

Article

Dry Country, Wet City: A World-Ecological Reading of Drought in Thea Astley's *Drylands*

Ashley Cahillane

Discipline of English, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

Abstract: Using a postcolonial and world-ecological framework, this article analyses the representation of water as an energy source in Thea Astley's last and most critically acclaimed novel *Drylands* (1999). As environmental historians have argued, the colonial, and later capitalist, settlement of Australia, particularly the arid interior, was dependent on securing freshwater sources—a historical process that showed little regard for ecological impact or water justice until recent times. *Drylands*' engagement with this history will be considered in relation to Michael Cathcart's concept of 'water dreaming' (2010): the way in which water became reimagined after colonization to signify the prospect of economic growth and the consolidation of settler belonging. *Drylands* self-consciously incorporates predominant modes of 'water dreaming' into its narrative, yet resists reducing water to a passive resource. This happens on the level of both content and form: while its theme of drought-induced migration is critical of the past, present, and future social and ecological effects of the reckless extraction of freshwater, its nonlinear plot and hybrid form as a montage of short stories work to undermine the dominant anthropocentric colonial narratives that underline technocratic water cultivation.

Keywords: Australian literature; world-ecology; blue humanities; world literature; ecocriticism; postcolonial ecocriticism

1. Introduction

Water dictates Australia's ecology, economy, and culture. Though surrounded by water, Australia is the world's driest inhabited continent. Most of its vast interior is arid, yet, periods of intense drought and heat are punctuated by heavy rainfall, leading to flash floods and monsoons. As environmental historians have argued, precolonial indigenous Australians developed sophisticated methods of hunting, planting, and migrating, which worked in alignment with Australia's erratic ecology (Flannery 1994; Gammage 2011; Pyne 2014). Water holes were also a focus of culture, symbolizing the reproduction of human, animal, and plant life and serving as settings for big ceremonies (McGrath 1987, p. 5). With the arrival of British colonizers in the late eighteenth century, however, Australia's ecology was to be reorganized and reimagined. Colonizers wrongfully pronounced Australia "terra nullius"—empty—and either perceived it as a virgin land waiting to be fertilized or a threatening barren land needing to be domesticated through the imposition of European agricultural methods. Securing freshwater resources in the especially arid continent was a priority for establishing colonial rule (Cathcart 2010). Yet, water sites were also integral to indigenous economy and culture, and so water enclosures were particularly violent, disruptive, and culturally devastating for the country's original peoples (McGrath 1987, p. 6). Throughout the nineteenth century, extraction from precious and previously sacred water sites was amplified to bolster the colony's agriculture and industry. After independence from Britain in 1901, large-scale hydroengineering and irrigation schemes fuelled "unbounded optimism" (Flannery 1994, p. 357) about national economic and agricultural growth and spurred an economic boom in the twentieth century. Yet, this optimism and wealth disregarded the natural aridity of the continent and, by the end of the twentieth century, Australia's

rivers and lakes were alarmingly polluted and depleted. As a solution, the country embraced water privatization and desalination technologies, believing the laws of the market would curtail excessive water extraction.

Colonial and postcolonial water management strategies in Australia have been supported by dualistic imaginaries whereby water is subordinated to economic growth. As Michael Cathcart argues, “Water is the fundamental limit on how Australians live. It determines where we establish our cities, how we think about country, how we farm it, build it, defend it and dream about it” (Cathcart 2010, introduction). The idea that water not only determines the physical geography of Australia, but also its cultural geography, forms the backbone of Cathcart’s concept of “water dreaming” (Cathcart 2010, introduction): the colonial understanding and narration of freshwater. Cathcart’s environmental history outlines how colonial explorers, and later postcolonial politicians and entrepreneurs, conceived of water as an entity that could be secured and harnessed for endless economic growth, if only it could be located in the hinterlands and enhanced through hydroengineering (Cathcart 2010). This fundamental premise underlies the unsustainable and socially inequitable ways in which water has been managed, allocated, and consumed in the various stages of its colonization and initiation into the world-capitalist system. Deborah Bird Rose similarly diagnoses “the death of water” in postcolonial Australian society: the imaginative failing, which sees water in economic terms through a human/nature binary (Bird Rose 2007, p. 16). This dualistic resource-based imaginary is not confined to freshwater, which is the form of water most central to national economic regimes, but also relates to seawater. As Margaret Jolly has argued, dominant Australian imaginations of the Pacific see it as a hole, an empty expanse upon which Australia can exercise its influence in global trade and act as arbiter in neighboring geopolitical struggles (Jolly 2007, p. 527). Furthermore, Ruth Morgan argues that the protracted 1990s drought influenced politicians and urban planners in Southwestern Australia in championing desalination (a technology previously too controversial to implement) as a method of securing “climate-independent” drinking water (Morgan 2017, p. 5). The rhetoric of “independence”—defined by Morgan as a synonym for “drought-proofing” (Morgan 2017, p. 1)—repeats the ecological error of “water dreaming”: reducing water to a commodity that can be shored up, secured, and made pliable to agriculture and industry. Contrary to the utilitarian mindset of settler and postsettler communities, indigenous views of water tend to be bound up with spirituality and creation myths, which permit its capriciousness and agency in ecology (Bird Rose 2007, p. 15). This alternative view has been subjugated by the hegemony of postsettler culture (Gammage 2011; Jolly 2007; Bird Rose 2007).

Thea Astley’s Miles Franklin-award winning novel *Drylands* (1999) makes an intervention into dualistic water imaginaries. It portrays a fictional small town in rural Queensland, named Drylands, economically and morally devastated by drought as, one by one, its inhabitants leave the town in search of psychological replenishment and greater economic prosperity in coastal or watery areas. The bulk of *Drylands* is a set of stories arising from the protagonist’s imagination. Sitting in her flat above her dying convenience store in a town economically crippled by drought, Janet Deakin decides to write a “book for the world’s last reader” (p. 6). Interspersed with short passages detailing Janet’s thoughts and reflections as she writes the novel, there are six stories imagining short periods in the lives of some of the town’s inhabitants. The ensemble of protagonists includes an accountant, a writing instructor, an indigenous farm hand, two housewives, and a farmer. The lives of these characters unfold in a nonlinear time structure, with no overarching or unified plot, connected only by their experience, temporary, or otherwise, of living in Drylands during the drought. The novel has been aptly labeled a *fin-de-siècle* work (Kossew 2004, p. 57) as it critiques the political and cultural atmosphere of racism, sexism, and speciesism prevalent in the 1990s in order to convey a pessimistic view of Australia’s social, cultural, and environmental future. The immediate political context for the novel is the upsurge of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party, a strongly nationalist and conservative political grouping that opposed Australia’s increasingly open immigration policies in the 1990s, as well as the country’s then emphasis on multiculturalism and land concessions to Aboriginal Australians. The novel also emerged after the intense Queensland drought, which lasted from 1991 to 1995 and cost the region’s

economy \$5 billion. This drought was closely followed by the severe nation-wide millennium drought, which began in South-eastern Australia in 1996 and spread out to rest of the nation at the turn of the century. The socially oppressive and environmentally ravished setting in *Drylands* conveys that, almost a century after federation, Australia is still influenced by the legacies of imperialism. Despite considerable recognition of the text's literary achievement, the ecocritical and anticolonial implications have been less emphasized (White 2013, p. 137). Building on recent ecocritical examinations that show how it challenges rationalist Enlightenment conceptions of nature as framed through a human versus nature binary (White 2013; Potter 2017), this article focuses specifically on the material representation of water in the novel. I argue that the unique dynamic between water, social relations, and economy is at the core of *Drylands*' critique of human versus nature binaries. The novel articulates a complex critique of colonial "water dreaming" and reinstates water's agency and integrity in Australian ecology, economy, and culture.

The first collection of ecocritical essays on Australian literature defined the country as a "littoral zone", encouraging engagement with its status as the world's only island continent (Zeller and Cranston 2007, p. 7). While this concept was employed to broadly signify place-centered literary analysis and the figurative "littoral zone" between physical environment and cultural production, we can take this concept verbatim to foreground the significance of Australian hydrology and water management politics to its literary culture. Considering the colonial history of water enclosures, understanding literary Australian hydro-aesthetics necessitates accounting for the influence of colonial and capitalist politics on environments and environmental attitudes. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin argue that Australian pastoral literature is distinct in its ironic engagement with its violent settler colonial past (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, p. 102). Poets like Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright use the pastoral mode to advocate responsible stewardship over a wounded land and evince the interconnectedness of indigenous and settler environmental attitudes (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, p. 103). Kylie Crane has also illustrated how concepts of the Australian inland as either a passive or threatening "wilderness" are interrogated as environmentally harmful and culturally violent by writers like Alexis Wright (Crane 2012, p. 30). As Cathcart shows in his monograph on "water dreaming", concepts like the pastoral and wilderness had enormous power in cultivating cultural support for large-scale hydroengineering schemes: "Quite early in my research, I was struck by the ways in which colonists often represented the settlement of Australia as a process of bringing civilised sound and redeeming song to a timeless, silent land" (Cathcart 2010, introduction). Cathcart shows how generations of colonial writers, like James Calder and WC Wentworth, conjure a silent land—which encompasses the silence of indigenous voices and is evidently gendered—that is both enticing and terrifying for settlers in its timelessness, emptiness, and wildness (Cathcart 2010, chp. 4). This powerful discourse underlay many twentieth century hydroengineering projects: for example, Alfred Deakin's pioneering state-sponsored irrigation schemes—expensive and ecologically unviable—were predicated on "breaking the barrier of silence" in the inland (Cathcart 2010, chp. 14). *Drylands* functions as a "postcolonial pastoral" (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, p. 103) and a "postwilderness" (Crane 2012, p. 30) text, in that it critiques the ecological and social implications of pastoral and wilderness tropes, yet it also critiques the deployment of these concepts in terms of water development specifically.

An understanding of the material significance of water to postcolonial ecocritical imaginaries in the Australian context can be grasped by recognizing the literary implications of water's role as a source of energy for economic development. Michael Niblett's (Niblett 2012) call to read world-literature in terms of Jason W. Moore's concept of the "capitalist world-ecology" (Moore 2015, p. 6) is useful here. Moore articulates a concept of "capitalism in the web of life", whereby capitalism works through nature (organizes it, commodifies it), and at the same time nature is made to work through the prism of capitalism (Moore 2015, p. 2). Niblett sees this worlding process, whereby particular configurations of capitalism shape and are shaped by nature within the world-system, as a touchstone for interpreting literary texts in specific contexts at certain phases of accumulation. He argues that the destabilizing effects of ecological surplus decline under capitalist regimes tend to be registered, and in some cases

consciously critiqued, through aesthetic and formal experimentation (Niblett 2012, p. 21). Drylands' portrayal of the crippling drought of the late 1990s captures a mood of anxiety surrounding Australia's water and a burgeoning self-awareness of the catastrophic misappropriation of water for economic growth. Rather than a whim of climate, the drought is a crisis of the accumulation of "cheap water" (Deckard 2019, p. 108). It registers the irony of Australia's status as a core country, and one of the largest exporters of "virtual water" (water-intensive commodities), yet one in which peripheral environments and communities are decimated due to capitalist water practices ushered in under colonialism. This happens on the level of both form and content: while its theme of drought-induced migration is critical of the past, present, and future social and ecological effects of the reckless extraction of freshwater, its hybrid form as a montage of short stories rejects the dominant anthropocentric and masculinist narrative modes that underline technocratic water cultivation.

Accordingly, I will first explore how the novel portrays drought as a legacy of colonialism and a manifestation of a crisis of capitalism. I will then articulate how the novel deconstructs the myth of redeeming the outback through hydroengineering, a myth that skews the uneven integration of the countryside in global economics and intensifies its underdevelopment. Finally, I will outline how the novel's critique of freshwater politics is also expressed through representations of the sea in order to convey a sense of ecology that is mediated through neocolonial capitalist modernity.

2. Drought as a Crisis of "Cheap Water"

Drylands presents stories of uncloaked racism and sexism, conveying the social atmosphere of bigotry, prejudice, and paranoia as Hanson's conservative politics gained ground in rural parts of New South Wales and Queensland. For Sue Kossew, "the drought is a trope for cultural, political and psychological aridity" (Kossew 2004, p. 57). Yet, the drought, which is present in all the stories, is more than a background or a metaphor for a tyrannical social environment. The drought is integral to the strained social relations and is one of the main drivers of depopulation and discontent in the town. As Emily Potter observes, "Human and meteorological conditions in the town are strongly interlinked" (Potter 2017, p. 3). Feelings of environmental alienation and conditions of poverty can be traced back to the menacing drought. This is quite explicit in the story of the indigenous farmhand, Benny, and the story of the farmer, Jim. A new water scheme for the town makes Benny's rent unaffordable, which induces him to move out of Drylands. Benny squats in a watery enclave in a nearby national park and feels an uplifting sense of connection with his ancestral past as he engages in a more direct relationship with the land, procuring his own water and food. Benny's lifestyle is sabotaged, however, by the local esquire, Howie Briceland, whose ill-concealed racial prejudices lead him to report Benny to the authorities of the national park. Jim's story iterates a similar drought-induced disaster. After selling his unprofitable farm (a consequence of "the fifth dry year" (p. 111)), Jim seeks solace in a personal scheme to build a boat and sail away from Drylands towards an unspecified coastal area. As Laura White surmises, Jim's obsession with the sea reflects a desire to engage with water in a reciprocal way "rather than as master, ending the struggle to impose his will on the dry land that resists its material treatment and conceptual definition as farm land" (White 2013, p. 142). As with Benny, the social dynamic of the town intervenes in his quest: Howie Briceland's young son, To , burns down Jim's boat in an act of vandalism (attributed in the novel to To 's misdirected anger due to his neglect by a father preoccupied with using the drought as an opportunity to expand the family's farming empire). The intertwining of the drought with the individual personal sagas conjures a "postcolonial pastoral" (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, p. 103), placing the 1990s drought within the longer history of water enclosures. Benny's experience of dispossession replays older histories of indigenous displacement under colonialism, a settlement project that was uniquely driven by a desire to secure water resources (Cathcart 2010). Jim's devastated farm and destroyed boat ties the plight of the small farmer to the assault on the land by dry farming methods. Indeed, in the cases of all the characters, their social identities and experiences are mediated by the material conditions of drought.

Rather than passively reflect the contemporary woes of colonial and capitalist-induced drought, *Drylands* critiques the phenomenon of “water dreaming” (Cathcart 2010), which underlies the drought. It does so through the technique of metafictionality. On its most basic level, the novel is about a woman writing a novel about life in a small town during an intense drought. The function of the implied narrator, Janet, is to highlight and subvert traditional methods of narrating water. Janet’s surname “Deakin” is an allusion to Alfred Deakin (White 2013, p. 144), one of the great “water dreamers” of the early twentieth century who championed the science of hydroengineering as a way of transforming what was perceived to be the dry and sterile desert of inland Australia into a lush Edenic landscape (Cathcart 2010, chp. 14). Janet thus inherits the legacies of “water dreaming”, and her fictional stories are an attempt to grapple with this history. Contrary to Alfred Deakin, who espoused that the inland desert was a garden that could be made to bloom through hydroengineering (Cathcart 2010, chp. 14), Janet Deakin takes a more stoic approach to narrating the outback: “Settle for claypan, arid plain, perhaps, a flattish hinterland with gauzy distances where the low Divide moves ever backwards as you chase the paddock grasses, wire fences, switching from verdure to an ochreous sheep-munch” (p. 6). Janet’s literary quest to “Use the place!” (p. 16) and represent the aridity of the outback in an unromantic fashion constitutes an attempt to renegotiate colonial Australian land discourses that posit water as a resource solely for capitalist development, separate to and controllable by human (i.e., capitalist) forces. Janet’s dreary portraits of drought-induced poverty and angst show how water is fundamental to the material and ideological composition of Australian life. As White posits, the stories emphasize embodied experience through human–nature relations, which individually and collectively counter dominant white male concepts of the outback experience (White 2013, p. 143). Extending this insight to consider hydropolitics, the portrayal of embodied human experience through water-relations also enables the novel to counter the racialized and gendered dimensions of “water dreaming”; discourses of making an arid land bloom through hydroengineering in settler-colonial contexts derive from the disregard of indigenous agricultural methods by colonial settlers (Gammage 2011) and also construct a feminized nature that must be managed and fertilized by male-steered technology (Gaard 2001). Aligning the drought with gendered and racialized social experience, the novel makes the point that forms of environmental and social exploitation overlap and support each other (White 2013). The characters in Janet’s tale are what Astrida Neimanis calls “bodies of water” (Neimanis 2017, p. 3): entities embodied within a hydrocommons of human and nonhuman co-constituted water relations, which are mediated through social power structures.

Through the implied narrator, Janet, drought is told through a female lens. This simultaneously asserts female and hydrological agency: it subverts the pacification of a feminized nature and highlights the differentiated experience of drought for men and women.¹ Certainly, Janet’s status as the implied narrator is not without issue: Janet herself is a white woman, and out of her six stories, only one centers on non-white experience. While sympathetic to racial injustice, the storyteller perpetrates the smothering of non-white views of nature-relations, which are attributed in the novel to causing the catastrophe. From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, therefore, Janet’s narratorial position is only partially subversive. Yet, the novel’s metafictionality is complex and Janet herself is theorized in the novel. As Emily Potter elucidates, Janet falls into the trap of narrating through the lens of a human/nature binary (Potter 2017, p. 9): “Her desire to encapsulate ‘the themes of a lifetime [spent] reading’ (10) in her novel rehearses the illusion of an ontological and epistemological ‘unitary base’ (Gibson 1999, p. 86) for knowledge and the production of meaning: ‘the one’ from which everything emerges” (Potter 2017, p. 9). The final episode sees Janet abandon her novel and quit *Drylands* due to her economic desperation, following suit with the characters of her novel, thus demonstrating how Janet herself is implicated in the socioecology about which she writes (Potter 2017, p. 10). The novel

¹ The 1990s drought, as it was felt in Queensland, was a gendered experience: women had less decision-making power than men in terms of farm management and were largely relegated to the domestic sphere (Stehlik et al. 2000, p. 39).

humanizes Janet, and thus illustrates how her perspective is constructed through embodied experience. This is the crux of Astley's metafictional critique of "water dreaming": representations of water cannot be extricated from their material conditions in a postcolonial environment.

We can interpret the drought in *Drylands* as a crisis of "cheap water" (Deckard 2019, p. 108) since, as Sharae Deckard argues, "'water scarcity' must be understood as socially manufactured, rather than naturally inevitable: the creation of capitalist hydrological regimes" (Deckard 2019, p. 110). The drought in *Drylands* is not merely a climatic vagary: it is a result of unsustainable irrigation and dryland farming. This prospect is suggested through the allusion to "water dreamer" Alfred Deakin, and also through reference to the Snowy River Scheme—the largest irrigation project ever undertaken in Australia—which, by the time of the novel's publication in 1999, had severely depleted Australia's rivers. Various images of water pollution and dysfunctional pipes and tanks attribute blame for the region's water woes to the infrastructures, which were initially planned to unleash, rather than diminish, the country's inland waters. Driving through the hinterland, the accountant thinks "this was a no man's land, it would appear, the cultivated terra nullius of our founding fathers" (p. 24), and later describes the outback as a "tan landscape whose gullies and small streams had almost forgotten the pollution that clogged them" (p. 32). The reference to the colonial history of declaring Australia terra nullius in order to justify the imposition of European farming methods links the current drought to the longer history of Western economic development. This self-awareness about the role of Western colonialism and capitalism in creating the drought is evoked through several sardonic remarks from characters and dark images of aesthetically displeasing water infrastructures. The accountant's failed attempt to assume a false identity and settle in an abandoned shack outside Drylands is foreshadowed by his observation that "The tank water stinks" (p. 31). The housewife Lannie scorns her husband's farm by reference to "a dried-out creek and dams little more than quagmires" (p. 216) and is later reminded of Drylands when she sees a "sluggish green-brown river" (p. 225) in a coastal town. In the story with farmhand Benny, the town's water scheme is portrayed as hopelessly inadequate: "He walked into dawn and looked at the drooping plants he'd struggled to establish in front of the stumps of his drooping house. There was never enough water in the tanks to sustain them through the dry" (p. 176). The references to these infrastructures are littered inconspicuously throughout the text, but their function nonetheless is to conjure an atmosphere where capitalist water mismanagement has manufactured water scarcity.

The understated but ubiquitous presence in the novel of stinking water tanks, sewage schemes and irrigation schemes is integral to the novel's portrayal of drought: it conveys the ironic invisibility of the human role in creating the water crisis. As Deckard writes, neoliberal water culture is characterized by "fluidity, hypermobility and ubiquity paradoxically conjoined with occulted visibility" (Deckard 2019, p. 112) in order to represent how the rampant exploitation of water often takes place out of sight. Australia's water crisis is defined by paradoxes of invisibility. Due to Australia's wealth as a core country of the capitalist world-system, the majority of its citizens do not experience water shortages due to the fact that governments and businesses can provide imported water (Barlow 2008, p. 5). As environmentalist Fred Pearce observes, a place can be in water scarcity even if water can be obtained short-term but dominant extraction practices disrupt the self-regeneration of the water cycle and compromise future natural water returns (Pearce 2018, p. 28). Overtly, *Drylands* depicts a fully-fledged drought and a pronounced absence of water. Yet, the littering of images of empty water tanks and polluted rivers create a mood of sterility, decay, and societal catastrophe, which expresses the invisibility of the systemic practices that are compromising the long-term water security of this place.

3. Dry Country, Wet City

The novel's structural form as a montage of short stories enhances its portrayal of drought as a crisis of "cheap water" by highlighting the relational process of space-making. As Laura White notes, the novel's nonlinear form decenters the human and enables a hybrid portrait of Australian rural life that foregrounds the voices of the typically silenced human and nonhuman others (White 2013, p. 143).

Subverting dominant conceptions of the outback as white and male, *Drylands*' focus on diversity in narratorial authority—it includes female and indigenous perspectives within a narrative that acknowledges the interdependence of the human with the nonhuman—renders the bush experience as one that is mediated by hierarchies of gender, race, class, and species (White 2013, p. 143). Emily Potter has analyzed the narrative implications of the implied author, Janet, and shows how Janet's inability to find redemption in writing and separate herself from the poverty-induced misery of the town about which she writes undermines the traditional omnipotent human narrator, and portrays a narrative instead as "profoundly ecological, emergent from, and operative within, these material interactions that take place beyond the form of the human subject" (Potter 2017, p. 12). The ensemble of short character portraits means that focus is directed towards the nonhuman force that links them together—the place itself, *Drylands*.

The foregrounding of this place, a rural town in Queensland, is significant for a 1990s Australian hydrofiction. Rural dwellers unevenly felt the impacts of the 1990s drought compared to urban dwellers, suffering increased mental health issues and social stress (Potter et al. 2007, p. 9). As well as theorizing this geographical disparity in the distribution of the effects of anthropogenic drought, *Drylands* goes one step further and renders drought as it is experienced by social minorities within the uneven relations between country and city. In showing how gender and race intersect with class to constitute the social experience of rural Australian drought, Astley complicates simple country versus city dichotomies; we get a narrative that acknowledges differences between rural and urban experiences of drought, yet subverts hierarchies of gender, race, and species within the disadvantaged countryside. Additionally, *Drylands* conveys the reckless extraction of water from the arid inlands: it draws attention to the nationalist construct of the countryside as an idealized space isolated from modernity in order to expose the logic of underdevelopment that overrides water mismanagement. As Cathcart argues, the arid hinterlands were particularly central to the Australian hydro-imaginary, as it was deemed necessary to settle and irrigate the inlands to further national economic growth (Cathcart 2010). Sue Kossew has demonstrated how *Drylands* undermines the isolation of the country by showing how the town is connected to the nation and the world by communication infrastructures such as the internet (Kossew 2004, p. 59). As we shall see, *Drylands* is also positioned within the global economy. The 1990s drought hit at a time when Australian markets were opened to the world economy; the progress of Australia as a player in the world market and an exporter of "virtual water" exacerbated the water crisis in the hinterlands (Stehlik et al. 2000, p. 39; Potter et al. 2007, p. 9). This worlding (Westall 2017, p. 266) of Australia's water is integral to the drought in *Drylands*, and is evident in the novel's depiction of space, movement, and urbanization.

The novel's portrayal of depopulation underlines the significance of water in shaping Australia's economy, ecology, and national identity. As mentioned, all the characters eventually leave *Drylands*. The novel is a depiction of climate migration, where poor country dwellers are "out-manoeuvred by weather" (p. 287) and seek solace and prosperity in larger towns and cities. In Australia, larger towns and cities are located near the coast. Reflecting the role of water in shaping Australia's urban geography, water dictates how the characters plan and execute their escape from *Drylands*. Most of the characters eventually move to coastal towns or cities: Lannie leaves her husband's dying farm and gets employment at a radio station on the coast; Joss moves to a "dying beach shack" (p. 269); Jim drives away to the "inevitable sea" (p. 147). At the end of the novel, Janet herself decides to leave the town for "a coastal lagoon somewhere north of Brisbane" (p. 294). When these multiple instances of migration are considered within the entirety of the plot, their watery dictates are even more significant. *Drylands* layers stories where a character moves from a dry space to a wet space due to mental and economic stress. We abandon characters soon after they move to the coastal towns, therefore the predominant setting remains that of the "dust and dying sheep" (p. 256) of *Drylands*. This repetition of drought-induced migration undermines the linearity of the national narrative of redeeming the arid countryside through hydroengineering: the economic growth of the countryside is instead stagnated and subject to repeated catastrophes.

Where water is represented, it is portrayed as fundamentally misunderstood by those who would commodify it. This is a critique of the bush myth of Australia, which “usually depicted nature as something to be endured or battled against rather than celebrated, its value being mainly of the economic variety” (Zeller and Cranston 2007, p. 18). When Benny moves to the National Park, he is accompanied by his white friend Paddy who represents the post settler-colonial psyche:

“Paddy climbed down and walked across to a dark unmoving circle of water. She shivered slightly in the hot midday. “I don’t like the feel,’ she said. There’s something wrong”.

Benny stood watching. He grunted then bent down and scooped a handful of creek-water and drank. It was sweet. Part black, part white, he understood that settler fright. Scrub. Scrub-scare! It was alien, spiky, unwelcoming. To them, anyway”.

(Astley 1999, p. 182)

This passage contrasts Benny’s appreciation for crude creek water as someone “part-black, part white” with Paddy’s apprehension of unkempt, uncultivated land. The difference between the two is thrown into relief by the element of water, and Benny’s reflections clearly attribute Paddy’s apprehensions to a type of settler unbelonging founded on a fundamental lack of understanding of Australia’s ecology. In presenting multiple instances of Australians abandoning a drought-stricken town, the novel performs the indictment of Western economic development in the outback that Benny intimates. This is an inverse of the national project of settling the hinterlands through hydroengineering. Whereas water once drew settlers to the inlands, it draws them away again.

Considering the drought as an example of crisis within the capitalist world-system sheds light on aspects of character and plot development in *Drylands*. Analyzing resources in fiction requires not only recognition of overt representations of energy crisis, but recognition of energy’s ability to influence impetus and productivity in plot and character development (MacDonald 2013, p. 5). In *Drylands*, we follow seven different characters as they fail to excavate a viable living in a rural economy based around drylands farming. Their story ends at the point at which they leave *Drylands* (or soon after), and then the narrative moves to another character. The reader is denied a teleological ending for the characters, and indeed the plot itself is suggested to be an endless process of repetition, as the final unpunctuated line of the novel proclaims, “There were no endings no endings no endings no” (p. 294). As discussed, this structure undermines the concept that water can be harnessed to linear economic growth in Australia. Considering the function of water as an energy source in the novel enables understanding of how the drought pushes the characters to leave *Drylands*: the absence of potable water is a major plot device around which the human characters act. This plot resists the quantification of water as a commodity and instead presents it as a generative, though unruly, ecological force. This representation of drought migration embodies a mode of resistance to “water dreaming”. As Claire Westall reminds us “resources can be resistive—that they are increasingly hard to mine, to frack, to extract—and that collective and pivotal resistance arises at particular sites of extraction and more widely in response to capital’s systemic extractivism” (Westall 2017, p. 267). The drought represents the agency of water; the countryside is not a hostile space that needs to be domesticated (as nationalist myth would have it): its hostility is inextricable from the larger forces of globalization. As discussed, the global status of Australia greatly reduces the impact of drought on its citizens compared to residents of water-stressed areas in poorer nations. Yet, the representation of rural Australia and its inhabitants in *Drylands* evinces that their plight is symptomatic of their status as a periphery in the world-system.

4. Turning Towards the Sea

Freshwater is not the only type of water of concern in the novel: the sea is also a major thematic device. As discussed, most of the characters leave *Drylands* for coastal locations. Prior to their departure, however, many of the characters idealize the sea itself as a panacea to the misery of *Drylands*. While building the boat that will be his vehicle to escape *Drylands*, Jim is motivated by childhood

memories of the power and beauty of the sea. He recalls how “his eyes were shocked by that moving world of aquamarine whose surface shook in repeated patterns of yeasty invitation. The vastness frightened him at first. The immensity” (Astley 1999, p. 113). Joss recalls her childhood on the Gold Coast and her time in New Orleans, United States: “Now in the aridity of dust and dying sheep I comfort myself with small sea-winds coming o the Gulf Coast and colder winds from the Atlantic :: : ” (p. 256). Lannie is invigorated by the sea when she abandons her husband and the family farm: “Bemused, she sat there staring at blue water. She was beyond thought and had merely a sense of catharsis and, after that, of escape. Bliss!” (p. 208). Yet, the characters’ appreciation of the material properties of the sea and their desire to engage directly with it is mediated by the political economy of water development. For characters whose social and economic problems are determined by a pronounced absence of water, the abundant sea is a fetish of the fulfillment and stability denied them in their drought-stricken hometown. This conveys that connections between freshwater and seawater in the Australian psyche are mediated less by a reverence of the ecological processes of the hydrological cycle, and more so by the nature-relations of capitalism. As Cathcart argues, the politics of freshwater underpin sea imaginaries in contemporary Australia (Cathcart 2010, chp. 7). In his study of the popular myth of the inland sea, Cathcart demonstrates how generations of historians had wrongly documented that colonial explorers went out in search of an inland sea (Cathcart 2010, chp. 7). The explorers set out looking for great rivers and lakes, not a sea. Cathcart interprets this error in historiography as itself a form of “water dreaming”: the significance of water for Australian national development lent itself too easily to exaggerations of the imagination (Cathcart 2010, chp. 7). In *Drylands*, the allure of the sea is anthropocentric and utilitarian, yet it is purposefully so. The novel’s plot does not contain actual fulfilling engagements with the sea. The sea’s function, rather, is to showcase the ideological force of “water dreaming”.

In *Drylands*, freshwater and saltwater work with each other in a productive tension to determine the motivations and movements of the characters. Imagery of abundant water and happiness at the coast contrasts with imagery of aridity and despair in the countryside. Jim remembers the sea as “fluid power” (p. 113), yet the outback is bitterly described by him as “flattened plains” under “an uncomplicated sky” (p. 126). Lannie is “deliciously freed” (p. 208) and falls asleep “lulled by the steady rhythm of the water breaking on the sand” (p. 208) at Emu beach, yet back at *Drylands* the family farm is “falling apart” (p. 217) and populated by only “a few sheep that Fred kept tottering around as a tax lurk” (p. 216). Joss recalls domestic bliss in New Orleans “in one of those pretty white clapboard houses near the sea” (p. 255), and later bemoans her life as a publican’s wife living in “a rundown six-bedroom wreck in *Drylands*” (p. 256). In the final episode, Janet vividly imagines the house that is to be her escape from “Drought. Dying stock” (p. 286): “Its two storeys listed towards the sea :: : the house, the name, the memory of the lonely sand-shore with its dripping she-oaks had stayed with her over the years :: : refinding would be like the search for the ultimate Eden” (p. 294). The di ering intonations of coastal and rural imagery underpin the decisions made by the characters to act out in defiance of their circumstances and migrate. The prospect of living in a water-abundant environment promises spiritual, emotional, and psychological rejuvenation. Whereas drought pushes the characters to migrate, the sea pulls them away.

The sea functions as a counterpoint to the drought to sustain the characters’ morale and incite them to take action. While the sea is alive in the minds of the characters, it does not directly influence action the way that the drought does. We leave each character soon after they plan to head out towards the sea and another drought story begins. This plot cycle deems *Drylands* a novel energized by the hydrological cycle as it manifests in neocolonial capitalist modernity. The drought depicted in *Drylands* is symptomatic of a disregard for water’s equilibrium as a renewable resource. The commodification of freshwater posits it as something discrete not only from the human, but from other ecological processes, and readily serviceable for a type of capitalism working on nature (as opposed to through it) (Moore 2015). Cathcart writes that “The commodification of our rivers replicates white Australia’s oldest folly: it treats water as if it can be separated from the environment, as if it can be trucked around

the country regardless of the logic of the land. It treats 'the market' as more natural than nature itself" (Cathcart 2010, chp. 16). *Drylands* reinstates the connection between freshwater and seawater that is occluded under neoliberal logic.

We can consider the representation of seawater in *Drylands* in relation to Ruth Morgan's argument that desalination plants on Australia's coasts were sanctioned under the rhetoric of "climate independence" (Morgan 2017, p. 1). As Morgan elucidates, anxieties regarding climate change and persistent national drought in the 1990s incited unprecedented public fear over the future of Australia's water (Morgan 2017, p. 4). Representing another chapter in a long-running tradition of understanding Australia's water in terms of frontier mythologies of mastery, self-reliance, and independence from nature, desalination was endorsed by politicians as a quick fix to the deep-seated water problems in the arid interior (Morgan 2017, p. 4). It has been largely criticized by activists as excessively expensive, wastefully inefficient, and dangerously toxic for marine environments and the atmosphere (Barlow 2008, p. 26; Morgan 2017, p. 8). While *Drylands* does not directly refer to the desalination debates emerging at the time of its publication, its plot mirrors the turn towards the sea as a new frontier of "cheap water". Yet, its complex portrayal of the coast and the sea rejects the utilitarian mindset that underpins seawater commodification. In the various stories, the coast is perceived by the characters as a place of superior culture and progressive social politics, yet at the same time is infiltrated by the same social hierarchies predominating in the countryside. Janet's mother is from a coastal town and is described as outspoken and educated, "a maths freak" (p. 103), yet her father objects to her gaining a university degree and she eventually marries a soldier who forces her to quit her job. The writing instructor Evie comes in from a coastal town and mentally contrasts the smallminded housewives she meets in *Drylands* with a "wry-mouthed" (p. 82) teacher she met in the last coastal town she visited. The teacher is an "expert" (p. 84) on the piano, yet Evie predicts that her "skewed talent" (p. 84) would not thrive when she married. The coast, while it is idealized by the characters, is also portrayed in very subtle ways as a false refuge that is not free from the social failures characterizing the countryside.

The novel undermines seemingly idealistic conceptions of the sea and, in certain cases, imbues it with ominous connotations. Recalling her first attempt at creative writing, Janet remembers describing her first love—a bigot who calls her a whore—using coastal imagery: "Charted your coast without once touching land : : : found the sea to be safer, sea between the islands" (p. 13). This imagery denotes identification with the sea as a refuge from oppressive gender politics, yet Janet further recalls "the pretentiousness of it!" (p. 13) and her frustration with the "abstraction of words" (p. 13). She denounces the writing as "Enclosed" (p. 13); in line with the ecofeminist strain of the novel that acknowledges the interlinking subordination of women and the nonhuman through feminized nature constructs (White 2013, p. 143), this is a subtle denial of an inherent alliance between women and the sea. Jim's fanciful plan to sail "from *Drylands* to waterlands" (p. 139) is sabotaged when To burns down his boat. The image of the boat burning personifies the fire as a playful, greedy villain with sea-like qualities: "the flames mounted and fattened and played with old Randler's boat and rolled it on its moorings and hissed like waves" (p. 145). Here, the "fluid power" (p. 113) of the sea turns hostile. Joss's escape from *Drylands* after being assaulted is colored with a similar irony. Joss takes refuge in a beach shack and is comforted by the "steady snore" of the sea, yet her haven is soon revealed as insecure: she is hunted down by her assailants who come to terrorize her further. Joss's paranoia takes expression through sea imagery: "But what I'm waiting for comes : : : and louder than the sea, louder than its high-tide wallowings, the breathing of bodies on the other side of the hollow wood" (p. 277). The breathing of humans as "louder than the sea" undermines the conception of the sea as separate to the crisis of social relations in the hinterlands. When her house is broken into, we are told "Sea air rushes down the hallway" (p. 277). This imagery counteracts the romanticizing of the sea in the various stories. It portrays the sea's energy as at once marvelous, dangerous, and undefinable. This is complemented by the narrative technique of repetition, whereby we follow various characters on a journey towards the sea yet are denied teleological endings to their individual and collective

stories. The promise of emotional and economic redemption via the sea is intentionally tantalizing. This is significant for *Drylands*' subversive representation of water: it denies simplistic representation of the sea as a solution for the economic catastrophe of the commodification of Australia's inland rivers. While it may not be overtly participating in anti-desalination debates, its reluctance to endorse the sea as a refuge from the economic and social woes of drought contradicts the influential pro-desalination rhetoric of "climate independence".

5. Conclusions

Drylands takes a subversive approach to narrating drought: rather than portray it as a naturally occurring catastrophe, it is portrayed as a crescendo of foolish and exploitative capitalist water management practices ushered in under colonialism. This comes through in a myriad of ways: through the metafictional critique of the gendered, racist, anthropocentric views that underline neoliberal water management; through the representation of the outback as underdeveloped according to capitalist logic; and through the dynamic between freshwater and seawater that highlights water's treatment as a commodity. The novel's representation of drought is a critique of "water dreaming": it shows how conceptions of water in Australia at the turn of the century were ideologically compromised. This reading of *Drylands* shows how representations of water in the post-settler colonial context of Australia must be understood in relation to the larger scheme and system of the world-ecology.

Funding: This article derives from research funded by a Galway Doctoral Research Scholarship.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, Alexandra Campbell and Michael Paye. I'm also grateful to Lionel Pilkington and Nessa Cronin for their helpful comments on an early draft of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Astley, Thea. 1999. *Drylands*. Victoria: Penguin Books.
- Barlow, Maude. 2008. *The Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water*. New York: The New Press.
- Bird Rose, Deborah. 2007. Justice and Longing. In *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia*. Edited by Emily Potter, Alison MacKinnon, Stephen Nowell McKenzie and Jennifer McKay. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, pp. 8–12.
- Cathcart, Michael. 2010. *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of Our Dry Continent*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, Kindle edition.
- Crane, Kylie. 2012. *Myths of Wilderness in Contemporary Narratives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Deckard, Sharae. 2019. Water Shocks: Neoliberal Hydrofiction and the Crisis of "Cheap Water". *Atlantic Studies* 16: 108–5. [CrossRef]
- Flannery, Tim. 1994. *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*. New York: Grove Press.
- Gaard, Greta. 2001. Women, Water, Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach. *Organization & Environment* 14: 157–72.
- Gammage, Bill. 2011. *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Ti. 2015. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Jolly, Margaret. 2007. Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific* 19: 508–45. [CrossRef]
- Kossew, Sue. 2004. *Writing Woman, Writing Place Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- MacDonald, Graeme. 2013. Research Note: The Resources of Fiction. *Review in Cultural Theory* 4. Available online: <http://reviewsinculture.com/2013/08/01/research-note-the-resources-of-culture/> (accessed on 19 September 2019).
- McGrath, Ann. 1987. *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Moore, Jason W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London: Verso.

- Morgan, Ruth. 2017. The Allure of Climate and Water Independence: Desalination Projects in Perth and San Diego. *Journal of Urban History*, 1–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Neimanis, Astrida. 2017. *Bodies of Water: Posthumanist Feminist Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Niblett, Michael. 2012. World-Economy, World-Ecology, World Literature. *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 16: 15–30. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Pearce, Fred. 2018. *The Global Water Crisis and How to Solve It*. London: Granta.
- Potter, Emily. 2017. 'No Nails New under the Sun': Creativity, Climate Change and the Challenge to Literary Narrative in Thea Astley's *Drylands*. *TEXT*. Available online: <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue40/Potter.pdf> (accessed on 19 August 2019).
- Potter, Emily, Alison MacKinnon, Stephen Nowell McKenzie, and Jennifer McKay. 2007. Introduction. In *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia*. Edited by Emily Potter, Alison MacKinnon, Stephen Nowell McKenzie and Jennifer McKay. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, pp. 8–12.
- Pyne, Stephen. 2014. *Burning Bush: A Fire History of Australia*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Stehlik, Daniela, Geoffrey Lawrence, and Ian Grey. 2000. Gender and Drought: Experiences of Australian Women in the Drought of the 1990s. *Disaster* 24: 38–53. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Westall, Claire. 2017. World-literary Resources and Energetic Materialism. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 53: 265–76. [[CrossRef](#)]
- White, Laura. 2013. Re-Imagining the Human: Ecofeminism, Affect and Post-Colonial Narration. In *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*. Edited by Simon C. Estok, Greta Claire Gaard and Serpil Oppermann. New York: Routledge, pp. 147–58.
- Zeller, Robert and CA Cranston. 2007. Setting the Scene: Littoral and Critical Contexts. In *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers*. Edited by Robert Zeller and CA Cranston. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

