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Ley Lines

By Sharon Thorne

From the time of European settlement in Australia, a series of cultural and historical displacements have precipitated the creation of wastelands nationwide. The existence of these wastelands has had major implications in the formation of the identities of cities and the attitudes of populations. Melbourne is a case in point, with respect to its western suburbs. This paper investigates these displacements and the need for wasteland, or a dumping ground for all that is considered in excess, or superfluous in the formation of Melbourne's identity as a city.

Our perception of what is, or is not waste, or a wasteland is tied to our cultural perception of the use-value of land, goods and people. In the developing stages of any city there are valuations put in place between what is ordered, structured and formed, and the residue, the peripheral, the unwanted. Among these remnants of civilization falls the wasteland. From Melbourne's formation colonisation brought with it new sets of values that deemed the swamplands to the west of the city as undesirable, although these marshes had been a valuable and abundant food resource for the Aboriginal population.

Individual and national identity is affected by these processes of classification. What we do with the land and how we live on it, whether with respect or disdain, has an impact not only on who we are, but on what we leave behind. In *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* Ross Gibson discusses the use-value of Badlands to an Australian mythology (15). In Gibson's argument, the central Queensland coast is positioned as other to the norm. This landscape then becomes the dumping ground for the thoughts, memories and harsh realities that contemporary Australians would rather forget. Since the time of white settlement, Melbourne has also had its own Badland. Where the inhabitants turn to face the setting sun, the marshes and tidal estuary of the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers formed a natural physical boundary to access to the west. This geographical depression, known as Batman's Swamp, created a barrier which has enhanced the cultural imaginary of darkness and undesirability that has always permeated Melbournians' thinking of the western suburbs. It is the displacements that occurred on a particular section of this in-between zone that this paper investigates.

West Melbourne itself no longer exists as a proper suburb, but more as a series of landmarks that remain to map out a territory. Ley lines drawn between these edifices mark the borders of an almost extinct suburb. Festival Hall and the Football Stadium are dotted along Dudley Street, which runs the length of West Melbourne as it heads for the river, and the new Docklands Development. Swallowed up in this new development is the history of a no-man's land that exists at the periphery of West Melbourne. Dudley Flats, as this remnant of Batman's Swamp has been known until the 21st century, is bounded by the rail, the main road to the west and the rivers. Rather than the history of violence along the Queensland coast, attested to in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, Dudley Flats has a long history as a wasteland and a space of displacement. This site has been Melbourne's dumping ground for its excess since early colonial times.



Melbourne CBD (red) Dudley Flats (blue)

What has contributed to the domination and marginalisation of this site, and the various human inhabitants who have been forced by circumstance to reside there? Gibson asserts that “The landscape itself has a memory, and the storyteller activates it so that the community can know its place in the world of time and space” (68). This then, is an attempt to activate the story of Dudley Flats by examining the history of displacements that occurred at this site after European settlement. Displacement functions differently at various periods in this history, which can be divided into four phases: the early colonial period of the 19th century: the era of wars and depressions that characterised the late 19th and early 20th centuries: the post-war years: and the contemporary attempt to develop Melbourne as a global city, which began in the 1990s.

The displacements which occurred on the site at these various periods in history are very much interwoven, as the City of Melbourne from its inception has attempted to control and contain its excesses and unwanted elements. These historic eras correspond to the use of Dudley Flats as the dumping ground for those elements of humanity considered other or in excess to the needs of the mainstream culture; the dumping ground for material waste; the degradation and displacement of the natural habitat; and the current erasure of the history of the site. Displacement functions differently in each of these periods, but its one commonality is that it always functions as an exclusionary force.

At the time of colonial settlement the swamps, marshes and mud flats of the tidal estuaries of the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers were shunned by the colonists, who wanted grazing lands and considered the marshes as useless swamps. A series of displacements of the perceived useless is the history of Dudley Flats from the time of European settlement. Throughout this period the history of Dudley Flats has been a history of the displacement of unwanted people and materials to the site, while the natural environment was gradually displaced from the site.

Batman’s Swamp or the Blue Lagoon, as it was known colloquially, took in an area the size of the grid of the City of Melbourne. The Moonee Ponds Creek was originally a series of waterholes or billabongs that emptied into the lagoon (Otto 67). For the local Wurundjeri tribes, the system of Yarra billabongs which kept the river healthy, formed a cluster of riverside sacred sites, and were the defining elements of Kulin Woirurung land. A colonist remembers the lagoon in the early days of colonial settlement:

On the waters of the large marsh or swamp lying between North Melbourne and the Saltwater River graceful swans, pelicans, geese, black, brown, and grey ducks, teal, (sic) cormorants, water-hens, sea-gulls and other aquatic birds disported themselves:

while curlews, spur-winged plover, cranes, snipe, sand-pipers and dottrels either waded in its shallows (sic) or ran along its margin; and quail and stone plover, particularly the former, were very plentiful on its higher banks... Eels, trout, a small species of perch... and almost innumerable green frogs inhabited its waters, and the last named on warm nights held a regular serenade that could be heard over the greater part of town. ("West Melbourne")

Few visual images exist of this area; tip sites are not a popular subject with either photographers or painters. However one painting by A. Sandford captures something of the beauty of the lagoon. Even though *Dudley Flats to Port Melbourne* was painted in 1930, Sandford's romanticized landscape depicts something of its former splendour. Carefully avoiding the tip site and squatters huts, he has given us a view of an unspoiled natural environment, looking towards the Docklands.



Dudley Flats to Port Melbourne, A. Sandford 1930

Despite the lagoon being abundant with wildlife and a plentiful food supply, the area was not to stay in this pristine state for long. From the 1840s onward there was a steady erosion of the Wurundjeri lifestyle, as the appropriation of Melbourne's waterways pushed the Kulin people further and further east up the lower reaches of the Yarra. They were gradually excluded from their traditional hunting grounds, and their sacred sites erased from the landscape. George Macrae writes in 1912:

You may search for it in vain today among the mud, scrap iron, broken bottles, and all sorts of red-rusty railway debris ... yet, once, it was there; a real lake, intensely blue, nearly oval, and full of the clearest salt water ... fringed gaily all round by ... pigface ... in full bloom, it seemed in the broad sunshine as though girdled about with a belt of magenta fire ... the whole air heavy with the ... odours of the golden Myrniong flowers ... (Otto 67)

What occurred on this site between the 1830s and 1912 to turn the heady scent of wildflowers to the stench of rotting carcasses and waste? The site had become the dumping ground for rubbish and the drain for the city's effluence from the time of colonisation. From the 1860s the Melbourne City Council and the Railways Department established several rubbish tips on the site, while the Harbour Trust deposited the silt dredged from the river and docks in the attempt to keep the waterways deep enough for shipping.

The displacement of the marshland itself and its flora and fauna was well under way by the time the Coal Canal was dug in 1885 to connect the Yarra River with Moonee Ponds Creek. The dumping of silt and the creation of rubbish dumps elevated the land level, drained the land somewhat, and obliterated the original saltmarsh vegetation.

European habitation on the site reached its zenith during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The land at the end of Dudley Street and along the Moonee Ponds Creek became the site of a tent city; where impoverished families scrounged for hessian, scrap iron, tin and old drums from the tip site to build makeshift shelters. Over 60 humpies had been erected by the mid thirties. They remained there until the advent of World War II because of the indifference of local authorities. This no-man's land fell outside the jurisdiction of local authorities. Neither the Melbourne City Council, the Harbour Trust, the Railways Department, nor the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works took responsibility for this wasteland ("Dudley Flats").



A Charity Worker (right) inspects a dwelling at Dudley Flats

It has been asserted that the recycling programs of the war years forced people to move, as any valuable trash ceased to be dumped. This could be the case, for the war put an end to the Depression in other ways too. For many the enticement of a steady job and regular pay was enough incentive to join the army. There are accounts that suggest this land was vacated in the early 1940s, and that the war waste recovery program eliminated tip scrounging ("West Melbourne"). However there are numerous oral accounts that contest this view: "even when the war finished ... people were living under bits of tin at ... Dudley Flats" (Hadfield).

Bureaucracy has a vested interest in putting forward its own view and the ideological underpinnings of official historical accounts must be taken into consideration when assessing the relevance of such reports. Dudley Flats was, after all, different from other tent cities which sprang

up all over the country in the thirties. This difference lay in its continual habitation by the displaced and dispossessed from the time of colonisation. Camps such as Happy Valley at La Perouse in Sydney and the camps in South Australia came into existence as a result of the Depression, and after the height of the Depression in 1934 the incumbents were moved elsewhere. In contrast Dudley Flats had been continually inhabited from the time of colonisation by the dispossessed and destitute. Although after the Depression the poor at Dudley Flats may have become a little less visible, it was the only tent city in Australia not razed to the ground as soon as possible once the worst of the Depression was over.

Sister Maude Ellis, Superintendent and founder of the Bethesda Aborigines' Mission in Coburg, reports that Combo George, an elderly Wurundjeri, went to live at Dudley Flats, sleeping under scraps of iron, when he was last released from prison around the late forties. She visited him there on several occasions before he died (Ellis). There is evidence to suggest that people were still living on the site in the fifties and sixties. In 1952 Betty Osborn wrote a report for the Argus, on the itinerants who lived on this site, scrounging a living from the tip. And although the paper's official photographers couldn't find anyone to photograph at the 'Flats', Betty had no trouble obtaining her own photographs with the assistance of her mother's box brownie (Osborn).

The myth in Australian culture that the lucky country is the heritage of all is a myth politicians, bureaucrats and media barons are unable to perpetuate without this interment of the darker side of our history. There are no plaques erected to the heroism of people who were sacrificed for the common wealth. No memorials, no edifices, no monuments, no significant buildings or statues have been erected to honour their struggles and their endurance in the fight for survival in their everyday lives. These people were in excess or superfluous to the working system of capitalism during the Depression. These processes of displacement hide the failure of capitalism to live up to its utopian promise of work and well-being for all. At the same time an attempt is made to bury the history, but the notoriety of Dudley Flats was such that it lives on in the communal memory of those who lived in Melbourne through this era. Our other side is hard to repress and such well known, but diverse Melbournians as Sir Robert Menzies, Barry Jones and Barry Humphries have referred to Dudley Flats and its gigantic rats, disease, pestilence and undesirability in interviews and cabinet minutes from the conclusion of World War II to the present day. For example it is in the Cabinet Minutes of 1951, when the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, on a return from a visit to London and India states; "I went through New Delhi and Karachi ... I can't understand why they have not had incredible pestilences – Karachi is just like Dudley Flats" (Nat. Archives Aust. 3).

This statement highlights three significant aspects of life at Dudley Flats. The first is the notoriety of Dudley Flats; Sir Robert, although born and bred in Melbourne, was speaking to a group of cabinet ministers who presumably understood the allusion. The second is the suffering that this poverty engendered, and the hard and bitter struggle for life on the site, in comparison to the romanticized view put forward by artists. And finally, the statement gives some idea of how much this area had altered in the time of colonial settlement.

The national President of the Labour Party, Barry Jones, referring to the Depression in an interview in 2000, remembers as a small child "seeing absolutely horrific things down at places like Dudley Flats... seeing rats the size of Airedales down there" ("Barry Jones" 14). Such memories are quietly displacing current attempts to squash and sanitise the history of the site. From these two reports it would seem that Dudley Flats was not quite the romantic stereotype Hal Porter sees from William Dargie's studio at Williamstown:

At night the twinkling fires of a raffish encampment can be seen inland from Fisherman's Bend – Dudley Flats, a squalid Alsatia of shelters made from packing-cases, fish-crates, oil drums and corrugated iron in which the more gypsified and degenerate victims of the Depression and their own weaknesses re-enact Gin Lane, swigging methylated spirits from triangular bottles, gnawing Cornish pasties and shark-and-chips, and consuming goatish amours in nests of newspapers and sugar-

bags. (Otto 205-6)

Nor does this over simplified and poetic view of the Depression inhabitants of Dudley Flats tally with the accounts of Barbara Waurm whose family lived near the Flagstaff Gardens, a short walk from the Flats. Any man from the flats who knocked on her mother's door was sat on the verandah with a sandwich and a pot of tea (Lowenstein, 118). This is hardly an action a respectable woman would take with gin-soaked gypsies. However, Hal Porter's account does pinpoint the place those who lived in this illicit zone performed as the function of Melbourne's imaginary other, assuring Melbournians of their own good breeding and civilized habits.

In 2005 Barry Humphries, another well known Melbournian noted for his ironic take on life in suburban Melbourne, refers to Dudley Flats as a site everyone knew about, but no respectable person would want to visit, particularly not his own parents who were ensconced in their comfortable eastern suburb of Camberwell (Humphries).

Issues of inclusion and exclusion have been predominant from the early days of European settlement in this country. The British colony not only came into being as a society divided by class, but as a settlement which chose to ignore the existence of the previous occupants as rightful owners to the land. We are a nation of squatters, who pushed the Aboriginal inhabitants to the fringes of our settlements as the primitive element in what we found to be a harsh environment. The ideological function of displacement is to exclude from the mainstream.

It's not surprising that a site on the periphery of Melbourne's central business district has such a history. Colonial history within Australia is itself the history of the dual displacement of both the indigenous inhabitants and the unwanted human waste Britain dumped on the shores of a country they saw as useless for any other form of exploitation at that time. Displacement is a process or form of genocide resulting in dispossession; a loss of sovereignty, cultural stigma and the erasure of an individual's autonomy and identity.

What do these processes of displacement cover over and who do they benefit? They create a non-space, a void where the history of peoples' lives has been obliterated. Dudley Flats was an embarrassment to those in power. Governments are traditionally embarrassed by lack of ability to contain their citizens so no lack or residue spills over from their control. The ideological function of history as it is constructed by the dominant ideology comes into play by re-writing the history of our colonial past and ignoring the history of this area. The history of this area remains invisible today precisely because it is of little use to those in power. The historical aspects of Dudley Flats have been alienated from the mainstream as not so much a rewriting of history, but a denial and burial of the seamy side of our past. A form of mythologising evolves as we are in denial about where we have come from. The lucky country perhaps, but it can never be acknowledged that the luck is not all-inclusive.

Today the native reeds, sedges, succulents and water plants indigenous to the area have re-established themselves from further along the creek ("Dudley Flats"). However Dudley Flats remains a no-man's land, a refuge for the dispossessed. In 2005 there is certainly evidence of human habitation on the banks of the Moonee Ponds Creek, even in the midst of redevelopment. Tarpaulins, cardboard wine casks and other rubbish is scattered among the trees, and litter the banks of the creek. The toxicity of the water at this site is carefully monitored. The itinerants who now sleep on the banks of the Moonee Ponds Creek must provide their own drinking water. There is a midden of plastic water bottles in the residue of habitation evident in the bush along the creek. Although the water is now unusable – as a basic necessity useless – it is being touted as an attraction to entice the global elite to Melbourne. This site has been reclassified in this century in an attempt to obliterate its previous notoriety, and present it as sanitised and desirable. The end of Dudley Street has been renamed Docklands Drive as the trendy address of the new film studios and luxury apartments recently constructed there. This space is now to become the outer projection of the powerful, where once it was the outer projection of the powerless. Waterfront

properties and a marina are the drawcards to lure the rich and powerful to Melbourne. In the 21st century the displacement of the site is almost complete as its past history is buried under film studios (ironically tin sheds) and expensive apartments, as it is developed as part of the Docklands Precinct.



Dudley Flats, film studios on horizon, 2005

The issue of boundaries and border protection is still important today as we attempt to patrol thousands of kilometres of coastline in an effort to purify and contain our culture from pollution. Our excess today is no longer seen in economic terms. Our perception has shifted and the threat today is no longer seen as from within. Waste threatens the urban map, whether it is waste product, wasteland or waste people. The city then is in a constant battle to eliminate waste and to contain its non-spaces, to reintegrate what is seen as its non-productive space, and to render invisible the itinerant and the homeless. The society of use produces a multitude of remainders with no use-value and no nominal exchange-value within the mainstream culture. In the 21st century the city as a capitalist enterprise aims to devour all negative space – is it the fear of terrorism that makes us imagine that the other may be lurking in these spaces or simply the pressures of a social system based on accumulation and greed?

Where it was once enough to exclude socially by dispossession, today our spatial politics becomes an architecture of repression. Based on fear and centring around fencing, barricades, detention centres and an elimination of all possible non-places, especially on the fringes of the city, a policy of the eradication of all negative space is put into practice; spaces occupied by the homeless, the aberrant, the other are cleared. In the attempt to purify and exclude this other the plight of the displaced person has shifted from the tent city to the detention centre. Difference cannot be tolerated, we have learnt to control and contain the world's excess who land on our shores.

Melbourne still looks to the West as its dumping ground and exclusionary zone for those considered undesirable. Although Dudley Flats has now been appropriated by the centre, it won't be fully integrated until 2015, and as yet very little has been done on the site. In spite of all the hype surrounding the Docklands Development, city maps still stop at the old rectangular grid to the north and west, while having extended south over the river. One more recent map has extended the grid to include the Football Stadium, but none so far go beyond the railyards. Our attitudes to the West seem much slower to change than our ability to reconstruct our environment

architecturally. We are still incarcerating our unwanted other. The abscess that once putrefied at Dudley Flats has simply shifted geographic position a few kilometres upstream, where the Maribyrnong Detention Centre nestles invisibly near the banks of the Maribyrnong River, just as the Kulin nation were displaced further and further up the lower reaches of the Yarra until they were so safely out of sight that we could appropriate the title of their people as the name for the new freeway extension. In the final irony, Wurundjeri Way exists at the very site of this dispossession.

In Aboriginal culture Badlands don't exist. The earth/landscape is regarded as a sentient being to be nurtured and cherished. In the case of unacceptable cultural practices, atonement must be made in the form of appropriate healing rituals to re-enchant and restore the land. Dudley Flats will undergo an epiphany when it is eventually incorporated into the mainstream, after more than 150 years as the receptacle for all that Melbournians found valueless or undesirable. This space has played the role of our collective burial ground where we dumped unwanted goods and people. When the bulldozers move in what will be excavated and brought to the surface and what interred? The luxury flats to be erected here will bury a heritage which is already partially interred, already an absence which will surely come back to haunt us.

To date Dudley Flats is still lying benign; it is a land in waiting. Waiting for the economic climate to be right; waiting for the disposal of the toxic waste from the site; waiting for the bulldozers; waiting for re-enchantment. It seems the time is ripe for the artwork, the realm of the imaginary, myth and dreams to take on the role of the alchemist. The redemption and re-enchantment of Dudley Flats is now in the hands of the artist and the storyteller.

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