Denise Varney

‘Droughts and Flooding Rains’: Ecology and Australian Theatre in the 1950s

This article uses historical-ecological insights for a re-reading of two little-known mid-twentieth-century Australian plays, Oriel Gray’s *The Torrents* and Eunice Hanger’s *Flood*, which highlight developments relevant to the environmental disasters of today. In particular, the article focuses on the significance of key cultural assumptions embedded in the texts – and a revival of *The Torrents* in 2019 – including those to do with land use in a period of accelerating development. This approach offers new insights into the dominance of mining, irrigation, and dam-building activities within the Australian ethos, landscape, and economy. One of these insights is the framing of development as progressive. The article thus also examines how development projected as progressive takes place amid the continuing denial of prior occupation of the land by First Nations peoples and of knowledge systems developed over thousands of years. The intersectional settler-colonialist-ecocritical approach here seeks to capture the compounding ecosystem that is modern Australian theatre and its critique. The intention is not to apply revisionist critiques of 1950s plays but to explore the historical relationship between humans, colonialism, and the physical environment over time. Denise Varney is Professor of Theatre Studies in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Her research is in modern and contemporary theatre and performance, with published work in the areas of ecocriticism, feminism, and Australian theatre. Her most recent book is *Patrick White’s Theatre: Australian Modernism on Stage 1960–2018* (Sydney University Press, 2021).

Key terms: First Nations, climate change, colonialism, mining, irrigation, dams, floods.

NOT LONG INTO the first scene of Oriel Gray’s *The Torrents*, first staged in Adelaide in 1956, Kingsley Myers, an engineer by profession, declares, ‘It’s the land and the saving of it that I love.’[1] The expression of an emotional attachment to the land and the belief that it needs saving sounds contemporary. Yet the play was written in the 1950s and set in the 1890s, long before environmental conditions had reached the crisis point of today. The engineer is visiting the office of *The Argus*, a local newspaper in Koolgalla, a fictional Australian gold-rush town set on a river and surrounded by ‘empty’ land. He is chatting to the typesetters and printers as he waits to speak to the newspaper’s editor, Rufus Torrent, to persuade him to throw his support behind the irrigation scheme he has designed and for which he seeks investment. ‘I tell you, Mr Torrent, bring water to this land and it will grow anything – peaches this size, melons, grapes.’[2] Kingsley’s argument is that the surface gold is running out and the town should plan for a more sustainable future in agriculture and farming. Torrent is not convinced, and is also concerned that the gentlemen on the Board of Directors will not support the scheme, given there is ‘good money sunk in those [gold] mines out there’.[3] The stage is set for a war of words between ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ elements over land use.

Flood by Eunice Hanger is a compact two-act verse drama set in the 1950s in the fictional town of Berandoa in south-east Queensland. It was written and staged in Brisbane in 1955. The original playbill added an exclamation mark to the title to suggest ‘Flood!’ – a familiar catchcry in a location known for subtropical cyclones and for dams that fail to hold back megalitres of water.[4] And so early in Act One, a local radio announces, ‘There has been heavy rain on the upper reaches of the Jessie River, which is rising at the unprecedented rate of two feet

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five inches an hour. As we reported earlier, the Jessie dam has burst.'[5]

The use of the word 'unprecedented' in the radio broadcast is ominously predictive of a word now commonly used to describe the intensity of storms, flood, fire, and drought in Australia and elsewhere. In March 2022, for example, Australian newspapers reported that, 'Yet again, regions across NSW and Queensland are coming face to face with "unprecedented" floods', in an article that acknowledges that frequent use has turned the word into a cliché.[6] The drama is notable in a country known for its 'droughts and flooding rains' as one of the few plays to give plot priority to environmental crisis.[7] In the aftermath of the radio announcement that the river is rising, the drama is played out in response to the experience of a major flooding event. Relationships, values, and daily routines – the mainstay of realist drama – are temporarily set aside. The play closes with three young people, including a forward-looking woman, imagining future scenarios. *Flood* is interesting because it raises questions about human settlements and water management in mid-twentieth-century Australia, in the period leading up to the catastrophic weather events of the early twenty-first century which include droughts, floods, and bushfires.

The histories of these two plays are connected, and intersect, with that of another, better known 1950s drama, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, generally regarded by historians as the beginning of modern Australian theatre.[8] History has largely forgotten that *The Torrents* was actually the co-winner with 'the *Doll*' of the 1955 Playwrights Advisory Board (PAB) Drama Award that made Lawler's play famous. *Flood* was awarded a special third place for the award in the same year.[9] Where *The Torrents* was considered technically the 'more complete play',[10] only 'the *Doll*' was provided with financial support for a first production.[11] *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* subsequently opened at the Union Theatre at the University of Melbourne with critics pronouncing it an instant success. National and UK tours followed in the next two years. The published version appeared in 1957, but *The Torrents* was not published until 1988, when it appeared in a feminist volume featuring women writers.[12] *Flood* was not published until 1978, when it appeared in a volume with two unperformed plays – *2D* and *The Frogs* – assembled by Gray's colleagues at the University of Queensland.

Theatre historian Michelle Arrow argues that Gray was marginalized by the male-dominated Australian theatre establishment on three counts: the feminist themes of her play, her association with the left-wing New Theatre, and that theatre's amateur status amidst the desire to create a professional national theatre.[13] *The Torrents* was revived in 1996, and again in 2019 as a feminist drama, but it also spoke to the primal debate in twenty-first-century Australia over the imminent transition from coal-fired power to renewable energy. *Flood* had a brief four-night run in October 1955 in an amateur production at the Albert Hall in Brisbane and the Hobart Repertory Theatre in 1956, as well as being adapted for ABC Radio, before disappearing from view. It has not been revived.

While Oriel Gray and Eunice Hanger depict the tensions that arise between socially progressive (including feminist) viewpoints and a conservative patriarchal system, and between old and new ways of environmental management, an expanded situation of reception incorporating ecocriticism directs attention to the interplay between European settlement and the catastrophic environmental effects that followed. On this broad overview, both *The Torrents* and *Flood* stand at the intersection of colonialism and ecology, the two connected through the actions of the one on the other. Elsewhere, historians have recognized this intersection in terms of 'ecological imperialism', which, as Alfred Crosby describes it, involves the violent appropriation of Indigenous lands and the denial of prior sovereignty in the interests of founding a colony and introducing large-scale European farming for local and export purposes.[14] In an essay exploring the 'ecology of memory', Gay McAuley discusses ongoing acts of denial in Australian culture. She draws attention to anthropologist William Stanner's depiction of 'the Great Australian Silence', which, she explains, begins with the Australian Constitution,

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and results in 'Aboriginal people becoming virtually invisible in the eyes of white Australia'.[15] We might speak therefore of settler-colonial ecologies as the grounds on which the wealthy modern economy stands on stolen lands and how culture issues from that same intersectional space.

Both *The Torrents* and *Flood* can be said to be culturally immersed in settler colonialism and to bear a paradigmatic relation to wider events on the southern continent, including the dispossession of First Nations peoples, the founding of the Constitution, and the acceleration of Euro-American modernity. Val Plumwood has argued that colonization oppressed both the environment and Indigenous peoples according to a binary logic of European superiority over all living and non-living things.[16] Yet there are instances in both plays when the settler-colonial nexus reveals a temporal rather than abiding grip on national culture.

For example, Oriel Gray's title – *The Torrents* referring to Rufus and his son Ben's surname – draws attention to the genre of the family drama, but it also signifies how the 'metaphorization of nature' by humans is not always anthropocentric but can link the human and non-human, human and nature, in a more continuous than oppositional way.[17] A torrent is water flowing with great rapidity and violence, and is etymologically linked to the French word for burning, boiling, and passion. The word hints at the presence of an overwhelming force that is denied by the characters in the everyday, but reveals human co-existence with epochal forces of nature. These variations of the word are acknowledged in a description early in the play of not only Koolgalla but also the rest of the country and, by implication, its people who are subject to the material, agential capacity of water to transform itself from 'a muddy trickle in the dry spells' to 'a roaring torrent in the floods'.[18]

This article uses historical-ecological insights for a re-reading of *The Torrents* and *Flood*, chosen both for the mid-century period in which they are written and their land-use themes. A case here is also made for re-setting the canon of Australian theatre to feature drama that deals with the environment. The approach develops Una Chaudhuri's observation of the trend in ecocritical discourse towards acknowledging the intersections of 'postcolonialism, queer theory, speculative realism, and the new – or "vibrant" – materialism'.[19] Adapted for the Australian context, the analysis that follows uses a methodology that encompasses a settler-colonialist-ecocritical approach to analyze the selected works. In doing so, the aim is not to apply revisionist critiques of the play but to expand on the foundational precepts of ecocriticism to study the historical relationship between humans, colonialism, and the physical environment over time.

Temporality, place, and action in these works of theatre and drama are here re-read as interactions between settlers and the environment under the conditions of settler sovereignty. These lines of enquiry help us to understand how Australia's ecological history came to be naturalized and what theatre's role is in that very process. The argument is that these two largely forgotten works are indicative of the colonial heritage of Australian theatre in that they feature unconscious representations of the land as empty, without prior occupation, culture, or history, and as a resource and commodity. The article aims to evaluate theatre's social and cultural role as a 'prominent place for public gatherings',[20] where audiences can respond to and reflect on what they feel and see on the stage. That said, in giving prominence to the land as an economic resource rather than as a background to naturalism's human story, these two works offer readers and theatregoers the opportunity to reconsider the assumptions and denials that underpin modern Australia.

Environmental Politics in *The Torrents*: 'Dreams of El Dorado' and 'Land for Cultivation'

The Torrents offers theatrical representations of the environment across three aligned temporalities: the 1890s, in which the play is set; the post-war period, in which it is written; and the present, in which it is revised, restaged, and/or read. Each epoch is marked with

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historical significance: the colonial period is one of systematic and invasive Indigenous dispossession of the land and the settlement of those lands by colonists; the 1950s, also known as the period of the Great Acceleration, is a time of rapid increases in population, manufacturing, food production, and fossil-fuel consumption;[21] and the early twenty-first century is a time of catastrophic environmental crisis linked to the previous timeframes. The three temporalities function as estrangement effects, offering a look back to the 1890s and the 1950s from the historical vantage point of the present.

There is also a parallel ecological history for each of these epochs. The late nineteenth century was a time when Swedish chemist Svante August Arrhenius (1859–1927) and others, such as French physicists Joseph Fourier and Claude Pouillet, raised concerns about the warming effects on the Earth's atmosphere of increasing levels of carbon dioxide.[22] Arrhenius is credited with applying the term 'greenhouse effect' to this phenomenon.[23] By the 1950s, scientists had gathered early data on how fossil fuels, especially coal, were changing the amount of carbon dioxide in the air.[24] The following decade, Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring*, published in 1962, exposed the chemical contamination of land and waterways by agricultural use of pesticides. By 2018–19, globally agreed targets for nations to reduce carbon emissions collectively were in place, though not met.

Dynamic flows of resonance in the text's three temporalities support the settler-colonial-ecocritical approach. At the micro-level, Gray's drama indicates how investors in one technology are reluctant to change direction; how lobbyists for both sides turn to the media to make their case.[25] Reference to the beginnings of irrigation speaks to the current reassessment of its long-term environmental effects on the sustainability of country towns, waterways, and animal habitats. The Arcadian view of melons, peaches, and grapes in contrast to the toxic waste of gold-mining takes on new meaning as contemporary spectators come to the theatre with an awareness that 'clean' irrigation has since been revealed as a contributor to environmental degradation.[26] The historical significance of the drama now lies in the way both parties now find themselves on the wrong side of debates about the environmental effects of mining, industrialized agriculture, irrigation, and dams.

The 2019 Sydney Theatre Production marketed the play as an ideas-driven comedy, an interpretation it underlined by casting the well-known comedian and actor Celia Pacquola in the lead female role as Jenny Milford.[27] Placing its emphasis on balancing comedy with a debate about abandoning gold for a more sustainable future, director Clare Watson sought to bring together character acting, gender, and ecology in period costume and setting. Act One introduces the cast of characters, and in keeping with the comic tone, they are typified according to role. Jenny is an independent, educated, and employable woman, while the men around her are mostly workers or 'prosperous colonists'.[28] After playful banter amongst the workers in ink-spattered aprons, the newspaper's editor, Rufus Torrent, enters. He is described as a middle-aged Irish-born widower '*with thick hair and a magnificent beard*', and as a mark of prosperity wears a heavy gold watch chain strung across a dark waistcoat.[29] The arrival of the new proofreader, J. G. Milford, who happens to be the emancipated Jenny Milford, not in a suit but in Victorian corsets and full-length dress (Figure 1), adds to the humour as Rufus splutters into his beard.

Act Two begins three weeks later with a meeting of the *Koolgalla Argus*'s all-male Board of directors and shareholders, including Rufus and his son Ben, who stands to inherit the newspaper but is uncertain if he will ever step out from under his father's influence and determine what to do with his life. The stage directions place Rufus at the head of the table, with Jenny sitting at a desk behind taking the minutes. Gray's representation of the town's civic dignitaries as a privileged male domain reflects ironically on how the colony mimics Victorian hierarchies of race, gender, and class. The 2019 production went for a less formal arrangement than Gray's stage directions, detracting somewhat from the play's presentation of settler autocracy (Figure 2).

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Figure 1. Celia Pacquola as Jenny Milford in *The Torrents* (2019), co-produced by Sydney Theatre Company and Black Swan State Theatre Company of Western Australia. Photo © Philip Gostelow.

Kingsley Myers is present to speak to the meeting about his new irrigation project. He has already professed an emotional connection to the land and the desire to care for it, marking him as a sympathetic character. But his vision of Pre-Raphaelite peaches also instances a mode of ecological imperialism in the desire for the colony to reproduce a mythical English landscape. This vision also guides his distaste for mining's potholes and muddy sluices. The gold rush, he argues, has other systemic problems that he believes obstruct progress in the colony. Gold fever, Kingsley claims, distorts the labour market by luring farm workers to the diggings while other industries, including shipping and retail, suffer from labour shortages, leading to disruptions in supply chains. The colony's demand for cheap and plentiful labour is prioritized by the young entrepreneur over the individualized prospects of the miner seeking El Dorado with the moral temptations it brings with it away from home and family.

As the meeting begins, Kingsley attempts to explain the irrigation plans by means of diagrams and figures that only serve to leave his listeners either confused or hostile.

KINGSLEY: . . . and as you gentlemen can see from these plans (*Bending over plans laid out on table.*) it would be possible to pipe streams of water from the main source and to divert them, where necessary, over land for cultivation. This portion here, which would flow across Simmerton's Flat—[30]

Simmerton's Flat is the richest gold-bearing ground in the area, and there is laughter at the preposterous idea that it might become a cabbage patch. Gold has a decisive materialist presence in Australia, to which the play draws attention. *The Torrents* represents gold in dialogue, debate, and scenographically in the form of a dusty glass case on the wall of the newspaper office displaying a plaster cast of the first great discovery of the precious metal in the district. This fetishized and reified object, having been cleansed of the materials

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Figure 2. Tony Cogin as Rufus Torrent and Luke Carroll as Kingsley Myers in *The Torrents* (2019), co-produced by Sydney Theatre Company and Black Swan State Theatre Company of Western Australia. Photo © Philip Gostelow.

in which it was encased below ground – quartz, mud, water – reminds the Board that their fortunes are based on gold. Accordingly, in the onstage office space in which they sit, the men of the Board – landowners and storekeepers – refuse to support the plan. In the end, as Kingsley leaves the meeting, having failed to gain support for his scheme, Ben, who has remained silent during the meeting so far, urges the gentlemen not to stand in the way of progress. He too leaves defeated but not before '*wearily and emptily*' damning 'all you old – cautious – safe men'.[31] Then Rufus, in a somewhat contrary way, changes his mind, arguing 'there are no more fortunes' to be made from the diggings.[32] But the meeting decides not to support the irrigation scheme, and the world of men's lives together falls into a dispirited frame of mind. There is no reference to any other parties that might be consulted.

The disruption of this dispirited state of mind happens soon afterwards. After the meeting, Rufus composes an editorial ignoring Kingsley's irrigation scheme. Unbeknown to his father, Ben submits a story promoting it. In the closing stages of Act Two, Jenny, who has witnessed the men's deliberations in the meeting, makes the fateful decision to send Ben's editorial for printing with the instruction that it be 'set double and bold'.[33] She then writes a letter of resignation. Jenny has already marked herself as one who defies the male dominance of the newsroom and once again demonstrates how precedent can be changed by human action. Predictably, all hell breaks loose among the Board members the following day.

Act Three begins with the fallout. Rufus is at first furious, unleashing a set of clichés about women's underhand interferences and lack of logic, but Jenny's bold intervention in the editorial process unexpectedly wins his heart and mind (Figure 3). Soon the conservatives on the Board arrive to protest. When told to retract the editorial, Rufus's gold watch, the

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one he wears to display what he has gained, does not stop him from risking it all to uphold a moral stance on editorial independence. He refuses to retract the article. The Board threatens to withdraw their investment in the newspaper and Rufus dares them to do so.

While the play is set in the designated onstage space of the office, the text includes spoken references to offstage places such as 'empty paddocks', 'gold country', 'this land',[34] 'fields', and broadly 'the land'.[35] These imagined rather than mimetically realized spaces are, however, incorporated into colonial culture in the form of lines and measurements on Kingsley's irrigation plans and as coordinates on a map. As striated marks on a map, the land is rendered symbolically passive, an object to be named, sketched, acted on, discussed, and possessed by the colonists. The *Argus* Board cannot imagine a sense of the land as an active, living thing, sustaining life and culture or yielding gold or fruit. Water is similarly imagined as passive, as a river to support fruit trees, to be dammed, re-routed, and managed. Plumwood's sense of 'hegemonic centrism', a negative concept she applies to androcentrism and eurocentrism, is here enacted as naturalized human agency.[36] The critique of androcentrism is not to imply that Oriel Gray is endorsing it but to propose that the dramaturgical arrangement of the Board meeting draws critical attention to it.

Less certain is Gray's critical awareness of eurocentrism, which arose in the post-1950s era within postcolonial discourse. One can speculate that via the New Theatre environment, she was aware that Marxist theory linked imperialism and capitalism, as exemplified by the British Empire. But this awareness seems less evident than her feminist critique of the all-male Board. Their deliberations are presented as startlingly ignorant and self-serving, but what is left unspoken

Figure 3. (*Left to right*) Rob Johnson, Geoff Kelso, Celia Pacquola, and Tony Cogin in *The Torrents* (2019), co-produced by Sydney Theatre Company and Black Swan State Theatre Company of Western Australia. Photo © Philip Gostelow.

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for is that economic power in the colony is built on assumed sovereignty over unceded land, now the source of their wealth. Yet this sovereignty only proceeds on the lesser claim – more broadly in colonial Australia – as a 'taken-for-granted mode of occupation' of the lands.[37] Sovereignty is performative and theatrical, and it has worked. The Board makes no effort to seek further advice or consultation, or to think about others with entitlements to the land under discussion. The scene is important for the way it enacts what Patrick Wolfe describes as the indisputable 'polarity' between Indigenous and settlers' rights.[38] This is settler-colonialism as it is clearly manifested in *The Torrents*. The Board gives no thought to an expectation for negotiation or compensation, or fear of conflict or resistance from First Nation peoples as settlers dig the ground for gold or re-route the rivers for irrigation. There is, on the whole, an unspoken presumption of uncontested settler incumbency.

The Torrents stages thereby an instance of *terra nullius* – the 'legal fiction' that Indigenous peoples did not have sovereignty over the land the British claimed on behalf of the Imperial Crown.[39] The cultural, environmental fallout, and legal effects, continued into the modern post-war era in which the play was written. The tiny, theatricalized constituency of the newspaper Board is therefore not a singular event but a paradigm of meetings all over the towns and cities of Australia. If this broader historical view of members of a small town meeting is taken as representative of those whom Larissa Behrendt refers to as 'the framers of our Constitution', then we can place these men in the same cohort as those who did not acknowledge, let alone consult with or include, Indigenous peoples in the writing of the Australian Constitution.[40] When it came into effect in 1901, having been approved by the British Parliament, the monarchy, and the Church of England, it enshrined the absence of citizenship and rights for First Nations peoples. After Mabo, the non-Indigenous researcher learns to read absence as erasure, as Patrick Wolfe has defined it.[41] Researchers after the 1990s understand decolonization as a continuous process and not one that came to an end with Federation and the Constitution.

The intersection of ecocriticism, history, and Australian theatre in *The Torrents* distils settler-colonialism as it affects the environment. The regeneration of this neglected cultural artefact is significant in that it offers an indicator, at the very least, of the 'ways in which time transforms a play' and how complex temporality enables historicized readings of the text and its performances over time.[42]

'After Chaos, Harmony Comes to Berandoa': *Flood* (1955)[43]

Eunice Hanger's *Flood* was written in the same period as *The Torrents* but is set in its own times. This post-war temporality places the action within the period climate scientists refer to as the Great Acceleration, 'the dramatic change in magnitude and rate of the human imprint [on Earth]', which saw rapid industrial, socio-economic development and population growth.[44] Where *The Torrents* features a debate about irrigation, *Flood* features dams as an engineering solution to annual flooding events. This representation reflects the moment in the 1950s when the number of large dams in Australia rose substantially, bolstered by the sixteen dams under construction as part of the Snowy River Hydro-Electricity Scheme in New South Wales that began in 1949 and was completed in 1974. Manufacturing and imports of consumer goods such as household commodities, appliances, new wall-to-wall carpets, and venetian blinds increased. In *Flood*, the women of Berandoa fear that the 'river in the streets and shops and banks and houses' will ruin these precious modern commodities.[45]

The Great Acceleration also saw a rapid increase in migration through schemes that attracted workers to build dams, roads, and bridges and to work in manufacturing and on the land. A lingering effect of increased migration was the expanded mode of racism and anti-Semitism among British-in-origin settlers amid the White Australia Policy and the ongoing exclusion of dispossessed Indigenous peoples. Robert Metluck, an engineer escaping war-damaged Ukraine for the New

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World, is treated with suspicion by the representative bigots in the town. *Flood* is an important work of mid-century Australian theatre for the way it represents the cultural attributes of the period. From a contemporary viewpoint, the action appears as a continuation of the settler-colonial narrative of self-determination and belonging, but the dramatic interruption of daily life by a major flood event suggests a way of life that is unsustainable in the long term. In the present of the play, high rainfall, a dam bursting, and a flooded township expose the fragility underlying European settlement of lands treated as an endless resource for nation building.

One of the radical features of the play is that unlike the passive representation of the land in *The Torrents*, *Flood* represents the river as a living, agential, performative subject with a life force and will to flow. This representation offers a treatment of the unseen river as a non-human actor driving the action in a way that demonstrates the limits of human mastery. The river is also close rather than distant: 'You mean it's flooding – here?' asks a character early in Act One.[46] We hear that 'rain has been beating down for a day and a half, beating / Down with a soft remorseless warm wetness / For thirty-six hours'.[47] News arrives that the dam has burst 'like last year' and water is coming the town's way.[48] From this point, the rain drives the action, and seven thousand people enter an all-night vigil.

Despite the raging floodwaters, and the theatrical potential of their symbolic or scenographic presence, the drama is confined naturalistically to the living room of a family home with only brief liminal scenes staged outdoors on the hill overlooking the town as the moon rises and falls, and dawn arrives. These interludes take place in front of the closed curtain. The home is that of the Morrisons, a respectable middle-class Australian family of Irish descent – white, conservative, and community-minded.

Tension builds as news of rising water levels is communicated by radio and includes early news of a tragedy. Young Hughie Johnson, who rides two miles to school each day, has drowned. The women make sandwiches, soup, and coffee, while the men attend to the rising floodwaters:

> ALL: Rain! Flat falling on the roof, on the river
> Levelling rain! Filling the holes and the gutters,
> The river level with its banks, level and over –
> Insidious rising. Rain falling and lying
> And slowly moving and rising to level the gutters
> To cover the roads and footpaths and lie in the
> Gardens
> And move into basements and lap against doorsteps
> And slowly
> Slide into houses – landings and kitchens and
> Hallways –
> Flood![49]

The chorus expresses a familiarity with the movement of flood waters that rise and fall, fill holes, move into basements, and slide into houses, consistent with its representation in this drama as a living material agent; water is not an object but an animal-like intruder reclaiming the land, if only in a temporary way. The water escapes from a man-made dam with a determination we can read as admirable. There is a submission to the water's arrival which sandwiches and sandbags barely mitigate. Life is put on hold as the world becomes wet, sodden, dirty, slippery. Buildings can be submerged by the raging river; the power is out, and people are vulnerable. There will be losses for business and houses inundated with water. New carpets and fridges are affected. The women speak again about the flood swirling and swelling from the catchment towards the town of Berandoa. News periodically arrives through the night from the town. The Morrisons' son David is endangered; his older sister Janie reports:

> David is in danger – he's helping a woman to stand
> And keep above water, in an overturned house;
> And somehow they can't release him and take his
> Place
> Without great risk to her.[50]

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As the floodwaters rise, daily life comes to a stop. The reversal of the power relation between humans and nature makes for an interesting disruption of the imperial relation between settler, culture, and nature. There is fear of human vulnerability even as heroic deeds are celebrated. On the other hand, as with *The Torrents*, the dramatic world is squarely settler-colonial – characters are of British and Irish ancestry, made even more hegemonic when faced with post-war migrants coming to town. As with settler-colonial theatre that continues into the present, there are no references to Indigenous peoples. This absence is consistent with the naturalization of ecological imperialism as the denial of Indigenous presence, land rights, and connection to Country, and the imposition of European farming on ancient landscapes and waterways.

Once the danger has passed, the evidence of the flood's presence remains in the town's 'muddy, slithery streets' and debris.[51] But the community soon falls back into old divisions. As they wait to get back into their homes, one of the women, Mrs Peck, an anti-immigrant who prefaces her racist comments with 'You mark my words', lives up to her name.[52] She complains about the frequency of the floods and the damage, finally proclaiming there must be something 'they' can do – the authorities or anyone in charge: 'all these clever people / Nobody seems to be able to find a way / To stop a flood like this . . .'[53] Overhearing her, Robert Metluck, the Ukrainian-born engineer who is new to the town, replies that she could have a dam built on her property. He warns her it will cost money, but it would be an investment in the future. In fact, he offers to buy the Pecks' flooded land for a decent price, if they are willing to sell it, and build a dam to show the city council how technology can prevent future floods. Distrustful, she pecks away at Metluck (who here does not live up to his name), calling him a black marketeer and a profiteer. When he patiently explains he would pay the price that the land was worth before the flood, the woman explodes with a chorus of anti-Semitic remarks.

Robert is shocked to encounter European prejudice in this wonderful new world. People in the town help each other, he argues, and this spirit should not be infected with hate. Mrs Peck begins to feel guilty, having given voice to culturally received racism, and the others admonish her by saying that he has worked on the floods all night and done wonders. In the spirit of the play's upbeat view of the Australian character, the woman reflects that she should not have spoken so hastily. Robert however has become aware that Anglo settlers are guarded against fine degrees of difference, which includes non-British white Europeans, and that his acceptance is always conditional. Evident in this prejudice is the narrow scope of settler colonialism and its British underpinnings and exclusions.

Towards the end, the three educated, liberal-minded young people – Robert, Janie Morrison, a teacher, and her fiancé Eric, a young doctor – reflect on what they believe in the wake of the flood, the overnight vigil, and their experience of fear. Science scares Janie, who has the capacity to look beyond the scale of the human world to perceive how space and time extend for millions of light years. Robert believes in the promise of science that the more you know, the less fear there will be in the world. Eric is a pragmatic Queenslander, a man from the people who 'keep our feet / Right on the ground', except when it floods.[54] The drama resolves itself by means of the butcher-bird and the cattle standing on the hill in the distance signalling a new day: 'After chaos, harmony comes to Berandoa'.[55] With its focus on the progress of a disastrous flood and its graphic descriptions of the water, together with the discussion that follows about the economic cost and preventative action in the future, *Flood* is a neglected work of considerable interest for today.

The anxiety experienced over one night by the townsfolk in mid-century Berandoa would only escalate in the twenty-first century. While Australian culture and history often refer to and celebrate the country's challenging climate, in February 2022 a dramatic new word was invented to name a record-breaking rainfall event that produced previously unimaginable flooding and damage across south-east Queensland and New South Wales. The Queensland premier, Annastacia

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Figure 4. Wreckage is seen at the Hawthorne ferry terminal on the Brisbane river in Australia, 1 March 2022. Australian Associated Press Ltd. Photo © Darren England.

Palaszczuk, called it a 'rain bomb', and scientists likened it to a 'tsunami from the sky'.[56] The deluge caused major flooding, including loss of life. In three days, Brisbane received 80 per cent of its annual rainfall; 1,450 billion litres of water filled up the Wivenhoe Dam, built to stop flooding in the sub-tropical area that includes Brisbane and its surrounding river systems.[57] This volume was estimated to be the equivalent of three Sydney Harbours' worth of water.[58] The premier, hoping to avoid electoral damage from the floods, announced that 'Nobody has ever seen this amount of rain in such a short period of time over our south-east catchment'.[59] Scenes filmed by citizens with mobile phones included that of a houseboat being swept along the Brisbane river and crashing into a ferry terminal (Figure 4).[60]

The rain bomb was attributed to the combined effects of the seasonal La Niña weather pattern, which blows warm air from the Pacific Ocean across the east coast of Australia, and unstable weather systems caused by climate change. Over the next month, the flooding rivers and dams of February 2022 would flow south into northern New South Wales across towns and farmlands that had never experienced such inundation or loss of property and homes.[61] The loss of life and mass evacuations, the haphazard and dangerous rescues, and the destruction of homes, buildings and infrastructure are massive escalations of Hanger's 1950s drama. The future imagined by the younger generation in the final moments of *Flood* is no longer served by building more dams. Harmony no longer follows chaos in towns like Berandoa. Real life under the conditions of climate change has overtaken the language of theatre and drama.

Ecocriticism and Australian Theatre and Drama

The future as articulated by the engineers – Kingsley Myers and Robert Metluck – represents the moment when development

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schemes are aligned with progressive forces in a move that is consistent with the ideology of the Great Acceleration. Kingsley's plan to bring water from the river to the paddock is presented as an engineering solution that insures farmers against drought and flood. Robert's dams will reduce stock and machinery losses on inundated farms. In this more predictable and productive future, men will not dig holes in the ground but grow fruit and be free of the tyranny of floods and drought. Working on the land is presented as a technical and aesthetic improvement on mining it, providing a pleasing outlook on 'fruit trees instead of mine shafts and potholes'; for Robert, building dams is preferable to 'working on the roads' with a 'pick and shovel'.[62] Here, the extractive nature of agriculture is concealed under the vista of Arcadian fruit trees and large dams. The back-breaking labour of planting and harvesting is presented as a more secure occupation than prospecting or remaining susceptible to flooding.

From a contemporary point of view, we can see that Kingsley's account of irrigation is unscientific. The belief that irrigation will provide more water for more users on larger farms without depriving others further up- or downstream of the flows that sustain communities is a common misapprehension of its benefits.[63] We also see how Kingsley's colonialist-anthropomorphic references to the land as grateful to be regulated is an attempt to make it more familiar than the alien, hellish underground world of mining. For American theatre, Downing Cless cites ecologist Frank Golley, who reminds us that the 'success of agriculture has led humans to disturb much of the Earth surface to produce food and fibre crops. The consequence of this evolution has been hubris, an attitude that humans are outside of the natural process and that production can go on increasing endlessly.'[64] In light of this view, which applies equally to Australia, Kingsley and Robert are blind to the environmental damage their promised improvements will accelerate. The idea of the progressive nature of irrigation and dams remains beyond the critical framework of Gray's and Hanger's epoch, but it remains for contemporary audiences to historicize and disentangle the alignment between human intervention and progressive land management.

Despite the lack of foresight into the long-term impact of irrigation and dams, the debates in both plays prefigure the politics surrounding the transition from fossil fuel to a decarbonized economy: continue mining for coal and increase global warming, or develop renewable energy. Kingsley seeks support from the press for his initiative in a way that resonates with the battle for media coverage and truth in contemporary global capitalism. Robert seeks local council approval for more dams. In both plays, new ideas are presented to regional communities in such a way that audiences witness how processes of change are prosecuted at a micro-level within townships and across properties reliant on the continuity of predictable seasons. Hence the plays present townspeople's beliefs that gold will never run out in Koolgalla and that floods will recur in Berendoa. These long-held beliefs are forms of denial and pragmatism familiar to everyone today. The ethos of the extractive economy is summed up by one of the old hard men in *The Torrents*, who states: 'Australia is a big country and it's yours for the taking. When we're finished here, we've only emptied one barrel – so throw it away, Ben. Throw it a way and open the next!'[65] Ecocriticism, together with greater environmental awareness, has had the effect that audiences have begun to understand the vulnerability of land and waterways there 'for the taking'.

The application of ecocriticism to Australian theatre and drama intersects with historic attitudes to, and treatment of, the environment, which takes us back to 'ecological imperialism', the violent appropriation of Indigenous lands, and the introduction of European farming throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.[66] The theatricalization of the terms in which a land-use debate takes place in a late-nineteenth-century setting and a dialogue about dams and ethnicity in the 1950s suggest Wolfe's broad concept of 'settler colonialism' in recognition of how colonialism was always about settlement – land use, mining, farming – 'premised on displacing indigenes from (or *re*placing them on) the land'.[67]

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The intervention of recent history further changes the situation of reception.

Mid-century theatre and drama is critically important for its historical placement on the cusp of the epoch, which slowly begins to recognize human-engendered environmental change. The focus on this period helps to understand the history and ethos of colonial attitudes to the land that we now understand as historical and culturally specific and not natural or sustainable. The common feature of the dramatic works of the period are actions such as mining for gold and other minerals such as coal, and the expansion of European-style farming by means of irrigation and dams. These are largely presented as the naturalized activities of a progressive nation and free country. An ecocritical lens attempts to break down these naturalized assumptions and to rediscover theatre works that both represent and show the inherent instability of a resource-based extractive economy.

Notes and References

1. Oriel Gray, *The Torrents* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2016), p. 5.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Ibid.
4. As I write this section in late February/early March 2022, south-east Queensland and New South Wales have had a year's rainfall in a few days. The city of Brisbane has once again broken records for the highest daily rainfall since records began in the mid-1800s.
5. Eunice Hanger, *Flood*, in *2D, and Other Plays*, ed. Alrene Sykes (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), p. 113.
6. Blanche Verlie and Lauren Rickards, 'Make no mistake: these floods are climate change playing out in real time', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 2022; <https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/make-no-mistake-these-floods-are-climate-change-playing-out-in-real-time-20220302-p5a11y.html>.
7. The quoted line is from Dorothea MacKellar, 'My Country', first published in the *London Spectator*, 5 September 1908; and later in Dorothea MacKellar, *The Closed Door and Other Verses* (Melbourne: Australasia Author's Agency, 1911). A recent play by Jacqui Smith, *The Flood* (2012), is also relevant, but falls beyond the scope of this article, which specifically focuses on the 1950s.
8. Ray Lawler, *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1957). See Peter Fitzpatrick, *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama since 1955* (Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1979).
9. Michelle Arrow, *Upstaged: Australian Women Dramatists in the Limelight at Last* (Annandale, New South Wales: Pluto Press; and Sydney: Currency Press, 2002), p. 11.
10. Leslie Rees, cited in John McCallum, *Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the Twentieth Century* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2009), p. 77.
11. Arrow, *Upstaged*, p. 25–6; see also Fitzpatrick, *After 'The Doll'*, p. 1.
12. *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing*, ed. Dale Spender (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988); see also *Sky without Birds*, in Katherine Brisbane, ed., *Plays of the 50s*, Vol. 1 (Sydney: Currency Press, 2004).
13. Arrow, *Upstaged*, p. 25–6.
14. The term 'ecological imperialism' was coined by environmental historian Alfred Crosby, and is cited in Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routlege, 2015), p. 2. See also Alfred W. Crosby, 'Ecological Imperialism', in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (second edition, London: Routledge, 2006), p. 494–97.
15. Gay McAuley, 'Place, Time, and Performance in the Memory Process', *Australian Studies*, V (2013), p. 1–16 (p. 3).
16. Val Plumwood, 'Decolonizing Relationships with Nature [Colonization, Eurocentrism, and Anthropocentrism]', *PAN* [*Philosophy Activism Nature*], II (2002), p. 7–30.
17. The term 'metaphorization' is used by Una Chaudhuri in her ground-breaking ecocritical essay '"There Must Be a lot of Fish in that Lake": Toward an Ecological Theatre', *Theater*, XXV, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 1994), pp. 23–31 (p. 24).
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19. Una Chaudhuri, 'Anthropo-Scenes: Theatre and Climate Change', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, III, No. 1 (May 2015), p. 12–27 (p. 17).
20. Baz Kershaw, *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 10.
21. The Great Acceleration draws its evidence from a series of graphs showing that from the 1950s 'humans have changed the world's ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than in any other comparable period in human history'. See Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, 'The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?', *Ambio* [Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences], XXXVI, No. 8 (December 2007), p. 614–21 (p. 619).
22. See Henning Rodhe, Robert Charlson, and Elisabeth Crawford, 'Svante Arrhenius and the Greenhouse Effect', *Ambio*, XXVI, No. 1 (February 1997), p. 2–5.
23. Ian Lowe, *Living in the Greenhouse* (Melbourne: Scribe, 1989), p. 1.
24. Ibid.
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28. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver, *The Colonial Journals and the Emergence of Australian Literary Culture*

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(Crawley: University of Western Australia Publishing, 2014), p. 314, 271.

29. Gray, *The Torrents*, p. 6–7.

30. Ibid., p. 27.

31. Ibid., p. 31.

32. Ibid., p. 32.

33. Ibid., p. 43.

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47. Ibid., p. 104.

48. Ibid., p. 112.

49. Ibid., p. 113–14.

50. Ibid., p. 140.

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63. See Sue Jackson and Lesley Head 'The Politics of Evaporation and the Making of Atmospheric Territory in Australia's Murray-Darling Basin', *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (August 2021), p. 1–23F (p. 13).

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