forgetting of the past in its modern industrialism. But this linear trajectory doesn't follow; in the west, a tract of land remembers and repeats and endures badness, releasing it, nervously, in fits and starts. The rough country of Tasmania's west constitutes the state's most convincing render of what the writer Ross Gibson calls 'badlands' in his discussion of southern Queensland in his *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. Gibson says badlands are disturbing places made by imaginations. Even a fleeting glimpse from the car window seems to yield the sense of this place being an immense, historical crime scene.¹

This is a place where the effects of the past are ongoing. This is a place where the clues to a ravaged history everywhere continue to disturb the present. It is in the encounter with this derelict country grotesquely disfigured by mining, with places that are subject to the full, violent forces of history, that this badness is most palpable. Plundered for its natural wealth, this desolate, semi-evacuated region is defined by topographies of strangeness forged through industrialism. Here, narratives and memories of furious booms and dismal busts, of violence, of treachery and crime – materialise in, cling to and resonate through a desolate and habitually wet country. In every sense this is a moving terrain: the blighted region shifts with the cadences of roving populations of itinerant workers, of fugitives running from the law, of landscapes of ruin. This is more than a place, if what is meant by that is a stable piece of land through which we form an attachment to; the west coast would seem to be an arrangement of scenes and events – *temporalities* – which everywhere evidence the effects of currents of disruption and displacement – from its forceful weather to its chronic poverty, unemployment and population loss, poor health and addiction, its drugs, alcohol, and other illegal vices. It is a place which is 'got down', as Kathleen Stewart would say, a tract of 'land gone wrong' as Ross Gibson would say.²

The impacts of histories are everywhere apparent in this place – in the textures of mining houses lined up row upon row, or the landscapes pock-marked by mines since abandoned – the bruised skin of this place demands to be read in all its coarseness. Things remain in this place. Here, rumours and half-said histories come to stick together in clumps and cling to the place so you can't make out one from the other. Here, death appears to brim with a kind of magic, to generate immense forces of atmosphere.

This piece performs a 'death trip' through the west coast – a term borrowed from Michael Lesy's classic country noir book, *Wisconsin Death Trip* – providing a psychogeographic tour through the material traces of what Peter Read calls 'lost places'³. Presenting an eclectic and fragmented collection of quotations, images, and impressions recorded of these

places so as to communicate something of their broken texture, this piece also charts the multitude of affective encounters with these bad, lost places and traumatised ecologies⁴. By tracking, in Kathleen Stewart's words, 'the traces of impacts,'⁵ this paper demonstrates not only the powerful material form that traumatic pasts take but also their displaced effects in a marginalised region which is continually overlooked in mainstream historical narratives.

Rumours

I am about half way to the west coast when, on the highway just out of Ouse, a sign announces Black Bob's Creek. From the Lyell Highway, a two-lane road slashing through dark wilderness and hence deemed worthy of an ex-Premier's name, I see a black vertical board hut by a creek. But it's gone in a flash; drive-by disappearance. The image remains with me though, like a bruise. Here, small things generate big stories. Here is a pocket of rumours. Here are stories endlessly repeated, circulating. Legendary Tasmanian clans, strange families eking out secluded lives on the back roads of geography and time. Freakish, two-headed descendants of convicts, lost miners, products of inbreeding, intimate encounters with animals: inheritors of 'bad blood' and myth. Threshold to the west.

Sedan

It is these endlessly winding roads that make up my childhood memory of the west coast. Driving the dizzying 99 curves of blacktop over mountain passes ('1, 2, 3...') round blind corners, made for restless, skewed perspectives, a spiralling out of control, sickness. The stuff of memory: a truck hurtling round a corner, brazenly taking over the road, and a trail of black-clad bikies following behind our family sedan as I waved at them, for thrills, out our car's back window. (They shook their fearsome fists, overtook us, and later pissed on the roadside against the guardrail.)

Effervescence

The prospector – pioneer of the wildest wastes – is still pushing on... The rough places he makes smooth, and into the dismal dens he lets light, till the beaten demons of the mine fly affrighted and yield him their long-guarded treasures. – *1890 Report on the State of the Mining Industry on the West Coast.*

There is an effervescent throb of life which rouses the blood... You feel you are in at the birth of a district or town and you wonder how it will grow. Everyone assures you that this is the coming district of the mining field until you really begin to feel and think it must be so. – Rev. FG Copeland, Twenty-eight articles on life on the West Coast, 1899-1901.



Anson Bros., *Frank Long, pioneer of Zeehan silver fields*, 18 – (Image courtesy of Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office)

Empire

The Empire Hotel in the mining town of Queenstown is a Tasmanian icon. Built in 1901 it dates back to the wealth of the mining era at the turn of the 20th Century....It is the grand old lady of the west coast and has a prominent facade in the town streetscape. Inside is a National Trust listed staircase made from Tasmanian Blackwood. The raw timber was shipped to England, carved and sent back to Queenstown where it has enjoyed a rich history and is admired by all. – <http://www.view.com.au/empirehotel>

Ros has her back to me as she types out the day's dinner specials on an old computer behind the Reception counter. As I wait, I read the plaque by the staircase that gives brief details of the staircase's distinguished journey across the world. Ros hears me, swings around, is startled by my presence. She says the staircase was built to impress mining investors stepping off the train back in the town's hey-day. As I ascend the dark carpeted staircase, room key in hand, a passing tourist whispers that it's like the hotel in *The Shining*. Every day of my stay I traipse these stairs, to-ing and fro-ing this restless, haunted space between Empire and metropole, hotel and town, to the sour scents of roast meat and beer.

Evacuations

Looking for Renison Bell: On the highway outside Zeehan, a sign for Metals X up ahead on the left, and I realise I must have passed the old town. U-turn, drive back, I'm scouring roadsides for signs. I spot a plaque on the right, pull over to a forest of Sassafrass growing out from the remains of a hotel. Out of the car, I read the plaque, but feel nothing but my own footsteps cushioned by grass tumuli grown over glass bottles and rubble.

Fuzz

Driving over to Gormanston, the radio drops out to crackle and fuzz. The hills are strange, bald – pinks, purples, and greys altogether, rough with alien white rocks and giant boulders. I take a right off the highway. Game rabbits bound among the ruins. Grid-iron streets hold fragments of stuff, a mess of detail. Houses of rusted corrugated tin, peeling paint, built across hollows amidst rubble. In a roadside gully, a dumped mass of broken things – I can't make out what – and the skeleton of a ute, insides torn out. I walk up Main Street to the top of a hill where a basketball court overlooks the town, ruined, without hoops, poles drooping like the weeds surrounding it. Beyond, a lone caravan floats amidst a backdrop of a dull, purple hill. It recalls the weirdly desolate Wisconsin landscapes in Herzog's *Stroszek*, and I expect the absurd twinkling of its accompanying soundtrack. Down the road, a suburban styled house of orange brick – glamour of the town – is boarded up with its rafters exposed, as if from a violent storm, owners uprooted and gone. A revving motor sounds across the valley and an old red Datsun tears down the hill, thuds of a sub-woofer, heading for Queenstown. This was a place, said the *Tasmanian Mail* in 1896, of a 'substantial and permanent appearance'.



Pining

A roadside junction triggers a flashback: a visit to my aunt and uncle who lived for a time in a caravan up in the bush behind Gormanston, with a contract to gather up fallen Huon Pine. So much fuss was made of Huon Pine in my childhood – its longevity, rarity, hardiness, ancientness, and most of all, its great monetary value – that I thought of it as a magical material. That our family was connected to this rich wood, I thought, meant that we were somehow touched by fame. But it was a dismal encampment they lived in, a lonely caravan in a clearing of wet scrub, and their revulsion toward it was equal to mine. After a year or so, my uncle's back gave out and he joined the growing west coast trade in drugs. The marriage broke up and they scattered throughout the state.



Trips

A Religious Maniac

(By Telegraph)

(From our own correspondent)

Hobart, Friday

Alfred Luckstone, a boatmaker, appeared before the police court to-day with a cross painted on his forehead. He was sent to New Norfolk, as he was suffering from religious mania.

– *The Mount Lyell Standard*, 13 November, 1897.

Outside the IGA in Queenstown, amongst ads for rental properties, ironing services, and washing machines and dogs for sale, is a newspaper clipping from five years earlier. A man from New South Wales is missing, his mum says he could be on a fugue. He loved rafting in the wilderness, she says. Refuge for the mad and the missing.



Shaken

If I had two properties, and one was in Linda and one was in Hell and I decided to live in one, it wouldn't be Linda! – King O'Malley, federal politician, circa 1897, paraphrasing US General Philip Henry Sheridan's celebrated comment in 1866, 'If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent Texas and live in Hell.'

Blasting explosives, used to break up the material in the open cuts, often shook the town...when we had a north west wind, which blew down between the two mountains ... it seemed to make the sound of the shots louder. – Edward John ['Rocky'] Wedd, *Linda: Ghost Town of Mt. Lyell*.

The shell of Linda's Royal Hotel looms over the highway. A decaying edifice of grey concrete, it is Linda's haunting icon, barren and vacant like the hills around it. Over the road, the orange light of the Telstra phone box pulsates with the luminous promise of connection. The town, it seems, never lived up to its pretty, feminine name since being established as a railway terminus and miners' settlement for the now-redundant North Mount Lyell Co; in its few short years, it became notorious for its excessively ribald residents: rough boxers and hard drinkers. So much so that, in 1920, Linda received a final blow: a rehousing program implemented by an image-conscious manager of Mt Lyell Mining and Railway Co. shifted the residents to Gormanston.



Fire

There are concerns a fire that burned about 30 hectares of bushland on Tasmania's west coast yesterday may have been deliberately lit... "There has been a pattern of deliberate fires being lit on the west coast in the last few years ..." – 'Queenstown Fire "Suspicious"', ABC Radio, 3 December, 2007.

Dundas

Dundas. – This forsaken township is about 5 miles from Zeehan, with which it is connected by rail and road. It had a population of 1,080 in 1891, but has gradually declined to a couple of families and a few of the ancients who always seem to linger about decayed mining camps. – Charles Whitham, *Western Tasmania: A Land of Riches and Beauty*, 1924.

Restlessness

Strange that these rovers settle down in the most outlandish spots! Many a similar one have I met in the wilds. Johnny had been in every continent as a sailor before the mast, had traversed the trackless wilds of western Tasmania in quest of gold and silver and tin, roystered in the hectic mining towns of the heyday of the coast ... He had been poor and rich and poor again. – ET Emmett, *Tasmania by Road and Track*, 1952.

Hallucination

I can't sleep. The walls are banging with bodies fucking on the other side. It lasts for days. The chamber maid leaves clean towels outside their door every morning. Driven to insomnia, I wonder at the wildness of it. I conjure scenarios, scenes, actors, celluloid fantasies, expecting one of Mrs Miller's jezebels to emerge from the room for towels. Boundaries pierced to thresholds. In their hammering, badness engulfs me: rhythmic gunshots that pierce skin and walls, sounding out death in heavy blows. In this frontier territory, badness is etched into walls, streets, lands, beds. Visions are blurred, hallucinogenic, the wicked after-life of years of drinking 'Sassy tea' – brewed Sassafrass leaf, highs bigger than Ecstasy. And the ecstasies of stories – told, remembered, lived, fabled, fibbed, bold and bolder. A storied place *made* bold then bitter, then more bold to cover over bitterness. But from the start, afflicted by the mania of booms and busts, wild mood swings of people 'there', the far away vendors; and 'here', the ecstasy of violence and treachery lived out in filthy encampments. A wild region turned desperate; the grafting of great Western scenes to this soppy ground didn't hold right.

Phlem

Wheezing coughs sound through the Robert Sticht Memorial Library, Queenstown's public library. Elderly men, come to read the daily paper, bark with bronchial catarrh and eye me, surrounded by books.

Axe

A man who stabbed another man with a 41 centimetre knife has been found guilty of murder. After deliberating for 15 hours, the jury in the Burnie Criminal Court found David John Wright murdered Nigel David Bigwood at Zeehan last year. Wright maintained he killed Mr Bigwood in self-defence after he came to his home with an axe. Wright will be sentenced in two weeks. – 'Jury finds Man Guilty of Zeehan Stabbing Murder', ABC Radio, 13 May, 2005.

Firewood

Crotty was abandoned before it boomed. When the two rival mines at Mount Lyell amalgamated, smelting was transferred from Crotty to Queenstown, and the population followed. Houses were chopped down for firewood. The hotel was deserted before it sold a pint of beer and then submerged by the hydro dam, Lake Burbury.

Enjoy

Just below the highway at Gormanston, down in a gully, is what looks to be a dismal clay football ground, and a faded sign gestures to a

MINIATURE
MOUNTAIN
RAILWAY

A portable home, only partly visible from the road, reveals itself to house a derelict tourist venture. On its corrugated tin shell is painted amateur scenes of mountains and the sea, and to the side, in block capitals, a rippling

CHECK
OUT
INSIDE

Giant truck tyres painted white, weeds sprouting through, surround the place. By the entrance is an introductory welcome blurb written directly on the wall in red marker pen unsteadily along ruled lines – seemingly the efforts of a child.

IN THE LATTER YEARS OF THE 19TH CENTURY, THE WEST COAST OF TASMANIA WAS REMOTE, RUGGED, HAD DENSE VEGETATION AND VERY INHOSPITABLE CLIMATE. THE MOUNT LYELL COPPER MINE WAS FORMED IN 1892 AFTER A DECADE OF SCRATCHINGS ALONG THE KING RIVER, LYNCH'S DIGGINGS, AND THE LINDA VALLEY. LARGE DEPOSITS WERE DISCOVERED NECESSITATING A HUGE PROBLEM TO OVERCOME.

A TRANSPORT SYSTEM

WELCOME.

PLEASE CLOSE THIS DOOR BEHIND YOU TO KEEP THE WARM IN ON CHILLY DAYS. REMEMBER ADMISSION IS ONLY \$2 PER PERSON.

PLEASE ENJOY YOURSELVES.



Devastation

Strong winds on Tasmania's west coast overnight have ripped the roofs off several buildings. A side wall and the roof of the old RSL Club at Gormanston collapsed. The roof of a house at Queenstown was also ripped

off. – Roofs lost as Winds Whip West Coast' ABC Radio, 28 December, 2005.

In the Galley Museum, Queenstown, a series of snapshots of devastation, 1918: the wall of a house ripped off by a 'tornado', with the bedroom inside exposed, the owner poses, staid, by a bedpost against printed floral wallpaper; two men replacing the tin roof on a Nurse Robert's House; a Mr B Bird frozen in the doorway of his butchery, a heap of scrap metal at his feet. These, are the freezes of a trembling, traumatised place, the arrest of the sheer flow of time in a lyrical image.

Down the street, something similar. The frontage ripped from a transportable house, revealing a wallpaper of yellow vertical stripes, insides exposed like a flimsy stage set. But perhaps it is on its way to somewhere else, such is the unsettling and strangely standard lightness of these towns – their ceaseless movement and recycling. Places where memories, desires, dreams, sadness are unlocked, unleashed, unhoused.



Unknown photographer, 'Damaged by Tornado', Queenstown, 1918
(image courtesy of the Galley Museum)

These are the things that constitute the broken and lumpy cultural life of this place that clings to the under-side of the world. At the edge of things, stuff gathers up and stories thicken. In the west, the full force of history is apprehended not directly, but is gathered only through its displaced effects, as history appears to heap up, as Walter Benjamin once said, 'wreckage upon wreckage'.⁶ From the rubbish dump of history, this place is scavenged and its skin – however fragile – is illuminated.

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¹ Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, St Lucia: UQP, 2002. p. 14-15

² Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. p. 11.

³ Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places*. Melbourne: Cambridge, 1996.

⁴ All the photographs are by Emily Bullock, except where their source is acknowledged.

⁵ Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. P. 56.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. p. 259.