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'Bloodwood' and 'Liminal Spaces, Timeless Places: Abjection, Liminality and Landscape in Australian Gothic Fiction'

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**‘Bloodwood’ and ‘Liminal Spaces, Timeless Places:
Abjection, Liminality and Landscape in Australian
Gothic Fiction’**

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Bachelor of Arts

**This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts Honours**

School of Arts and Humanities

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ABSTRACT

This creative honours project comprises a work of fiction titled 'Bloodwood' and an accompanying exegetical essay, exploring the concept of liminal space within the Australian landscape. It investigates the anxieties and consequences of past trauma that linger within the landscape of modern Australia, exploring themes such as time, connection to nature, trauma and grief. Using Julia Kristeva's abjection theory, particularly her ideas on liminal space, this work addresses the contentious issue of postcolonial theory within the field of literary studies, as well as the concept of grief as a liminal process. These ideas are explored through the storylines of three interwoven protagonists, as they each navigate their own altered realities following personal trauma or loss, within a shared physical landscape. Abjection, as well as other elements of the Australian Gothic literary genre, is used to convey discomfort and unease within the landscape, linking the three separate protagonists to an established site of trauma. The project also delves into ecocriticism to address ways in which the Australian landscape is viewed and represented within Australian gothic literature.

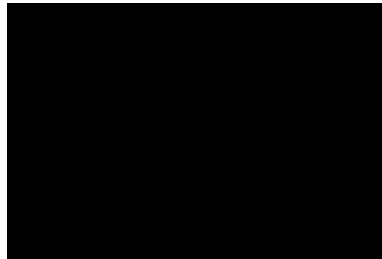
This thesis was conducted using a practice-led research, research-led practice methodology combined with textual analysis of several key works within the genre of the Australian Gothic, analysed using the framework of Kristeva's abjection theory, which in-turn influenced the writing of the creative piece 'Bloodwood'.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed:



Date: 26/11/2018

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**Liminal Spaces, Timeless Places:
Exploring Abjection, Liminality and Landscape through
Australian Gothic Fiction**

This practice-led research, research-led practice Honours project comprises a short story, 'Bloodwood', and an exegetical essay. 'Bloodwood' features three narrative strands, each with its own protagonist—Leah, Natalie, and Kye—who are eventually revealed as having a familial connection. These protagonists present three generations of a single bloodline, though the storylines are told concurrently rather than as a linear, chronological narrative. Each of these characters experience trauma, loss and the process of grief in places to which they have a significant connection. This creative work is intended to have a strong sense of place and connection to landscape, conveyed through writing within the Australian Gothic genre, and inspired by my own experiences of Australian landscapes.

Through researching the Gothic genre, I discovered that many of my favourite novels fall into this broader category, such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (2012/1847), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1970/1847), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (2010/1817), and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2007/1890). I looked for Australian authors who had worked in the Gothic genre and came across Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2009/1967), Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* (2009/1986), Patrick White's *Voss* (1960/1957), Rosemarie Ham's *The Dressmaker* (2015), and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005).

For this project, I focused on the Australian Gothic literary genre, identifying the common themes, elements and literary devices employed in each of these texts, and considering how I could apply these to my own fiction. Several key texts proved useful in developing my understanding of the genre and its use in various fictional texts; amongst these are William Hughes' *Key Concepts in the Gothic* (2018), Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy's *The Routledge Companion to Gothic* (2007), and Gerry Turcotte's *Peripheral Fear: Transformations of the Gothic in Canadian and Australian Fiction* (2009). I then read, or returned to, several key Australian Gothic novels to identify the tropes and constituent elements used in their writing. These texts include *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (2009), *The Well* (2009), *The Dressmaker* (2015) and a selection of colonial Australian Gothic Fiction, including- Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' (1974/1892), and Barbara Baynton's 'The Chosen Vessel' (1902/1896). I

also read novels outside the Australian Gothic genre which explored themes related to human's connection to landscape, and an inherent sense of place; these included *Into the Forest* (1998) by Jean Hegland, which strongly resonated with the concepts I was exploring. I found all these stories to feature a strong sense of place, connection to the surrounding landscape, and to employ fragmented non-linear narrative structures, which inspired and influenced many aspects of 'Bloodwood'.

Due to the reciprocal nature of the academic research and creative writing processes which make up the project, I conducted my thesis using a practice-led research, research-led practice methodology, combined with textual analysis of key texts within the genre of Australian Gothic fiction. This methodology allowed me to explore theoretical concepts such as abjection, ecocriticism and postcolonial literary theory through academic research, which inspired the creative work 'Bloodwood'. The progression of the creative writing also led to further research areas, allowing the project as a whole to develop into a concise honours thesis. The reciprocal nature of this methodology and its benefits within academic fields is explored in Hazel Smith's and Roger Dean's *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2009). Smith and Dean credit the process of practice-led research, research-led practice for:

Bringing with it dynamic new ways of thinking about research and new methodologies for conducting it, a raised awareness of the different kinds of knowledge that creative practice can convey and an illuminating body of information about the creative process (2009, p. 1).

Smith and Dean also detail ways in which creative practice can contribute to research within university environments, while also benefiting from a basis in academic research. They refer to the incorporation of specific practices into recognised disciplines, such as the creative writing practice as a means of research within the field of literary studies. Smith and Dean claim that "literary studies, for example, has been shaken up by the inception of creative writing programs which put the emphasis on process rather than products, writers as much as readers" (2009, p. 35). I found this to be the

case for my own work. Though I have undertaken both research projects and creative writing throughout my undergraduate degree, 'Bloodwood' is the first piece of creative work I have produced with a basis in academic research. I found the process of practice-led research, research-led practice allowed me to produce a well-informed work of fiction and accompanying research essay combining what I encountered academically with creative inspiration.

Linda Candy describes the process of a similar, practice-based research methodology as follows:

Creative output can be produced, or practice undertaken, as an integral part of the research process. However, the outcomes of practice must be accompanied by documentation of the research process, as well as some form of textual analysis or explanation to support its position and to demonstrate critical reflection. A thesis arising from a practice-based research process is expected to both show evidence of original scholarship and to contain material that can be published or exhibited. (2006, p. 2)

This process allowed me to create a work of fiction informed by academic research in literary, cultural and psychoanalytical fields, without sacrificing the exploration of the creative writing process. Certain elements of my project changed during this process, due to the reciprocal nature of the method. While I initially proposed a focus on national identity in Australian Gothic literature, this focus evolved to an interest in ecocriticism and the ways in which we view natural versus created landscapes. This research and understanding of new concepts allowed a stronger development of the short story I was writing. In *Practice as Research* (2010), Andrea Goldsmith is cited on the power of creative writing to provide redemption. She states that "fiction can open new corridors to understanding. Fiction dramatizes and provides multiple perspectives" (cited in Perry, 2010, p. 44) and I hope this has been achieved in my work.

Many of the fictional texts I read featured abjection, a concept I had encountered initially in an excerpt of Julia Kristeva's work in *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (2008). In Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) I found that her theory of abjection resonated strongly with both the Gothic concepts and my own creative ideas. Kristeva's theory is psychoanalytic, focusing on the sense of discomfort produced when one is faced with a breakdown of perceived boundaries. Kristeva states that abjection "refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (1982, p. 217), a breakdown which makes way for a transitional space between boundaries which she calls the 'liminal space'. I identified many examples of abjection in the fictional texts I read, and incorporated ideas of the abject in my own writing, which I will return to for further discussion. It was the concept of liminal space, however, which I utilised to drive the narrative. I connected the concurrent storylines of 'Bloodwood' by placing each of the protagonists in a similar liminal space, as well as a shared physical landscape.

In researching the Australian Gothic genre, it was also necessary to delve into Postcolonial theory. I discovered the subject of postcolonialism presents a contentious issue within the field of literary studies. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2015) by Ania Loomba, and *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (1998) by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, the writers suggest the prefix 'post' in the term postcolonial is problematic, in that it suggests an aftermath of colonialism, which Australia has, perhaps, yet to experience. These texts explore, and allow me to consider, the divisive binaries represented by colonialism, and to question whether the resultant anxieties and consequences of these still linger within our shared cultural landscape. Research into postcolonialism also led me to further consider Indigenous ideas and experiences of time and place.

Travels to remote south-west locations inspired 'Bloodwood', and as I became more aware of the area's Indigenous (Noongar) history, I wanted to

explore this in my work. Equally, however, the ethical contention (within the field of literary studies and writing) around representation of Aboriginal people meant I was hesitant to write an Indigenous character or appropriate any narrative that is not my own. After meeting with both Indigenous studies lecturer Kenneth Hayward and Noel Nannup, the resident Elder at Edith Cowan University, I felt confident that I could integrate Indigenous culture and ideas respectfully without creating an Aboriginal character. This was achieved by focusing on the landscape and including descriptions of native flora in the south-west area. In order to do this, I sought advice on traditional uses of trees and plants, to connect the landscape to the narrative in a way that acknowledges the cultural knowledge and traditions of the Indigenous people of that land, rather than directly including any Indigenous characters. This decision was prompted by my desire—as a non-Indigenous writer—not to appropriate an Indigenous voice, and in the hope that the absence of a representative Indigenous character may create a presence through that absence, and also a resonance through the intermittent interleaving of Indigenous knowledge of flora. I also attempted to establish a site of trauma within the landscape of the narrative, and to write the stories of three protagonists in connection to a particular place. While Postcolonial theory informs my creative work, I wanted to include it in my work reflectively rather than writing it in a politically charged manner.

During my research, ideas pertaining to the crossing and dismantling of boundaries, and the ambivalence of the space between boundaries (Bhabha cited in Tompkins, 1997, p. 503) reminded me constantly of Kristeva's concept of liminal space. I then focused my creative work on this concept of liminality and transitional space, exploring it further, and identifying liminal processes common to all human experience. Tracing the concept of liminality to its origins, before Kristeva's use of it, I came across the anthropological works, Arnold Van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* (2013/1909) and Victor Turner's *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage* (1987/1967), and found that they each identified transitional phases such as grief as liminal processes. I applied this concept to each of the interwoven stories I wrote, exploring grief through each of my protagonists. Natalie experiences grief through the loss of her stillborn baby

and subsequent breakdown of her marriage. This is what leads her to the south-west landscape where 'Bloodwood' is set, as she seeks an isolated place where she can allow herself to heal. Leah similarly experiences a breakdown of the life she knew prior to the narrative, with the death of her guardian and mentor Gav. Her grief prompts her to leave the isolation of their dwelling in the forest and sets in motion her departure from the landscape. The third protagonist, Kye, returns home to Perth after the sudden death of his mother, who is later revealed to be Leah, and is encouraged to return to her birthplace for closure. He travels to the south-west with her ashes and ultimately releases them over the forest. Each of the protagonists in 'Bloodwood' experience grief as a journey—what Genep and Turner would identify as a liminal process. I have attempted to connect the transitional experience of each character's grief by situating them in a shared physical landscape.

Psychoanalyst, philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva presented her theory of the abject in her work *Powers of Horror*, first published in 1980. Kristeva contends that abjection "refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (1982, pp. 3-4), suggesting that it is not the horrifying thing itself which repulses us, but rather the forced acknowledgement that the boundaries between two things are more fragile than we would like to think. Kristeva uses the example of a corpse, informing us that it is not the object of the corpse itself which provokes feelings of horror or disgust, but the realisation that the barrier between life, representing the 'self', and death, the 'other', is not as distinct as we believe. Kristeva postulates that abjection places one "at the border of [their] condition as a living being" (1982, p. 3). An abject reaction reminds us of the fragility of perceived borders, and it is this which produces violent reactions of disgust and horror. Other examples of abjection include things that were once integral to the body, but are rejected, such as blood (menstrual or otherwise), sweat, urine, vomit, faeces and semen. It is the transition from one position to another which causes an abject reaction. These bodily fluids were once part of the healthy

‘wholeness’ of the body, and have now become something ‘other’, something no longer integral to the living self. In this way, they have become abject to it. Kristeva states that abjection allows us to establish what we *are* by rejecting what we are *not*. Going back to her examples of a corpse, or bodily refuse, she claims these things “*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (1982, p. 3), essentially suggesting that by rejecting the ‘other’, we come to establish our ‘self’.

I have attempted to draw on elements of abjection in my creative work through descriptive language and imagery—for example when Leah recalls “Sometimes we tie animals on strings too, but after they’re dead so the insides can fall out” (Olson, 2018, p. 4), and that she had buried someone “like we did the animal carcasses” (2018, p. 12). Leah’s story consistently refers to such things: animal carcasses, blood, sinew and muscle, and wounds being stitched back together. I have also drawn on the abject in Natalie’s story, first by having her think about blood when we first meet her character, and then by using imagery, such as the dripping red gum of the marri tree (2018, p. 6) and the juice of stewed plums (2018, p. 13), to evoke a sense of foreboding and disturbed peace. Following her introductory scene, in which she finds sap trailing down the trunk of a tree and pooling below it—and seems unnerved by it—is another fragment in which she stews plums. This mundane task leads to the image of plum juice trickling down the counter, jarring her into an unsettling memory “of her little boy’s body—too small, too vulnerable, too soon—his fist-sized head falling unsupported to one side, and the trickle of impossibly bright blood from his nostril pooling on the hospital sheets” (2018, p. 14). Though it is implied earlier, this is the first time the reader is presented with the image of a corpse—that of Natalie’s stillborn baby. Having alluded to the image of trickling blood through the tree sap and plum juice, it is hoped this sudden glimpse into Natalie’s loss (the recalled image of which includes her baby’s trickling blood) is all the more powerful, and the abject response produced more disturbing. Kye confronts abjection by dealing with the sudden death of his mother, and the confrontation of his father’s fragile mortality as he now wears a “bag strapped to his leg to drain a catheter” (2018, p. 21),

evidence of a breakdown of his once ‘whole’ and healthy body (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3).

In each of ‘Bloodwood’s interwoven storylines, the protagonists are constantly dealing with abjection and lingering reminders of death. Abjection is used in similar ways in several of the novels I read. Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* describes a vision of “the lost girls lying rotting in a filthy cave...filled with crawling worms” which makes a younger student “violently sick on the floor” (2009, p. 136), and description of another mangled body which makes the gardener who discovers it “violently sick” also (2009, p. 182). As well as these direct examples of abject responses to death, Lindsay’s novel repeatedly describes the body, with references to “warm sour breath”, “heated bodies”, and “sensitive breasts” (2009, p. 137). Jean Hegland’s novel *Into the Forest* describes the horrifying death of the protagonists’ father in grim detail, from the girls first witnessing how he “lay bleeding his life into the earth” (1998, p. 91), to describing their reluctance to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation: “we were squeamish, reluctant to get bloody, reluctant to have to witness the meat, the torn jumble of muscle and sinew our father had become” (1998, p. 91). The following description of the girls burying his body is equally abject: “There was no way to ease him down, no way to make it gentle, to mask the fact that this was a dead body tumbling into a pit” (1998, p. 95), an uncomfortable transition from the father they mourned and cried over in the previous pages, to a corpse, at once suddenly devoid of life and an abject reminder of their own mortality. Hegland also describes one of the girls’ bodies after a brutal rape: “bruises were already flowering on her arms. Her face was torn and swollen, and her thighs were streaked with blood” (1998, p. 144). Other examples of abjection in the novel include the butchering of a wild pig, and the pregnancy and childbirth that result from the earlier rape.

Although *Into the Forest* is not situated within the Australian Gothic genre, I found it aligns with many concepts and ideas in my own creative work, particularly the use of the abject, the grief experienced by the novel’s protagonists, and the connection to landscape. Hegland’s use of abjection also provides contrast to Rosalie Ham’s abject descriptions in her novel *The*

Dressmaker. Ham approaches the abject with humour, referring often to base bodily functions through comical situations, such as this scene in which two characters are interrupted conducting an illicit affair:

There was a sudden, loud, thruuppppp as the water-jet from the hose ripped across the windowpane. Una jumped and sat up wrenching her knees together, catching Evan's testicles and squashing them so they shot up, leaving his scrotum crawling and empty. He bent double, folding like tinfoil, his forehead cracking dully on Una's. (2000, pg. 223)

Ham's Gothic tale of revenge relies on abjection as much as Hegland's novel does, and comparing the different approaches and how they each work in their respective narratives was useful to consider how to use the abject in my own work. Comparing such different ways in which a theory such as Kristeva's abjection theory can be utilised in fiction helped me understand the concept beyond theoretic consideration, and enabled me to see that varying approaches are possible.

In 'Bloodwood', Sergeant Nolan returns to the site of a rape he committed years before, and upon realising he has stumbled on the location of his transgression, he is so overcome that he vomits:

He rounded the woodpile, and all at once he knew where he was. He took in the veranda wrapping the old wood house, and the thick vines that grew over the support beams. The back door, now dusty with spider webs and years of disuse. That feeling in the pit of him. The rancid stench coming from his own boots. The sweat seeping through his starched uniform. Nolan spun on his heel away from the house, lurched forward onto his knees, and emptied the contents of his stomach in a rush of sharp bile, at the base of a great marri tree. (Olson, 2018, p. 30)

This scene foreshadows the rape scene itself (2018, pp. 42-43), which is, I believe, the most unrelentingly confronting scene in the narrative. I consider the detailed rape scene a necessary inclusion, despite how unsettling it is. Given the focus within abjection theory on the fragility of borders, Natalie's rape is intended to take the story from a place of discomfort and liminal space to one which unquestionably breaches the fragile boundaries which

abjection forces us to consider. This scene is brutally rendered through its refusal to look away, but rape is brutal (and transgressive) and the description is intended to be confronting in order to illustrate the disturbing and violent nature of the abject. It also serves to establish a site of trauma in the landscape, in connection to postcolonial criticisms which I will later address.

Julia Kristeva's work also suggests crime as an example of abjection, claiming that it is also that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, p. 4), and therefore "draws attention to the fragility of law" (1982, p. 4). Many Gothic tales draw on abjection to create a sense of the disturbing and horrifying. In *The Gothic: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Gilda Williams refers to Kristeva's abjection in place of "constituting barriers between subject and object" (2007, p. 198). Gothic texts frequently draw on abjection because they already inherently deal with redefining boundaries, often those between past and present, right and wrong, and the real and imagined. Gothic texts seek to place what should never be 'right' into the world we, as readers, recognise and understand as such. This is why crimes such as rape and murder present such abjection, they are an affront to the 'rightness' of the world, a threat to our own autonomy and to our right to safety in the world we know and have always occupied. As well as Natalie's rape (Olson, 2018, pp. 42-43), I have used abjection in this sense in several other ways. The images presented in Leah's storyline, for example, are of a young child digging a grave and burying a body (2018, p. 12), disembowelling and stringing up animals (2018, p. 4), and turning the earth to mask the scent of fresh blood (2018, p. 10). These are all images that are at once familiar, in the sense that we comprehend the actions, and unfamiliar, because it is a young child performing them. These unsettling images produce an abject response, because we are not quite sure how to reconcile these opposing visuals. These things should not be 'right', and yet they are occurring in this established world.

Similarly, Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well*, challenges borders between life and death, and wrong and right. Though the strange man the protagonists hit with their car is revealed to have been committing a crime—it is suggested he was on the road leaving their home after robbing them—it is seemingly a

much greater crime to dispose of a human body down an old well, in the same manner that they habitually disposed of broken crockery and other trash throughout the novel, especially when it is suggested that he may not have been dead when they threw him down it. Katherine tells Hester: “He isn’t dead at all. I heard him. Soon after you’d gone I heard him. I heard him praying” (Jolley, 2009, p. 149). The boundaries between the real and imagined are confronted here, as it is never revealed whether this man was in fact still alive and injured down the old well, or the product of Katherine’s guilty conscience and imagination.

Abjection essentially challenges accepted binary paradigms, and in place of the borders they dismantle exists an unfamiliar in-between space which Kristeva refers to as “liminal space” (Hughes, 2018, p. 15). Kristeva asserts that we determine what we are through rejection of the ‘other’, or that which we are not. Through this rejection, we establish our position on either side of a liminal space. Liminality is commonly defined as a transitional stage or space which occupies the position normally held by a boundary or threshold, and many Gothic texts operate within the realm of liminality. Before it appeared in Kristeva’s work on abjection, the concept of liminality was first introduced in the anthropological field through the work *Les Rites de Passage* (2013/1909) by Arnold Van Gennep. This work described rites of passage, such as coming of age rituals and transitional processes such as marriage. Gennep’s work postulates that any rite of passage consists of three stages: separation—defined as the temporary removal from ‘normal’ society; the liminal or transition period—which allows one to learn new roles and behaviours; and re-assimilation or incorporation—when the subject is readmitted into society anew (2013, p. 26). Liminality was studied again in the work of Victor Turner (1987) who wrote about not just liminal processes, but also liminal individuals. Turner defined these individuals as “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (1987, p. 7) and also claimed the liminal stage was a “realm of pure possibility” (1987, p. 7). Turner’s idea of a ‘realm of pure possibility’ aligns well with Gothic fiction. As previously discussed, the Gothic genre often operates in a space between

established boundaries, which challenges our perception of what is real and what is fiction. This allows for a certain 'realm of possibility' that would perhaps not be accepted in other forms of writing. I have attempted to use this idea in 'Bloodwood' in a few ways. Leah's story is perhaps the most obvious example of this, as I have placed her in an unusual situation with the intention of making the reader believe it is plausible. Within the world of 'Bloodwood', a girl living in the isolated landscape of the Karri forest, understanding hunting and the slaughter of animals, and having the experience and knowledge to live off the land is all within this 'realm of possibility', despite seeming unusual to the characters who find her. This is also true of the ultimate integration of the three storylines, with the revelation that Leah is Natalie's daughter, and Kye, Leah's son. The world created in this piece is so full of the liminal and the abject, that while we are experiencing this story these unlikely characters and connections are entirely plausible.

Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* takes this idea of transitional space a step further and creates a space which is seemingly suspended in time. The concept of time is a recurring theme in the text, symbolised often in conjunction with 'established' locations such as the college and the households of the upper-class characters. A preoccupation with mathematics, time and structure is evident in almost all scenes that do not take place on Hanging Rock. When the picnic party first reach the grounds at Hanging Rock, it is revealed that all their watches and timepieces have stopped at 12 o'clock. It is stated: "my old ticker seems to have stopped dead at twelve o'clock", "stopped at twelve. Never stopped before", and "Miranda - you have your pretty little diamond watch - can you tell us the time?" "I'm sorry Mam'selle. I don't wear it anymore. I can't stand hearing it ticking all day long just above my heart" (2009, pp. 22-23). The effect of this is a sense of timelessness (of being outside time) in the natural surroundings of Hanging Rock, a 'realm of possibility' which ultimately has the girls enter a mysterious liminal space which some never return from. The symbolic catalyst Lindsay uses here is the crossing of a creek, representing a final border the girls cross. The girls walk alongside the creek for a while, hovering on this side of the liminal space, lingering in the realm

of the familiar. There is a final exchange: “‘We really must find a suitable place to cross over,’ said Miranda. ‘I vote we take a flying leap and hope for the best,’ said Irma, gathering up her skirts” (2009, p. 25) before they are over the creek towards the Rock. The character Mike Fitzhubert watches them cross, and “reminds himself that he was in Australia now: Australia, where anything might happen.” (2009, p.28), a strange foreshadowing of the mysterious events to follow. It is here that the girls enter Turner’s ‘realm of pure possibility’, and a space somehow suspended from normal time. This is suggested in later scenes where the girls hear noises and look down on figures ‘like ants’ below them. One of the girls observes “tiny figures coming and going through drifts of rosy smoke” (2009, p. 35) on the plain below, and a “rather curious sound...like the beating of far-off drums” (2009, p. 35). Though this occurs chronologically before the girls have even completed their climb, and well before anyone would worry they were missing, it sounds eerily like the search party later described, suggesting that their entire experience of climbing Hanging Rock took place in a kind of limbo. This is explored in depth in Rosemarie Millers essay ‘Return to Hanging Rock: Lost Children in a Gothic Landscape’ (2017), which explores Indigenous ideas regarding the sacred quality of the landscape in connection to Lindsay’s published novel, as well as the posthumously published final chapter *The Secret of Hanging Rock* (2016). This final chapter also makes the idea of suspended time much more apparent.

In my own creative work, I have attempted to echo this idea by choosing not to tell the story of ‘Bloodwood’ in a linear narrative format. The reader experiences Leah’s, Natalie’s and Kye’s storylines concurrently, and their genealogical connection is not revealed until much later. I wanted to write an ambiguous ending that positioned the characters, after each of their personal journeys, within a shared temporal space. To achieve this, I ended the story at the point where Natalie walks into the forest, Leah walks out of it, and Kye returns with Leah’s ashes. At this point, the three protagonists are finally all in the same space. I used imagery to suggest that they—for a moment—exist there together, playing on the concept of suspended time encountered through analysing *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

One of the earliest inspirations for the creative work ‘Bloodwood’ was the landscape of the south-west karri forests, which I have visited several times over the last few years. While I thought the isolation and stillness of the region would be a perfect setting for a Gothic story, I was adamant throughout the writing process that I wanted to avoid demonising the landscape, or making it appear hostile within the narrative. This is something I came across in many Australian Gothic texts, particularly colonial gothic literature. Henry Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’, for example, presents the Australian landscape as a threat to the ‘safe’ space of the home, utilising a key element in Gothic fiction, the *unheimlich* or the uncanny. The concept of the uncanny refers to an essay by Sigmund Freud titled *Das Unheimlich* (1919) which distinguishes the *heimlich*—the homely—and the *unheimlich*—the unhomely. The latter is often translated from the German as ‘the uncanny’ (Hughes, 2018, p. 151). Freud stipulates that there is an uncanny element when familiar places, people or concepts feel unfamiliar, even due to the slightest changed detail. Essentially, the uncanny is the uncomfortable feeling produced when the familiar becomes unfamiliar. In his essay, ‘The Uncanny’, David Punter states that the effect of the uncanny is to “render us strangers in a realm where we feel we have the right to be ‘at home’” (2007, p. 134) and it is, as a concept, often closely related to that of abjection. Both concern the fragility of borders, and through an abject response to that which disturbs us, or that which threatens what is familiar, we may experience the uncanny.

In ‘The Drover’s Wife’, the outside world and the natural landscape of the Australian outback is presented as a physical threat to the home. It is “Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation—a shanty on the main road” (Lawson, 1974, p. 2), immediately suggesting a negative (uncivilised) view of the surrounding landscape. The woman in the story is then forced to protect her children from a snake beneath the house, representing nature threatening the safe space of the home. Descriptions of the weather have a similar effect, establishing the elements as threats: “the wind, rushing through cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle” (1974, p. 3). The woman’s isolation and loneliness are highlighted, and the landscape

is only ever referred to as something to fight against or escape. The final line of the story reads: “This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees—that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ships can sail—and farther” (1974, p. 9). A tendency to demonise the landscape is prevalent in Australian colonial literature, a subject discussed in Christine Tondorf’s thesis “‘Lure’ and Does the coast have a place in the Australian gothic landscape?” (2016). Tondorf refers to the colonial narrative which “cast the continent’s interior as wild, strange, even evil – in need of taming and subduing” (2016, p. 95) and described the way in which the Australian Gothic genre cast off the castle or haunted house integral to the traditional Gothic, replacing it instead with the hostile landscape. Tondorf states “it was nature that trapped and menaced the protagonist” (2016, p. 95) and many Australian Gothic texts see their protagonists either consumed or driven mad by nature.

This idea of separation between settlers and the natural landscape is common in Australian Gothic literature. Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* also explores this concept, initially establishing human’s inferiority to and separation from the natural landscape. The text reads “confronted by such monumental configurations of nature the human eye is woefully inadequate” (Lindsay, 2009, p. 29) and characters are separated from the natural environment by gated picnic areas (2009, p. 19) and even by their restrictive colonial dress (2009, p. 21). In her article ‘Fear and Loathing in the Australian Bush: Gothic Landscapes in *Bush Studies* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*’ (2010), Kathleen Steele discusses Lindsay’s novel, stating that “the description of Appleyard College in the opening paragraph of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* suggests establishment. The Saint Valentine’s celebrations and immaculate flowerbeds deny the existence of an Australian landscape” (2010, p. 35), a separation quite stark in Lindsay’s text. The established worlds of Appleyard College and the outside environment are separated in almost every way, including the way the characters are forced to dress despite the heat of an Australian summer. It is stated that their attire of petticoats, corsets and kid boots ensures they are “insulated from natural contacts with earth, air and sunlight” (Lindsay, 2009, p. 21). Once the girls

wander away from the group, they gradually remove these layers of separation as they become further immersed in the landscape. The final descriptions of the girls have them “sliding over the stones on their bare feet...torn muslin skirts fluted like a nautilus shell” (2009, p. 35), and serve to undermine colonial codes of behaviour and suggest the boundary between nature and culture has been breached. It is implied, given the lack of conclusion regarding their whereabouts, that the girls have become one with the landscape, and the language used in the final descriptions of them eliminates any spatial separation between them and the landscape.

In ‘Bloodwood’, I want to avoid presenting the landscape as hostile, and attempt instead to transform the established home into the threatening element in the narrative, with the surrounding forest providing an eventual refuge from the house. One of my aims is to consciously write each protagonist into their surroundings to provide a strong, positive connection to place which I found lacking in much of the Gothic fiction I read. I also made the creative decision to break up the sections of the narrative with descriptions of native flora in the area, so that I could connect to the story the landscape that inspired me, without overloading the narrative with description. A connection to place is one of my research and writing interests, and for years I have been drawn to Indigenous perspectives on the intertwining of time and place. In her work on biodiversity and the Australian environment, Irene Cunningham confronts ideas of dispossession and misuse of the natural landscape, detailing her personal reconnection with nature and traditional methods of land management (2005). She discusses Australian Aboriginal celebrations and sacredness in relation to Country, and refers to the Indigenous experience that “the past is alive in the present, in the timeless age-old festivals that celebrate the land, the plants and all life.” (2005, p.10). She also discusses English writer DH Lawrence, who visited Western Australia in 1922 and “sensed the spirits of the place” (2005, p. 13), which he later wrote about in *Kangaroo* (1980): “it must be the spirit of the place...he felt it watching and waiting—it was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness” (Lawrence, cited in Cunningham, 2005, p. 13).

Regarding this concept of the ‘spirit of place’ Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs’ *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* states:

Many Aboriginal claims for sacredness depend on stressing the fact that their view of the land is entirely different to, and distinct from, ‘ours’—and that ‘we’ can never hope to understand it (a position which is quite different to David Tacey’s, which had suggested not only that we can understand these things, but that we can absorb and transcend them, too! (1998, p. 18)

They refer here to David Tacey, author of *The Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* (1995), which they cite as a key text on the subject of Aboriginal sacredness. I aim to establish a sense of place within my narrative in a way that reflects David Tacey’s view, as discussed by Gelder and Jacobs, that the sacred quality of the land is not necessarily inaccessible to non-Indigenous individuals who are open to understanding it. The landscape of the karri forests in the south-west provided the initial inspiration for my writing, and the idea of an “ageless watchfulness” seemed entirely plausible to me; I felt, as I often feel in nature, that there is a sacred quality to be found in the landscape. I imparted this in ‘Bloodwood’ by establishing a space within nature for the protagonists to deal with their individual grief. I resent the hostile representation of the landscape that I found in the majority of the Gothic literature I read, and focused instead on the intertwining of time and place. I constructed a non-linear narrative that told three stories concurrently, coming together at a point that connected their narratives and established the three protagonists in a single space. In my initial research, I particularly liked a suggestion by David Punter in his essay ‘The Uncanny’ that “we are composed of the past” (2007, p. 136) and developed this idea in ‘Bloodwood’ to suggest that each of the characters, despite two of them never meeting, had an inherent connection to each other as well as to the place in which the narrative unfolds.

After learning that significant areas of the karri forests had been replanted after timber milling in the area for over a century, I became interested in the way in which landscape is viewed and presented in literature in terms of the

dichotomy between natural and created landscapes. Something that required significant editing in my initial drafts and in the proposal stage of my thesis, was the way in which I referred to natural landscapes. I have since researched ideas of landscape and how its representation is constructed in writing, and this research led me to the field of ecocriticism and the construction of 'wilderness'. Greg Garrard's book *Ecocriticism* (2012) discusses the ways in which we imagine and portray relationships between humans and the surrounding environment. In this text, Garrard refers to the concept of 'constructionism'. He postulates that it is a useful tool for cultural analysis, and discusses the challenge eco-critics face to balance the opposing ideas that 'nature' is always both a social construction and a thing that physically exists on its own terms (2012, p.10). Garrard suggests that we think of the constant transformations between nature and culture as "negotiations" (2012, p.11) rather than constructions, and applies the same idea to considerations of "real and imagined versions" (2012, p. 11) of nature. During the writing of 'Bloodwood', I tried to write the landscape as I remembered it; however, applying Garrard's idea of "negotiation" to integrate my real experience of the landscape with my imagined version aided the writing process and allowed me to create a world which, I hope, feels authentic.

Postcolonial studies involve the examination of "history, culture, literature and modes of discourse that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France, and other European imperial powers" (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 306) and refer to the discourse and culture of colonised nations, including Australia. The theoretical principles of postcolonialism were first clearly conceptualised in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), where Said analysed what he called "cultural imperialism", but the current literature surrounding the field indicates that it is not a unified movement and lacks a distinctive methodology (Abrams & Harpham, 2012, p. 306) though criticisms tend to include a few recurrent issues. Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998), discusses each field in depth and presents valid points for each. I found this text integral to my initial understanding.

One of the key issues I found within the field was the “rejection of the ‘master narrative’ of Western Imperialism” (Abrahams & Harpham, 2012, p. 307). I found this concept of rejecting a master narrative tied in with what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin refer to as ‘hybridization’ in the text *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), which layers imperialist literary practices with Indigenous traditions. This work suggests that “language is a material practice and as such is determined by a complex weave of social conditions and experience.” (2002, p. 40). Similarly, Ania Loomba’s work postulates that a recognition of a “multiplicity of histories” is necessary in order for former colonised nations to overcome the anxieties and oppressions put in place by colonisation (Loomba, 1998, p.13). I drew on this idea of a multiplicity of histories and applied it to the structure of my creative piece. I first considered writing a dual narrative that presented a single story from alternate perspectives, but settled on intertwining three separate stories occurring across time, resulting in the combined storylines that make up ‘Bloodwood’.

Author Anita Heiss discusses disputes by Aboriginal writers who reject the term ‘postcolonial’ for the implications it carries that “colonialism is a matter of the past, and that decolonisation has taken place” (2003, p.43), a view which aligns with Ania Loomba’s notion regarding the problematic nature of the term. Loomba claims that the prefix ‘post’ is problematic because it suggests a position beyond that of being a colonised nation. She suggests that this prefix implies an ‘aftermath’ in two senses: “temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting” (20013, p. 7). In contrast, in his book *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007) Graham Huggan suggests that instead of asking whether Australia is postcolonial *yet*, we should be asking “is Australia still postcolonial” (2007, p. 27), postulating that because Australia is no longer colonially dependent on Britain, we must soon cease to be defined by our colonial past. He does concede, however, that despite being postcolonial in relation to our former colonies, our “treatment of [our] own Indigenous peoples” (2007, p. 27) renders us still considerably colonial or neo-colonial.

While Huggan and Loomba both outline arguments on each side of this debate, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs discuss this in-between position in their

work *Uncanny Australia* (1998). Gelder and Jacobs claim the binary to be both unavoidable and necessary, suggesting that reconciliation—as well as the impossibility of such—are ideas that “co-exist and flow through each other in what is often, in our view at least, a productively unstable dynamic” (1998, p. 24). As their work suggests, the current position occupied by those who seek to discuss postcolonial theory in Australia is a rather unstable, though necessary, one.

This contention in the field of Australian literature seems to allow for a transitional space between the two sides. As I was exploring this field concurrently with Kristeva’s theory of abjection and liminal space, I made the connection that this space can be considered one of transition and liminality. Ania Loomba’s work claims that “the process of forming a community necessarily means unforming or re-forming the communities that existed there already” (2015, p. 2), and this concept of re-forming aligns with the idea of an in-between space produced through the pushing, crossing or dismantling of boundaries. Commentators including Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs discuss ideas of place, reconciliation and the crossing or existence of boundaries, though an exploration of liminal space operating in relation to colonialism doesn’t seem explored in great detail.

Professor Jane Tompkins has suggested this space as a site of ‘ambivalence’, referring to the theoretical work of Homi Bhabha (1997, p. 503), though this study seems to focus on human subjects and their identities, leaving the landscape quite unexplored. Tompkins’ article ‘Breaching the Body’s Boundaries: Abjected Subject Positions in Postcolonial Drama’ (1997) proposed that colonised subjects can adopt liminal identities, and David Punter’s work *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body and the Law* (1998) takes a similar approach. Punter presents the body as a vessel which keeps us located in “in-between” spaces, stating “[the] Gothic questions how we are clothed in the human” (1998, p.11). While I liked this idea, I used my creative work to speak on the landscape as the subject of liminal processes. The concept of the landscape as transformative space was emphasised in Gelder and Jacobs work, and I wanted to draw on this by establishing the physical landscape of

‘Bloodwood’ as one of transformative space, allowing my protagonists to move through the liminal process of grief.

Particularly in Australian texts, the Gothic has come to be defined by elements such as “an emphasis on the returning past, a dual interest in transgression and decay, commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear, and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy” (Spooner & McEvoy, 2007, p. 1) and often draws on elements of abjection and the uncanny. In ‘Bloodwood’ I focused on abjection, as I used the framework of Kristeva’s theory, and the concept of the ‘returning past’, to explore the fragile nature of borders, the return of past transgressions and the discomfort of uncertain reality. I attempted to dismantle borders between time and place by using a non-linear narrative format, telling the stories of three related protagonist as though they were not separated by time. The return of the past was used in several ways. Through her grief, Natalie is haunted by the memory of her stillborn baby. The figure of the baby returns to her in abject visions, and she tries to dig up his buried body from the earth, hears him crying at night, and sees his limp body before her when reminded of her last view of him (Olson, 2018, pp. 25-26). This also explores the boundary between the real and imagined. The return of the past is utilised in Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well* when the figure of the man the protagonists hit with their car and dispose of down a well returns metaphorically through—the likely imagined—conversation with the impressionable Katherine, and then later, more literally when a storm floods the well and threatens to wash up his corpse.

In the writing of ‘Bloodwood’ I attempt to invert the common depiction in Australian Gothic fiction of the landscape as the hostile space, instead constructing the landscape as the comfortable, ‘homely’ space the characters each eventually return to. I was inspired by Aboriginal perspectives on nature and the environment and include botanical excerpts throughout the piece to connect these perspectives—and traditional uses of flora in the surrounding area—to the narrative. The title of the piece was derived from one of these excerpts, which refers to the marri tree. This is the type of tree which Natalie returns to several times while mourning her lost child, as the

dark red gum it produces reminds her of blood. ‘Bloodwood’ is the name of the group of eucalypts to which this tree belongs (Wheeler, 2016, p. 20).

I also wished to refer to the return of the past in terms of the relevant postcolonial issues, though I wanted to avoid writing an obviously political story. I decided to work postcolonial concerns into the narrative reflectively, and Natalie’s rape became integral to the story, despite how difficult it was to write and how confronting it is to read. As well as establishing a site of trauma within the landscape, to recall the dark past of Australia’s colonial history, this scene provides the turning point in the story, brutally revealing and dismantling the fragile boundaries which abjection suggests, and allowing the protagonists to move forward. Kye returning to the site of trauma brings the story full circle, as all three protagonists exist across chronological time but within the same narrative time and space. Initially, I had planned to write three generations of female characters, but also wanted to avoid perpetuating the stereotype I found in much literature of women being inherently closer to nature, and men seeking to dominate it. In a chapter on sexuality in the Gothic, Gerry Turcotte discusses Teresa De Laurentis’ warning not to minimise the feminine subject to one “defined by silence, negativity, a natural sexuality, or a closeness to nature not compromised by patriarchal culture” (2009, p. 181) and I realised that if I told the story of only women in this setting, I would be portraying a closeness to nature as a feminine experience. I also wanted to negate the brutal representation of masculinity in the character of Sergeant Nolan (in Natalie’s storyline) by writing a male character (Kye) whose resemblance to Nolan doesn’t extend beyond a biological connection.

To further explore Nolan’s complicated position, I introduced him first in Leah’s storyline as an upholder of the law, later making the connection that he is also Natalie’s rapist. Though Nolan experiences a physical reaction of horror—an experience of the abject—when he returns to the site of trauma, his position of power enables him to manipulate the situation to absolve himself of any responsibility, either to Leah—his biological daughter—or in regard to his own past transgressions. I intended for this uncomfortable conclusion to mirror that of Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005), in its

refusal to allow a lack of surviving witnesses to negate guilt for what must be considered inherently wrong. Grenville's novel, as discussed in a critical review:

pivots the tropes of Australian Gothic to chart the secret river as it runs through a national story dominated by the pioneer legend, which faces away from the violent history of Aboriginal dispossession towards the economic blessing and social harmony provided by settlement (Conti, 2017, p. 17).

The 'secret river' that gives the novel its title refers to W.E.H. Stanner's 1968 'Boyer Lectures' in which he spoke about 'the secret river of blood' that flows through Australia's history in relation to its colonial past (1969). Grenville's novel tells one man's story of settlement from first contact to the brutal massacre of the area's Indigenous population which allows him to realise his dream of becoming a landowner. Grenville's narrative details the protagonist William Thornhill's struggle to build a life for himself from nothing, and to interact with the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area, ultimately leaving him with exactly what he wanted, along with the unsettling sense that "he could not understand why it did not feel like triumph" (Grenville, 2005, p. 334). The part Thornhill plays in the massacre of the 'blacks', as they are referred to in the text, is undeniable, though he is never held truly accountable for the murder. Jo Jones' 'History and the Novel: Refusing to be Silent' (2010) discusses the subject of reconciliation and the role of literature in establishing what can be considered a 'truthful' narrative. Jones postulates that many such stories of trauma in Australia's history either have no witness or none willing to speak about their experiences. Jones states that "[these stories] may never be part of a national history because of a lack of empirical evidence or the understandable reluctance of Nyoongah people to open up the story to outsiders, but there is an important truth here" (2010, p. 47), and I wanted to impart a similar view within 'Bloodwood' through Sergeant Nolan's storyline, to suggest that a lack of evidence or witnesses does not negate the reality of lived experience. This desire to maintain a sense of 'truth' within the narrative also influenced my decision to render Natalie's rape in such detail. I found that many Gothic texts I read dealt with physical violence and

trauma in a brutal and descriptive manner, as Grenville did in the massacre scene in *The Secret River*, though they rarely used the same approach when writing sexual violence. Grenville refers to the systematic rape of an Aboriginal woman kept chained by a settler after the fact, when he offers Thornhill a piece of “black velvet” (2005, p. 252), stating that “she done it with me and Sagitty” (2005, p. 252). Barbara Baynton’s colonial Gothic short story ‘The Chosen Vessel’ features the rape and murder of a woman in the Australian outback, and the scene itself is entirely left out of the text, moving from the moment the man’s hand first “gripped her throat” (1902, p. 149), to that of a boundary rider discovering her body, with its “swollen, disfigured face” (1902, p. 154), the next morning. In ‘Bloodwood’, I felt that it was necessary to render the rape in unflinching detail—regardless of how confronting this would be to read—both to represent past trauma within the landscape, as Grenville’s massacre scene does, and to reiterate the importance of narrative truth. I felt that—in the same way the acts of brutality which constitute Australia’s colonial past are often skimmed over—it would be challenging for readers to understand the extent of Nolan’s guilt within being exposed to the true brutality of his crime. It is the brutal rendering of violent acts of this nature which causes such discomfort when we realise the perpetrators will never be held responsible.

I began this Honours thesis with little idea of the story I wanted to write beyond situating it in the Australian Gothic genre. Through research, writing and editing processes it has evolved into an informed project that I could not have envisioned in the planning stages. The proposal and literature review components required me to explore theoretical perspectives I wouldn’t have otherwise considered, and to link concepts and elements of creative writing practice that would complement and inform further academic research. The depth of this project required extensive research into literary, cultural and psychoanalytic fields, as well as new research methods. My research into Kristeva’s abjection theory and liminal space allowed me to reach a deeper understanding of elements of Gothic fiction, and how complex theories such as the abject can be explored through literature. I also came to understand the unsettling horror of the Gothic genre in a way that I

didn't previously, despite many of my favourite novels being situated within the genre. Research into postcolonial concepts and contention within the field of Australian literary studies pushed me to produce a piece which speaks back to many of the concepts I researched, establishing a liminal space within the narrative landscape to investigate the anxieties and consequences of past trauma which linger there. I identified grief as a liminal process, using this to link the experiences of my three protagonists, as they each moved through the process in their own way. Using a practice-led research, research-led practice methodology allows me to produce a creative work and accompanying exegetical essay that combine academic research and creative writing practices, drawing on my strengths in each of these areas to produce what is, I hope, an informed and thought-provoking narrative.

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