

The University of Canberra

Danielle Nohra

Stolen landscapes: trauma, agency and environmental ideology in Lucy Christopher's *Stolen*

Abstract:

This research is part of a larger investigation examining female protagonists' interactions with the 'landscape' in young adult fiction. It will argue that a close study of Lucy Christopher's novel, *Stolen* (2009), demonstrates her use of the 'landscape' as a vehicle to both create and mitigate trauma for the protagonist, Gemma. This can be depicted by reading the novel in relation to two notions of environmental writing described by John Stephens (2006). The first ideological perspective Stephens describes in fiction is a human – 'landscape' relationship where characters appear to be positioned embodying a higher status. This assumes control over the environment, creating trauma when characters face harsh 'landscapes'. The second perspective models feelings of belonging within the 'landscape', prompting the protagonist to care for it. This enables characters to overcome their trauma and in doing so achieve a new sense of agency. The paper will draw on Clare Bradford's (2008) definition of agency in young adult dystopian fiction. Bradford's book focuses on social, institutional and cultural arrangements that produce conflict in utopian and dystopian fiction. Her ideas on agency will be applied to this research but rather than examining human-made structures that engineer conflict, this paper will consider non-human conflict represented in the novel. Then drawing from Christopher's (2011) auto-ethnographic paper on *Stolen*, this research will analyse the ways that Gemma's relationship with the 'landscape' is the vehicle used by Christopher to reshape her character's agency when viewed through the lens of Stephens' (2006).

Biographical Note:

Danielle Nohra is Creative Writing graduate and a current Honours student at the University of Canberra. She has recently completed a research project on the Australian landscape and its effects on character trauma and agency in young adult fiction.

Keywords:

Australia – landscape – trauma – agency – young adult

Introduction

This paper is part of a larger project investigating the association between the ‘landscape’ and protagonists in three selected Australian young adult fiction novels. Each character experiences stages of trauma through these interactions with the ‘landscape’. These phases of trauma become a facilitator for agentic change. The same argument is used in this paper when closely looking at the novel *Stolen* (2009) by Lucy Christopher.

Stolen is a young adult novel which takes the form of a letter written by 16-year-old, Gemma to her captor who has taken her from an airport to ‘a prison of sand and stars’ in Australia (Christopher 2009: back cover). Former British city-dweller Gemma faces the unknown of the harsh Australian desert. It quickly becomes this large inescapable ‘landscape’ to her and if she tries to escape, she will die.

Gemma initially awaits her death at the hands of her captor, Ty. But Ty has no plans to hurt Gemma, instead he wants her to love him. Ty too once lived in the city, Gemma’s city. It’s here where Ty watches her and decides to take her to the outback. He wants to teach her to form a relationship with the land, just like he did when he was a child.

Gemma is reluctant to learn about this foreign place and dreams about her old life back home. After multiple attempts to escape the desert it surprisingly begins to become part of Gemma’s identity. She learns to see the environment just like Ty does and begins to sympathise with him. Eventually the ‘landscape’ rejects her allowing Ty to save her from the desert and himself. Without him she is left to consider whether she did end up loving him, or if her feelings were a result of Stockholm syndrome.

Throughout the examination three papers are largely drawn from. The first reflects on Clare Bradford’s (2008) representation of agency. The second marries parallels between Christopher’s (2011) paper and *Stolen*, and the third uses John Stephens’ (2006) paper on environmental ideology to argue the presence of two ‘landscape’ and character relationships in *Stolen*.

In *New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations* Clare Bradford (2008) suggests that:

A dominant preoccupation of much adolescent fiction is with how notions of identity are formed within specific contexts and shaped by larger social structures and processes (Bradford: 2008 17).

Bradford’s (2008) book focuses on social, institutional and cultural arrangements that produce conflict in utopian and dystopian fiction. Her ideas on agency will be applied to this research but in regards to a different core concept. Rather than highlighting human-made structures that engineer conflict, this paper will examine the influence of non-human conflict in *Stolen*.

In the novel there is a paradoxical notion where the environment produces trauma, which strips the protagonist of her identity but also simultaneously mitigates that trauma allowing her to heal. These experiences of Gemma’s are mirrored through Christopher’s (2011) life influences. By drawing upon Christopher’s auto-ethnographic paper on *Stolen*, this research will analyse the ways that Gemma’s relationship with the ‘landscape’ is the vehicle used by

Christopher to reshape her characters agency when viewed through the lens of Stephens' (2006) notions about 'landscape' and ideology. Christopher suggests that her definition of the 'landscape' is a representation of her own creation.

When I use land I am referring to the actual, physical matter of the earth we walk upon; landscape refers to a representation of the word land. So, as an author, when I write about the desert I am creating a landscape, but the desert itself is the land (2011: 6).

When referring to the 'landscape' this paper acknowledges it as Christopher's own subjective fictional invention. She becomes a creator of words and a creator of worlds.

Finally, Stephens' (2006) two ideologies on environmental writing will be used as a framework throughout the paper:

The first of these continues to promote mastery over nature, whereby the natural world exists for the benefit of humanity and must be subordinated to its desires and needs. The second assumes or promotes an attitude of caring, wonder and understanding of the natural world, or an awareness of environmental issues. There is only a limited degree of embeddedness, however, and humans are positioned as outside of nature and as the source of value and meaning (Stephens 2008: 40).

The two perspectives Stephens argues as present in children's literature are embodied in *Stolen*. Firstly, Gemma attempts to defeat the landscape which leads to the creation of emotional trauma. Secondly, she starts to care for the environment which enables the land to become part of her identity, reducing her trauma. Thirdly, when conflict is resolved, a sense of agency is restored.

The formation of trauma in *Stolen*

The desire to overcome any restraints that the 'landscape' enforces forms conflict, producing emotional trauma. Gemma subconsciously tries to control the 'landscape' through her attempts to escape it. Regardless of her situation as a helpless victim she must defeat the desert-'landscape' in *Stolen*. This desire demonstrates the first perspective in Stephens' paper which suggests 'mastery of nature, or human domination ...' (Stephens 2006: 16). This leads to trauma because in reality the 'landscape' is passive which means that the environment has not relationship with humanity. It will continue to do the same thing, with or without humans. It does not need humans, but humans need it.

... it is nature not man that has the power to unsettle the constructed environment and the lives of the people in it (Burgess 2013: 173).

Burgess suggests that the 'landscape' has control over humans, humans do not have control over the 'landscape'. This is illustrated through the personification of the desert in *Stolen*, exemplifying a human – 'landscape' struggle:

[The desert] ... clawed at my throat and tried to stop me from breathing (Christopher 2009: 12).

This imagery portrays the desert in its organic state, producing heat that it would regardless of Gemma's presence. It is Gemma that does not belong in this environment, yet she still

continues to try and control it. These ideas are echoed by Christopher during her first few months in Australia.

I also became quickly acquainted with the beauty and terror of Australian land in a more physical sense ... I was terrified of it ... It was the first time I could remember living so close to something so untamed ... for the first few months there, I was too nervous to go beyond the garden fence and explore (Christopher 2011: 7).

This is a clear intertextual link between Christopher's self-reflective paper and *Stolen*. Christopher's childhood anxieties, formed through her experience with the Australian land have arguably been transferred to her novel. They both exemplify mental and physical trauma through their desire to have control over the 'landscape'.

The further Gemma fights the 'landscape', the more trauma she faces. During one of her attempts to escape, her plans become defeated by this 'landscape'.

The land was beating me, wearing me down like it had worn down the rocks. I was going to die (2009: 189).

The notion that the Australian 'landscape' is predominately dangerous and in conflict with humans is not a new one. Weaver (2011) suggests that in apocalyptic texts some authors use Australia in order to draw attention to the country's dangerous 'landscape'. Through Gemma's perspective, her position in *Stolen* can also be viewed as apocalyptic. To her, this is the end of her world. A new world where she has to suddenly find ways to survive in this hostile and unfamiliar environment. Gemma's initial survival method, though, enables trauma.

The trauma produced by the 'landscape' also strips Gemma of agency. Gemma's attempt to have control over the desert becomes unreachable. It eventually creates a shift in her identity. In medical writing, Martha McClellan argues that after disasters occur:

A plethora of emotions may be present and need attention before patients can function appropriately (McClellan 2001: 529).

The 'disaster' of being kidnapped causes trauma for Gemma which affects her ability to function properly. This disables any sense of agency she has previously embodied.

My body went limp and empty. In the house you wrapped me in blankets. You put something hot in my hands, which you made me drink. But my body and my brains and my insides had frozen solid. I had slipped down; down into a dark, dark, empty place. You were saying something to me, your voice muted. I didn't want to surface. The truth was too hard to listen to (2009: 74).

Gemma now has to rely on her captor, Ty to make agentic decisions for her. Gemma's attempt to defeat the 'landscape' causes her trauma, which restricts her agency and now the large scope of the desert appears too overwhelming to tackle.

As far as I could see, there was nothing. There was only flat, continuous brown land leading out to the horizon. Sand and more sand, with tussocks of small scrubby bushes and the occasional leafless tree. The land was dead and thirsty. I was in nowhere (2009: 19).

In this realisation Gemma's attitude towards the environment shifts. The trauma Gemma

currently embodies, as well as her limited agency, places her in a position where she can choose to heal. She begins to do this through her interactions with the passive 'landscape'. By doing so, she demonstrates the second perspective in Stephens' paper.

Mitigating trauma in *Stolen*

The 'landscape' mitigates the same trauma it previously created. Once Gemma comes to terms with the fact that she cannot defeat the 'landscape', she then forms a different relationship with it. Still in a position of trauma, Gemma begins to heal through her interactions with the passive land. Here she embodies the second perspective in Stephens, which assumes care for the environment. Through this perspective two things are achieved:

- The first mitigates trauma.
- The second, through this mitigation, slowly returns agency to the character.

Stephens argues that "... human participants will grow and develop through contact with nature." The more Gemma knows about the 'landscape's' harsh aspects the less likely she is willing to challenge it. By becoming aware that the 'landscape' is separate from Gemma, it allows her to mend her own trauma rather than waiting for the desert to fix her. Through care for the 'landscape' a journey is initiated where trauma is mitigated which helps regain agency.

Ty teaches Gemma about the healing powers that the 'landscape' possesses. Through his teachings she learns about the positive aspects present in the environment. The land passively provides humans with water, food and can be therapeutic (Ewart, Mitten & Overholf 2014: 1). Ty personifies the 'landscape' and describes it as a friend to humans:

[This is] Turtujarti ... [it] gives you sweets, salt, nuts... shelter too. She's your friend out here, if anything is (2009: 99).

This images of the 'landscape' here illustrates it as a resource for human survival. This is juxtaposed with earlier imagery which represents the 'landscape' as deadly. Through Ty's guidance Gemma begins to appreciate the land.

Gemma begins to see the positive aspects in the 'landscape.' The more Gemma learns about the Australian desert, the more she begins to form a bond with it. Christopher (2011) as a child, new to Australia, mirrors Gemma's feelings of initial discomfort. They both experience situations where they are in need of a mentor-like figure to help them make sense of the land. Christopher compares Gemma and Ty's relationship to her own childhood relationship with Dot from *Dot and the Kangaroo* ([1977]2016):

"There is no doubt that during my first years in Australia, I felt lost: like Dot without her kangaroo. Gemma, too, is a lost child. Like Dot, she initially thinks of the land as hostile. She also needs a friend to reveal its beauty. Ty does just this." (2011:8)

Through intertextuality Christopher uses Ty's character to act in a similar manner to the kangaroo in *Dot and the Kangaroo*. His guidance allows Gemma to become more at home in the desert. As the novel progresses and she begins to feel more comfortable, imagery of her as a part of the land becomes more prominent:

My arms were already so brown, browner than they'd ever been. When I lay them down against the ground they almost blended in (2009: 153).

This imagery exemplifies the newly-formed positive relationship between Gemma and the desert. She is no longer a light-skinned teenager constantly in battle with the land. Now she has blended in, becoming a part of it and no longer in contrast with it. This imagery is a metaphor representing the way the 'landscape' mitigates Gemma's trauma as she interacts with it.

Opportunities to care for the 'landscape' arise when characters immerse themselves with it daily. In relation to this new sense of belonging Gemma begins to care for the environment. She understands her limits in the 'landscape' now and demonstrates respect by no longer initiating conflict.

... a couple of weeks I would probably have stamped on... [the ant]. It crawled over my next three fingers, then disappeared somewhere underneath my back. I didn't move, afraid I might crush it (2009: 153).

Gemma is no longer trying to defeat the land. Now, she is beginning to live around its barriers. This becomes beneficial for her mental wellbeing. Through this she even learns to form a relationship with her captor, Ty, who metaphorically is a representation of the 'landscape'. This is illustrated through certain imagery where Ty smells of eucalyptus, is as "brown as a stretch of dirt" and is rough like a rock (2009: 5). Arguably, Gemma learns her own barriers with Ty, just like the land. It is easier for her to get along with Ty just as it is easier for her to not control the desert.

The 'landscape' then becomes therapeutic to Gemma. It has produced many challenges for Gemma which have largely influenced her negative frame of mind, but also has played a major part in her healing process. Through Gemma's isolation she is forced to heal through the passive 'landscape'. She has nowhere to escape Ty or the land except for in the land. Imagery then becomes present which personifies the 'landscape' as an outlet that heals Gemma:

It was actually nice, right then, to look at all that blackness. It was kind of soothing... (2009: 229).

The 'it' here represents the 'landscape' which has the ability to sooth. It is passive during Gemma's interactions, but through this passivity she has no choice but to heal. Gemma overcomes her trauma through the 'landscape.' It provides her with comfort and gives her purpose. This is illustrated when Gemma eventually takes on the initiative to feed the chickens in the Seperates. These distractions help Gemma to forget the reality she experiences as a captive. In medical literature Ewart, Mitten & Overholf (2014) suggest that the natural landscape can provide positive health benefits and even serve as a mediating variable for health problems. In Gemma's situation the 'landscape' helps her to heal and achieve a greater sense of agency.

... it was the only thing that kept me going, the rain. Each drop was like some sort of remedy, healing me... keeping me conscious (2009: 265).

The 'landscape' helps Gemma to overcome a challenging scenario. The drops of water are

metaphoric. They wash away the trauma produced by the ‘landscape’ right before she is freed from Ty’s desert-prison. Once Gemma’s trauma is mitigated she can finally epitomise a sense of agency.

Regaining agency in *Stolen*

Agency cannot be achieved until Gemma is free from Ty’s desert-prison. Once released from the outback Gemma’s physical agency returns. In the outback she relied heavily on the ‘landscape’ to help her heal emotionally. The ‘landscape’ cannot literally take care of her because it has no consciousness, it is passive. Bradford suggests that agency cannot be ascribed to the nonhuman. She describes agency as having:

a collection of heterogenous components, a material informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction... (Bradford 2008: 158).

While it didn’t actively help her mitigate trauma, it did urge her to heal herself. On Gemma’s plane out of the desert, the ‘landscape’ automatically becomes illustrated as an untouched, re-identified image.

From up there, the desert was made up of so many colours... so many shades of browns and reds and oranges. White dried-out creek beds and salt pans. A dark river, curling like a snake. Burnt-out blackness. Swirls and circles and lines and textures. Tiny dots of trees. Dark smudges of rocks. Everything stretched out in an endlessness of pattern (2009: 286).

Its endlessness here reiterates, on a large scale, just how powerful the ‘landscape’ is. The personification of it stretching out represents Gemma’s new freedom. Now she can begin to unravel and regain her own sense of agency.

The desert, at times, still controls Gemma, even from afar. Gemma begins to embody a new sense of agency physically, but she is also confronted by other factors that slow her agentic process emotionally. There are social expectations from her parents and health professionals, post her time in the desert. When Gemma is reunited with her family her agency becomes questioned for a second time. Gemma has formed an unexplainable relationship with the ‘landscape’. In a way it healed her and so did Ty. Gemma’s unwillingness to let go of this connection with Ty prevents her from achieving agency. Until she ends that relationship she has no authority over her story which is the framework of her identity. Magazines and newspapers are now telling her narrative:

I felt like I was in a play, with everyone waiting for me to say my lines (2009: 278).

Gemma even feels obliged to tell her parents what they expect to hear about her captor, rather than what she wants to say. A new and complicated image of her begins to emerge as she feels more confused now than ever before. “Mostly I don’t know what to think” (2009: 295). Gemma reaches a destabilising point here because, she gained some level of acceptance over who she was in the desert, but now she is expected to be somebody else yet again.

I wrapped blankets over me, suddenly cold. I felt naked ... as if I’d shed my skin in the desert like the snakes do. As if I’d left a part of me behind somewhere (2009: 281).

She is left with similar feelings and vulnerabilities that were evident at the beginning of the

novel. This simile is a turning point for Gemma. It represents Gemma, shedding herself from the hold that the negative aspects of the 'landscape', and that Ty, mentally have over her.

Through positive reflections on the 'landscape' Gemma regains agency. Gemma's epistolary voice, that takes the form of a letter, allows her to reflect on the 'landscape' and subsequently mitigate the trauma produced by it. Through this she finds a sense of agency. The letter ultimately becomes Gemma's outlet where she can learn to understand the world. During stages of the novel Gemma was controlled by Ty, by the barriers in the Australian 'landscape' and now, by society; who expects her to say specific things in court. Without the 'landscape' though, which also mitigated her trauma, she would not be in a position to write. Gemma is now in a situation where she can find power in words and writing. It is writing that enables her to describe that the 'landscape' helped mitigate her trauma, placing her in an emotional state where she can gain agency.

What you did to me wasn't this brilliant thing, like you think it was. You took me away from everything – my parents, my friends, my life. You took me to the sand and heat, the dirt and isolation. And you expected me to love you. And that's the hardest bit. Because I did... (2009: 299).

This is a reversal here between Gemma and Ty. He imprisoned her and now he is the imprisoned one. Gemma also captures the 'landscape' with her words, but she will never physically have a hold over it.

Gemma finds answers in the 'landscape' that guided her growth. She seemingly won't let Ty or her parents influence what she will say in court: "When I get into court, I'm going to tell the truth. *My truth.*" (2009:299) This is a powerful moment where Gemma goes against her parents who she loves, and Ty who she also supposedly loves, in order to be true to herself and her identity. It is here where she stretches out like the image of the desert and regains her agency. This control over her agency, which is influenced by the 'landscape', is mirrored in Christopher's (2011) paper:

Direct experiences with Australian land, as well as interaction with Australian landscape, shaped me as a young person, contributing to my sense of personal and cultural identity and sense of belonging. These experiences shaped me as a writer too, most particularly as the writer of *Stolen* (Christopher 2011: 5).

Christopher argues that her interactions with the Australian landscape shaped her as a writer for *Stolen*. These parallels, between her childhood and Gemma's, exemplify her choice to use the 'landscape' as a vehicle that creates trauma, mitigates trauma and ultimately constructs agency.

Conclusion

The research conducted conclusively depicts that Gemma in *Stolen* appears to embody and represent the first two types of human-'landscape' relationships, as outlined by Stephens (2006), before achieving greater agency. When referring to Bradford's (2008) studies on agency it is argued that a sense agency is achieved when characters have overcome conflict in certain environments. In this case Gemma gains control over her identity after mitigating

trauma produced by the 'landscape'. As the 'landscape' has no consciousness it is then represented as passive. This passivity forces Gemma to face her traumas on her own in order to overcome them. These ideas are mirrored in Christopher's (2011) auto-ethnographic paper where she self-reflexively comments on her childhood. Through this it is evident that the formation of *Stolen* is created from past experiences, former emotions and the use of intertextuality. A close study of the text *Stolen* determines the use of the 'landscape' as a mechanism to produce trauma, mitigate trauma and obtain character agency.

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