TWITCH GOTHIC:
An Exploration of the Female Protagonist in Contemporary
Australian Gothic Short Fiction

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
Doctorate of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program (with the exception of one story, and reasons are given for its inclusion); any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Yvette Harvey
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Abstract

Twitch Gothic: An Exploration of the Female Protagonist in Contemporary Australian Gothic Short Fiction

Twitch Gothic is a creative practice-based PhD consisting of fifteen short stories, a short film and a creative practice exegesis. This project contemplates the creation of female (sexed and/or gendered) characters and related tropes in contemporary Australian Gothic short fiction. The short stories, described as Twitch Gothic short stories, draw on or are infused by the Gothic genre to provide moments of shudder, overlap, shock, repulsion and mutation. These short stories are arranged to reflect four theories central to the Gothic genre: Edmund Burke’s sublime, Sigmund Freud’s uncanny, Tzvetan Todorov’s fantastic and Julia Kristeva’s abject. Twitch Gothic examines some of the Australian social, political and cultural impacts on the Gothic short story. This mode of creative practice engages in genre overlaps and experimental character creations. The project encompasses liminal spaces, identity intersections and everyday provocations. Twitch Gothic explores the multiplicities that exist within the dialogue between the stories and the generative, rhizomatic context of a Gothic-infused creative writing practice. This process has led to the adoption of a hopeful “radical and” in my practice.
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Dr Brigid Magner is a brilliant academic, writer and mentor, with a superhuman knowledge of Australian, New Zealand and world literature. Dr Jessica Wilkinson is an award-winning scholar and practitioner. As my senior supervisors, they brought their considerable time and skills to bear on this work. They have trusted that I would recognise the connecting threads. Dr Rose Michael joined the supervisory team in the final year. Her insight and skills as a genre fiction writer, academic and editor brought much focus in the final iterations of this project.

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During this PhD I spent much of the time outside Melbourne. “Home” was a moving feast of experiences. I often felt unanchored, sometimes fragmented. On this journey, I have slept in caves, swags, tents, a friend of a dear uncle’s farmhouse, on couches, in spare rooms, in vacant houses, on floors in attics and on slowly deflating blow-up beds. I have studied in libraries,
cafes, bookshops and at the Abbotsford Convent. There have been travels near and far. For all those who were kind to me along the way, and/or sheltered me, and/or worked with me, and/or helped me to move or to move on ... thank you!

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This PhD is dedicated to my grandmothers:

Lorraine Prichard and Jean Harvey

&

to difficult (inimitable) women

(&thank Goddess for music)
Twitch Gothic

An Exploration of the Female Protagonist in Australian Gothic Short Fiction
Contents

PART ONE

1 Project Scope

   Motivations

   Key concepts

   Process

2 Character

   Led by the female lead

   Character journeys

   Character as genre and character in genre

   Character 1 ‘The Drover’s Wife’ and the exploration of archetypes

   Character 2 ‘Squeaker’s Mate’ and the subversion of stereotype

   Practice reflection: writing ‘Olivia & Harry’

3 The Female Gothic

   Context

   Character 3 ‘The Doctress’s Tale’ and the narration of the abused woman

   Character 4 ‘The Night the Prowler’ and the author’s grip

   The abject

   Character 5 ‘Refractions’ and an abject point of view

4 Australian Gothic

   Context

   Character 6 ‘The White Maniac’ and the colonial Gothic

   Character 7 ‘Yara Ma Tha Who’ and Aboriginal Story and the Gothic

   Practice reflection: Place, Artform and Story

   Character 8 ‘Anguli Ma’ and contemporary Australian Gothic
5 The Short Story........................................................................................................... 138

Context

The Gothic short story

Gothic hybrid short stories: Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber

The Australian (Gothic) Short Story

Character 9 The male 'I' in Peter Carey's 'Peeling'

Practice reflection: 'Justify'

6 Conclusion.................................................................................................................. 169

7 References.................................................................................................................. 173

8 Appendices................................................................................................................ 213

Appendix 1 Story submission grid

Appendix 2 Research uses to date

PART TWO Contemporary Australian Gothic Short Fiction

Twitch Gothic Short Stories.......................................................................................... (under embargo)

PART THREE

Twitch Gothic Short Film............................................................................................. (supplied for viewing)
PART ONE
1

Project Scope

Motivations

The Gothic can be an exciting site of experimentation precisely because it is malleable, omniscient and pervasive.\(^1\) It is lowbrow, highbrow and "middlebrow".\(^2\) It preys on recurring and repressed fears. It conjures doubles, triples and uncanny multiplicities in its own image. The "original" Gothic images are fractured and distorted into a million gorgeous grotesqueries. At its ghostly heart, the Gothic is a literature of angst and fear, "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind" (Lovecraft, 1927/2014, p. 1858). Fear can be perceived as "a response to an identifiable threat" and angst as "a response to an unidentifiable threat" (Asma, 2011, p. 185). Fred Botting states that the gothic "resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past" (2012, p. 14). The emotions of fear and angst are manipulated in Gothic texts for their effects on the reader.

When I began to reflect on what causes angst and fear, I thought of some of the central conceits of the Gothic: body violence and horror, terror and madness, dead young women and how these themes are depicted in Australian literature.

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\(^1\) These characteristics of the Gothic have been separately, or in some combination, widely attributed to the Gothic across multiple texts by multiple authors.

\(^2\) Catherine Spooner writes that contemporary Gothic "can be progressive or conservative, nostalgic or modern, political or apolitical, feminine or masculine, erudite or trashy, transcendentally spiritual or doggedly material, sinister or silly. It is difficult to say what contemporary Gothic 'is' or even what it is like, since it does all these things so well" (2006, p. 156). In her various works on fashion and pop-culture Gothic, she further highlights that the Gothic is not always transgressive or the rebel outsider genre or mode: it can also be a highly profitable affair, exemplifying trends in neo-capitalism.
I have grown up seeing the front pages of newspapers marked with the faces of dead women. It must be a tough job for the victims’ families – tasked, in their grief, to find a photo that the media will then use and distribute until that face, that person, that life, is pixelated beyond recognition. A photograph composed of ellipsis-like dots that will forever connect the dead woman’s face to a crime that was committed against her personhood. The often-savage media aftermath can further displace the person from the life that she once lived.

On 22 September 2012, 29-year-old Jill Meagher was walking home after a post-work drink with friends. She was viciously raped and murdered in a Melbourne suburb not far from where I was living at the time. This public act of violence, perpetrated on an individual, galvanised many with the horror of the act and its symbolic representation of the women who have suffered a similar fate; the few who have suffered at the hands of a stranger and the many more who have suffered at the hands of an intimate partner. This act of violence provoked outrage but it also caused many in the community to question how and why the rates of domestic violence against women are so high in the “lucky country”. Is there an entrenched cultural problem? Is there a deeply ingrained misogyny in Australia, with crimes such as this just its most perverse and public face?

Police and criminologists confirm that there are often different motivations behind the actions of a psychopath stalking a victim on the street and those of an intimate partner.³ It is, however, hard to ignore the underlying “status reset”

³For instance after Eurydice Dixon’s murder in Melbourne in 2018 The Australian newspaper’s crime reporter Chip Le Grand (2018) quoted forensic psychologist James Ogluff about stranger attacks: “If you think about what drives these aberrant crimes, disrespectful attitudes towards women isn’t a necessary or sufficient explanation.” Identifying a very particular psychology of the stranger-rapist-murderer, Ogluff says: “There is a lot of merit in continuing to address attitudes towards women, but the outcome won’t be that these crimes will be eliminated.”
of the dominant male aggressor over the female victim in both these types of acts of violence against women.⁴

On 10 October 2012, Julia Gillard, Australia’s then Prime Minister, delivered a speech that resounded around the world. What is now referred to as the “Misogyny Speech⁵” was an act of protest by Gillard at the hypocrisy, sexism and misogyny that was being directed at her by the then leader of the Opposition and members of Australia’s Liberal–National Party Coalition. Gillard’s sexuality, appearance, gender and marital status had been regular go-to insults; behaviour that continued long after the incendiary speech was delivered.

These two events changed the course of my creative writing enquiries. Prior to the PhD, my creative practice had been focused on writing in various forms⁶ and styles, including film, fiction, poetry and multiplatform works. I had focused on magical realism⁷, among other genres. Then came the impetus for me to seek change and a way to investigate the sometimes conflicting emotions and thoughts emerging within my own writing practice. I was compelled towards the

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⁴ Change the Story Report: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia (Our Watch, 2015) lists several gendered drivers of violence against women including: “1. condoning of violence against women, 2. men’s control of decision making and limits to independence in public and private life, 3. rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity, 4. male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women [... and] 9. backlash factors (increases in violence when male dominance, power or status is challenged).” (p. 8).
⁵ Gillard’s “misogyny speech” can be found on youtube at ABC News (2012, Oct 8).
⁶ Although the short story is often classified as a genre, in this research to avoid confusion I refer to the short story as a form and the Gothic as a genre.
⁷ In Magical Realism, as described by Wendy B Faris (2002, p. 102), the single essential element is not fear but an “irreducible element” that is unexplained by the laws of modern man. Both the Gothic and Magic Realism can use supernatural phenomena – doubling, fantasy, dreams – and both can be employed by writers as a form of political resistance. There are writers, such as Salman Rushdie, claimed by critics as belonging to both genres, but the Gothic and Magic Realism differ in their essence – in what they are centrally concerned with depicting and exploring.
literature of fear – and parodies of this genre\textsuperscript{8} – as a writer and researcher. I was full of doubt about where this exploration would take me.

The short story, 'The Interview', is a story included in this PhD that I had written prior to the formal commencement of my doctorate.\textsuperscript{9} It was written when I was researching and developing my ideas for the PhD and it has been revised during the process of my creative practice journey. I wrote this story as a way of grappling with the impact of seeing persistent images and news reports about women who had been killed or were the victims of daily degradations.

Feminist works have explored different forms of oppression of women. Anne Summers' influential text \textit{Damned Whores and God's Police} (1975) articulates the structural sexism and barriers that women face in diverse areas including sport, literature, politics; in the workplace and within the family. Summers uses detailed analysis of statistical data, media and literature, and a sociocultural lens. Her work was recently updated in 2016 and reflects the significant progress women have made in many areas in Australia; women now hold or have held significant positions of power, including Julia Gillard's term as Prime Minister (2010–2013), and since the text was republished, Susan Kiefel has been appointed Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia. Summers' updated text also highlights the disturbing and continued trend of domestic violence in Australia.

In Australia, approximately one woman every week dies at the hands of a partner or family member.\textsuperscript{10} When the budget for community legal centres and critical domestic violence services was cut in 2014, the advocacy group Destroy

\textsuperscript{8} Women writers of the Gothic who have parodied the genre include Jane Austen and Edith Wharton. See further Beer & Horner (2003) on Wharton's parodic gothic.

\textsuperscript{9} Appendix A details the writing/submission history of the short stories.

the Joint\textsuperscript{11} commenced a tally “counting dead women”; the fatal victims of violence against women in Australia. According to this count, the number of women dead from violence was 52 in 2017. By August 2018, the count was already at 42.

The tone in ‘The Interview’ is light. Nonetheless the story attempts to examine a kind of hyper-awareness, the “voice” or script inside our heads that becomes informed by abhorrent criminal actions and the subsequent media reports. Our reactions are also fuelled by the surrounding online commentary that sensationalises these events or adopts a necessary community awareness and protest stance. No matter how dark the events over the past years have felt there has always been hope, through the many voices that have been fighting with unrelenting passion for justice and equality.\textsuperscript{12} This sense of hope is reflected in ‘The Interview’ when the protagonist leaves an unpalatable work situation in order to join a collective of women dancing.

Jill Meagher’s story was transformed into a different type of Gothic narrative by the media. I felt that she was unfairly co-opted into this narrative, even as I perpetuated it. I read the articles, watched the news, had the conversations and responded, creatively and critically, sometimes to the event, rather than to Jill Meagher as a person. She was, in fact, violently co-opted into this story by a man who chose to stalk, rape and murder her, with parts of the media frothing into a rabid frenzy over that act. Her liminal afterlife\textsuperscript{13} continues to appal me. That she was forever caught on a CCTV loop was not her fault, yet this Gothic protagonist

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Destroy the Joint. (ongoing tally, this webpage was – depressingly – visited many times throughout 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). Retrieved from http://www.facebook.com/DestroyTheJoint/ This website (the 2015 tally numbers) was also cited in Summers (1975/2016, p. 15).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} As I am about to hand this PhD in, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to two such people – brave and determined anti-rape activists Denis Mukwege and Nadia Murad. See further: The Nobel Peace Prize 2018 - Press Release.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} For further, see the layered analysis by Janine Mary Little (2015) in her article ‘Jill Meagher CCTV’.}
continues to flicker in distant parts of the internet to this day. Jill Meagher on CCTV footage became emblematic for me of the 21st century – technologically infused and media-driven – Gothic narrative.\textsuperscript{14}

I moved to St. Kilda in Melbourne in 2013 before starting this doctorate. It was the first time in my 30-something years when I wasn’t living with a partner, flatmates or family members. It should have signalled a period of independence, not fear. Not long after this move, a vigil was held around the corner for Tracy Connelly.

Tracy Connelly was a woman. She was also a sex worker who lived and worked in St Kilda, and was found murdered on 21 July 2013. A crowd of mourners attended the vigil, yet there was not the same outcry as there had been the year before for Jill Meagher’s murder. There seemed to be a difference in the tone of the conversation.\textsuperscript{15} Familiar sentiments about women needing to look after themselves – not to go out late, not work in dangerous industries – seethed in reports about the horrific crime. Where Jill Meagher had been (mostly) painted as an innocent victim (although similar notions about not drinking alcohol and not wearing short clothing, were visible then too), Tracy Connelly’s death was not portrayed in the same light.\textsuperscript{16}

To me, these tragic events each appeared to spark a specific and concentrated reaction within each respective community. They were real-life events that spoke in stark contrast with the woman-murdered-as-entertainment. That

\textsuperscript{14} For a further discussion of how these technologies are influencing and impacting the reception and production of horror texts see for instance: Xavier Aldana Reyes and Linnie Blake (Eds.), Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage, (2015)
\textsuperscript{15} See also: Beattie (2016, September 29). Still Not My Fault, Overland literary journal that examines how the claims of a woman who came forward after Meagher’s murder were treated.
\textsuperscript{16} See for instance: Squires, W. (2014, July 22). ‘She was a sex worker and she was murdered. One thing doesn’t make the other any less tragic’ on how Connelly’s death was treated by the media.
variant of thriller is not a new genre of fiction;\textsuperscript{17} it has origins in the earliest Gothic texts. Edgar Allan Poe (1846/2014, p. 16) famously said:

\begin{quote}
I asked myself – "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the \textit{universal} understanding of mankind, is the \textit{most} melancholy?" Death – was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?" [From what I have already explained at some length,] the answer, here also, is obvious – "When it most closely allies itself to \textit{Beauty}: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world [...]" (my brackets/ellipsis).
\end{quote}

These sentiments, about "poetical topics" of interest for creative writers and in the culture more generally, along with a finite and very limited cultural view of beauty, are echoed by a conversation in which contemporary media continues to engage. The death of a young woman such as Jill Meagher can rouse intense media interest with a strong public reaction and lead to responses in the arts.\textsuperscript{18}

These responses are to be expected and are necessary because the acts of violence that initiate them are tragic. To argue that the acts of violence don’t warrant attention and scrutiny would defeat the purpose of some of my own creative and critical responses. There remains for me a question as to why our culture as a whole participates in perpetuating this trope and whether fictional narratives reinforce or challenge social and cultural values that underpin the actions of the perpetrators.

The narrative response to death and beauty at the heart of Gothic literature may appear to emphasise or echo a particular narrative in real life, as well as discussions about who the female protagonist should be: what is her role or

\textsuperscript{17} An exquisite reversal of many of these tropes can be found in \textit{Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law & Order SVU} by Carmen Maria Machado (2013).

\textsuperscript{18} See for instance: Garner (2012). 'Death in Brunswick'.
function in our society? Is it just to be beautiful, to die, then be memorialised in a fetishistic way?

In Australia, women are the most likely victims of domestic violence and rape. They are not the most likely victims of violent deaths. Women are, however, often the focus of myriad fictional stories (in print, and on TV and film) that focus on their death, and also the tropes of female madness and violence against women. This has led to examinations of the "violent male gaze" in films and the coining of terms such as "crime porn". Vicary and Fraley (2010) have also found that women are more likely than men to be readers and viewers of true crime thrillers and crime programs that often feature female protagonists. This research has led me to investigate if there are other reasons that women might be drawn to Gothic texts.

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19 Our Watch Australia (and other Government sources) have compiled data on ‘understanding violence – facts and figures’ that are available on their website https://www.ourwatch.org.au
20 This disparity in the discussion around violent deaths was noted in a recent article in The Conversation, McPhedran and Eriksson (2017) note that the “typical” male victim of violence is in his 20s or 30s and is more likely to be stabbed or beaten to death.
21 Penfold-Mounce (2016) discusses how TV crime porn normalises violence against women; “The "ideal victim" helps create "ideal drama" based on hideous crimes. The female becomes a linchpin for compelling shock driven visual tales using extreme, final and often gruesome violence”.
22 Vicary & Fraley suggest multiple factors drawing women to true crime texts (as opposed to other violent genres that more typically attract male viewers), these include female protagonists, the opportunity to learn ‘survival tips and strategies’, and also a potential vicious cycle of women drawn to these texts because they are afraid of these types of crimes, but the texts then reinforce and amp up this fear, drawing the viewer/reader back to the genre in a perpetual loop (2010, p. 85). See also for instance Brigid Magner’s (2012, p. 255) article tracking the origins, functions and impact of BookScan (data) on Australian book sales and the market, in which she notes in Australia: “[r]eplicating trends evident in the United Kingdom and the United States in 2011, by far the largest number of titles came from the “Crime, Thriller & Adventure” category.” A recent news website article notes this same trend on the popularity of true crime on these BookScan lists: “Neilsen BookScan Australia, which monitors book sales, notes that novels within the Crime, Thriller & Adventure genre have increased in sales by 11 per cent from 2016–2017, in comparison to Fiction as a whole, which grew by one per cent in total. The category now makes up 31 per cent of all adult fiction sales and in 2017 was worth $74 million.” (Saw, 2018).
23 Further explored in this thesis in the chapter on the female Gothic.
Motivated by this social and cultural context that I was writing into, an examination of the Gothic, and the role of its female protagonists, appeared to be an important ground for exploration. It seemed particularly pertinent in the female Gothic, which Ellen Moers (1976/1986, p. 90) states is “the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic”. As a woman writer living in Australia, influenced by the events around me, I wanted to examine the female characters in Australian Gothic stories.

Political, social and cultural events that occurred in Australia while I was focused on my enquiry have forced me to confront perceptions of how both fiction and facts are presented in the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves. The history of this country, its deeply embedded mythology and its concept of national identity, emerged in new shapes for me alongside this practice. In ever more pressing and recurrent bells, strikes, whistles, cracking blows and pinpricks, events and cultural positions began to polarise people around me. It felt as if indiscriminate punishment was being meted out to those who seek another, kinder, more generous, or even more just view of the world.24 Those with the loudest voices seem too often to win the debate – such as it is – by default, rather than on merit, vision or expertise.

My creative writing is an attempt to engage with and understand this world around me. The short-story form is capable of a more immediate response to these impressions, thoughts and feelings. Short stories have been recognised as “a highly transient genre” and one where “many of them have never received any critical attention because they disappeared from view almost as soon as they were published” (Einhaus, 2016, p. 6). This very transience, like writing in sand, holds a unique appeal for a writer trying to grapple with the slippery

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24 See for instance how the Australian of the Year (2015) and family violence campaigner Rosie Batty was treated by some of the more vitriolic parts of the Australian political/media landscape (Baxendale & Morton, 2016).
ephemera of an ever-changing and rapidly fragmenting social and political climate.

The desire to react and respond to external circumstance encourages a creative-practice enquiry developed from “the light of the flash”, as Nadine Gordimer so eloquently describes the form. Gordimer writes that the short-story writer’s practice “is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment” (1994, p. 265). Throughout this PhD, the greater context of our collective history provided an ideal basis upon which to embrace a focus “on the moment” as a creative direction and to look at what that seemed to say about the female protagonist and ‘Others’ more generally.

At this time in Australia, I perceived a falling back onto the amorphous values of “mateship” – such as a valorising of the ANZAC tradition, which I too revere, but not to the point of blindness or unthinking perpetuation. These specific values and corresponding narrative frames, at the exclusion of others, instigated a ramping-up of “culture war” rhetoric in sections of the media and by some politicians. Strong ideological notions of mateship and other more racist or exclusionary policy were being celebrated at the expense of positive narratives about, for instance, the newly arrived refugee or the first female Australian Prime Minister.

I started to question how I could use genre, form and the female protagonist to contribute to this conversation. What strategies could my research uncover for exploring the historical and contemporary dominance of one kind of story over the many others available for the telling? French philosopher and linguist Luce Irigaray developed a “both/and” approach in her challenges to patriarchal writing, as Elizabeth Grosz (2002, p. 176) comments:
She [Irigaray] refuses the ‘either/or’ logic of dichotomous models by presenting the feminine as a mode of occupying both alternatives, exerting a ‘both/and’ logic of difference in its place. To speak as woman is already to defy the monologism of discursive domination under phallocentrism.

The dichotomous logic that riffs through Australian literature is not confined to a binary representation of men and women. The controlling monomyth commits to the periphery all those outside its central narrative. I can obey and conform, or challenge and be accused of degrading this narrative, but all actions and inactions will still engage with this dominant narrative. How is this ever to be shifted?

“We” (as a general term for community and country) seem(ed) collectively and at all levels of leadership incapable of a radical step forward – applying *and* instead of *or* – a seemingly small change on paper that may have enormous repercussions for our sense of self as individuals and as a nation. This inability to express more than one version of history, along with the toxic culture wars that such entrenched positions have provoked, led me to wonder if there was such a thing as a *radical and*. A *radical and* that embraces multiple viewpoints and mythologies, that allows for the celebration of the WWII digger *and* the Sudanese refugee cardiologist *and* the single-mother shift nurse *and* the Holocaust survivor and artist *and* the Aboriginal intellectual *and* writer who excavates unheard of histories that, tragically, have occurred *and* imagines new futures.

The short-story experiments in my practice have attempted a kind of revision of common Gothic tropes such as death, grief, violence, rape and madness. Some are successful at reimagining Gothic tropes, other story-experiments challenge key themes or the development of a character archetype, some perhaps fail to enact a recognisable Gothic contemporisation. The protagonists in these stories
are strong and vulnerable, mad and sane, kind and cruel and powerful and ordinary. The Australia depicted is fictional and infused by a subjective real as strained through my eyes, inspired by reading in the Gothic genre and living day to day. The stories are set in the city and the centre and suburbia. They are intended to lend themselves to ambiguous and personal interpretations.

To explore female characters in a contemporary short-story variant of the Gothic genre, I had to examine character, the Gothic genre and the short story form. Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver (2017, p. 4) comment that character “types can take control of a narrative, determining its priorities and ideological direction” but that “types also change, they come and go, they interrupt, they mutate”. My efforts are perhaps not sufficiently radical to shift some of the presumptions about the female protagonist, or women/Others in society, but they may provoke further conversations about how complex literary characters can alter genre, impact on form, and open discussion to include a diversity of experiences.
Key concepts

The Gothic

The Gothic is a literary genre that uses "particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered or disseminated through the modern Western literary tradition" (Byron and Punter, 2004, p. xviii). It is generally accepted that the ("classic") Gothic can be traced back to Horace Walpole, who wrote and published his self-coined “Gothic” novel *The Castle of Otranto* in England in 1764. The Gothic novel later reached popular and critical heights in Ann Radcliffe’s works, which included *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1796).25

Clive Bloom (1998, p. 1) suggests, "[a]lthough the term 'gothic genre' may be singular its incarnations are diverse and often retain only the slightest genuflection toward an original core or formal set of generic properties". There are, however, some common elements that are recognised by critics and theorists as informing the genre, at least the “classic” texts26. These include but are not limited to: inclusion of elements of horror and terror (Miles, 2012, p. 93), the supernatural and presence of the uncanny and an atmosphere of mystery and suspense (Cornwell, 2012, pp. 64–66). The Gothic conjures images of

25 Ellen Moers described Ann Radcliffe’s literary focus as on the ‘travelling woman’ who combines “travel” with “rapture” (1976/1986, p. 128) and who “moves, acts, who copes with vicissitudes and adventure” (p. 126). At the time of writing *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Radcliffe had never been out of the UK, so her settings were imagined from paintings and accounts by men who had travelled to these destinations (p. 128).

26 While this thesis aims to give some background to the arrival of the Gothic in Australia and its development (with particular emphasis on character and the short story form), a complete survey of contemporary Gothic across different media is outside its scope. For a recent examination of contemporary Gothic across forms, regions and genre-fusions, Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Erin Mercer edited a special 'new directions in Gothic' edition of the Media and Culture Journal (17(4), 2014) which gives voice to diverse scholars and practitioners working in this space. For a recent pop-culture example of contemporary Gothic see the brilliant TV/streaming series *Sharp Objects* (2018).
monsters and hybrids including vampires, zombies, ghosts and doubles. Further, Botting states that: “gothic texts register revulsion, abhorrence, fear, disgust and terror” (2014, p. 2) and Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) is considered by most theorists as critically important to an understanding of the Gothic genre.

Freud developed the concept of das unheimliche or “the uncanny” – the familiar turned unfamiliar – as an “aesthetic concept or an affect” (Masschelein, 2016, p. 699). In 'The Uncanny', Freud (1919/2003, p. 197) describes the uncanny as “nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed.” Freud delivered a veritable catalogue of examples: death, dreams, repetition, eyes and sight and blindness, the mother and her body, madness and intoxication, severed limbs, magic, dreams, live burial, haunted houses, mirrors, shadows, doubles, the living doll or animated statue, and the deception of the senses (1919/2003). This sense of the “long familiar” becoming strange pervades the Gothic and Freudian-inspired theoretical, critical and creative interpretations of the genre. Freud's concept of the uncanny also helps distinguish the Gothic from the literary worlds of Fantasy or Science Fiction – where the rules are already altered from our understanding of how the “real” world works. The Gothic may draw from and be compared to, but is held to be different from, these other-worldly realms.

Hesitation and doubt are recognisable tropes in Gothic fiction, emboldened attributes of some uncanny works, yet they are firmly associated with a genre complementary to the Gothic: the Fantastic. Tzvetan Todorov's influential text The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to Literary Theory (1973, first published in

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27 While vampires, ghosts and doubles feature in the thesis discussion below and in the short stories, there is no specific mention of zombies in this project. For further discussion and recent examples see further: Baker (2014) on ‘the walking dead and gothic excess’ and Botting (2013) for a critical reading of zombie texts using a ‘globalgothic’ lens.

28 For an interesting discussion on Australian science fiction and how this genre explores the anthropocene see Jason Nahrung (2016).
French in 1970), draws from Freud’s uncanny, as well as many examples from
world literature to emphasise a moment pre-choice, a moment of doubt.
Todorov states: “The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we
choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre,
the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a
person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an inherently
supernatural event” (Todorov (1975), p. 25; in Sandner, 2004, p. 122; in Gelder,
2000, p. 15). The Fantastic is a genre that moves alongside other key
components or primary Gothic concepts. It emphasises the moment of doubt
rather than the fear-induced terror or outright horror that Gothic texts generate.

Gothic scholar Catherine Spooner highlights Chris Baldick’s definition of the
Gothic that combines “a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a
claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing
one another to produce a sickening descent into disintegration” (Spooner, 2006,
p. 17). Baldick’s definition, originally printed in his introduction to The Oxford
Book of Gothic Tales (1992, p. xiii), draws on the uncanny; there is something
“long familiar” (the inheritance) becoming unfamiliar (rising claustrophobia as
panic, rejection, overwhelm) in the substance of a Gothic text.

Yet even this elegant definition cannot encapsulate all the texts that are created
as Gothic or affiliated with Gothic literature. Some may still be infused with
Gothic meaning29 in terms of their creation or public reception, despite not
seemingly conforming to any of the above-suggested definitions. This is a genre

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29 I include texts claimed as “colonial realist” (by Baynton and Lawson) to reflect on in this PhD
as examples of how these colonial short stories experimented with depictions of grim reality to
explore terror, horror, doubt and violence – central themes of Gothic literature. This choice is
further reflected on in the chapter on Character below.
that likes to set boundaries in order to break them, and is often seen as “transgressive”, particularly in feminist readings.\textsuperscript{30}

I began to recognise that the Gothic literary genre deploys artistic methods to convey meaning via form and content, as well as intertextual relationships and a broader historical and cultural context. The Gothic can, perversely, communicate at an almost intangible, half-buried and half-revealed, "disintegrated" level. As Spooner (2006)\textsuperscript{31} highlights we see the corpse hand raised, grasping from the dirt and know there is a body buried below. The exact shape of this body and the state of decomposition are matters for our further imaginative engagement. The shock and simultaneous understanding at the moment of encounter with "it" – the Gothic almost-thing – are what produces a recognition of the Gothic genre at work. The Gothic activates a double reaction in its audience: simultaneous sensations of shock and recognition.

The setting is vital. Originally drawing from medieval architectural ruins and ancient haunted castles, a Gothic mirror is firmly hinged in the interactions between plot and setting, with characters both informing and transformed by particular settings.

Dale Townshend (2012, p. 43) identifies Ann Radcliffe as drawing inspiration from Shakespeare: “in her works, the landscape and setting serve as a form of “objective correlative” to passion and feeling”. The landscape then is more than mere backdrop or evocative tool of pathetic fallacy. The use of landscape and

\textsuperscript{30} Elaine Showalter (1990, p. 149) suggests that Romantic figures that populate Gothic texts such as the ‘veiled woman’ in fin de siècle stories – the veil representing the ‘concealment of the grotesque’ as well as ‘crimes’ or ‘past suffering’ – reflect “ambiguity and transparency of sexual difference, and the sense of guilt, decadence, transgression, and sexual anarchy”. Horner & Sloznik (2014, p. 59) link this insight by Showalter with “the feminine, the romantic, the transgressive and the revolutionary” found in the Gothic genre.

\textsuperscript{31} Spooner (2006, p. 17) suggests “In Gothic texts, the past returns with sickening force: the dead rise from the grave or lay their cold hands upon the shoulders of the living”.

place in the Gothic can be a tool for articulating and conveying meaning across an entire text. Setting is an important component of the Gothic development of “atmosphere”, as life-sustaining oxygen is for human beings or water to a fish.

Female Gothic

The Gothic genre has flourished, creatively and critically, since the first Gothic texts. Monica Cristina Soare (2013) argues that the Gothic genre extended an invitation to women writers, as well as women readers, through early publications such as The Lady's Magazine in the United Kingdom. These publications and the popularisation of the romance novel, created a kind of “connoisseurship” among women (p. 2) and some anxiety about the immoral influence of these texts; an anxiety that was satirised by Jane Austen in her Gothic parody Northanger Abbey (1817).

In The Literature of Terror, founding Gothic-studies scholar David Punter states: “It is no accident that many of the most important Gothic writers of the last two centuries – Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Dinesen, Carter – have been women” (1980/1996, p. 411). Alison Milbank echoes this sentiment when she suggests that:

It is no wonder the Gothic mode has attracted its female readers over the centuries, because the Gothic heroine, reading the world correctly, really does inherit the earth – as she glimpses something of the nature of reality itself. (2004, p. 163).

Certainly the literature features a large number of female protagonists and women readers, over generations, have formed strong communities of readership.

32 Such as Walpole's Otranto, Clara Reeve's The Old English Baron, (1777) and Sophia Lee's The Recess, or a tale of other times (1783).
The Gothic is, however, littered with the dead bodies of female protagonists. Many authors and readers are still seeking literature that includes these tropes, arguably for catharsis and further exploration of important themes. Women in these stories are often portrayed as growing, learning, escaping and fighting back. The Gothic is a genre that depicts violence against women in a variety of forms – from the subtle to the gratuitous, psychological and physical, including aggression between women. Many female writers have adopted and co-opted the Gothic self-consciously in their work, enjoying both popular and literary results for their efforts. Along with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and Ann Radcliffe’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), writers such as Daphne du Maurier, Sylvia Plath, Flannery O’Connor, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Isak Dinesen have all engaged with the form during its long tradition.

The Gothic genre can express both entrapment and confinement within the patriarchy and provides a way for women writers and readers to creatively explore taboo attitudes and content. Women writers are powerful and transgressive, as well as capable of being the very (re)inforcers of the conventions and laws that keep women trapped.

Australian Gothic

What happened when this genre, a double-edged sword, arrived in Australia with the First Fleet? A place, where as the title of Summers’ important work spells

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33 There is a current reconsideration about depictions of violence against women. See, for instance, a new prize – the Staunch Book Prize – for books that do not feature violence against women: http://www.staunchbookprize.com

34 *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, edited by Chris Baldick (1992), opens with a fragment written by Anna Laetitia Aiken. Many women are included in this collection including: Isabel Allende, Joyce Carol Oates, Angela Carter, Alejandra Pizarnik, Eudora Welty, Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), Ellen Glasgow, Edith Nesbit and Charlotte Perkins.
out, women were routinely cast along binary lines as either “damned whores” or “God’s police”.

The Gothic was lashed to the masts of the British ships that invaded Australia. Bloody massacres and the enslavement of Australia’s original owners occurred here. In some cases this led to the retributive killings of white settlers. To the tune of clanking convict chains and the wind howling across her vast deserts, from inside her prisons and asylums and below her omnipresent scorching sun, the Gothic Gorgoness put down ripe roots. She swallowed fecund dirt laced with minerals and stretched out, as difficult to stop as the spread of lantana. Our literary history is literally riddled with her arrival, adaptations and legacy.

The Australian adaptation of the Gothic genre is perhaps best articulated by author Marcus Clarke (1846–1881) who coined the term “Weird Melancholy” to describe the landscape, drawing from the poetic sentiment of father of the Gothic short story, Edgar Allan Poe. Clarke’s formative views and his adaptations of the genre in his own creative practice helped to establish the Australian Gothic genre.

The Australian landscape – in all its “weird melancholy” and frequent descriptions as a source of fear – is intimately connected to the female and the feminine. Schaffer has explored the connection between the maternal and the bush with the discourse of violent or aggressive acts committed against nature and women in her influential text Woman and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition (1988) and her earlier PhD thesis, The Place of Woman in the Australian Tradition: An Analysis of the Discourse (1984). In these works, Schaffer analyses “marginalised texts by women writers which defy

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35 This expression is most often connected to Marcus Clarke’s preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon’s Poems published in 1876, but was “recycled” from earlier contributions, such as a paper for Country Leisure, September 4, 1875 (Wilding, 1997; Wilding, 2011).
imperatives of sexual, political and economic dominance over the land” (1984), including Barbara Baynton’s short story collection *Bush Studies* (1902). Her analysis has helped to raise critical awareness of Baynton’s (“dissident”) text. By placing it alongside an analysis of Henry Lawson’s stories, Schaffer draws attention to the gender imbalance that infects the Australian canon.36

Baynton’s neglected place in the literary canon is a good reflection of the status of Australian Gothic literature. There is a reverence for the genre’s ability to depict the often brutal realities and awe-inspiring landscapes, alongside a deliberate wish to “feminise”, “maternalise” and sideline the Gothic genre. Reading Baynton’s stories led to my investigation of some archetypal characters in Australian Gothic fiction.

Kenneth Cook’s 1961 novel *Wake in Fright*, and Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) were my earliest introduction to the Australian Gothic. They explore the Australian outback and bush settings respectively. A pervasive sense of claustrophobia and paranoia secretes from Cook’s text. A supernatural foreboding permeates *Picnic*. They both investigate an Australian version of the sublime, a founding concept for Gothic literature.

In his treatise on the sublime, Edmund Burke writes: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (1757/2014, p. 81). This concept of awe and terror is often recognised most obviously in terms of

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36 “Canon” here is taken to mean a collection or group of key or essential works that are culturally significant to a place or time and/or represent high literary value or skill. This terminology remains problematic, as the designation of value, skill and significance can be a manifestation of power and control. See also Holden (2000) on the anthology in Australia as a strategy of canon formation.
landscape particularly in Australia where so much of our Gothic literature focuses on expanse, voids, the outback and the bush, as well as the lost and wandering souls said to roam there.

The sublime features in many classic and contemporary works of the Gothic, for example in texts such as Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Radcliffe notes in her discussion on the supernatural in poetry (1824/ 2004, p. 65) that “terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” thus emphasising terror as the highest source of the sublime. Donna Heiland (2004, p. 58) states that Radcliffe “redefines sublimity as an aesthetic that multiplies differences, and that therefore empowers rather than effaces women” and that Radcliffe “redefines” the Burkean sublime as an “essentially generative experience” (p.68). Radcliffe’s version of the sublime celebrates the imagination and the human capacity for imaginative, transformative experiences.

In the Australian tradition the sublime power of the landscape as a monolithic presence, its supposed menace and potential to vanish (annihilate) people, remains a more inviolable if still mysterious rule – most notably Peter Weir’s 1975 adaptation of Lindsay’s novel, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. The book and film of *Picnic* have more recently inspired a Foxtel Television series (2018). This latest series shows the pervasive influence of Lindsay’s text on the Australian imaginary and reveals internationally received notions about Australian national identity – as an expansive, dangerous, other-worldly type of place.

The Australian Gothic genre doesn’t only articulate a “white unease” in the outback and doesn’t end with colonial Australia. Aboriginal Australian writers and writers from diverse cultural backgrounds have used the genre – or Gothic tropes – deliberately, such as Chi Vu in her novella *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale*
(2012). Writers such as Patrick White and Kate Grenville have used the genre to explore toxic suburbia, poking fun at archetypes of the petit bourgeoisie and exploring the outcasts who inhabit Australia’s urban spaces and capital cities.

In their examination of Australian colonial character types, Gelder and Weaver (2017, p. 10) see “[g]enre [as] a key determinant here: it represents social persons as characters but the ‘mode of being’ is always specific to a particular genre’s imperatives”. I wanted to understand what the “mode of being” was for the female protagonist in Australian Gothic texts. To explore a “mode of being” in the Gothic genre, I started to analyse how previous Australian writers approached Gothic tropes such as domestic violence, trauma, incest, rape, incarceration and grief and how this had changed or reinforced certain aspects of the characterisation of women.

The Short Story

To narrow my field of enquiry, I decided to focus on the short-story form. In this practice, stories by Peter Carey, Chi Vu, Barbara Baynton and Mary Fortune are in dialogue with stories by Patrick White, Christina Stead, David Unaipon, Kate Grenville and Henry Lawson. The choice of texts reflects a progressive journey through the Australian Gothic and highlights well-known contributors to the development of the genre. Other stories are included because of a greater personal resonance or because of recent revisions, for example: ‘The Drover’s Wife’ by Henry Lawson was recently adapted into a gripping play by Leah Purcell, which heightened and exploited hidden and/or overt gothic tropes found in the existing text.

37 This long short story, or novella, in multiple parts, is discussed further in the Australian Gothic chapter below. For further on the Australian long short story read Sayer, M. (Ed.). 2009. The Australian Long Short Story.

38 Short stories by Patrick White and Kate Grenville are further discussed in the Female Gothic chapter below.
Short-story theorist Charles May has drawn an explicit link between Walpole’s Gothic text *The Castle of Otranto* with its blend of romance and realism and the emergence of the 19th century short story. May (2015) links Walpole’s impact to the emergence of Poe’s aesthetic of the form:

Walpole creates a puzzle with scattered pieces based on the latent taboo psychological plot, Poe creates a puzzle based on laying bare the naturalistic explanation for the seemingly supernatural events. Poe makes the unconscious obsessive unity that holds Walpole’s story together into a conscious basis for his aesthetic theory of the unity of the short story. (5 May, blog post)

This ‘unity’ of the short story can be achieved in a variety of ways. In advice to writers of the form, Aisla Cox (2005, p. 3) writes: “[t]he short story is a protean form, encompassing infinite variations and, just like the novel, shading into other genres. As writers, we need to recognize a special quality in short fiction without imposing rigid definitions”. Recognising a mutable quality in the short-story form allowed me to explore multiple female protagonists, settings and themes. I was able to experiment with infinite variations exploring forms that ‘shaded’ into other genres.

Not wanting to pin a too-rigid definition on the short-story form, but wanting to recognise its formal qualities, I arrived at a composite definition of the short-story form.\(^{19}\) I define the short story, for the purposes of this research, as a written narrative of between 500 and 20,000 words\(^ {40}\) that focuses on one or

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\(^{40}\) This is an aggregate number of words based on reviewing the requirements for multiple short-story competitions in Australia and overseas, although many short-story competitions appear to prefer short stories of between 2000 and 8000 words. See for instance the guidelines for submission on the *Southerly* literary journal website.
more of the following: a limited number of events; a moment in time; one or a few central characters; a “unified” effect; a singular overall sensation or tone and a complete reading experience in one sitting.

In my practice I treat the short story as differentiated from the novel. Ideally, as Poe states in his ‘Review of Twice-Told Tales’, a short story is something that you can read in one sitting, otherwise “it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality” (1842/1994, p. 61). The short story arrives, exists and leaves a reader in a moment. It is not something that you read over many nights and days.

Clare Hanson writes, “the short story has been from its inception a particularly appropriate vehicle for the expression of the ex-centric, alienated vision of women” (1989, p. 3). This mirrors Frank O’Connor’s view that “we can see in it an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups, whatever these may be at any given time – tramps, artists, lonely idealists, dreamers and spoiled priests” (1962/2011, p. 20). The short story then is a genre of examination and periphery, a form that embraces woman as “Other” and is primed to engage with the roles she plays in reinforcing or transforming her “ex-centric” place in society.

The short story is, Hanson (1989, p. 23) argues, often seen as “the little sister” of the novel. The novel is viewed as having “breadth”, “scope” and “universality” in comparison to the “fragmentary, subjective [and] partial” form of the short story (Hanson, 1989, p. 23). The novel is understood to generally include a combination of central and secondary characters, plots and subplots, and many events, tones and effects. It may also allow space for inconsistencies to occur and perhaps be resolved, and perhaps even careless writing that would likely be revealed or highlighted in the condensed short story form.
Other written or graphic forms might include none of these elements of character, plot and setting – such as a signature. There are forms, too, that use a concise or image-driven written form for other purposes – such as the poem. What is often emphasised in the short story form is brevity and craftsmanship (Washington Irving (1824) in Harrington, 2008, p. 4). There are special relationships, too, between the experience of time and closure - especially the epiphany - that separate the form from other written forms.

The short story has been compared to film (Hanson, 1989) due to its elliptical storytelling. It has also been linked with fragments and epistolary forms. Grove (1997, p. 2) argued that the fragment was the “quintessential unit that creates the poetics and politics of Gothic fiction”. The short story (and the short film), then, appeared to me to be an instructive vehicle for examining character and theme in the Australian Gothic genre.

**The original concept of the Twitch Gothic Short Stories**

The short-story form, so often associated with innovation, is turbocharged by the Gothic genre. It is a form made for testing out the many shades of the “ex-centric” female protagonist. This experimentation could, in turn, shift the binary bind of domestic goddess or evil temptress by producing a choir of new voices enlivened with the radical and. The stories offered me the opportunity to engage in hybrid-genre exchanges (for instance with a cybergothic\(^{41}\) sensibility) while they attempt to communicate subtle or shocking, and immediate and local tremors that arise out of my experiences in Australia in the 21st century.

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\(^{41}\)Bryan Alexander (2014, p. 143) states that “the cybergothic follows the well-worn Gothic tradition of displaying contemporary anxieties in fictionalised shapes or metaphorical forms”. He further cites anxieties about online spaces, uncanny bodies and the “human-seeming robot”, as well as the use of modern technologies (such as smartphones or the proliferation of CCTV) in cybergothic narratives (pp. 143–155).
I jokingly called the “Big Four” philosophers and thinkers who most influenced my understanding of the Gothic the “goth-philosofaclypse” for the impact Freud’s Uncanny, Kristeva’s Abject, Burke’s Sublime and Todorov’s Fantastic had on my practice. The short stories are grouped accordingly in four parts (Part 2). It was these theories that enabled me to recognise and classify my short stories as moments of “twitch” – a word I coined early in the PhD to describe this collection. For me, Twitch Gothic combines the concept of woman as witch (akin to Kristeva’s dissident woman) with the idea of betwixt – a Shakespearean throwback to the idea of in-between, liminal, the almost-but-not-quite ghostly halfway-there space. The word twitch also speaks to the physical response the Gothic can conjure: the jerk of revulsion or fear.

My short stories, while not classically Gothic, do encompass moments of fear, terror, horror, repression, doubling, hesitation, rejection and repulsion. These are the flavours that have most heavily infused my research enquiry and the short-story creative practice experimentation that it produced. The ‘Twitch Gothic’ stories aim to capture a genre that is as receptive to the time in which a work is created as it is to the concepts and histories that have influenced its perpetual becoming.
On process

This PhD has tracked alongside my varied life experiences. The Gothic is the running constant between the work experiences in which I have engaged between 2014 and 2018 and my travels and the places I have lived. It is partly what makes this project practice led: the critical and creative research was undertaken through the lens of my specific life experiences. The coincidences this collection manifests were not forced, manufactured or made up. What and how I write is directly influenced by my lived experiences, as much as it is by the literature and media – pop culture, film, radio, TV, books, mass market newspapers and websites and the journals, texts and academic articles – I consume as part of my research practice.

For example, I worked on a variety of projects across different creative and legal contexts. I was exposed to my own preconceived ideas about outback Australia and finally confronted some of the large gaps in my knowledge of Australia's history and culture. I watched as colleagues complained, unsuccessfully, about the treatment of youths in detention. I saw a top-down approach to justice that was at times unjust and heavy-handed. The outback was both Gothic and not at all Gothic. It is a unique and vibrant part of Australia and represents many different things all at once: a multiple entity and a single powerful symbol – as with the mighty Uluru itself. This experience impacted on several of the stories, either the initial content and/or later editing process.

42 Experience is a recognised feature of many fictional writers’ output. Australian writer Maria Takolander states: “My writing is informed by places I have inhabited, people I have encountered, stories I have been told, films I have watched, emotional states I have experienced, ideas that have captured my interest, situations I have witnessed, and events that have happened to me.” (2014, p. 41)

43 A Royal Commission into youth justice in the Northern Territory was instigated after journalist Caro Meldrum-Hannah led ABC’s explosive Four Corners investigation (‘Australia’s Shame’, 2016) into the operation of the Don Dale detention facility. The Royal Commission has since concluded. No arrests were made. It was recently reported by The Guardian Australia (Allam, 2018) that every single child in detention in the Northern Territory is Indigenous.
Later, at the end of 2015 and start of 2016, I worked in a community legal context at the intersection between mental health and the law. As I moved from the second year into the third year of my PhD, this experience exposed me to some unsettling truths about how people with mental illness are perceived by the wider community. People in this space came from all kinds of backgrounds and social and cultural groups – they were not the Gothic ‘madwomen in the attic’ that people might associate with insanity.

Some of this experience informs the short story ‘Ratatatat’ and the reason I chose a male protagonist for it. I wanted to challenge the stereotype of madness in Gothic stories, which is often associated with the home and the mother. At the time of writing ‘Ratatatat’, I was watching news reports about lone male attackers, usually white males, who committed violent actions in public spaces. They were often referred to by the media as “mad”. This conflated all mental illness with the actions of some violent individuals. I didn’t want to glorify those types of actions, instead I wanted to investigate how someone gets to a point where they could even look like such a dangerous threat, and the consequences of their actions for that individual. The protagonist in ‘Ratatatat’ is unwell and although he appears to be a lethal threat to strangers, he is not carrying a weapon, rather a plastic imitation. He is not treated in the sense of therapeutic intervention but instead his treatment highlights his vulnerability.

This fusion and reaction, understood as part of a creative writing practice-led method, of life experiences, reading, analysis, reflection, writing, editing and initial motivations or “inspirations” was my process. This “rhizomic/rhizomatic”44 approach underpinned my research.

44The Oxford English Dictionary (OED Online) defines a rhizome as: “A continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals.” I became influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome (A Thousand Plateaus, 1987/2016), “a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles.” This “tuber” like chain of connections reveals how the rhizomatic process is engaged in
Instinctively, I understood my practice to be "generative". I discovered that reading (Gothic fiction and Gothic critical work) often raised questions or compelled me to conduct an exploration by writing a short story.

The texts I reflect on in this thesis were not used as formal case studies but represent points of generation in my creative-practice process. They have been identified for further discussion because of specific content, context or narrative techniques with which I then experimented. These “reflection” texts are further contextualised by my wider reading of classic and contemporary 21st Century Gothic novels and stories from Australia and overseas. Many genre stories could have been included for analysis, and reference made to a plethora of examples of popular contemporary genre fiction, such as those published on genre story websites. In the end, the stories I selected do not seek to offer a prescriptive or total view of the range of fiction in this thriving area. They reflect significant points of generation in my creative practice, as I travelled along the history lines and into the contemporary practice of writing, responding to and/or adapting Australian Gothic themes.

Gothic classics, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories written in the 1830s and 1840s, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and R.L. Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) were read alongside modern and contemporary novels written by Australian and international authors such as Charlotte Wood’s *The Natural Way of Things* (2015) and *The Engagement* (2014) by Chloe Hooper and

*“agglomerating very diverse acts” and encompasses multiplicity and the “subterranean stems and flows” of language. (p. 6) I grew to think of my methodology as a rhizome-like flow – “there is no difference between what a book talks about and how it was made” (p. 2) – a text is an “assemblage”. This rang true for my process as a writer and my exploration of the Gothic genre – itself an assemblage of intertextual, cultural and historical meanings.*

short stories by many modern and contemporary writers including, Cate Kennedy, Ellen van Neerven, Maria Takolander, Angela Carter and Shirley Jackson. The short stories in Part 2 (Sections 1 to 4) reflect this journey and these lessons. They examine my research areas and are informed by the wide-ranging literature review. The 'Twitch Gothic' short stories are both the experiments of this practice and the result of these experiments.

I found it difficult to explain this process of experimentation and generative practice in a singular methodological concept – it felt like a many-stranded thing, a multi-headed beast, which didn’t fit with my expectations of the type of research I thought I "should” be conducting. My case studies were catalysts, my practice raised more questions than answers, and my focus was infected by – and frequently updated because of – my personal environment and experiences.

A formulaic or systematic approach to engaging with the Gothic in this creative practice-led work proved as elusive as providing a singular definition of the genre. Raducanu employs her self-described "diverse critical apparatus”, which reflects the multiplicity inherent in the Gothic, in her book *Speaking the Language of the Night: Aspects of the Gothic in Selected Contemporary Novels* (2014, p. 11):

> reading the Gothic is an issue of individual perspective, a matter of interpretation, an endeavour to select particular texts, acknowledge a variety of common characteristics, discuss their function in particular contexts and consider the inter-textual web of which they are part and parcel.

Drawing from Raducanu’s approach, I embraced a practice method of many-methods. This inspired me to not undervalue the interactions in my creative process between the personal and objective, the experiential and observational, the creative fieldwork and the critical theory.
Creative practice-based research works have also given me insight into how other creative writing practitioners are interpreting the Gothic. I found Henry Ashley-Brown’s use (after Wittgenstein) of the metaphor of "the spinning of a thread by the twisting of fibre about fibre" (2009, p. 83) instructive. The dialogue in Ashley-Brown’s work was inspiring at a time when I had lost energy for my own creative practice and research. It allowed me to imagine my nebulous, unfinished work-in-progress as one more fibre among a mass of others that connected with a vast tapestry of Gothic Australia.

My task became to develop a critical language that describes a multilayered methodology that has the capacity to morph and shift my creative practice with each new experiment, endeavour or personal encounter.

This is not a new challenge, although practice-based research is still a relatively emergent field of research (developing from the 1980s onwards in Australia). It can be described as "an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice" (Candy, 2006) and is practised in universities across Australia and overseas.

Creative (writing) practice-based research is “drawn from and inflected by the long-standing and accepted working methods and practices of disciplines in the arts and design” (Haseman, 2007, Text online). The research may not start with a clearly stated "problem" to solve, but Haseman (drawing from Gray, 1996/1998), argues that creative-based research does identify a problem (or problems) even though "it may well be that it is only in the final stages that a practice-led researcher will articulate and explicitly connect the problem with the trajectory their research has taken" (2007). Through practice-led problem identification and experimentation, creative practice research does produce new knowledge.
To represent knowledge within a research context this new knowledge must be able to be “shared” and “challenged” (Candy, 2006). It allows, within the practice, the means of research, inquiry, and the solution, results or outcome; the research is the “doing”, “making” (and “redoing”, “unmaking”) (Batty and Berry, 2015). I have used a creative practice-based research strategy in my work that offers new knowledge through the production of short stories, a short research film and this dissertation that documents my research and reflections on my creative practice.

The research “problem” I initially faced was being a writer and a woman in this country and time, a place that has a lot of firm opinions about what “being a woman” means and a lot of actions by those in powerful and privileged positions which do not align with this rhetoric. I began to match my self as a reader of the Gothic with my artist self, writing about the female as a subject in a place and context – home/nation – that was aggressively opposed to the idea of woman as a free, sexual, equal being. I was fragmented. I decided this was a strength. I was free to draw on seemingly disconnected threads – character, variants of the Gothic, the short story and parts of my experience and socio-cultural context – in order to create my contribution to the Australian Gothic short story.
2

Character

Led by the female lead

For the purposes of my research, I defined the female protagonist as a lead character who demonstrates or reflects female biological (sex) characteristics and/or feminine social traits (gender). While sex and gender are conflated in this definition, it enabled me to explore and experiment with the multiple potential available to characters that might reflect “femaleness” in contemporary Australian Gothic fiction. This approach was a way of acknowledging difference but also appreciating how the intersections of sex and gender provided spaces for exploration and expansion in my creative practice. This definition led to experiments such as ‘The Octagon’, where I tried to create characters with no defined sex and gender to see how that lack of definition potentially impacted on character and the short-story form.

Creating characters is an exercise that I had never before analysed overtly other than to randomly reflect on moments where I had been captivated by a specific feature (someone’s look or gesture, for example), or a response I imagined a person having in a given situation (in terms of their actions or behaviours) – this was an inherent part of my method as a writer/human-magpie.

Complicated female characters were becoming my focus and the particular challenge for this project, but how to go about trying to avoid the pitfalls of stereotype and caricature in creating them – particularly in the Gothic short-story form? I wondered how I could create layered characters while wrestling with a world that was telling me I’d never had it so good (as a white middleclass Australian woman). I have experienced great privilege, but have also had other
experiences where I was confronted with violence and traumatic life events such as those facing many women (like and unlike myself) right across the world.

Critically, for my practice, I became hesitant about using throwaway comments and dialogue that a friend or acquaintance who belonged to a cultural, racial, health or other background might offer up in conversation, or that I might overhear. For instance, an Aboriginal colleague made a joke one day and I tried to write a similar version of it in a story, as direct dialogue. Written by me it came out as derivative and inauthentic, potentially racist. It rang false.

Creating stories that feature fictional human beings required me to look into the differences and points of overlap that contemporary intersectional feminist theories point to. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw is a civil rights advocate and anti-discrimination law expert who wrote *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (1989). Crenshaw observed the way that racism and sexism were interpreted as applying to categories: African American men (racism) and white women (sexism), thus marginalising the experience of racism and sexism experienced by black women in an employment law context. This approach was further expanded to look at a variety of social identities and people who might exist at the overlap of multiple groups. I am cautious about misappropriating intersectional feminism here, yet this research has caused me to reflect on

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46 Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach state, "because people with multiple subordinate-group identities (e.g., ethnic minority woman) do not fit the prototypes of their respective identity groups (e.g., ethnic minorities, women), they will experience what we have termed "intersectional invisibility" (2008, p. 1). See further for other 'intersections' and a discussion of "movement intersectionality" (Roberts & Sujatha. 2013). I am apprehensive about appropriating intersectional feminism for my character creation approach as it has been criticised as being co-opted by white feminists who "build over the fundamentals" (Gordon, 2018) and have emptied this approach of its active collective potential – using the language but with little action that supports black women, which is not an intention of mine. see further: Tamela J Gordon (2018) on 'Why I’m giving up on intersectional feminism'.
moments of invisibility that occur throughout a character's day or even lifetime – where a person's identity is reinforced, subtly degraded or challenged by the environment she lives or works in: by the way her worth is reflected back to her.

Incorporating aspects of these theories into my process has not always resulted in successful short stories. I have, in further iterations or editing, changed the character completely if I couldn't get the voice right. I recognise this as part of the growth and change involved in a developing writing practice.
Character journeys

Chris Baldick states that character is "a person in a narrative or dramatic work" and further:

a kind of prose sketch briefly describing some recognisable type of person. As a minor literary genre, the character originates with the characters (late 3rd century BC) of the Greek writer Theophrastus; it was revived in the 17th century by Sir Thomas Overbury in his Characters (1614) and by La Bruyere in Las Caracteres (1688). (Baldick, 2008)

For the purposes of my investigations, I understood a female protagonist to be a lead or central female character in a story, and the one who drives the action – even if she is not the narrator. I wasn’t trying to explore “types” of people, although I would invariably draw from archetype, stereotype, literature and the people around me as much as any writer.

Like many students and writers, I spent time with Joseph Campbell’s A Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949). Like many women, perhaps, I had wondered whether it truly applied to women’s journeys. In the index, the entry for ‘woman’ gives the following references: (symbolism in hero’s journey), (as goddess), (as temptress), (Cosmic Woman), (as hero’s prize); see also mother (1949/1975, p. 349). The female character is referenced in relation to the role she performs or plays for the male hero of the story, as Uber-symbol of feminine traits, and is “playing the roles that are elsewhere assigned to males” in matriarchal cultures (1949/1975, p. 255, my emphasis added).
Maureen Murdock responded with *The Heroine’s Journey* (1990/2013), which detailed the steps of a female character’s adventure, including passing through a stage that “involves the healing of the wounding of the feminine that exists deep within her and the culture” (Murdock, personal website, 2016). These journey-cycles focus on the archetypes of hero and heroine as they pass through stages on their quests, and draw on religious and mythological sources. Many interpretations, including Campbell’s own original monomyth study, privilege a psychoanalytic approach that has not always been accessible for me, as it can seem to reinforce reductive and stereotypical roles for women (in life and in fiction).

Campbell and Murdock’s respective work emphasises something fundamental to storytelling: that there are differences between cultures and symbols of myth and as Campbell (1949/1975, p. 12) emphasises, similarities between myths and religions across cultures and eras of human history.

As with any system, generic formula or writing advice, the hero or heroine’s journeys don’t necessarily apply across different forms (the short story may pose different considerations to a movie script) or styles of writing (banal social realist propaganda would likely draw on different considerations than the creative demands of a nuanced “essayistic meditation”, or a work speaking from and into Aboriginal and Western literary traditions). No hero or heroine’s journey-cycle can possibly avoid generalisation. The importance of these monomyths, however, is that they get writers and researchers such as me to think critically about the relationship between narrative structure and character.47

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The journeys articulated by both Campbell and Murdock include phases of self-exploration by which we are often fascinated (overcoming challenges, receiving boons, discovering self-knowledge and the “integration” of the self). These aspects of human experience may be investigated within the short story, but a focus might be on a single stage, or aspect of a stage, rather than moving a character through a process of integration or victorious return. This is not to suggest that writing short story characters does not require adopting the “signposts” that Tom Bailey (2011, p. 53) details as “motive, conflict, climax, resolution and epiphany”. A change or shift in the character, or the story about that character, is arguably still necessary to captivate a reader’s interest. In a short story often the ending – or epiphany – can reveal or change our view of a character and their journey.

My characters didn’t always fit the character types of hero or heroine or develop via articulated journey stages. They are still informed by some of the same mythological and religious constructs that have informed story for many years, but they didn’t fit neatly in with the obvious arc of the hero/ine’s rites of passage. My characters were, maybe, those who didn’t fully rotate through the requisite cycle.

Threshold characters beckoned. I wanted to explore the full spectrum of experiences – including overlapping and invisible ones; the female characters who behave like heroes and those that don’t; the mundane, the lost, the beautiful, the brazen, the forgotten and the frightful. The protagonist lost in a permanent carnivalesque48 appeared a reason for exploration – not fear.

48 I use this term after Mikhail Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World (1968/1984) where he introduced concepts about the social collective (“carnival”) and the grotesque body (“grotesque realism”), investigating the relationship between literature and the social, and the ways and means by which the ideal and noble, spiritual and conceptual, are brought back (down) into the material plane where the functions of the body, body parts and body changes, challenge perceived hierarchies and invite renewal through their very extreme nature. The carnivalesque woman, is identified by Mary Russo (1995) as a representation of “the female grotesque”.
Multifaceted male characters have been the norm for a long time and it is rare to see a genuinely weak or "pathetic", pitiable man as a victim. Female characters are often punished in text or by the reader if they step outside the bounds of mother, wife, and daughter or refuse the opposite team-jersey of happy-to-please-you temptress. Complicated women confuse and upset the apple cart.

I began to reflect on the idea that characters are created in the interplay between writer and reader. Bailey (2011, p. 84) writes: “the reader is not a passive witness”. The creative fiction writer is tasked with creating (in fiction) “a person, and a person who is a living, thinking, feeling human being” (Engber, 2007, p. 16). Although, Kate Grenville (1990, p. 36) cautions that “[c]haracters are not people, but they are like people in being, finally, mysterious. Their delicate mechanisms can’t be summed up neatly in formulas or rules”. Writing characters was an exercise in tapestry, drawing from many different threads.

The writer may create characters, as per E.M. Forster’s advice in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927/1949), that are “rounded” and three-dimensional, or “flat” sketches or outlines of characters who perhaps advance the plot but offer no detailed insight into human character, emotional response to or engagement in the writer’s storyworld, nor the “real” world. The test of a round character, Forster opines, “is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way” (p. 75). The writer draws on methods of characterisation such as: appearance, actions, thoughts, dialogue, authorial interpretation and presenting a character through another character (Burroway & Stuckey-French, 2007, pp. 80–172). The reader is tasked with further breathing life and energy into the fictional being, but is only tempted to do so if they are enticed (or “surprised” and interested enough).
I started to look more closely at some of the lead women in texts that had captivated me as a reader at different times, but had stuck with me because of an essence or energy that I continued to connect with at different chapters of my life and in different ways: Lilian from *Lilian’s Story* (Kate Grenville, 1985) and more recently characters in *The Natural Way of Things* (Charlotte Wood, 2015).

Lilian describes herself as “a woman people could see was not like most women, they could see at a glance from the layers of shabby clothes I wore, and the way I looked them in the face, and sometimes I spoke to them in ways that took them by surprise, and made them fearful. Mad, I saw them think as they watched me looking into their faces, *there is something wrong with her.*” (Grenville, 1985/1997, p. 209). This characterisation fuses Lilian's point of view and further insight into how other people, in the story, act towards her appearance, speech and actions.

*The Natural Way of Things* (2015) by Wood brings together a collection of diverse women in a hellish landscape. They are imprisoned for their social transgressions. At first the women are unaware what it is that connects them and has relegated them to this brutal place. There are a chorus of characters, including women who resist, women who sacrifice themselves, and the woman who aids and abets in creating the gruesome situation. The characters are complex. Some characters are all the more chilling because of what Aristotle termed “consistent inconsistencies” (cited in Burroway & Stuckey-French, 2007, p. 148), their internal idiosyncrasies and foibles.

The unresolved ending of this novel leaves the two main protagonists, Verla and Yolanda, “free” (if only in a physical sense) but they are fundamentally changed and transformed by what they have endured. They are the result of an equation that sees their (transgressive, resistant or possibly even naive or foolish) behaviour as inherently wrong. The behaviour of the males involved in these
women’s stories (often criminal behaviour) is left largely unexamined. It is convenient both to shame the women (as a deterrent to other women who might act similarly) and also to remove them from the general population – lest their abject selves infect others or cause a reminder of the damage and violence personally and structurally perpetrated against women. By not including the men responsible for these acts of misogyny writ large in the story, Wood points out a form of societal collusion that allows the powerful to remain protected.

*The Natural Way of Things* is a good example of the fusion currently taking place in female characters in Gothic-inspired texts where the characters remain unresolved and complex. Verla and Yolanda are not “insipid heroines” or “inspired geniuses” or even empowered superheroines. Wood’s superb howl of rage is not an incidental act of feminism. This text prompts the reader to question how and why women are treated as second-class citizens, how cruelty against women – psychological, emotional and physical cruelty – is so efficiently normalised in our contemporary society.
Character as genre and character in genre

Murdock’s *Heroine’s Journey* prompted me to consider why we appear to privilege male heroic acts and characters over women’s stories. We have long had heroic protagonists in fiction and film who exemplify a stereotypical masculine view of the hero, and the figures at the centre of many historical events are often male.\(^{49}\) Recently there has been an overt push across media for more lead female characters, and recognition of the importance of female writers, directors and storytellers.

In the Roman and Greek cultures that underpin Western civilisation, men held the positions of authority and power, within society and the myths that informed culture, regardless of some significant female mythological and religious figures.\(^{50}\) Summers (1975/2016, p. 119) writes that:

> The distinctions of mind/body, good/evil, Logos/Eros have all at times been utilised in the spurious quest to give male supremacy a philosophical justification. By defining women as separate and as radically different (not just in biological capacity but, as theorists as diverse as Nietzsche and Jung have argued, in essence from man) the realities of power and exploitation and cultural apartheid have been obscured or even justified.

These binaries helped codify behaviours for women – what a young woman should aspire to (obedience, chastity and nurture) and what she should avoid (curiosity in any form). This presentation of women in culture also, helpfully –

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\(^{49}\) In Australia, Kate Grenville’s *Joan Makes History* (1988/2015) is an example of an attempt at redressing this imbalance.

\(^{50}\) This is a point that has been noted by many academics as well as researchers looking at aspects of the Gothic and other text types see for instance: ‘Female Identity: Rewritings of Greek and Biblical Myths by Contemporary Women Writers’ by Funda Basak Dorschel (PhD thesis, Middle East Technical University, 2011) and ’The gothic feminine: Towards the Byronic heroine’ by Suzanne Valentina Buffamanti (PhD Thesis, Purdue University, 2000).
along with the other sclerotic limbs of the patriarchy – privileged a viewpoint and a cultural framework that helped reduce Woman down to her biological functions and – depending on class – the domestic sphere. Gothic literature took this reduction to extremes. Sometimes these extreme positions were not transgressive but continued to keep her imprisoned in those few spaces that the patriarchy had deemed acceptable: the nunnery, the asylum and the home.

Regarding the relationship between character and plot, Aristotle argues, “character determines men’s qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions” (transl. in Butcher (Ed.), 1951, p. 343). This understanding catapults the hero (male character) onto his adventurous journey (plot) and into the unceasing spotlight. Importantly, this also describes the critical interrelationship between action, character and plot that could be argued to be even more acute or explosive in the compressed artistic medium of the short story.

James Jiang (2018) writes character was “an internally unstable term – with its satirical slant, character writing tended to point up the hidebound limitations of the social world that the term ‘character’ evoked.” Later, in the Victorian era, the focus came to be on an individual character central to the “omnibus novels” of that era; these texts still retained, according to Jiang, a didactic core.

This history of character and genre reveals that the philosophy and creative practice of working with a character has been sieved publicly through a predominantly male imagination. It is a consideration still present in all forms of storytelling, as when Natalie Portman presented the "all male" nominees for the Best Director Award at the 2018 Golden Globes. It is present when a major Australian free to air TV channel’s pilot week was programmed with shows that
each had male lead presenters.\textsuperscript{51} Within the media and community at large, there is (an arguably deserved) celebration of former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s savage wit, however parts of the media are merciless towards a passionate woman such as writer and activist Yassmin Abdel-Magied for even opening her mouth.\textsuperscript{52} Like history and political commentary, recognised or official storytelling in non-fiction and fiction has been a decidedly one-sided affair.

Both men and women police women in real life and in politics, in the media and associated propaganda, and also within fictional representations. These borders – the intersections of “real” life, media, political propaganda and fiction – are increasingly blurred, with social media playing an \textit{ad hoc} news publishing role and news outlets reprinting social media gossip as news, as well as fictional sources that use these tools and/or co-opt them. If a writer creates a disgraceful character who says disgraceful things that echo contemporary media, political players and the surrounding environment in general, many in the media or wider community – who perhaps don’t read the news or a story or social media differently – can simply assume these are the author’s views. Similarly, if a post goes up on social media targeting an individual and it garners enough ‘traction’ it is often considered news/fact without any further investigation of the narrative that is being presented.

This development in notions of character and how we are responding culturally – how we are reading fiction, gossip and fact – was something that led to my

\textsuperscript{51} See for instance Australian writer and activist Van Badham’s article (2018, July 24) on this decision for “pilot week” in The Guardian Australia.

\textsuperscript{52} Abdel-Magied is a writer, activist and mechanical engineer, not an elected official, who has been bullied by parts of the Australian media over some of her views. While I may disagree with some of Abdel-Magied’s views on fiction writing, her views contributed to, and in many ways kickstarted, a necessary debate about complex issues such as cultural appropriation in fiction. Dr Julia Baird (2017, July 14) discussed Abdel-Magied’s treatment as the “latest woman to be roasted on the spit fire of [Australian] public life” (also the title of her article) in the Sydney Morning Herald.
short story ‘Justify’ (2015). Due to our policing of one another, those with the most money or power are able to distract our attention from cruelty, bad policy and dangerous attacks on the polity. Their “character” may or may not be unimpeachable, but those that have weaponised character attacks in the 21st century understand that the politics of outrage are the politics of distraction. Outrage culture reduces the power of strong, nuanced and complex character representations in fiction. We need a healthy community capable of critical analysis and reflection on writing that is being produced, and narratives these fictions reinforce or challenge, but reactive outrage is not this.

Popular contemporary studies of character generally focus on theatre and film, perhaps most famously the how-to screenwriting guides, such as screenwriter Robert McKee’s *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (1997). McKee writes that the argument as to whether plot or character is more important is “specious” because “structure is character; character is structure” (1997, p. 100) and further, that “[t]he revelation of deep character in contrast or contradiction to characterization is fundamental in major characters. Minor roles may or may not need hidden dimensions, but principals must be written in depth – they cannot be at heart what they seem to be at face.” (1997, p. 103). This emphasis on depth and contrast could potentially provide significant challenges to the short-story writer, where less scope and space for detail means that the condensed form amplifies the tension between the creation of deep characters and the space for layers of characterisation. It is, perhaps, one of the greatest and most rewarding challenges when this tension is achieved.

Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* (1998/2007, p.4) draws from Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell’s work, and writes:
The repeating characters of world myth such as the young hero, the wise old man or woman, the shapeshifter, and the shadowy antagonist are the same as the figures who appear repeatedly in our dreams and fantasies. That's why myths and most stories constructed on the mythological model have the ring of psychological truth.

Vogler states that archetypes operate “not as rigid character roles but as functions performed temporarily by characters to achieve certain effects in a story” (p. 24) and, partly because of this, “The Hero’s Journey is infinitely flexible, capable of endless variation without sacrificing any of its magic, and it will outlive us all.” (p. 20). It is arguably a pattern that humans naturally look for in the stories they read and myths they exchange.

To attempt to look for new patterns in character stories seems a tall order when compared to the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the hero’s journey, and its enduring relevance, which Vogler highlights. Looking for craft techniques and insight into what makes short-story characters different led to researching the way that character relates to literary and dramatic forms.

In *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1942/1960, p. ix) Lajos Egri states:

Characters in every type of writing must first of all be human beings. The principle aim of all storytelling is to expose the inner workings of the human mind through conflict, whether it be told in a short story, novel, radio, movie or play.

Egri fleshes out an approach to creating ‘tridimensional characters’ that involves (a writer) contemplating the details of the physiology, sociology and psychology
of their characters,\textsuperscript{53} and creating a character that experiences growth and change (positive or negative). For Egri, character trumps action. He states:

Every great literary work grew from character even if the author planned the action first. As soon as his characters were created they took precedence, and the action had to be reshaped to suit them. (1942/1960, p. 88)

The length of a text, however, matters. Jack Hart states that a generally accepted principle is “that the novel explores character and the short story explores situation” as there’s less room to “probe the complexities of character” (2011, p. 164). The only major difference between short stories and novels, according to Burroway and Stuckey-French, is that a “short story can waste no words” (2007, p. 276). Perhaps because of this, short-story characters can lean heavily on archetypal or symbolic shorthand.

A short story writer is tasked with making their (necessarily) brief character descriptions and characterisation as sharp, specific and meaningful to the story as possible. As Egri (1942/1960, p. 88) suggests, “character is the most interesting phenomenon anywhere. Every character is a world of his own” and the form of the short story doesn’t disturb its central importance. In the short story without specific and acute detail (and tri-dimensional characters), a writer can’t properly hint at a fictional world.

A revised understanding of character and characterisation germane to the modernist short story has occurred according to scholar Paul March-Russell

\textsuperscript{53} According to Egri (1942/1960, p. 35 – 42) these three character dimensions include:

- Physiology: sex, age, height, weight, colour of hair, eyes & skin, posture, appearance, defects, heredity.
- Sociology: class, occupations, education, home life, religion, race/nationality, place in community, political affiliations, hobbies/entertainments. &
- Psychology: sex life, moral standards, ambition/personal motivations, frustrations, disappointments, temperament, attitude to life, complexes, extro/introversion, abilities, qualities.
(2009). This revision is due to developments in the use of epiphany and its “deflation”; the use of characters in states of flux; the ability for marginalised voices such as women writers to deploy the abject; and LGBTI writers to use the short-story form to develop characters that reflected their political or socially invisible status (March-Russell, 2009, pp. 120–133). Modernist short story narrative techniques were "prefigured in the Gothic where the fracturing of identity has been integral to the [Gothic] genre since its emergence in the mid eighteenth century" (March-Russell, 2009, pp. 126–127). These techniques include: silence (Krueger, 2014), slippage (Marsh-Russell, 2009) and fragmentation (Haggerty, 1989). March-Russell links character with identity and shows the short story as a form able to explore shades of identity with nuance. This takes on added dimensions in the age of "identity politics".

Poe championed atmosphere and unity of effect over plot and character in his short-story theories, but character in short stories has developed to be more than mere cipher. Gothic short stories are "affective" (Haggerty, 1989) and written to invite, or manipulate, reader responses and imaginative engagement with character and plot. Narrative techniques used in the Gothic short story, such as fragmentation, doubling, the use of character doppelgängers, dream sequences, the focus on the moment54 and frame stories, as well as the affective design, all place emphasis on the relationship between writer and reader and the text in the development of characters.55

This idea of the character double and a reader co-creating character are concepts that I worked with in the short story ‘A Game’. It became a meta-

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54 New research has just been published by scholar Emma Young that "introduces a new way of theorising feminism in the genre through the concept of ‘the moment’ " in her book Contemporary Feminism and the Women’s Short Story (2018) Edinburgh University Press. This text was not accessed before this PhD was submitted but Young’s text points to new directions and the continued interest and important scholarship occurring currently in this field.

55 See, for instance, G. E. Haggerty’s discussion in Gothic Fiction Gothic Form (1989). In his introduction ‘Gothic Fiction and Affective Form’, he writes "It goes without saying that these works are primarily structured so as to elicit particular responses in the reader" (p. 8).
narrative about character creation as the protagonist answers questions, almost
in the fashion of an online personality quiz, in order to construct her online
player alter ego. This alter ego begins to reflect back to the protagonist
uncomfortable aspects of a submerged self – her memory, experiences and
desires:

"Isn't it just how you remember it?" She asks in her deep voice.

She laughs smugly as she points out the part of the story that I once enacted
with Barbie dolls at age eight. The portion of the storyworld that has been
strained from my dreams as a teenager. The various impacts of *The Exorcist* and
*It* and *The Wizard of Oz*. My old games that I played with Charlie, my imaginary
friend. The hunter who looks a lot like someone I used to know lurking in the
background of the forest that morphs into a park near a creek.

"It's what you wanted. Isn't it? It's what you've always wanted."

In this relationship between the mirrored selves, the story asks the reader to
contemplate how character is created and structured to reflect back sometimes-
uncomfortable versions of the self. The physical and cultural environment and
the individuality of the writer and reader – as well as the layers inherent in the
depiction of character, enhanced through the narrative technique(s) of the short
story, influence this process.

H.P. Lovecraft56 highlights the slapdash character archetypes of the classic
Gothic including the “tyrannical and malevolent nobleman as villain”, “the

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56 H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937) is an American short-story writer, who used racist epithets and
imagery in some of his writing, some of this was perhaps a product of the time he was writing in,
or emerged in contemporary readings of his texts, and some of it is arguably his disturbing
personal views. I reject the racism in his writings, but recognise and draw on some of his
contributions to the Gothic and weird genres of literature and to the short story. See his
collection for instance: *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories* (2001) and further his
critical writings such as ‘Notes on Writing Weird Fiction’ (1933/2014).
valorous and immaculate hero” and the “saintly, long-persecuted, and generally insipid heroine who undergoes the major terrors and serves as a point of view and focus for the reader’s sympathies” (1927/2014, p. 1867, my emphasis added). The role of the female protagonist has long been a central feature of the Gothic genre, even for those who would have her role reduced to a rallying point for disaster.

Gothic characters can be viewed as archetypes or allied to a particular function. This ‘essentialising’ and generalising aspect of character archetypes across genres, including the Gothic, reflects the dichotomy the hero’s and heroine’s journey monomyths re/present. They may be useful as narrative tools, guides, and as prompts for reflection but they also have, of necessity, severe limitations – they cannot possibly encompass the myriad subjectivities of writers, readers and therefore characters and stories.

General Gothic character types provide a useful reflective and comparative tool but the Gothic critical field has, importantly, revised and made new investigations into individual characters, texts and writers. These texts and characters present challenges to dominant myths that sieve character through a masculine perspective – drawn from archetypes and language structures that perpetuate the centrality of the dominant narrative.

Character 1: ‘The Drover’s Wife’ and the exploration of archetypes

Drawing on Australia’s history of invasion and settlement, Summers (1975/2016, p. 427) noted:

As Australia evolved from a penal colony to respectable society, those influencing and determining the change wanted women to be wives, not whores. They wanted to alter the social conditions that had forced women to be whores, and to eradicate the evidence of the colony’s far from illustrious recent past.

This eradication had serious implications not only for women settlers but also for Aboriginal Australians. National identity in Australia was founded on a mythology made up of omission. Women made up a part of this silent ‘other’ story. The feminine ideal (God’s Police) that the influencers marched society towards was matched with a more brutal reality. Don Watson (2014, p. 105) notes that while some colonial-era women:

never have to fear for their safety or their virtue, some declare it ‘a peculiarity of this country ... that men ... are rather fond of beating their wives’, and some, like Mrs Sarah Davenport, found herself among bushmen who ‘was for pulling me from under the dray for their own brutal purpose’.

Women were expected to put up a stoic front in the face of isolation and physical hardships, while adopting the class system and social niceties of their British rulers.

Gelder and Weaver’s (2017) text on Australian colonial characters tracks the development of the “currency lass” and the Australian Girl which highlight the

58 The traits of a colonial Australian character type are described by Gelder and Weaver as “good health and beauty, a Sydney-based education, horse-riding skills, freely offered opinions, and
traits of humour, rude health and endurance that came to define an emerging
type of Australian femininity in the colonial era. An Australian female character
began to emerge in colonial short stories – she was tough as nails but, mostly,
civilised as a prayer book; strained through a "stereotype of Australian
womanhood" (Summers, 1975/2016, p. 133) by writers of both sexes.

The literary project began to focus at this time on “Australian” characters and
stories. The Bulletin (1880–2008) published many short stories that were
emblematic of this nationalistic fervour. A. G. Stephens, writer, critic and then
editor of The Bulletin advocated to “look at our country and its fauna and flora,
its trees and streams and mountains, through clear Australian eyes” (1901/1973,
p. 11). Stephens exhorted men to aspire to the “highest standards set in
literature, in order that we may set the standards higher and preach discontent anew” (p.11). Henry Lawson’s short stories were championed by The Bulletin and
its editors as exemplars59, beginning a phenomenon in Australian letters.
Lawson’s story, ‘The Drover’s Wife’, continues to be examined, updated, reflected
on and critiqued, such as in Ryan O’Neill’s recent publication 99 Reinterpretations

Although firmly claimed as colonial realism, ‘The Drover’s Wife’ (first published
by The Bulletin in 1892 and later published in While the Billy Boils in 1896, the
text referenced here is from 2017) also explores Gothic settings and tropes that
have been further enhanced in adaptations and iterations of the tale.

affinity with wild native species as well as with domesticated garden spaces and floral
abundance” (2017, p. 120).

59 Lawson, known as “the people’s poet” (Schaffer, 1988, p. 112), was taken to task for some of
his perceived failings of character and writing: Schaffer wrote that “In 1922 A. G. Stephens wrote
that Lawson ‘saw the bush through the distorting glass of his own moody mind’. But Stephens
blames what he sees as an idiosyncratic fault of the artist on Lawson’s feminine weakness”
(1988, p. 129). In a Sydney Morning Herald article titled ‘Gloomy yet gifted minstrel of the people’,
(14 December 2002, no author listed) A. G. Stephens is quoted as saying: “His six months’
journey to the Queensland border in 1892, the basis of all he has written of Australia’s outback,
was like the journey of a damned soul swaggering through purgatory, and Lawson persisted in
looking at Australia through the memories of these six months.”
Set in pioneer Australia, the story tells of the eponymous drover’s wife, left alone with her children in the bush for six months. Her husband is away droving and she must look after their children and fend for herself. One evening, as the sun sets and a thunderstorm rolls in, she and her children are menaced by the presence of a woodheap snake that could attack them from beneath their two-room house. She takes her children in to sleep in the attached kitchen, where it is safer as it has no floor through which a snake might strike.

The “four ragged, dried-up looking children” (2017, p. 3) sleep on the table as their mother sits through her protective vigil accompanied by her dog, Alligator. In this anxious pose – and almost as if floating on a tide of feverish nightmare – she takes the reader through the many struggles and grim realities that constitute her life. In quick succession and in the compressed, ever-direct form of the (Bulletin) short story, we learn of the death of a nephew, a great drought that ruined her husband, scant provisions, loneliness, dusted hopes, a careless husband, the lack of healthcare or assistance but for “Black Mary”, as well as the tragic death of a child. That’s just the start of her troubles.

All the while, the drover’s wife waits in vigil. She works and sometimes “lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks. She thinks of things in her own life, for there is little else to think about” (p. 8). A speaking and thinking agent is at the heart of this story, albeit an idealised version of a woman as wife, mother and resilient defender of her lot in life.

The reminiscing continues and extends to include a bushfire, flood, broken dam, a mad bullock that she skinned and “got seven and six-pence for the hide” (p. 9). Horrors attack from the skies above: she has had to fight crows and eagles. More menacing yet there was “a gallows-faced swagman” (p. 10) and others that have come along to nearly scare “the life out of her” (p. 10). Her pleasures are few
and small and pursuit of the ‘“womanly’ or sentimental side of nature” (p. 11) is out of reach. She collects the events that happen to her as stories to share and have a laugh about. Or a cry over. Storytelling builds the nation, ‘The Drover’s Wife’ tells us, as well as character.

The climactic ending of Lawson’s story sees her and her dog kill the snake in frenzy and throw it on the fire. Her plucky eldest son Tommy pipes up: “Mother, I won’t never go drovin’; blast me if I do!” (p. 13).

Frank Moorhouse\(^6\), a (short story) writer who has himself been linked with the Gothic tradition (Tuercotte, 1998), recently edited a compilation revolving around (the version cited here of) Lawson’s most famous tale. Moorhouse (2017) and his collaborators carefully examine the many facets of this famous story. This contemporary text is a fascinating example of a creative practice research methodology at work. Moorhouse’s critical explorations and beautifully written personal essays unfold in conversation alongside creative engagement by various authors responding to the original story.

Moorhouse includes an essay written by Louisa Lawson on the bush-woman. Louisa Lawson separates the bush-woman from her other colonial sisters (the city-woman and the country-woman) as “thin, wiry, flat-chested and sunburned” and, further, as “healthy and full of vigour, but it is a leathery, withered, sun-dried health” (Lawson, L (1889) cited in Moorhouse, 2017, p. 83). Exactly as she is portrayed in Henry Lawson’s famous story. The bush-woman, Louisa Lawson argues, works “harder than a man” and has a “fine, hard, patient, character; she is not emotional, nor very susceptive, but she has no conception of the spite and petty meanness of city women” (p. 84). The bush-woman “suffers silently” (p. 84), but it is her daughters who would carry the “best qualities” (p. 88) of the bush-­

\(^6\)Moorhouse is the author of short story collections that arguably explore Australian Gothic sensibilities such as Tales of Mystery and Romance (1980).
woman forward. It was to be Louisa Lawson’s son who enshrined this character deep within the Australian psyche.

There is real “friction”, as Moorhouse terms it, in the story that pits the white woman as both helped and aided by Aboriginal Australians, but which also depicts Aboriginal Australians as second-class citizens – treated in this tale with the callous, ignorant and offensive views that permeated settler culture, including of course, its literature.

Leah Purcell’s 2016 theatrical adaptation of this story, originally performed at the Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney\textsuperscript{61}, was groundbreaking. Purcell’s female protagonist – the drover’s wife – is a hard worker, and a mother, isolated in the bush. So far, so fitting. Her play, however, draws loosely from the original story and incorporates Aboriginal culture and autobiographical elements into a compelling and unrelenting experience that reflects contemporary conversations in feminism along gender, race and sex lines. In this case, during a specific moment in Australia’s history, which speaks powerfully to the present moment.

The play includes a rape scene, the death of an infant, and a protagonist with both Aboriginal and white heritage. Purcell’s text and performance amplifies the brutality inherent in the original story and heightens the cultural complexity as experienced by a specific woman, with her specific history and experiences. Purcell’s iteration raises many questions about the mythological shorthand in some of our colonial stories – such as Lawson’s – to challenge long-held conceptions of national identity.

\textsuperscript{61} I attended the Belvoir Theatre production of \textit{The Drover’s Wife} by Leah Purcell on the 15 October 2016. It brought to life a lot of the theory and critical voices that I had been reading and it was an exceptional adaptation and a completely new narrative experience that drew from the short story’s themes. The writer’s and director’s notes are also included in Morehouse’s compilation (2017).
In Lawson’s short story, rape is averted by the “determined-looking woman” (p. 10) and her dog in a manner that disturbingly suggests, perhaps, that this is somehow the expected duty of the housebound woman. There is a harrowing scene in Purcell’s play that leaves no doubt as to her female protagonist’s struggle and the nature of the act committed against her.

As Purcell’s character undergoes trauma and endures, the “flat” or bland character of bush-wife and mother plays backdrop to her burgeoning curiosity, her fury, and her passionate rejection of the place where she finds herself. She begins to take control of her narrative. She accessorises with a shotgun. The characterisation and subjectivity achieved in Purcell’s adaptation highlights the generalised character of bush-woman – that Lawson helped create – and its inherent limitations.

Lawson\(^2\), disaster prone in life and in-text, created an enduring classic. In his tale the Australian bush setting is taken to its limit, starting with a foreboding thunderstorm and then traversing an array of natural disasters and threatening human experiences. The tension ratchets up and up through the long night.

‘The Drover’s Wife’ is a portrait of fear set against a tenacious protagonist. Unlike a Radcliffean genius, the drover’s wife is emblematic of the coarse, salt-of-the-earth bush-woman – stoic and a courtesan of resilience, but no princess.

The enduring legacy of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ shows how that character trait of resilience has lived on, not only in this legend and its retellings, but also in our romanticism of the jillaroo and renegade female outback characters such as in *The Burial* (2014, first published in 2012) by Courtney Collins.

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Henry Lawson, or at the very least some of his editors and later acolytes\textsuperscript{63}, attempted to elevate the character in this story (and others) to a national ideal. This story reinforces some perverse notions (racism, limiting gender roles) \textit{and} celebrates aspects of ‘Aussie’ character – such as female resilience.

This story encouraged me to take a small, domestic (but suburban) space as a starting point for a resilient protagonist. In ‘Mumma Nursey’, Laura Hamer (thinks she) is beset by almost supernatural beings that are suffering from a curious derangement. There is an increasing sense of agoraphobia and claustrophobia that causes her to make bizarre decisions – albeit in self-defence. Laura doesn’t have much time for modern pursuits (the drover’s wife shares an inability to pursue supposedly “feminine” ways of life), but rather than mourn missing a yoga class, she takes matters into her own hands and fights back in the only ways she can. The protagonist of ‘Mumma Nursey’ isn’t idealised like the drover’s wife, nor is she the classic madwoman trapped in an attic; she is resilient, \textit{and} defends herself with gusto. Arguably, she draws as much, if not more, from some of Barbara Baynton’s female protagonists.

Mary is the chief protagonist of Barbara Baynton's short story 'Squeaker's Mate' from Baynton's collection *Bush Studies*, published in 1902. Kay Schaffer describes this story as "a superbly ironic critique of the Australian tradition and the impossible position of Woman as she has been constructed within it" (1988, p. 149). Mary is mate to Squeaker. She does all the work until her back is broken in an accident. Squeaker stows his old mate out in the back shed and leaves her to rot. Squeaker then installs a new, younger and pregnant mate who is terrified of the deteriorating, mostly silent, ex-partner out back. Mary enacts a kind of revenge on her old mate and his new partner when she and her dog attack them, and the terrified new mistress flees – but Mary suffers a harrowing beating from Squeaker during this confrontation.

Squeaker’s mate is described as the "best long haired mate that ever stepped in petticoats" (1902/2001, p. 54) by the other squatters. The women in the community, however, challenge Mary’s "right to womanly garments". As Leigh Dale (2011, p. 374) notes, the mate in the title would “usually be masculine” and Mary “is twice called barren”, an insult more recently hurled at our first female Prime Minister. Mary is respected but set apart in the minds of the men, and denied and excluded by their wives from what there is of a society.

Baynton uses subtle characterisation in the story – the details of Mary’s costume and props – that function like Chekhov’s gun to bring to life a nuanced portrait of this resilient and stoic but feeling, intelligent and fearless bush-woman.

Baynton has her character deliberately choosing to dress in conventional skirts but augments the standard style with the addition of her pipe, as well as an axe, that she carries. Mary wears this axe in her belt, wields it, cares for it almost tenderly, and it is this same axe that splits in two when her back is broken, and
which she rejects from that moment. Her costume is an extension of her character, as well as a shield against her detractors; it is a uniform, as well as a customised outfit, that denotes her independence from the herd.

It is unclear in the story whether the outfit, with its petticoats and skirts, contributed to Mary’s inability to escape the rotten tree that falls and breaks her back. This could be perceived as an oblique comment on the ambiguous burden of femininity in a society that privileges a specific masculine experience and view of the world.

Her partner Squeaker views the protagonist’s physical strength, once she is lying prostrate in her petticoats, as a grotesque bulk and a burden. Lying there, crippled, Squeaker tosses her a stick to light her pipe, and “The lighted stick, falling between her bare arm and the dress, slowly roasted the flesh and smouldered the clothes.” (p. 56). Up until the accident Mary’s womanliness has been covertly criticised by the society the character finds herself in – because of her lack of children and her “unfeminine” behaviours – but at the point where she is disabled and loses her masculinised working value, her dress goes up in flames. The fusion of masculine and feminine within her character and costume make them inextricably linked and balanced; the loss of one aspect destroys the other.

Turcotte (1998) argues that writers such as Baynton blend both realist techniques and romantic traditions. Baynton’s short stories are a grim portrayal of the realities faced by the pioneers and early settlers, particularly women. “Her work makes clear that the Gothic need not be escapist, excessive or frivolous” (Turcotte, 1998, p. 7). This aspect of grim brutality was reflected in “colonial realist” fiction (Krueger, 2014, p. 144) and in the evolving Australian Gothic tales that derived as much motivation from “weird melancholy” landscapes as from harsh experience.
Baynton's protagonists, such as Squeaker's mate Mary, presented challenges to the entrenched idea of binary female positions as well as to the larger mythology of pioneer women as silent if stoic supporters of the ("real") back-breaking workers – their husbands. Krueger (2014, p. 166) states that:

Barbara Baynton's stories expose the way in which rhetorical constructions of the Bush Girl and the Drover's Wife entrap women in a social milieu that their presence, despite emigration pamphlets and bush lore, cannot alter for the better. Even as they fail in their endeavors [sic], they do not cede easily into roles as objects and victims.

Baynton's use of silence is deployed as a character strength. Krueger (2014, p. 160) states: "Baynton's decision to gradually eliminate insight into the woman's thoughts is not solely a representation of victimization; it is also a resistance to it." She suggests, too, that Baynton was mislabelled as a colonial realist Australian writer (by for instance critics such as A.A. Phillips and the editors of The Bulletin), and that this denies the international reception she received at the time of writing and publishing her stories for her modernist tendencies. I would argue this relegation also dismisses her use and fine-tuning of developing Australian Gothic tropes. Baynton's own ability to realistically depict the harsh realities of the Australian bush (the masculine literary tradition in Australia) allowed a (limited) place for her as a "powerful writer" (Schaffer, 1984, p. 166) in a male-dominated tradition. More importantly, Baynton's (female) short story characters did not "cede easily" (Krueger, 2014, p. 166), they were resilient and claimed agency despite the limitations of society.

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64 Krueger (2014) deliberately analyses the work of Katherine Mansfield alongside Barbara Baynton in her article, which highlights the divergence in the reception of Mansfield (a widely known and celebrated short story writer, often connected to innovation and modernism of the form) and the quieter appreciation Baynton has received. For further on Mansfield and other modernist short fiction by women writers see Drewery (2011).
Practice reflection: writing 'Olivia & Harry'

I used inspiration from 'Squeaker’s Mate' to locate the psychological axe in my own work when writing 'Olivia and Harry'. Squeaker’s mate rejected parts of the archetypal female roles and functions – not only after her backbreaking tragedy, but also long before any bad luck or horrible happenstance.

In 'Olivia and Harry', I attempt to bring the views of the reader up against the acquiescing nature of the husband’s character. Harry sees himself as first mate to his brilliant wife. The story does not suggest that she is – or isn’t – brilliant and worthy of such support, even if her character as written is competitive and acquisitive. The reader gets insights into the female protagonist's mindset:

She didn’t engage Diana further on the subject because she knew the inference was that she was somehow defective, unable, unworthy of motherhood. Recently her dreams had stretched out night after night in a grotesque pantomime. Thousands of crying babies. None of them her own. Her ovaries plucked out and being forced to wear them as earrings to show people that she was unable to conceive.

The concept of maternal instinct is challenged in the story, as well as what a “good mother” is and does. Olivia is a working mother; while she is also active in her child’s life the primary care duties are conducted by her husband. These are inferences – that she is less of a mother for that – which an unforgiving society might make or co-opt for its own neo-liberal purposes.

Olivia is also very much, as she would see it, in charge of her life. She doesn’t recognise the impact of entrenched patriarchal forces that curb the choices in how she can live or be represented. Harry is derided because he is seen as “Olivia’s bitch”, which is particularly offensive when connected to the fact that
Harry says that he actively, not passively, chooses the role he takes on. This reinforces the double standard: men still have options, men own the radical and whereas for many women, thinly veiled either/ors are perceived as real choices when viewed through a gendered lens. Class, too, underscores another type of double standard at play for both men and women.

Olivia makes the comment that marriage is non-negotiable. It is necessary to a strong career woman to show that she is a mature and adult woman, “otherwise career women were often accused of being lesbian”. Olivia has swallowed poisonous perceptions of what society will think of her, which then make her separate and distinguish herself from an arguably further marginalised group of women. Baynton’s fiction helped me see how I might break down the rigid binaries that still exist around the sanctioned roles and acceptable functions of women in society. Her writing demonstrates how women are often an active part of creating the restrictive expectations of how other women should act.

For readers, the most repugnant thing might be not the situation or the semi-role reversal, or Olivia’s aggressively capitalist modern-woman—with-baby-as-accessory character, but that Olivia has broken an accepted moral code: the inference at the end is that Olivia’s baby daughter is not Harry’s and that Olivia has stepped outside her marriage to get what she wants. If marriage is the law of the father in perpetuity, then Olivia has decided to flout one of the most traditional codes of patriarchy. The psychological axe, so to speak, is about challenging moral outrage based on the female protagonist’s actions and behaviour, not her function and role as wife and mother, or even as (anti)feminist symbol. In this story, husband Harry is complicit.

This story hopes to reflect on acceptable social laws and the virtue signalling of the neoliberal paradigms that prop up the world these characters live in. These underlying structures frame the main characters’ competitive actions and self-
obsessed views. Olivia and Harry's (and potentially the reader's) acceptance of these structures, deserves more examination and perhaps, real outrage or action beyond (what can be achieved by) my creative practice research.
The Female Gothic

Context

The female Gothic is often associated with fears specific to the female body such as motherhood, birth and menstruation. Mulvey-Roberts (2009, p. 106) states “blood marks the milestones in the female rites of passage from menstruation and the loss of virginity to childbirth which is literally a body of knowledge experienced only by women”. The female Gothic developed in response to social, political and legal constraints on women and biological social versions of female-centric experience. Social, political and physical differences in female experience, and experiences of femaleness, are explored in female Gothic texts.

Ellen Moers defined the female Gothic as “the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” in her text Literary Women (1976/1986, p. 90). Moers’s study found that writers such as Radcliffe and Shelley had undermined entrenched character types: courageous – rather than Lovecraft’s “insipid” – heroines were re/discovered.

Moers identified two types of female Gothic – “the travelling heroism of Ann

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45 Mary Shelley, who wrote Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus (1818), was the daughter of proto-feminist and activist Mary Wollstonecraft who wrote A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), which argued for the education of women. Sue Chaplin (2016) analyses the relationship between the Gothic, love/marriage, “agency” and the law – Chaplin states that millenial texts continue to show “the subjectivity of women before the law is deeply conflicted” (2016, p. 147), perhaps necessitating authors to continue the exploitation of subversive/radical potential in the Gothic text. Ann Radcliffe was writing her Gothic novels in the political wake of the French Revolution and “The Terror”. Gothic writers generally (not only women writers working in the Gothic) were even seen as “the terrorist school” whose texts addressed febrile political notions about the “tug of war between older and newer belief systems” (Hogle, 2016, p. 575). Many of the older belief systems being challenged promoted highly conservative notions about the rights and roles of women in civil society.

46 For further excellent analysis of Moers’ work and its impact and relationship to the “hitching of the Gothic’s wagon to feminism’s star” (2009, p. 14) see Lauren Fitzgerald: Female Gothic and the institutionalisation of gothic studies.
Radcliffe's novels and the birth myth of *Frankenstein* (Wallace and Smith, 2009, p. 2). Moers reads Radcliffe as the "mistress of the pure Gothic form" and found that her stories depicted a "central figure [who] is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine" (1976/1986, p. 91). The female protagonist is central to these stories. Female Gothic texts arguably promote a female protagonist as more than a mere body or site of horror, or the character who experiences terror – "she" is created as a speaking agent with feelings, a soul and desires. How these aspects of character are articulated remains a question for contemporary writers and critics currently working with the female Gothic.

Moers highlights the originality of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which introduced "a new feminine mythology" that counters deeply entrenched cultural attitudes about "happy maternal reactions" (1976/1986, p. 93). Shelley blended "together the Romantic and Faustian motif of the male over-reacher (more typical of what has become known as the 'Male Gothic') and the horrors of maternity" (Wallace, 2016, p. 232). Descendants of this variant of female Gothic include the poetry of Sylvia Plath (*Ariel*, 1965, which includes works such as ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’) and Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847).

Shelley’s famous novel and Radcliffe’s works are read today, analysed in literature courses around the world, and maintain a privileged place in Gothic studies. Radcliffe’s use of the free indirect narration style "which gives access

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67 Bicentenary celebrations of the publication of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) were marked in popular culture and academic circles around the world in 2018 and at conferences such as: The Australian National University’s *Frankenstein: Two Hundred Years of Monsters*; Arts University Bournemouth’s *Frankenstein Unbound: An Interdisciplinary Conference Exploring Mary Shelley and Gothic Legacies* and The University of Bologna’s *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, 1818–2018: Circuits and Circulation* – as well as recent expert panels on both Radcliffe and Shelley at the International Gothic Association 2018 annual conference at Manchester Metropolitan University Gothic Studies Centre. These attest to the continued interest in and importance of these foundational texts for Gothic studies.
to the heroine’s thought processes and gives her perspective on events a
privileged status in the narration” (Milbank, 2004, p. 157) foregrounds
contemporary conversations about the need for more, and varied, female lead
roles in texts. The contribution by Shelley and Radcliffe extends beyond the
bounds of female Gothic – both these texts reflect on key philosophical
concepts such as the nature of the sublime and complex ontological questions;
*Frankenstein* famously pits the limitations of “man as all powerful creator”
against nature.

Moers (1976/1986) argued that Gothic fictions written by Radcliffe, Shelley,
Emily Bronte and Christina Rossetti, rewrite myths and introduce wholly new
types of monsters. These texts were a focal point of the second-wave feminist
literary project. Moers’s own critical text changed perceptions of the maternal
and its sometimes-grotesque nature, as well as notions about “girlhood”, and its
potential for savagery. This potential for savagery was something I explored in
the short story originally titled ‘Flower Girls’ (now ‘Blood’), inspired in part by the
Slenderman-related crime in the US.68

Literary Women has drawn some criticism for linking the gender of the writer
expressly to the mode of the text. Hudson (2018, p. 129) writes “while 'Female
Gothic' does describe early Gothic texts written predominately by women, this is
not to say that such texts are defined exclusively by gendered aspects”. Male
Gothic is generally accepted as related to horror and female Gothic as related to
terror. Andrew Smith (2013, p.129) writes:

> In Radcliffe, Terror is represented through gesture and implication and so
> stimulates the imagination and feelings. In contrast Horror has an explicitness

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68 See for instance Caitlin Dewey’s (2014, June 4) article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* about
Slenderman’s online urban legend status and the crimes that resulted from pre-teens that went
too far. Fiona McFarlane’s recent short story ‘Buttony’ (2016) also explores the power dynamics
and rituals of the school ground, if from a different age-group and POV.
that overwhelms, and negates, the imagination. Terror is linked to the Female Gothic, whilst the explicitness of Horror is linked to images of violence found in the Male Gothic of Matthew Lewis.

Although connected by Moers (1976/1986) to the female Gothic, Haggerty (1989) notes that Shelley read works by both Radcliffe and Lewis before she wrote *Frankenstein*. As a combination of both horror and terror, Shelley’s *Frankenstein* can be claimed by both female and male Gothic literary traditions. It doesn’t have a female protagonist and abounds in horror, yet it explores the birth myth and concepts of the maternal, which are central to the female Gothic.

Another second-wave feminist scholar or critic to re-evaluate female Gothic texts was Elaine Showalter, who analysed Charlotte Bronte’s “subversion of the Gothic” in the doubling and repression of Jane’s sexuality and passion (*Jane Eyre*, 1847); and Mary Braddon’s “murderous Angels in the House” as “innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life, and [which] led to fiction that was intense, compact, symbolic and profound” (1977/1982, p. 28). This concept of doubling is profoundly linked to the Gothic, the uncanny and the short story.

The double as a Gothic marker is used in character doubles/doppelgangers, thematically and in narrative techniques. Shelley used a frames-within-frames narrative in *Frankenstein*. With each new frame there is a doubling effect in the “narrative participant[s]”, the “reader becomes the ultimate alter ego on whom the burden of responsibility finally falls” (Haggerty, 1989, p. 43). The double as a marker of uncanny literature remains evident in contemporary Australian

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69 The double is not just a feature of female Gothic, but central to Gothic studies more generally. Andrew Smith (2013) states the double represents the “harbinger of death” or “liberator from censorship” and acts as a “mode of repression” in texts such as Le Fanu’s vampire story *Carmilla* and R. L. Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (p. 93).

70 Meaning is “geometrically” multiplied by the framing devices in *Frankenstein*, as Haggerty (1989, p. 42) points out on one occasion Mary Shelley is writing the character of Walton narrating Dr. Frankenstein telling the story of the creature watching the De Lacey family in dialogue with one another.
genre-hybrid fictions, such as Maria Takolander’s collection *The Double* (2013). In Takolander’s short stories, the use of intertextual allusions and reflections parallels the double as character and the act of reading.

The doubling between polarised characters and mirrored reflections is recognised by both Moers and Showalter. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar also examined the role of the author and their double-as-character within a text.

In Gilbert and Gubar’s influential work, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1980, first published in 1979), texts by the Bronte sisters and Mary Shelley, among other Victorian-era writers, were explored – as were the undercurrents of perceived authorial rage and frustration with the limitations inherent in the patriarchal order. Characters that rebelled against the traditional love-and-marriage plot trajectory were discovered lurking in texts by both Gothic and realist writers, including Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot. Wallace and Smith (2009) highlight that, like Moers’s *Literary Women* and despite relevant criticisms of this text, *The Madwoman in the Attic* helped to rescue some women writers from the shadow of a male-gendered canon of literature that presupposed women’s contributions as of lesser merit, and it reinvigorated critical attention on the female Gothic.

In their discovery of a “distinctively female literary tradition”, Gilbert and Gubar found repeated images of “enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles function as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors [...] along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia and claustrophobia” (1980, p. xi). These repeated motifs and images were also seen as textual

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72 Showalter discusses the character double in *Jane Eyre*, when two polar personalities are said to be “destroyed to make room for one unified integrated spirit/body consciousness”, in *A Literature of Their Own – British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977/1982, p. 113).
representations of an “anxiety of authorship” among women, which linked female writers across varied forms and genres.

Gilbert and Gubar (1980) suggested that by writing as women, these Victorian-era writers were innately conflicted, as this was an activity connected with the “assertiveness, aggressiveness – all characteristics of a male life of ‘significant action’ – [which] are ‘monstrous’ in women precisely because ‘unfeminine’ and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of ‘contemplative purity’” (p. 28). Gilbert and Gubar argued that women writers were a product of their influences – male writers such as Dante, Milton, Swift, Spenser, Shakespeare – who wrote women as virgin muses or cynical monsters, vile degenerates, silent sufferers of rape, or hysterical madwomen.

Within this female literary tradition, Gilbert and Gubar (1980, p. 51) traced a “disease”, “disaffection”, “disturbance” and “distrust” that “spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women”. These works were also “parodic”, “duplicitous” and “extraordinarily sophisticated” and aware of the operation of these restrictive binaries. Gilbert and Gubar (1980, p. 80) considered the strategies that female writers used in these texts to be “revisionary and revolutionary”. One of these techniques was to re-appropriate the monster:

from a female point of view the monster woman is simply a woman who seeks the power of self-articulation [...] she presents this figure for the first time from the inside out. Such a radical misreading of patriarchal poetics frees the woman artist to imply her criticism of the literary conventions she has inherited even as it allowed her to express her ambiguous relationship to a culture that has not only defined her gender but shaped her mind. (Gilbert and Gubar, 1980, p. 79)
This strategy frees women writers to use these tropes in subversive and ironic ways. Women writers are just as able to conjure gorgons, sirens, witches and half-serpents – to what purpose and for what ends may remain the critical difference. So, is it a betrayal to the sisterhood for a woman writer to grotesquely parody or satirise women characters? It is perhaps appropriate to put one of these character types into circulation when describing a female character who is hell-bent on murderous revenge, actively imprisoning or violating other women – or who is in/directly engaged in sending Ophelia to the madhouse for her own entertainment. It is a depiction of monstrous behaviour, rather than a critique on their sex or gender that leads to this type of portrayal.

Deploying monstrous female tropes can conversely be a strategy to transcend and transform the very connotations that are limiting about these tropes: if I portray a character as Medusa and she turns out to be startlingly complex, perhaps the mythology underpinning her monstrous nature is then challenged and revised.

Arguably, characters that express unconventional attitudes and are socially marginalised are just as often punished in female Gothic texts as “dun-coloured” (to borrow from Patrick White) social realist texts. Female rage, or even unpleasantness, is not as well understood or easily accepted in society or fictional narratives as male rage and revenge plots and adventurous narratives. Gina Wisker writes that in some “post-feminist Gothic” works such as Sarah Waters’ The Paying Guests (2014):

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73 This could be changing with the appearance of more lead female superheroes in major Hollywood blockbuster films and in young adult fiction series such as The Hunger Games (2008–2010), Divergent (2011–2014) and Twilight (2005–2008), there has been a focus on adventurous, taboo-breaking young female protagonists. There remain questions about how violence is depicted in these texts (Pinheiro, 2015), however they do seem to signal an important shift in the contemporary interest in the complex female protagonist.
there are continuing, haunting concerns, dark scenarios, where ostensibly
improved conditions have in fact worsened, where idealistic hopes for gender
and other equality are revealed as fantasies. (2018, p. 143)

The undercurrents of what Wisker (2018, p. 135) terms “the unfinished dark
business at the core of post-feminist Gothic” continue to explore many of the
concerns at the heart of the female Gothic.

Some of the second-wave feminist re-examinations and psychoanalytically
entrenched perspectives have been accused of being essentialist. Wallace and
Smith bundle up criticisms of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, as by “reducing the
diversity of women’s writing to this single plot [...] [Gilbert and Gubar] come
closer to offering a universalising interpretation of women’s writing” (2009, p. 2).
An emphasis on a “single plot” denies the imaginative capacity of authors to
create complex characters that speak for more than a limited range of
experiences; it reduces women writers to only creating characters that act as
mouthpieces for their repressed anger at the patriarchy.

Alison Milbank states that “there has been a definite turning away from straight-
forward feminist interpretations as taking too essentialist an approach to the
nature of gender, while psychoanalytic readings have given way to more
historically contextualised approaches” (2004, p. 156). Raging at the patriarchy
has never been the sole purpose of female Gothic texts. Elaine Showalter
surmises that women’s imaginations, and the products of these imaginations, are
impacted by “the operations of the marketplace” (1977/1982, p. 12). Brewster
(2014, p. 315) notes that “historicising accounts” of the female Gothic (such as
by E. J. Clery, 2000/2004) show that female authors were “preoccupied with
questions of imaginative autonomy, audiences and the economics of authorship

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74 For instance in 1995, critic Anne Williams developed a psychoanalytic explanation of the
origins of the male and female Gothic in terms of Greek mythology, the Oedipal journey at the
core of the male Gothic and the myth of Eros and Psyche.
rather than the exposure of the oppressive constraints of patriarchal family structures”. Some revisionist female Gothic interpretations have sometimes sidelined creative achievements and wider industry influence (Ann Radcliffe, for example, was a bestselling popular author of her time) by too closely focusing on female Gothic texts as only a rallying cry from and for entrapped women.

Many of the key female Gothic texts remain “classics” not only because of their female protagonists, narrative voices or what they say back to, or about, the patriarchy. They remain in print and revered because of their originality of concept (Frankenstein), their intensity and passion (Wuthering Heights), their consummate craft (Northanger Abbey) and all of these qualities – originality, intensity and craft – that I find living on in Sylvia Plath’s poetry (such as in Ariel, 1965) and in Toni Morrison’s many works including Beloved (1987).

The celebration and reverence for the insipid heroine, and a writing strategy that employed “accents of acquiescence” (Gilbert and Gubar, p. 74), opens the way for a charge against female Gothic as a female victim-centric discourse. Diane Hoeveler (1998) states that 18th and 19th century female Gothic texts concern “making middle class society safe for women who feared their bodies as much as men did” (Hoeveler, 1998, p. 246). This sentiment is echoed in contemporary discussions of thriller films and gothic-infused fiction as “White women’s porn” for women who don’t have anything “really” scary in their lives. A consideration

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75 Germaine Greer wrote an article for Radio Times (2018, May 1) on the disturbing implications of market forces and female victim-centric film and TV, as watched mostly by women. Responses to this article included Zoe Williams’ article ‘Are women really responsible for all the extreme sexual violence on screen?’ published in The Guardian (2018, May 2). Williams comments: “So the question of why women are interested in this dark subject matter does seem to be freighted with the unspoken expectation that we should prefer nice things.” Regarding “torture porn” in TV, see further Davison, C. (2017). Gothic American Film & TV. In J. Weinstock (Ed.), The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic, pp. 215–228. I first encountered the term “white women’s porn” when it was used casually in a discussion by writer and journalist Amal Awad at the Bellingen Readers and Writers Festival 2018 on a panel titled: ‘Speaking as a Woman: Stories from around the World’, which discussed the #metoo movement among contemporary narratives in fiction more generally.
of Australian domestic violence statistics and the ingrained misogyny on display in the media and politics might offer an alternative reason women are drawn to these texts.

Hoeveler (1998, p. 19) argued that women writers and readers constructed the patriarchal home as an experience akin to a prison or asylum, and that the female Gothic was a foregrounding to "victim feminism", "adopting a cosy, bourgeois, complicit and passive aggressive relationship to the patriarchy" (p. 245) where "pretended weakness was strength, and that the pose, the masquerade of innocent victim, would lead ultimately to possessing the master's goods and property" (p. 246). Hoeveler's text made me think of a type that asks: "Who needs a revolution when the patriarchy is working out so well for me?" A strident and outspoken female protagonist is, however, also manipulative and self-hating in Hoeveler's reading, adopting aggressive strategies to win the prize of property or status.

This position is echoed in coded and flagrant expression in Australian social and media commentary. The term "feminazi" and the depictions of women who complain about sexual assault or gender inequality as whingers who need to "toughen up" reveals a similarly implicit double bind at the heart of the reception of female Gothic narratives. Female protagonists in female Gothic thrillers can be viewed as victim-centric "poor me" snowflakes but also the polar extreme: as revenge fantasies enacted by and for "nasty" women. This dichotomy entrenches a limiting binary and denies both the craft of the writers working in genre fiction, and the intelligence of readers and audiences that enjoy it as entertainment, stimulus, catharsis and representation.

These narratives employ strategies of escape and resistance, and reveal and critique the causes of fear in patriarchal structures that create this dynamic in the first place. Breaking the pattern of seeing women as perpetual victims or
angry bitches – rather than as survivors and creative, engaged and yes, sometimes enraged, or even complicated individuals who can act in monstrous ways – is an ongoing project in both fiction and feminism.

In creating female characters I was influenced by my experience as a woman and as a witness to other people's experiences of femaleness. Russo (1995, p. 54) writes about how she remembers the implied judgement when someone talks about a woman “making a spectacle out of herself” as it “seemed a specifically feminine danger” that an aged, grotesque, dimpled, over-rouged or untidy woman could give an:

impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped as it were into the limelight out of turn–too young or too old, too early or too late–and yet anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she wasn't careful.

This concept of what we see as spectacle, a performance outside of the expected norms, can serve to reinforce limits and it can challenge strict concepts of gender. Judith Butler questioned gender as a construct and as a socially conditioned response and introduced the idea of gender as something that is “performative” in her influential text Gender Trouble (1990). Butler (1990/2007, p 190) writes that:

Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalises nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires, and because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness.
This has implications for how we read and receive female Gothic texts and understand "female" or feminine experience or femaleness. If gender is not reliant on any biologically predetermined behaviours, it is much more fluid and unstable than what is suggested in binary understandings of male/female duality and good/bad expressions of femininity. It also matters what "performances" are being represented. It is hard to actively "assume" your own fate if the world is perpetually reflecting back to you that you are disgusting or abnormal – or even invisible.

I was drawn to discover writing and theory that challenged a world that reduced women to a gendered binary. For instance, the Gothic vampire is a character well known for its transgressive qualities that can challenge binary concepts of gender, biology and sexuality (Wisker, 2016b; Mulvey-Roberts, 2016; Horner and Zlosnik, 2014). The vampire is a prototypical symbol of the Gothic and has been recognised as "a figure that has always crossed the divide between eastern and western cultures" (Stephanou, 2013, pp. 78–79). The 'gendered' Gothic vampiress more specifically has also undergone a zeitgeist transition, from the fin de siecle where this character represented "the nymphomaniac or oversexed wife who threatened her husband's life with her insatiable erotic demands" (Showalter, 1990, p. 180) to a more fluid representation. Femaleness does not need to be bound to specific readings of role, function, biology or sexuality.

I used some of these fluid characteristics for the mirror characters in 'Lotions' and 'A Game'. I explored a form of strength and creativity not always traditionally associated with woman, and a type of vampiric power that was blatant, sexual and unequivocal. This approach allowed a way of exploring aspects of sexuality without having to conform to masculine stereotypes about feminine/ female sex, passion and power. An original character could be drawn in by qualities that are transgressive in this double or mirror character, and their own sexuality, power and desires are then reflected.
The female Gothic canvassed taboo subjects for Victorian-era writers, and simultaneously facilitated women’s engagement with the marketplace. The middle-class obsession with property and ownership, and persistent victim-identification, has been challenged in successive waves of critical readings and creative investigations. This is unlikely to stop. This continued interest underscores the importance the area has as a forum for discussion; a place to explore and challenge new characters, stories and approaches to fictional representations of women. Horner and Zlosnik (2014, p. 56) note that:

> [t]he Gothic’s transgressive space provided the fictive theatre where such performativity could be brought into the spotlight. Thus fiction anticipated, as is so often the case, insights derived from intellectual argument and theoretical formulation.

Robert Miles’ (2009, p.47) insight that: “The Female Gothic always has something to say about the woman question”; the idea that the feminism is not “incidental” to the text, seems pertinent. This acknowledgement of feminism’s place in the female Gothic is important in light of the directions of 21st century female Gothic writing and feminist discourse (that might, as Wisker (2018) points out, challenge the very idea that we are in any way “post” feminism at all). A nuanced sociocultural perspective can alleviate myopic insistence on specific female experiences for all women and still account for individual difference, and identify points of collective understanding and signify powerful resistance.

Contemporary critical and creative work highlights new intersections in class, health, race, ability, sexuality and important revisions of the centrality of essentialised mythologies around ‘mother’. Gothic scholars such as Gina Wisker (2012, 2016a&b, 2018) continue to draw attention to voices that deliberately
deploy and often subvert Gothic tropes in female Gothic literature, such as Sarah Waters, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison. Wisker (2016a, p. 3) states that her recent exploration examines how these writers:

use and develop forms and expressions provided by the literary Gothic in order to argue their points about power, identity, relationships, culture and history. At the same time, they offer a combination of established and new perspectives, new versions of reality and sometimes potential new futures.

New fictional approaches to expressing femaleness, and using (misusing/abusing) female Gothic tropes such as incarceration, violence, madness and family relationships, continue to fracture the female Gothic, offering these “potential new futures”. Themes of domestic entrapment, service and servitude, violence against women, female beauty, female sexuality, death and escape from tyranny are incorporated into both classic Gothic texts (such as Ann Radcliffe’s novels) and contemporary Australian Gothic texts.

Female gothic analysis in Australian gothic studies has included postcolonial interpretations of key texts (Turcotte, 2008), an analysis of the “sexual Gothic” in Elizabeth Jolley’s The Well \textsuperscript{76} (Turcotte, 1995) and female gothic and its relationship to Australian gothic generally, the inherent “specifically female fears” in some Australian gothic works (Turcotte, 1998). Further, the work of Kay Schaffer (1988) and Elizabeth Webby (2001) on Baynton’s stories provides feminist interpretations of key Australian gothic texts.

\textit{The Engagement} (2014, first published in 2012) by Chloe Hooper\textsuperscript{77} is a psychosexual Gothic melodrama. It speaks particularly well to the ways in which

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\textsuperscript{76} Elizabeth Jolley’s earlier text Milk and Honey (1992) is also an example of an exploration of the ‘old European’ Gothic and its (knowing) adaptation in Australia.

\textsuperscript{77} Chloe Hooper’s \textit{A Child’s Book of True Crime} (2002) has also been linked with the Tasmanian Gothic and explores themes such as the missing woman and “the uncanny dialectic between
female sexuality and identity can be appropriated and maliciously handled in a misogynistic world where women’s bodies may still be viewed as chattels. Hooper’s lead character Liese plays with wearing performative masks of femininity that she herself creates, and those that society forces her to adopt. Liese is then confronted with the flipside of this at first playful, then increasingly dangerous, negotiation of her sexualised persona and her personal identity. Hooper never lets Liese’s subjectivity, despite a fraught performance of sexuality and identity, be corrupted by other perspectives within the text, even as this character descends into a “gaslighted” madness.

It is easier to cast women as outcasts than disturb a view that privileges the male right to all experience and the female to only what is allowed to her – tax-free sanitary products at a pinch, perhaps, but not equal pay or representation in politics, policy making and governance. The female Gothic can act as a potential site of experimentation, with its terrified white middle-class history and its more diverse contemporary capacity to speak to less essentialised concepts of femaleness across a spectrum of experiences.

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innocence and guilt” (Rudd, 2010, p. 122) that ripples through contemporary Australia’s connection with our history.

Gaslighting is a phenomenon coined after the (theatrical play and) movie Gaslight (1944) that describes persistent manipulation of another person psychologically so that they doubt their own sanity. Domestic violence legislation in Australia recognises the insidious impact of this kind of emotional and psychological torture that can occur between partners and/or family members. In the workplace it would likely be viewed as a severe form of bullying. In Liese’s situation the gaslighting behaviour leads to further criminal acts by the male antagonist including stalking, harassment, intimidation, impersonation, abduction and false imprisonment.
Character 3: ‘The Doctress’s Tale’ and the narration of the abused woman

To investigate how female Gothic themes are interpreted in Australian Gothic short stories and to critically examine how narrative techniques impact on the female protagonist, I examined 'The Triskelion' by Christina Stead.

Stead was an Australian writer whose talent was recognised by other writers including Angela Carter, Jonathon Franzen and Patrick White, and is known for her "dense, lyrical style and relentless analysis of character and of power structures" (Sage, 1999, p. 599), perhaps most famously her 1940 novel The Man Who Loved Children.79

Stead’s use of hybrid genres, uncanny effects, Gothic imagery, repetition; her fusion of naturalistic and supernatural styles; and her focus on the experiences of children (Lane, 2008, p. 151) and the abject female body is explored in 'The Triskelion'. Diana Brydon (1987, p. 76) notes that “[t]he taboo against incest, which Freud saw as the basis of civilisations, has always interested Stead” and Stead “explores its sexual dimensions” in this tale. It is included in The Salzburg Tales (1934/1989), a collection of interlinked “nested” short stories that brings to mind Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, the folklore story cycle the One Thousand and One Nights or Boccaccio’s Decameron. This is a tale told in three parts, and each of Stead’s linked tales is “so designed as to express the personalities of their narrators” (Geering, 1962, p. 210). Stead’s story collection uses multiple genres, including fantasy, realism, magical realism and the Gothic.

79 Deemed a critical failure when it was published, it has since been recognised as a “great” novel (Jarrell, 1965/2001; and Jonathan Franzen, 2010). This novel is a rendering of a very “unhappy family”, the Pollitts, who are deeply tormented by each other. Stead is able to convey the exquisite, sometimes painfully sharp renderings of the points of view of the Pollitt children and adults. R. G. Geering (1962) notes that Stead "has received attention, not always flattering, from her fellow Australians" – with a book banned nationally but also winning recognition from some critics.
‘The Triskelion’ is one of the darkest tales in the whole story cycle. It deals in the Gothic themes of blindness, incest, murder and child molestation.

Brydon analyses it as "a blood-curdling tale of sexual abuse in the family", that tends "to blame the victim and express titillation rather than horror at the story’s revelation of corruption" (1987, p. 46). Brydon (in a manner that echoes Gilbert and Gubar) traces this victim-blaming to Stead herself being a victim of an "inherited discourse"(p. 46). This view insists on an author attributing moral blame in-text or else being read as participating "in the blindness of her characters [at this point]" (p. 46). This is a view that binds a moralising aspect into storytelling that I as a writer have struggled with when creating unpalatable characters or situations. In the end I have reconciled this problem of a 'moral-finger-wave' as an optional, not a mandatory, function of the fiction writer. This story, I would argue, does apportion moral blame but it does so using the heightened conventions of the Gothic mode. Triplicities abound and create a fracturing of the Gothic female protagonist into a mosaic of her parts.

A storytelling event acts as the frame narrative for this nested set of stories. The collection starts with a scene-setting prologue that details the “old princely and archiepiscopal city” of Salzburg on the brink of the first day of the town’s August Festival, when plays and music abound throughout the town. A chapter follows that details information about the “personages”, including ‘The Doctress’, described as:

a Scottish woman from Inverness, jolly, fresh-complexioned and round, tall, with a small waist and wide bosom; with ginger hair and russet eyelids and eyes like cat’s eyes. […] The Doctor preferred scandalous stories and her ideas came out of a slip-shod imagination, with an evident intention of pleasing only herself…” (Stead, 1934/1989, pp. 16–17)
The different personages then spend the next seven days in and around Salzburg, taking turns to tell tales to one another. On the third day, “as the dusk gathered slowly over the wide landscape and began to soften the faces of her audience” (p. 211), the Doctress begins to recount the story of the triskelion.

The Doctress’s tale is divided into three parts, the first of which tells of a blind semi-orphaned teenager named Arnold, aged 19, a patient of the Doctress. Members of his family – including Sylvia (supposedly his aunt) and the boy’s grandmother – come to collect him from a care facility. Arnold is about to leave with Sylvia and the grandmother but hurries back to the Doctress one last time with a strange gold medal, imprinted with the three-legged triskelion symbol. He had found this treasure at a beach long ago and it “had been his pride” (p. 213) but he now gifts it to the Doctress, which sets the tale properly in motion.

In the second part of the tale, The Doctress tells those gathered a story that her friend, barrister Kate, had relayed to her about Kate’s family’s visit to the beach when Kate was a child. This story morphs into Kate’s voice even if relayed by the Doctress. Kate and her family stayed at a boarding house run by her mother’s cousin Rhoda. Kate tells her family that she has seen a “wheel made of three legs rolling fast as the wind” (p. 220) along the beach. This makes Rhoda nervous, as it is clearly a bad omen. Rhoda worries that something will happen to the Jenkins family, who are to arrive later that night. The family – comprised of a mother, father and a teenage daughter named Sylvia – soon arrive. Mr Jenkins’s presence at the boarding house is initially viewed without suspicion, however it becomes clear that his is not a benign presence; he is actually evil realised. Kate recalls Mr Jenkins approaching her on the beach:

Presently he took a shilling out of his pocket and offered it to me, without a word. I pushed it away, while my heart thumped hard. His two small eyes were
reddish and ichorous, as if they were two little wounds looking on an interior ulcer. (Stead, 1934/1989, p. 226)

Kate escapes him but later, another child is found to have been abused and murdered. Rhoda goes to wake the Jenkins family and finds the teenage daughter missing and the father in a pool of his own blood. Sylvia had killed him as he had "betrayed" her by abusing another child. Sylvia later gives birth – to a son by her father – in an asylum.

A member of the group, described as "a Balkan lawyer", has a "sequel" to this tale to tell all of the people listening to the Doctress's tale. This new narrator briefly tells the crowd that the widowed Mrs Jenkins ended up marrying Sylvia's own suitor, and Sylvia was later found dead from suicide. This third piece of the tale operates to complete the tale of Sylvia's life journey. The Doctress is too afraid to take off the charm now attached to her bracelet in case it starts spinning and causes more horror, and the story baton moves to the next teller in The Salzburg Tales.

William Lane writes that this tale "has three parts, three narrators, three time frames; its imagery is centred on the three-legged triskelion; and it focuses on an incestuous three-way relationship" (Lane, 2014, p. 45). The symbolism of three is echoed further in each part's content: Arnold's likely impending death in part one, the death of the father in part two and Sylvia's suicide in part three repeat the trauma of this sorry intergenerational tale of harm and abuse.

The triskelion wheel, rolling rampant, embodies the destructive forces at work in the story. Its symbolic entrapment on the face of the supernatural medal reveal evil's ability to morph and return in new guises. The supernatural overtones fragment the unholy trinity of the unspeakable, the unthinkable and the
unbelievable – the triplicate of effects caused by the horrific actions of Mr Jenkins.

While Sylvia and her mother are in each part of the story, Sylvia is the Gothic protagonist. Her story isn’t told in a linear fashion; it is fragmented. Her childhood trauma, incarceration, marriage, separation and suicide mark the moments of her tragic life. The three parts are retold in the voices of three different women – the doctress, barrister and lawyer. These changes are registered through a change in the storytelling style for each part. The ‘background and overview’ approach to the narrative of the Doctress, the supernatural aspects of the narration as the Doctress retells it from Kate’s voice and the return to a more naturalistic summation by the Balkan lawyer in the third section. Kate’s section uses evocative descriptions and heavy foreshadowing to serve as the Gothic heart of the tale.

The uncanny is evoked via the blind boy and in the disturbing power of Mr Jenkins’s ichorous and wound-like eyes and references to sight and failing sight (Lane, 2008). Where Arnold is actually blind, Sylvia was blinded by her father’s abuse and her own rage and eventual despair, while her mother is willingly blinkered.

The Gothic setting is developed from the start of the Doctress’s tale (told at dusk) in Salzburg, and later in the description of the beach holiday town as a part of nature – “I hate nature: it is full of cries and tears like a female madhouse,” says Kate’s mother. This description coincides with the night the young child is abused and drowned, and also foreshadows Sylvia’s later punishment of being sent to the asylum for killing her paedophile father.

Stead draws on the “weird melancholy” of the Australian landscape and has Kate describe:
The curlews cried by the lake, at dawn and dusk, and nothing was more appropriate to the dreary wastes of sand-rooted underbrush, the overgrown shrubbery full of tarantulas, the dreary wastes of the turbulent ocean, always peaked and foamy, and the bleak and ravaged headlands. O, that distant time, happy, morbid, cud-chewing dawn of adolescence! (1934/1989, p. 218)

The setting amplifies hidden dangers and the potent forces of evil in this Australian Gothic short story *par excellence*, with a Gothic female protagonist of seemingly classic archetype. In this story, however, femininity, female experience and female voices – literally as speaking agents – add complexity. These techniques challenge a reading of this tale as just one more about an abused-woman-dead.

A fragmented narrative covertly centres the protagonist in ‘The Triskelion’, although all of the extreme violence and horror she has endured sought to decentre her as a woman. The actions of the ‘real’ perpetrators of crime are pointed out: her despicable father and wilfully blind mother. Sylvia couldn’t escape the wrecking ball of fate but does endure in the imagination. Her portrayal suggests that fragmentation alone is not always a path of survival. This story highlights that other people (the reader/community) are sometimes needed in order to help piece together a fractured soul; isolation can leave a potential mosaic as just so many broken pieces.
Character 4: ‘The Night the Prowler’ and the author’s grip

I wanted to explore what happens when Bertha is not locked up in the attic but is instead free to roam (sublimely toxic) suburbia and how a woman who doesn’t “fit” the female character binary can inhabit Australian Gothic short fiction. So I turned to Patrick White’s celebrated portrayals of Australia’s suburbs and the characters that lurk there.

In many of his novels and short stories, White deploys a unique Gothic sensibility. Gerry Turcotte suggests White “blended a metaphysical with a scatological darkness, and a scathing language which attacked what he considered to be Australia’s ‘dun-coloured realism’” and further, White’s “world maps a psychologically Gothic terrain which is also extraordinarily physical. It is also relentlessly, though not necessarily lovingly, Australian” (1998, p. 7). White’s short stories (and plays) are, however, often overlooked in favour of his novels.

Carolyn Bliss (1986, p. 100) writes that Patrick White used the short story (and forms other than the novel) “to experiment” and quotes White on his effects being “cumulative”, so he saw his style as not wholly suited to the short story (p. xii) and his short fiction arguably never received the same critical reaction and applause as his novels. However, White’s use of “richly metaphorical language” (Clunies Ross, 1981, p. 167), his “idiosyncratic and confronting” style and “thematic and structural complexity” (Torre, 2009, p. 432-433), an ability to explore character interiority (Tsiolkas, 2018) and shifting points of view (Juchau, 2018) are features of both his long and short fiction.

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80 His novels, including Voss (1957), The Tree of Man (1955), The Vivisector (1970) and The Eye of The Storm (1973), were cited as the reason for his Nobel Prize for Literature. See further the Nobel Prize in Literature 1973 press release.
Features of White’s short stories have drawn critical praise. David Myers notes that the best of White’s stories may lean towards novella-length works (1978, p. 6) but that White’s stories “often surpass the novels in sheer intensity of effect” and they are “particularly rich in variation of mood and tone [...] and are knit together by a network of images and leitmotifs that are of imaginative originality and a great lyric force” (1978, p. 3). Arguably, White’s inimitable style is driven to a torrential force in the short stories in such a way that it appears to engage some readers more, while distressing or disturbing others who prefer the force of his style, his energy, the tonal shifts and dazzlingly sharp scalpel, to be given more room, more context, as in his long form works.

Myers identifies White’s short story characters in two groups: “the satirized bourgeoisie” and “a smaller group of seers” (1978, p. 181) and notes they are not presented “with economic detail” as is the custom in short fiction (1978, p. 112). Christos Tsiolkas has recently explored White’s writing and recognises that Patrick White is “accused of misogyny and misanthropy” but was also “the writer of some of the greatest female characters in our fiction” (2018, p. 89). His female short story characters arguably do fall into a binary of shallow/intense but they are especially memorable, offering extreme caricatures and/or rich interiority. His scalpel is too sharp to need to plagiarise or simplify a “real” person in two-dimensions. Even his caricatures ‘live’ on the page and could certainly never be accused of boring the reader.

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81 Tsiolkas writes of Elizabeth from *The Eye of the Storm* (1973) after she has experienced a sublime moment of “spiritual transcendence”:
“She remains selfish and cruel but that moment lasts a lifetime and that vision is there with her at the hour of her death. No, I am wrong – it is a mistake to conceive of Elizabeth as monstrous. There are no monsters in White. Though he borrows signs and meanings from Christianity, Orthodox and Protestant, and from Judaism, White’s spiritual vision is also Pagan. Vision can be granted to the kind and the unkind alike.” (Tsiolkas, 2018, p. 79)
Given my particular creative practice, I began to examine a notable female protagonist of one of White’s (long) short stories. In ‘The Night the Prowler’ (*The Cockatoos*, 1974/1983), the female protagonist Felicity Bannister is a young woman engaged to be married. We first meet (and eavesdrop on) Mrs Bannister, Felicity’s mother, mid-conversation on the phone with her friend. The reader eventually learns that: “Felicity found a MAN in her bed … Yes … Well I can hardly bring myself to say it. He-raped-my little-Felicity!” (White, 1974/1983, p. 111). The intruder had climbed through her window with a knife, and he had then apparently violated Felicity. Yet, this version of events is revealed as not being the full story. The incursion, White later suggests, is both feared and grotesquely embraced by Felicity, and afterwards she eschews entrapment in her impending marriage.

White allows his characters to move, flip and surprise themselves. While many of his female characters are sharply drawn, some of his female characters can be shrewish harridan-like caricatures. White writes into Felicity’s experience and point of view with less savagery than, for instance, the character of her mother. Mrs Bannister is described by White with a “pleated” forehead (p. 116) as she “blubbed” (p. 115) and “babbled” (p. 117) about “the ghastly Business” (p. 119). Mrs Bannister finds the “whole affair far more ghastly” due to her discovery of “the limits of her own powers: when she had always secretly believed that, with the exception of cancer, air disasters, and war, she had circumstances under control” (p. 110). White exploits Mrs Bannister’s limited point of view with wicked ease to reveal an asinine and self-obsessed suburban mother/wife sketch.

Bliss (1986, p. 100) suggests that:

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82 David Myers suggests this story is “not strictly a short story” in length or aims but is a story with a coda and a ‘multiplicity and profundity’ of aims (1978, p. 113).
[...] with rare exceptions ... the protagonists of [White's] short stories are not people for whom failure can act as a stimulus to further discovery of the self; rather they are those for whom failure, the failure to love and ultimately to live, is the fullest expression of self. They are thus irretrievably damned.

Felicity is arguably one of the rare exceptions, but she is a character who fails at living a life that society would deem acceptable for her. She remains trapped in its perverse borders; in this sense her failure is her "fullest expression of self" and also the catalyst for her exploration of self.

Andrew McCann reads 'The Night the Prowler' as a "sustained attack on suburbia" and:

a story where trauma of invasion and sexual violation is couched in terms of anxieties that indicate the norms of sexual and social conduct, oriented to heterosexual conjugality, to which Felicity is already beholden. (1998, p. 60)

Setting, society, femininity and sexuality are central to the characterisation of the protagonist in this story. Xavier Pons (2013, p. 2) notes that even if "the feminine was for him [White] another facet of his complicated soul" that "where female sexuality is concerned, and for all his insistence on the feminine in his self, White also wrote very much from the outside" (p. 3). The description of Felicity’s feelings about the attack on her could be interpreted as White not being able to comfortably inhabit Felicity (or Mrs Bannister’s) point of view. This is not to suggest that writers shouldn’t imagine the experiences of varied people, but rather that even in the hands of a 'master-writer' some characters will reflect elisions, reductions and stereotypes.

In the first half of the short story, Mrs Bannister describes Felicity (or “Tchitchy”, her childhood nickname) as something of a Daddy’s girl. On the morning after
the rape Felicity's physicality is initially described as a “firm heaviness”, with attention given to the shape of her breasts, the sight of which make her father feel “shy, almost virginal” (p. 118) and fascinate her mother (pp. 118–119). White characterises Felicity as “healthy rather than pretty”, but her mother’s pride in her comes from the perception of her daughter’s public acceptance of the societal norms for a young woman: “[e]ven more important, she had learnt to speak a language everybody understood ...” (p. 124) (Her mother later describes her as a “girl of delicate sensibility” (p. 125), confusing Felicity’s desire for privacy with an approved sensitivity or meekness of character.)

When Felicity breaks her engagement with her fiancé, he protests, “[s]urely the thing about marriage is that two people do take part in it?” Felicity replies, “[t]hey can – and sometimes they don’t. As in a rape” (p. 131.) White is using Felicity for a purpose. He juxtaposes her sharp view of marriage (as potential entrapment) with a very strange view of rape (Felicity appears to fantasise during the attempted rape before she smells and sees how “mingy” the intruder is and instead starts to beat him up). White describes Felicity’s initial reactions to the prowler:

She was ready to grapple with him in the glorious but exacting game in which she had never taken part [...] Then, according to the rules, she would dare him with her wordless mouth to plunge deeper. [...] she would urge him on [...] It was she who would ordain the death thrust. (p. 140, my ellipses)

Felicity’s response to the prowler is a painfully cynical view that privileges ancient male mythologies that ‘no means yes’ and that ‘she really was asking for it’. These are sentiments that emerge in conversations and some media responses to contemporaneous murders and rapes of women. White doesn’t so much as question this view as reinforce it with how he depicts Felicity’s response. Her point of view becomes farcical and cynical to the point where she
is reduced (like her mother earlier) to a flat caricature. Felicity later describes the attempted rape as a failure to be celebrated (p. 142). Her actions – freezing, disassociating, ruminating on the possible outcomes, punching, biting, usurping the knife and then finally demeaning and evicting the intruder – could, however, potentially be revised in a feminist reading.

Felicity’s father responds to the trauma in obtuse ways; he remarks to Felicity that a neighbour’s burgled house was “a kind of mausoleum asking for rape” (p. 145). Felicity becomes more “rounded” as a character as White explores her “release from the myths” from which she “had been enslaved” (p. 154). As a law-breaker, Felicity chooses vacant houses to enact her version of intrusion. She tries to “expend by acts of violence, the passive self others have created for her; though this behaviour too, she suspected, was ending in conformity” (p. 145).

These actions could be construed as a person with some form of post-traumatic stress disorder re-enacting a form of their trauma; repurposing it for their own needs in an uncanny repetition.

McCann writes that this story reveals “a deep dissatisfaction with the faith placed in signifiers as mediators of quotidian pleasure and identity” (1998, p. 63). Felicity breaks and enters into the carefully curated homes of the middle class, and White puts us inside her head as she destroys a photograph: “In the end she was forced to break the glass protecting the expertly shaven smile of all soft, fleshy, successful men. The smile she tore like pasteboard. All men were soft” (1974/1983 p. 138). Felicity begins to smash all the frames that previously kept her bound and under glass. “Anything big enough ought to be shattered!” (p. 131) she proclaims.

Felicity describes herself in abject terms, “as though she herself were responsible for infecting the innocent with moral disease” (p. 145), and carries the guilt born of experiencing violence. The reader struggles with Felicity to
grapple with each successive intimate, hilarious and mundane moment, “the dizzy course of perpetual becoming” (p. 154). Felicity's heavy-footed assault on the world is dynamic and often ridiculous (e.g. swinging a bicycle chain over her head as she chases others in the park at night).

Does White make us laugh at a near-rape victim's attempts to free herself from trauma, or her perverse transformation from it, or does he satirise a middle-class suburbanite and her experience of a sexually repressed and toxic society? Felicity's “superficial” mother says: “[n]obody, surely, will laugh at an outrage?” But she knew it wasn’t true, however shocked she tried to sound: given a different target, she and [her friend] Madge might have enjoyed a laugh on the phone […]” (p. 116). Felicity's character and this story remain controversial, provocative and rewarding reading. Felicity may only be halfway to realising a perspective of femaleness that is not mired in a subterranean cynicism, but she is an important character in the history of the Australian Gothic short story. The fusion of styles White deploys explores a complex situation and a character attempting to break free of a stifling binary logic.
The abject

Woman as *Other* is not new philosophical or intellectual terrain. Simone de Beauvoir’s work explored a philosophy that many women innately understood:

> One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as *Other.*” (1949/1997, p. 295)

Freud hypothesised a woman’s clitoris as an almost-but-not-quite-there penis, and Lacan located the entire Symbolic Order as a masculine merry-go-round of the phallus.\(^{83}\) Even if this phallus is a phantom phallus, Lacan illustrated that it was the ultimate signifier and prime cause of desire.\(^{84}\) Women are symbolically understood as lack, the negative; denied by language and systems of authority within the patriarchy – law, civilisation, power, and expression. This is reflected in a binary interpretation of woman that is systematically depicted throughout Western philosophy and literature as noted above by Summers (1975/2016). Woman is the Other: the shadow, the opposing, reflected image to man that is the "self" constructed at the heart of patriarchal societies. And because of this, "woman" is dangerous.

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\(^{83}\) See for instance Freud’s *Some Psychical Consequences of The Anatomical Distinctions Between The Sexes* (1925/1991) and *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud* (1938) and Lacan’s 'On The Signification of The Phallus' (in the *Ecrits*, 2001 edition) – there are many who would (correctly) suggest that Freud and Lacan didn’t themselves invent phallocentrism, just give it language. Feminists such as Irigaray have in fact used these theories as a foundation from which to elaborate strategies of resistance, rupture and challenge to the patriarchy, as in her *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985). Kristeva notes that fear of castration and penis envy are "hypotheses, a priori suppositions intrinsic to the theory itself, in the sense that these are not the ideological fantasies of their inventor [...]” (Kristeva, J & T. Moi (ed), 1986, p. 197).

\(^{84}\) Lacan (2001, p. 321) writes: "It is for that which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love.”.
Otherness is inscribed in the laws and rules that aim to contain women – laws that enforce reproductive control; rules that entrench gender inequality by excluding women from positions of power in religion, politics, law and education; or systems of distribution of capital that deliver unequal pay in the same positions or value “women’s work” less than men’s.

Notwithstanding the obsessions many male philosophers and thinkers have in needing to inflate phallic value (a biologically overheated subprime market), theorists and writers have also used the concept of Other/otherness to advocate for ways to resist and challenge a repressive status quo and to redefine key concepts of the Symbolic Order related to womanhood and the maternal.

Julia Kristeva articulates the abject in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982, first published in French in 1980). This work describes the abject as “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness”; it is “not nothing” but a “something” that Kristeva does “not recognize as a thing” because recognition would annihilate the self. Kristeva’s abject is the complex reaction we experience when we encounter putrid food, a corpse, the skin on milk, a bloody or pus-filled wound (1982, p. 3). Our responses are to reject, retreat from or expel these things that we “permanently thrust aside in order to live” (p. 3). What does not “signify death” but “shows me” in direct, violent confrontation creates the abject. What can erase borders, but in fact helps us negotiate the fragile borders of “I”, is abject.

Elisabeth Bronfen (2016, p. 1) writes that the abject “speaks to a threshold situation” and “abjection entails an exclusion of that which blurs the boundary between the self and other, so that by virtue of this separation, subject positions can again be clearly drawn”. According to Kristeva (1982, p. 4), what would infect life or disturb identity causes abjection. As in the Gothic, uncanniness and sublimation are combined in an overwhelmed/ing response.
I read Kristeva as further arguing that "woman" is already a multiple figure (occupier of semiotic and Symbolic positions and a spectrum of the in-between) and creature of the *chora*, a state that pre-exists the stages that Lacan termed the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order and the initiation into language, culture, subjectivity and identity. Kristeva develops a concept of chora where an infant is in a state of "oneness" with the mother, with no borders (McAfee, 2004, p. 46). Before the child can begin to develop a sense of their separate identity, the infant has to begin this process by rejecting "what seems to be a part of oneself" (p. 46). McAfee writes, "[And] the first 'thing' to be abjected is the mother's body, the child's own origin" (p. 48). Abjection helps prime the child to develop an awareness of boundaries and separation, however, what is expelled as abject is not extinguished but lingers.

Kristeva (1982, p. 4) writes that "it is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order". However, in a world where women can be reduced to the function of maternal body, the Symbolic Order can further, mistakenly, classify the female body and its functions as abject and therefore link it to all that is unclean, sinful, dirty and monstrous.

Woman can be seen as a threatening concept to a subject afraid of returning to this state of pre-separated identity where, Kristeva writes, the child risks being "swamped" and the decimation "of the totality of his [their] living being" (p. 64). The monstrous maternal body is a recognisable trope in Gothic texts, e.g. *Aliens* (1986) (Bronfen, 2016, p.3) and this struggle with separation is reflected in the absent mother of the female Gothic and a protagonist’s efforts to flee and escape enclosure in the family home, such as in Radcliffe's oeuvre.

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In a contemporary context, I understand the abject as puncturing the Symbolic when applied to the actions and language of the man accused of sexual harassment who then further debases his accuser by referring to her abjectly as dirty or ugly or smelly; the legal system that then drags her, as if an abject body in a chaff-bag, through the mud. The abject is found in the actions, language and offers of the male predator who creates a body-part system of barter for his captive prey's escape. It permeates, like a bad smell, the comments of the politician who talks about a female Prime Minister as “deliberately barren” and media commentary about her “empty fruit bowl”. The woman-as-abject is reflected by the gangbangers wearing expensive sunglasses and posing before flashing cameras like rock stars when an inquest or case is mishandled and they go unpunished because of a legal technicality. A woman’s abjection is inflamed by an urticarial rash of camera flashes and exploitative tabloid op eds.

Kristeva argues that “[t]he in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a saviour ... is abject” (1982, p. 4). This necessary process that ensures we expel what we must for the good of the community can also be perversely used to target women.

An abject woman can be described or viewed as a chaff-bagged body, a smelly or degraded body to be used or calls made to “lock her up” and, importantly, she is all of the things that these abject-ifications were deployed to try and cover up. Woman is a creative performative agent, with or without a womb, a sexed being, a being of thought and action and feeling; woman is a speaking person; she exists too in the bloody power of menstruation – as “issuing from within identity” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71) – and as the person with the ability to bear and nurse children. Kristeva writes that “fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power” (p. 77), which I read as both “maternal” and “creative”. These are aspects of the abject – the maternal body, the woman,
and a spectrum of creative femaleness and the feminine – that terrify and challenge those who prefer the binary that sets woman in shadow opposition to man, as slut or virgin/mother.

Woman is a focal point precisely because she is "Other". She is the insipid heroine of tired male fantasies, or turned into a predatory punchline and a point of invisibility – the person attached to or conscious of the void, breasts, body, and the place of a return to death. Woman is a point of flux and transition - capable of inhabiting and causing fluctuations, resistances and ruptures along Kristeva's semiotic–Symbolic spectrum. "Woman" embodies an innate multiplicity – the body within a body, and difference: each woman is not identical; some women have different biology and different experiences of femaleness. In terms of the Australian Gothic, each female/feminine agent – author who writes, character who acts or reader who imagines/responds – contributes their own unique part to a mighty story mosaic that stretches throughout Australian culture.

Kristeva explicitly links the abject with the work of literature, its confrontation with the “unnameable” and its ability to probe fear. She explores the works of writers who are abject, including Dostoevsky and Proust, and analyses the Bible and the abject and anti-Semitism in Celine.

Kristeva writes that literature "represents the ultimate coding of our crises, of our most intimate and serious apocalypses. Hence its nocturnal power" (1982, p. 208) and it "may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word" (p. 208). As she demonstrates in her analysis, this “nocturnal power” can be a tool for discovery and the necessary expulsion of destructive forces. Kristeva’s work emphasises that certain borders are the very things that keep us alive and their resurgence in literature can work as a
cathartic exploration of what we must reject (incest, rape, murder, genocide) to survive. Other threshold characters and experiences, however, warrant further exploration. Some boundaries (those that entrap and limit women for instance) deserve transgression.

I was inspired by Kristeva to imagine a “new order” of language that is not a permanent return to the pre/semiotic (woman as mother only), nor a confrontation and adaptation of the existing Symbolic Order (reduced to woman as binary of slut or virgin/mother). A new language would have to avoid the neurotic hair-splitting of impotent sophistry, and reject a contemporary puritanical militancy that curtails basic freedoms such as freedom of speech, and remove the debased tokenism inherent in a political class that limits the scope of socially “acceptable” behaviour for women while simultaneously parading a series of ignorant, unintelligent or even criminal men before its appalled polity.

The notion of abjection recognises necessary civil limitations in exploring character and in social exchanges. It simultaneously reveals how confined “woman” is because of a “mistranslation” of the abject mother. I wanted to engage in a chora/ic, semiotic and symbolic conversation that built on Kristeva’s platform by creating multifaceted characters. The goal or desire, however, doesn’t always match the fictional “reality”. I began to search for characters that embodied multiplicity and discovered Kate Grenville’s short stories.
Character 5: ‘Refractions’ and an abject point of view

I searched for stories that explored the experience of cyclical, abject and fragmented femaleness. Kate Grenville’s story ‘Refractions’ (Bearded Ladies, 1984) depicted a female protagonist as symbolic occupier of a landscape of trauma, and a powerful liminal multiplicity. ‘Refractions’ provided an interesting counterpoint to both Stead’s broken protagonist in ‘The Triskelion’ and White’s provocative story ‘The Night the Prowler’.

Grenville won the 1984 Vogel literary award for Lilian’s Story (1985) but in Europe, Australia and the US had previously written and published short stories later collected in Bearded Ladies.

Gerry Turcotte notes that Grenville’s “concerns are with notions of cultural and personal silencing – and with terror tactics – carried out by dominant hegemonies” and that Grenville “uses the Gothic mode to examine these issues” (2009, p. 210). Grenville describes the inspiration to write the stories in Bearded Ladies as occurring after reading feminist theorists, including books by Australian feminists Germaine Greer and Anne Summers (Tulip & Turcotte, 1988). Grenville then went looking for fiction and: “there were parts of my own experience as a woman in 1976 that I couldn’t find reflected in fiction anywhere”. In this interview (Tulip & Turcotte, 1988) Grenville remarks that Bearded Ladies was chosen as the title as she wanted to ‘talk about two things’:

- women who wanted to have some of the qualities of men, in other words
- women who wanted to not just be the shrinking violets that women were

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86 She has since won or been shortlisted for almost every major writing award and has published fifteen books across fiction, non-fiction, biography and on the writing process. She has also completed her creative practice doctorate at UTS, about the writing of her acclaimed novel The Secret River (2005).
supposed to be, bearded ladies in a metaphorical way, also women who felt themselves to be outsiders, alien, slightly freakish.

These were women who thought themselves “freakish” despite Grenville not suggesting they were, and her stories attempt an exploration of the gap “between the external rhetoric and the internal self image” (Tulip & Turcotte, 1988) that is arguably an even more pressurised space in contemporary selfie-obsessed culture.

In her fiction Grenville uses and “breaks with” Gothic generic conventions to “abruptly break with traditional storytelling methods” (1988). Bearded Ladies was as Grenville describes it, her writing ‘apprenticeship’ where she used the short story form “to take enormous risks” and because of that “some of the stories have a very experimental feeling [...] that reckless feeling that there was nothing to lose” (‘Kate Grenville in conversation with Bruce Bennett’ in Righetti (Ed.) 2006, p. 24). These stories were written out of a “kind of red hot rage” (Righetti (Ed.) 2006, p. 28; also summarily cited in Sheridan, 2011, p. 3) at the lack of choice she was being offered and:

feminism was happening just in time thank goodness. So, what I was recording was the world out of which feminism had to happen, the world had to change. This was the bad old days that feminism was leaving behind.

The reaction to the publishing of short stories such as Roupenian’s ‘Cat Person’ (2017) and Machado’s ‘The Husband Stitch’ (2014) suggests that short stories are still an explosive medium for exploring the operations of the patriarchy and how women are responding to it.

In ‘Refractions’, Grenville is complicit. She envelops the reader in the character’s point of view, not judging or positioning her protagonist Louise from a more
distant authorial or critical standpoint. Louise in 'Refractions' is immersed in introspection and the deeply troubling insights and awareness that float up from the depths. We see the world, as viewed by her character, from the opening lines:

Once a year for a week, the Harbour is surprised by a deep red stain throughout its waters. For a week, the tides that jostle the hairy pilings move sullenly as if conscious of some shame, and the seagulls shift from one foot to the other and inspect their underwings at length, waiting out this time when the water is dark and opaque and fishing is impossible. (Grenville, 1984, p. 104)

Grenville stirs the unconscious to the surface in truly uncanny terms. The story themes and style are established from these opening lines. The overlapping and slippery "s" sounds are used throughout the piece and disturb as much as they soothe. The lapping rhythm is punctuated (less often) by sharp, ripping "k" sounds – dark, opaque – words that paw at the surface of the text like the jellyfish that are the “impossible to get rid of [… ] flaccid domes from the Harbour during its season of red water” (p. 104).

This Freudian imagery provides the backdrop to a story about a woman watching in her dinghy as a pair of children and their dog laugh and play nearby on gardens that abut the water. In the bushes near the children Louise sees a man begin disrobing and lying in wait. Louise must intervene to warn the children. As she rows closer through the red stained water – as the flaccid domes flip off her oars and into her small vessel – she travels back to her own childhood.

Her memories are triggered of when she and another child, Kevin, explored an abandoned warehouse that "reeked of the forbidden, of all those warnings from Mum" (p. 107). What takes place in this memory is a horrible and utterly disturbing event. Her motivation to warn the children is born of a dire
understanding of how easily the surface can be pierced. Louise never leaves the boat. She never reaches the shore. The children are diverted from the potential predator by their dog, but not before the man has noticed Louise in her boat coming to warn them. His barely clothed body then begins to move through the bushes towards her and:

his stare opens into a grin that exposes every tooth and the shining pink end of a wet tongue. He continues to stare directly into her eyes and she has to stare back as she propels herself away from him with convulsive jerks on the oars, feeling her palms slip on the leather grips and long fibrous threads squeezing between her toes. (Grenville, 1984, p. 113)

Louise confronts and retreats from this hideous event. The residual repressed memory, described in explicit sexualised language, which has now surfaced, is the stain that will regularly trouble her. It is an event that is triggered, and will ooze out in insistent tentacle-like threads for the rest of her life. The man has threatened an adult woman physically and by prompting this memory to resurface.

Everything in this story is described using sight, smell and texture. The uncanny is drawn in minute detail, depicted in excruciating and terrifying sensory terms: “Louise watched a fly crawl towards the other eye, which was pale as if boiled and leaked shining tears” (p. 110). This zoom-in takes us from the slippery harbour surface to hyper-close proximity with the predator, along with the character of Louise. We smell the creosote and sweaty heat and see the flash of red when the man offers her lollies that spill from his pocket. The reader feels the splinters that prickle child-Louise’s back and that foreground a tearing of innocence. The catalogue of intimate detail is so suffocating. I was cast, as the refracted reader, into Louise’s story-present role, struggling to warn the children by the harbour.
The story allows us Louise’s unbroken point of view. We are given this glimpse of her life, like the flash of her oars “bone-white from the years” (p. 104), stripped back and revealing one of the character’s darkest personal memories and how it impacts her adult life. The implications and social threads that can be drawn from this story are implicit to the narrative.

The explicit events are tied to one central protagonist but there are layers of meaning that pile up and by the end of the story they leave rust in the reader’s mouth. The reader might feel relieved that the children are safe, but the ending also feels like panning back out from a horror of sensory detail. This wider scope brings a greater awareness of how trauma can act as a domino, cascading through a life, mutating not everything, not continuously, but as present under the skin’s surface as the platelets that float in blood.

The reader is tricked by the slippery surface. We think we know this place – the Harbour that is often equated in Australia with beauty and riches. The reader is engulfed in a rising flood of experience. The feelings of revulsion, pain and then insight are built up without the judgement or polemic that traumatic events in stories can sometimes prompt. Louise is never portrayed as a hero or victim, or a “damaged” character forensically displayed for our “examination”.

Refractions, diversions and tangents are explored across participants and timelines in this story – the protagonist in present time, protagonist in childhood, and reader as protagonist. The children are diverted, the man’s attention is diverted, and the course of Louise in her boat alters because of the events in the story. The reader confronts how the details of individual lives can stretch and fold and change at any given moment, and according to circumstance. We are left with a sense of how much a single event can change the course of a life.
Louise is left bobbing on the ocean of her life, palms jerking against the oars as she moves hastily away from the threats – both physical, and the potential psychological suffocation by this rising surge of painful memory. The female protagonist character – as with Felicity – has undergone a narrative force (rather than cycle) in the compressed form of the short story. We are left with no final details, no epilogue to their lives, but these characters linger on long after their reading.

The present-day man lying in wait mirrors the memory of the vagrant in the warehouse for Louise. This man-in-a-bush (as opposed to the revered archetype of bushman) is an abject force that engages repression and destabilisation; his actions imply a predator, animalistic and alert to vulnerability. The rising terror and dread created by the resurfaced memory cause Louise to intervene to save someone else and to reject this man’s evil intent. Her fragmentation is unified into a protective force, rather than as in Stead’s story of broken, isolated Sylvia.

'Refractions’ is crafted in controlled, sensory, layered brush strokes, revealing a character of insight, strength, action, fear, reaction, duty, shrinking, vulnerability, anger, confusion and fearlessness. I met Louise, and left her, in her rocking boat. Now I am compelled on a new tangent.
Australian Gothic

Context

The Gothic tradition and its Romantic associations were deemed by some as “antithetical” to the very nature of Australia (Gelder, 2012, p. 380). Ken Gelder also suggests that the Gothic genre was used “as a means of eliding (or at least, sublimating) both the depressed and dispossessed predicament of actual Aboriginal people by this time, and the harsh, austere realities of settler life in the bush” (2007, p. 116). This process of dismissal and erasure of the First Nations people and their culture and claim to land ownership and self-determination is not a distant echo.

The *Terra Nullius* doctrine was adopted after the British invasion to maintain what was later described as the “legal fiction” that Australia was “nobody’s land”, uninhabited at the time of British arrival and subsequent settlement. The High Court of Australia in Mabo finally rejected the concept of *Terra Nullius*. These violent and racist beginnings of “Australia” as a place and a fictional setting mark some of the early attempts at Gothic literature.

Early stories and tales such as the first novel published in Australia, *The Guardian: a tale (by an Australian)* (Anna Maria Bunn, 1838) reflected a dismissive

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87 Clare G Coleman’s dystopian speculative fiction novel titled *Terra Nullius* (2017) examines invasion and colonisation narratives and speaks as much to an ‘imaginary’ as to the experiences of Aboriginal people living in contemporary Australia.

88 Bruce Pascoe’s book *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014) decolonises urban myths about traditional Indigenous agriculture. His work shows the erroneous application of terms such as hunter-gatherer to generations of Aboriginal people obfuscates the highly sophisticated agricultural and land management techniques that Aboriginal people have developed and long used as traditional owners and custodians of the land.

89 The landmark case *Mabo and Others v. Queensland (No.2)* [1992] HCA 23; (1992) 175 CLR 1 overturned *Terra Nullius* but accepted Britain’s assertion of sovereignty in 1788.
view of Australia as a remote, isolated place where the “lost ones” ended up (Turcotte, 1998; Watson, 2014). These earliest adaptations of the Gothic relied heavily on the borrowed or inherited impressions of the genre. They confirmed a view of Australia as “beneath Europe physically on the globe, which positions Europe on top” (Wisker, 2007, p. 147). Some short stories that emerged at this time were set overseas and reflected a predominantly Eurocentric view of life. Attitudes persist, explicitly and implicitly, in many colonial Gothic works, including Marcus Clarke's portrayal of Aboriginal Australians as dancing “natives painted like skeletons” in 'Australian Tales' (1896, cited by Young in the introduction to Macabre, 2010, p. 10). It is a consideration for a writer if continuing to depict the outback as a malevolent force and a void perpetuates ugly Gothic tropes born of fear and violence.

Gerry Turcotte notes that, “the history of the Gothic in Australia is the story of change and adaptation” (1998, p. 12). As the colonial project marched on later and celebrated works transformed and revitalised Gothic themes and motifs into a recognisably Australian Gothic literary genre. Turcotte notes that “our local variant” of the Gothic became “one which turned to the specifications of the domestic landscape and gave voice to articulate the fear and exhilaration of the colonial condition” (1998, p. 3). Writers and artists began to use local themes and motifs and adapted the genre to Australia’s specific setting90.

Marcus Clarke, inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, drew from the landscape’s sullen gorges and mopoke-filled trees, bewitching campfires and bunyip-inhabited lagoons; he found that “all is fear – inspiring and gloomy” (cited in Wilding, 2011). Imagery of lambs, dingos and curlews are used to create a devastating Gothic backdrop to a threatening swagman and an isolated shearer’s wife in

90 For a collection of colonial Gothic stories see Gelder & Weaver (Eds.) The Anthology of Colonial Australian Gothic Fiction, (2007).
Baynton’s short story ‘The Chosen Vessel’ (1902). These Gothic backdrops swell with an underlying national significance; as the modern nation was in the process of brutally “becoming”, the Gothic tapped into pervasive fears but also helped to develop enduring national myths and images.

From 1788–1868, the British used Australia as a penal colony, with free settlers also arriving from 1793. Clarke explored this history. His prolific oeuvre (especially for one who died at 35) displays invention and innovation as he experimented across genre and form, publishing many sketches, short stories (such as the Gothic short story ‘Cannabis Indica’, 1868) and poems as well as his well-known novel For the Term of His Natural Life (1884). This novel prominently featured Port Arthur. This site has multiple meanings for the contemporary reader as it is the place of massacre for Aboriginal people, a former convict settlement and the site of a mass shooting in 1996, that then led to sweeping gun reform. Such uncanny triplicities and multiple meanings proliferate in the Australian Gothic.

Colonial-era stories set in Australia tended to focus on the “weird melancholy” landscape. Nature was also perceived as abundant, providing promise and a new start. The Australian bush was “an innocent virgin, a fickle temptress and ‘irrational’ creature” and described in further abject terms as “the womb and the mother and a barren hag” (Watson, 2014, p. 99). The frontier aspects of our history, and the character of the bushman as a key heroic figure, persist (Gelder and Weaver, 2017; Summers, 2016; Schaffer, 1988; Watson, 2014). The mythical privileging of the bush as central to Australian identity, continues to prove rich for generating stories, however, new accounts that are emerging from more

92 A ’defining moments’ timeline is available on the National Museum of Australia website (among other interesting and interactive timelines) and this part of Australian history is also included as part of a broader Australian history discussion in Macia Langton’s Welcome to Country: A Travel Guide to Australia (2018).
diverse voices challenge how and why this trope still has meaning in contemporary Australia.

This genre is sometimes viewed with embarrassment as frivolous, whiny, fevered, un-careful, and feminine. Australia’s much lauded social realism can be viewed in oppositional pride of place93 to the “feverish” Gothic genre and its hybrid-genre co-conspirators. Yet, Australian Gothic is a genre that has been engaged in or has, at least critically, been linked (sometimes controversially) to a good number of our most famous writers.94 It is a genre featured across artistic mediums, for instance in Tracey Moffatt’s visual art and film95, in Australian Gothic theatre,96 in children’s and young adult fiction97, and many successful thriller and horror genre films, such as The Babadook (2014) and Wolf Creek (2005).

The Australian Gothic genre reflects a modern nation founded upon the genocide and dispossession of the traditional owners, whose living descendants represent the longest continuous civilisation on earth, and modern Australia also reflects immigration from all corners of the globe. The Gothic is of the oppressor and a tool of subversion that can be used by voices beyond the coloniser.

93 In Erik Jensen’s interview(s) with Helen Garner in an article in the June 2018 The Monthly, Garner uses appropriately Gothic terms to describe the fictional works that are the inferior aberrations from the rest of her more literary output: “‘The stuff I abandoned, it hardly even knew what it was or wasn’t,’ she says. ‘It hadn’t even become anything yet. It was all wandery and waffly, so I guessed it would have been fiction. Awful stuff, some of it: gothic, or whiny. Embarrassing.’”

94 These writers include Patrick White, Richard Flanagan, Janette Turner-Hospital, Tim Winton, Elizabeth Jolley, Henry Lawson, Christos Tsiolkas, Peter Carey, Frank Moorhouse, Thea Astley, Kim Scott, Mudrooroo (a.k.a. Colin Johnson), Beth Yahp, Sonya Hartnett, Alexis Wright, Maria Takolander, Kate Grenville, Cate Kennedy and fiction by Helen Garner such as ‘Little Helen’s Sunday Afternoon’ (1985, which also appeared in Personal Best: Thirty Authors Choose Their Best Short Stories, 1989).

95 For instance Moffatt’s film Night Cries - A Rural Tragedy (1990), featuring Marcia Langton and Bedevil (1993). Moffatt’s visual art was shown as part of the Acid/Gothic exhibition (Garner, cur., 2014) at the galerie pompom, Chippendale, Sydney.

96 Current PhD research is being conducted by Melbourne playwright Andrew Harmsen, see further his article ‘Beyond Sorry: colonial oppression on Australian stages’ (The Conversation, 2015, 25 May).

97 For example, Sonya Hartnett’s The Ghost’s Child (2009)
Australian Gothic literature can explore sometimes-repugnant aspects of history and be a site of potential transformation, too.
Character 6: ‘The White Maniac’ and the colonial Gothic

Mary Fortune’s 1867 story ‘The White Maniac’ was (mostly) set in some imagined and non-descript countryside just outside London.

Fortune “was one of the first women detective writers in the world, and the first in Australia” who published more than 500 detective stories and wrote poetry, short stories and articles under the pseudonym Waif Wander (Challis and Young, 2010, p. 32). Fortune is credited with a distinguished if dubious honour. ‘The White Maniac’ is “arguably the first Australian ‘vampire’ story – arguably, because the antagonist is not representative of what we expect a vampire to be” (Challis and Young, 2010, p. 32). Challis and Young are referring perhaps to the publication of Fortune’s story before others in this vein.

‘The White Maniac’ draws on many classic Gothic conventions. It is a short story told through the point of view of Dr Elveston – young, romantic and a “clever physician and man of honour” who also flippantly suggests his social position and class has more to do with his popularity rather than his skill. Still, this doctor treats only those who cannot afford treatment or who most need it, or in his most curious investigation, a young woman with an allegedly shocking condition.

Fortune lets us laugh gently at this bumbling overcurious do-gooder and explores his striving for balance as he vacillates between scientific rationalist and self-described romantic. Fortune also plays interestingly with gender in this text. When aligned to a Romantic mode, the good doctor shakes and shudders and quivers, overtaken by his passion, he “felt as if myself under the influence of

98 Significant work on this pioneering writer has been undertaken by (Gothic, dark/fantasy and science fiction) short-story writer and academic Lucy Sussex in The Fortunes of Mary Fortune (1989) and anthologies of Fortune’s stories in The Detective’s Album (2003) and Three Detective Stories (2009).
some fearful mania” (2010, p. 51), as he is constantly “ejaculating” phrases. His modes are not necessarily gendered as we might understand gender in contemporary culture. He is the most easily persuaded, vacillating, impetuous and irrational character in the story. These are traits that do not reflect the female or feminine gender but that have been associated with women and the female Gothic. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, chastised that “damned mob of scribbling women” for writing Romantic “trash” (Harrington, 2008, p.1) and the nervous Gothic reader Catherine Morland in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817) parodies this representation of female/feminine character.

Dr Elveston’s “lunatic princess” patient is described as beautiful, calm and expressionless as a marble statue with a musical and low voice. She is a strange conflation of a Gothic binary (madwoman/saint) who arouses his curiosity and he casts her as “an angel!” that he would die for (2010, p. 45). The reader, too, is unsure of what to make of her. She isn’t a silent penitent but uses language to raise doubt in the doctor’s mind about her condition and persuade him of her position. She is clever and curious, “wonderingly” making sense of her visitor turned suitor. The impression she makes on the reader contrasts to the angel-girl her suitor-doctor imagines.

Fortune creates an aura of permeating doubt throughout the whole story. She does this by creating an unreliable narrator protagonist, an unreliable and potentially mad cannibalistic female antagonist, and an unreliable secondary character in the role of a controlling uncle.

When the doctor first becomes aware of this strange house in the countryside, a French family is revealed to be residing in it. The entire rear garden and everything inside the house visible from the outside are white. A man who is seen regularly approaching the dwelling is revealed to be an uncle looking after his ill niece. He always changes into white clothing before he enters. The doctor
is intrigued, but his reputation has independently made the uncle seek him out for medical advice about his ill niece. The doctor is told that one colour (red) sets off a horrible chain of events, however for safety the uncle has removed all other colours to prevent exciting the young girl.

After he has been called in to treat her, the doctor is told an alternative story by the niece: that in fact it is her uncle who is mad and keeps her locked up due to his own monomania. The doctor decides to test the premise by taking a bouquet of scarlet verbena flowers to his now desired bride-to-be in defiance of the uncle. Before this there is an epistolary intervention that further fragments who and what we can believe in the narrative when the doctor receives a letter from the sick girl’s seemingly returned-from-the-dead father.

Fortune uses white in a way that might conjure comparisons with Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892). The colour permeates everything in the narrative – tone, atmosphere, and meaning. White is referred to as the colour of funerals, death, mourning and madness; it also paradoxically underlines the doctor’s desire for his new crush to be pure, angelic, saintly and virginal. White is used as the colour of punishment and as the symbol of the imprisonment that so arouses the doctor initially. It becomes a blank canvas onto which he projects his desires for the royal-blooded French creature.

This story draws out familiar fears of difference, “foreignness” and also a desire to keep women in check despite their demonic tendencies ready to spring up at a moment’s provocation. Fortune calls the protagonist “Blanche” (French for white) in arguably a particularly self-deprecating “Australian” way and has the characters mock this in-text.

This story offered me writing lessons in denouement. Although some questions remain for the reader about exactly what took place, much else is summarised
and too-neatly tied up by the end of ‘The White Maniac’. This was a useful reminder for me of how an original theme or concept, or intriguing characters, can miss making a mark as powerfully when the short story is concluded by a summary paragraph. It was a good reflection of my own writing’s editing process, where much of the focus became about drawing out the narrative tension and focusing on the reader’s experience, from a story’s start to finish, aiming for ambiguity instead of explanation.
Character 7: ‘Yara Ma Tha Who’ and Aboriginal Story and the Gothic

Bruce Pascoe (2012, p. 24) writes: “The ancestral creative beings were said to have left language on the country, along with the first humans and their culture”. Aboriginal Australians have had story at the centre of culture for thousands of years (Wheeler, 2013, p. 2). Story is explored through language, art, symbol, sign, scar, dance, tales, myths and text (Van Toorn, 2009). Complex media include oral, graphic, performative and written expressions. The voices of developing critics and established writers in Aboriginal literature are pointing to a serious revision of how all Australians can better critically engage with Aboriginal story\(^99\) in its many forms that pre-date the arrival of the tale, sketch and short story brought by European colonisation and the many forms since.

These ongoing developments\(^100\), especially once *The Uluru Statement From The Heart* (Referendum Council, 2017) is implemented, will better inform future discussions on the Australian short story, the Gothic genre and intersections with Aboriginal Australian literature. However, as a non-Indigenous Australian, my desire for understanding potentially obfuscates a much more complex process of decolonisation. Poet, writer and academic Evelyn Araluen writes:

> Literature is a term we apply to the textual products of the West, or those texts that reinforce accepted narratives of the other. For those who live in a perpetually compromised position regarding the sovereignty of our ancestral homelands, for whom the West came with guns and disease, literary theory usually signifies a binary of applicability: either it is unconcerned with our

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\(^99\) In a 2016 Australian Association of Writing Programs Conference paper, Benjamin Miller references critics such as Sophie Cunningham’s responses to Peter Craven’s 2009 criticism of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, and Peter Minter’s work in eco-poetics, as well as writers such as Tony Birch and Melissa Lucashenko; “Aboriginal writing provides important critiques of Australian nationalism” (2016, pp. 2–3) and points to new ways of discussing and understanding the role of Aboriginal literature in Australia.

\(^100\) See the article by Timmah Ball, ‘Indigenous Voices Have Never Been More Important To Australian Literature’, *The Guardian Australia*, (2018, 23 June) which sets out the developments in and importance of Aboriginal literature writers and critics.
material realities and processes of cultural production, or it has seized upon our creations for its tropes and metaphors. At worst, literary and poetic theory is elitist, ahistorical, esoteric and universalising. (Overland online, 2017)

These various and insidious modes of operation infect the Australian Gothic genre. It is an adapted genre that mirrors inherent Australian literary violence and prejudices. The Australian Gothic, because of its particular literary history, can also perhaps be used as a way of engaging with exactly what has been repressed, appropriated or essentialised by non-Indigenous Australians.

Place, in the sense of both outback and urban Australia, its specific landscapes and meanings, is fundamental to an attempt at understanding the depth of Aboriginal story. Bruce Pascoe has written books, such as *Dark Emu, Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014), that examine the integrated approach between Aboriginal spirituality, culture, trade and cultivation of land and place. He states that “[t]he ancestral beings, many having both human and animal qualities, turned a flat, featureless plain into the wonderful and varied landscape we admire today” (2012, p. 8). Pascoe (p.13) continues:

There are multiple and complex connections and we continue to have obligations and responsibilities for particular areas of land, our ‘country’. This remains a fundamental element of our culture and identity.

The concept of place then is fundamental to Aboriginal Story and how it is told, understood, and performed in culture. The Gothic is a genre of fiction that is intimately connected to setting and place and relationship to place. In the earliest colonial offerings the Australian landscape and her traditional owners were often painted with the same crude brush.
The Australian Gothic genre initially sought to violently repress or distort the truth through the lens of the settler (Weaver, 2009); Aboriginal Australians were depicted as ghosts, phantoms, or monstrous Others. In contemporary readings of the Australian Gothic there is more nuance and context to ghosts and acts of haunting.101

Australian Gothic texts have more recently been examined by scholars using a postcolonial framework. This focus contemplates the uncanny, spectrality and allows for a more subversive notion of haunting (Kral, 2008; Turcotte, 2008). Australia is acknowledged as an 'unsettled' place (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998; Gelder & Jacobs, 1999) in modern Australian Gothic, haunted by its violent colonial beginnings in texts written by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors, but arguably for different ends. The Aboriginal Uncanny/Gothic further subverts the notion of haunting – the white colonialist and his descendants (as people, colonisers or even as representations of injustice and repression) can instead be read as the ghostly, phantom or monstrous presence within an Aboriginal Australian imaginary (Clark, 2013, Mayr, 2017). Gothicised tropes in texts classified as Aboriginal Gothic, written by Aboriginal Australian writers, move away from fetishizing and/or cordonning off sacred sites (Mayr, 2017102), spirituality and Aboriginal Australian history and interrogate the violence of colonisation and its overt and subtle cultural legacies.

101 Ghosts and spectral presences have a central place in the Gothic as emblematic of what haunts individuals and societies. The ghost story is its own sub-genre and there are collections of short stories dedicated to celebrating the generic conventions of the ghostly tale. For further see: The Penguin Book of Ghost Stories from Elizabeth Gaskell to Ambrose Bierce (Newton (Ed.), 2010) and Ken Gelder (Ed.) The Oxford Book of Australian Ghost Stories (1994). Gelder & Jacobs (1999) describe the Australian ghost story as "a minor genre, a marginal genre" but also "gross", "luxurious" and "over the top"; one that can blur the lines between sacred sites and haunted spaces (p. 116).

102 Mayr considers the representation of Aboriginal culture and history in Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet (1991) and states: “By on the one hand, recognizing Aboriginal dispossession and non-Aboriginal violence against Aboriginal people, but on the other hand relegating the violence and any instances of Aboriginal power exclusively to small physical spaces such as houses and a long-ago past a writer such as Winton suppresses Indigenous people’s historical and contemporary concerns.” (2017, p. 2) in contrast with Aboriginal Uncanny texts where: “the white dominant culture is figured as the source of the frightening and uncanny.” (p.3)
Kral (2008, p. 110) identifies two aspects, a "double polarity", in what he terms Black Australian Gothic: “an (over)emphasis on the body, and on the other hand a certain spectrality, in other words two specificities that strike at the heart of the postcolonial experience”. Writers appropriate the "subversive potential inherent in the Gothic“ (Kral, 2008, p. 113) but rather than ‘writing back to empire’ as postcolonial narratives, I would argue these texts create new worlds, nuanced literary spaces and collective, political and individualised genre-fusions, evident in works by writers such as Kim Scott, Alexis Wright and in the short story form by Ellen van Neerven.

The postcolonial short story as a form has recently been explored in a collection of essays by Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell (2013). This collection emphasises the form as "shadowed" by oral and folkloric traditions and techniques that are used to explore themes including "fragmentation, displacement, diaspora and identity" (2013, p. 3). The scholars comment: "dissidence arises from who and what the short story focuses on" (2013, p. 4). The postcolonial/Gothic short story appears to be primed to engage in exploring what and who has been forced to the margins of our national history, what and who has been de-centred from discourse. While the ‘how’ (for example: bricolage, narrative frames, formal experimentation, pastiche) (Awadalla & March-Russell, 2013, p. 2) seems to easily link with the Gothic genre, the ‘who’ and the ‘what’, and I would also argue the ‘who by’ of context/ intention/ reception, are equally as important.

Reading Araluen’s article forced me to question how ‘postcolonial’ as a concept is deployed in the academy (potentially as further obfuscation) and this led me to recognise that the Gothic exists in Australia "knowingly" along a deep "fault line" (Araluen, 2017). How the Gothic is used, updated and contextualised could reinforce racist attitudes or potentially disrupt and challenge them.
Scholar Katrin Althans (2010) coined the term Aboriginal Gothic and applied this to works by Aboriginal Australian writers. Colin Johnson, also known as Mudrooroo\textsuperscript{103} writes of Katrin Althans’s applying this term to his work:

Similarity does not imply identity and, hence, Aboriginal writers and their Maban consciousness should not be confused with European Gothic as Althans has done. She does mention my use of the term ‘maban reality’ in passing, but prefers the use of ‘Gothic Aboriginal’. I argue against this, as I believe that such Aboriginal writers and filmmakers should be seen as gaining their creative impulse from their Aboriginal culture and consciousness rather than from the Gothic tradition of Europe. (Mudrooroo, 2010, online copy)

As a genre that arrived with invasion and settlement, Johnson/Mudrooroo argued, the Gothic cannot claim "Maban consciousness" – a materiality informed by Aboriginal experience, culture and story, which predate the arrival of the Gothic in Australia. Bridget Haylock suggests that writers such as Alexis Wright draw from Maban reality and that there are implications for character in Aboriginal writing: “A Maban is a Clever Man or Woman, a Shaman, holder of knowledge and culture, a person able to interact and know the world in a way

\textsuperscript{103} Academic and writer Bruno Starrs (2014) suggests there is some controversy over Mudrooroo’s Aboriginal indigeneity: “Despite his once revered status, Mudrooroo is now exiled from the Australian literary scene as a result of his claim to Indigeneity being (apparently) disproven (see Clark).” Maureen Clark (2006, p. 122) states: “In more recent times, strong evidence has come to light that supports the reality that Mudrooroo’s mother was of British heritage whilst his father’s family background was a mix of Irish and African American. Such evidence also suggests that the author may have been aware of his mother’s whiteness long before such a possibility was ever made public.” It is for this reason that Kral (2008) employs the term ' Black Australian Gothic’. What cannot be argued with is this writer’s contribution to Australian literature and the Australian Gothic conversation generally. Mudrooroo/Johnson’s works, including Master of The Ghost Dreaming (1991) and The Undying (1998), "locate their ghost and vampire tales at the site of the invasion of Australia by Europeans, and around a battle which was frequently effected through missionary activities." (Turcotte, 2003, p. 2). Rudd explores Mudrooroo/Johnson’s work as a re-working of the Gothic that explores the abject “whose source lies with the human colonizers” (2010, p. 130).
very different from the rational mode” (Haylock, 2011, p. 6). Haylock suggests that Maban writing is a “political” strategy and a way of depicting trauma. Maban reality combines natural and supernatural themes and characters, and time is not necessarily linear. This is a strategy, a combination of literary techniques and political interventions that would not necessarily be known widely to non-Indigenous readers. Parallels can be drawn with explorations of memory and trauma in postcolonial/Gothic short stories but are arguably not sufficient in explaining or interpreting these strategies.

Writer and academic Bruno Starrs wrote That Blackfella Bloodsucka Dance! (2011), a story that explores the vampire monster from an Aboriginal Australian perspective. Starrs (2014) has coined the term Aboriginal Fantastic, a literature that combines his Aboriginal heritage, Catholic religious upbringing and Gothic inspirations in his work, as an alternative to Aboriginal Gothic or Australian Gothic.

The use of the term Australian Gothic in this discussion was not designed to either critically appropriate works by Aboriginal writers who deploy supernatural elements or other tropes that might appear to a non-Indigenous writer as similar to those used in the Gothic genre, nor is it being used as a term of exclusion of works of an Australian writer of any cultural heritage, or writing about Australia that uses or subverts Gothic tropes.\(^\text{104}\) Althans has recognised this conundrum in her critical work, writing:

\(^{104}\) The Gothic genre for example could be critically applied to recent texts, such as Leah Purcell’s play ‘The Drover’s Wife’ (2016) and Warwick Thornton’s film Sweet Country (2018) – both include graphic depictions of rape and violence, and reveal embedded narratives of sexual and racial inequality in Australia, which are themes that are persistently repressed and resurfaced in Australian Gothic literature. Lawson’s ‘The Drover’s Wife’ was originally written at a time when the influence of the Gothic was pervasive, if still critically reviled, making the Gothic relevant to an analysis. Purcell’s theatrical version of this story is arguably informed by the Gothic, and Purcell has indicated it is also informed by US Western genre tropes, the formal properties of theatrical performance and the inclusion of autobiographical material. However, the director of Sweet Country, Warwick Thornton has specifically cited the influence of his Aboriginal culture as well as the US Western genre on his film, not the Gothic genre.
If all intertextual relations to Gothic works or the Gothic tradition itself were left aside, though, that would mean ignoring a central issue of Aboriginal Gothic. Similarly assessing Gothic instances in Aboriginal literature only in terms of Maban, which is a parallel and specifically Indigenous reality, [...] removes it from any literary history and context and places it in an imagined precolonial void. (Althans, 2013, p. 144).

I disagree that a rejection of the Gothic, and a focus on Maban realities, “removes it [Maban literature] from any literary history or context” but I would argue that it is the underlying notions and understanding of what constitutes Australian “literary history and context” that needs to be re-examined, as well as the emphasis given to postcolonial critiques when a discourse around decolonisation is being engaged in by contemporary Aboriginal writers, activists and academics. This is especially the case when investigating the Gothic genre because of the specific details of its fraught arrival and adaptation in Australian literature.

In Aboriginal culture Langton (2018, p. 34) writes: “Storytelling is the original classroom where history, morality and knowledge about people, places and the world are relayed to each new generation” and “storytelling is entertainment, bringing people together to laugh about life, adventure, lore, travelling and mishaps”. Further investigation could explore the role of Maban texts and Aboriginal storytelling that pre-date invasion and colonisation and that continues today.
An original vampire: ‘Yara Ma Tha Who’ by David Unaipon

I first read David Unaipon’s story ‘Yara Ma Tha Who’ in the *Macabre* (2010) Australian short story collection, and was struck by its central character, whimsy and lingering power. David Unaipon is described as “a preacher, inventor, and the first Indigenous Australian writer to be published” (Challis and Young, 2010, p. 136). Unaipon was recognised as a writer of Aboriginal stories in his lifetime. Anita Heiss and Peter Minter write: “the 1929 publication of *Native Legends*, David Unaipon’s collection of his people’s traditional stories, was a [similarly] significant development in Aboriginal writing” (2008, p. 3). ‘Yara Ma Tha Who’ is a vampire story that predates Mary Fortune’s ‘The White Maniac’, but was not published until 1930 and without Unaipon’s authorship attributed until 2001 in *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (Challis and Young, 2010, p. 136). This history reveals how Aboriginal story has been co-opted, stolen, neglected or wrongly attributed in the "literary history and context" of Australian letters.

Unaipon “draws directly from the living wellspring of his traditional culture, but it is also literary in its adaptation of his cultural imagination to particular modes of authorship and narration” (Heiss and Minter, 2008, p. 4). The Yara Ma story – brief, layered and fused with descriptions of nature – reflects these attributes of Unaipon’s writing.

The vampire doesn’t suck blood with its mouth but uses fingers and toes like cup-shapes, “like the suckers of octopus” (Unaipon, in Challis and Young, 2010, p. 137). He drops from thick-boughed trees onto his surprised victim, then “he places his hands and feet upon the body, which sucks the blood from the body and leaves him helpless on the ground” (p. 138). The Yara Ma then lies down

105 Other monsters particular to the Australian imaginary include variations on the idea of the Bunyip, a "uniquely Australian ghost" that was "originally derived from Aboriginal oral tales" but disseminated and memorialised in stories by colonial writers such as Rosa Praed and Aboriginal writers such as Percy Mumballa (Rudd, 2010, p.110).
and faces his victim, crawls “like a goanna and open his mouth wide and suck the food down head-first, then he will rise and stand on his little leg and dance and dance around until the person is well inside his belly” (p. 138). This evocative description marries the deeply terrifying with a magical whimsy. It conjures images of a python swallowing someone whole, and certainly both a thirsty and hungry type of vampire. The Yara Ma then performs a complex regurgitation and there is a waiting game to see if his victims are still alive.

The story details that if you are caught three times you transform into a Yara Ma (p. 139) yourself, which symbolically resonates with the three Denials of Peter and other three chances or warnings in Western mythologies. Benjamin Miller (2016, p. 1) states “Unaipon’s rhetoric was fashioned from indigenous and western traditions”. Unaipon’s allusions to Jonah and the Whale may emphasise the “capture and redemption” narrative also found in various religions.

There are, however, rules that govern the bloodsucker’s behaviour: if the Yara Ma doesn’t regurgitate the victim, giving them an opportunity for survival, there is a punishment for the Yara Ma’s transgression and he is turned into a tree fungus.

Unaipon uses multi-stranded storytelling to convey his tale and there are potentially further layers of meaning impenetrable to a non-Indigenous Australian reader that cannot be drawn in my critique. Stories can still shelter “critical information from the uninitiated” (Pascoe, 2014, p. 144). The relationships of “reciprocity” (Pascoe, 2014, p. 143) between: behaviour and environment, story and land, between myth and reality, are held in Unaipon’s story in the same proportional balance as punishment and redemption for all the participating characters in the tale. This storytelling differs from the interpretations of some religious texts that seem to emphasise strict binary
concepts of right/wrong and man/nature reflected in a hierarchical mode of storytelling that positions the author/character as god/moral agent.

This tale manages to weave together several descriptions of animals and natural formations, and how people can get water if the Yara Ma has purposefully drained the rock holes or waterholes. The story’s tone is entertaining and informative, terrifying and delightful. The central character of the Yara Ma evolves and shape-shifts in the tale. Miller (2016, p. 8) suggests that:

Given that so many of his [Unaipon’s] tales focus on characters constantly in the process of becoming – from ally to enemy, to despised outcast, to respected outcast – perhaps he was all too aware that survival required contradiction, complicity, resistance and perseverance.

The tale draws on the supernatural but takes an Aboriginal approach, it does not need to be categorised within the Gothic genre. This story’s underlying menace, whimsy and supernatural elements could see it fitting within a tradition of Maban literature and/or the Aboriginal Fantastic. This tale creates intriguing parallels with the Gothic; it reverses the land as a place of void or fear into a fecund landscape that reflects back interconnection, challenges, punishments and opportunity.

The final lines, indicating that the tale acts as a warning for children, are important. In the short-story form, a conclusion assumes special significance (Lee, 2009, p. 5). Although this story could be analogous to a fairy tale or folktale, its cautionary purpose is withheld until the end, where it is described as “one of the stories told to bad children: that if they do not behave themselves the Yara Ma Tha will come and take them and make them become one of their own” (p. 139). In a contemporary reading in light of the Stolen Generation, these final lines have a haunting significance.
Practice reflection: Place, Artform and Story

I was determined to keep my stories set in metropolitan suburbia, but life has a way of spinning out its own trajectory. My creative practice aligns with this journey and vice versa, whether or not I had ever wanted to acknowledge this. In my second year of my PhD my work in the Territory exposed some significant areas of lack in my writing ability. This was due to gaps in my understanding of history and place and working through these led to various attempts through story – some successful, others unsuccessful - to wrestle with these lacks.

Lawyer, mentor and advocate Terri Janke, working with academic and writer Anita Heiss, wrote ‘Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing’ for The Literary Board of the Australia Council for The Arts (2002). The Protocols focus on stories that depict Aboriginal people and places. They include questions for writers to engage with, such as:

- How will your writing affect the Indigenous group on which it is based?
- Does it empower them?
- Does it expose confidential or personal and sensitive material?
- Does it reinforce negative stereotypes?

The protocols act as an important guide to writers and artists in representing Aboriginal themes and material in fictional and non-fictional formats. Arguably, to most people they might appear very simple to follow. I wasn’t aware of them until after a significant amount of creative practice. I had to then ask, could my approach serve to offend and further disempower Aboriginal people? Arguably, yes. I had to confront the fact that due to persistent attitudes of arrogance and racism in Australia maybe ironic or perversely satirical positions were not the best to adopt in my fiction in relation to indigeneity (and other culturally
marginalised groups). Nor was a saccharine or unexamined pretence at understanding what I so clearly did not understand.

Writer Michael Giacometti has encountered a similar conversation in his own work. His short story 'my abbr’d life' (published in Cracking the Spine, 2014a, and available on his website, 2017) tells the story of a young Aboriginal girl with an alcoholic mum. The young girl suffers repeated abuse and dies from petrol sniffing. Giacometti contextualises his story in a companion essay (2014b). He foregrounds his experience living in Central Australia – his community, work and friends, and his feeling of how little he "knows" about Aboriginal culture. However, he has chosen to use a young female protagonist in his short story that focuses on quite horrific events and themes. Importantly, he underscores that he is writing a completely invented story, not based on anyone he knows or any events specifically. He further raises a critical evaluation of the questions as they apply to his story and adds a further two questions for consideration to the protocols. They are: Does it [the story] deserve to be told in the public domain? And do you have the right to tell it?

Giacometti suggests that Aboriginal artists also depict confronting themes and still receive criticism. In a functioning democracy, this is to be expected and art has certainly, no matter the sex, sexuality, race or cultural heritage of the artist, often divided and provoked audiences. With honesty, Giacometti states, “I am reticent to read my Indigenous writing in Alice Springs” (personal website), but adds that he feels more comfortable to do so elsewhere. Giacometti’s reflections show that these protocols do spark further necessary investigations by writers into their creative work, and provide checkpoints. They also feed into a larger conversation as Araluen (2017) has outlined.

I was only beginning, as an Australian writer in my 30s, to properly learn how pervasive the issue of representation is for Aboriginal people in fiction, film and
culture more widely. Marcia Langton (1993, p. 81) writes that “Aboriginality’ is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation”, often by white people imagining characters based on misguided stereotypes or reinforced by negative stereotypes, which have been largely created by white artists and writers. Langton critiqued the binary of negative/positive images and representations of Aboriginal people, as it “sets the limits of cultural criticism” (p. 41) and spoke of the need to “decolonise” consciousness at the intersection of race and gender (p. 54). This approach reawakened my awareness of limiting binaries and my need to not write into my own learned stereotypes. As I began to concentrate more on reflection, and on the structural issues that I was witnessing, this changed the way that I approached character creation, place and story.

One of the first stories I had written in the PhD, ‘Chambers’ (2014), looks at refugee law. As Evelyn Araluen (2017) suggests, there is a link between colonial and “postcolonial” structures, and their impact on First Nations Australians, and refugees and asylum seekers to Australia. ‘Chambers’ (now ‘Artforms’) was told not from the perspective of a refugee but a lawyer engaged in her legal practice. It looked at how Australia’s laws can ruthlessly operate to exclude people. Araluen (2017) writes: “the colonisers have not left, but instead police our borders and imprison those who seek asylum from conflicts in which we are implicated.” This story seemed to fit within my reflections on contemporary Australia as a place and historic site of strangely interconnected but unbalanced and disproportionate concepts of “justice” and “nation”.

In the Territory and elsewhere in Australia I met people from across the political spectrum who were strongly opinionated about reconciliation, treaty and constitutional recognition. I met Aboriginal and white Australians – who confronted me with what I thought I knew about my country’s history and my implicit involvement. I saw the damage of low expectations and the white
saviour complex in action. I turned over these sensations in my own belly – the unhelpful inherited sense of guilt that is, in a sense, a form of prolonged racism, and my own reactiveness to criticism; what is now termed “white fragility”.¹⁰⁶

My story 'Place' is clearly born of my travels and experiences in the Northern Territory. My original title was 'Wake Mid Flight' and was a reference to the role of the aeroplane that bookends the story, and as an obvious nod to Kenneth Cook’s classic Australian Gothic novel *Wake In Fright* (1961). There is still something of the essence of that book that exists in parts of central Australia, certainly in some of the almost segregated areas (what I reactively called “dogville” after the film by that name) where racist white Australia can fester. There is also beauty, strength and determination and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who live there and enjoy story, culture and place.

I came slowly to confront the "fault line" along which white Australian authors can self-consciously write, which can do more to reverse or impede decolonisation narratives, even if that is not their intention. In this story I had wanted to explore place as the ill-informed, over-eager new arrival with no clue – because that was how I was.

I was likely viewed by Aboriginal colleagues as excruciatingly naive; I would sometimes repeat things other legal colleagues had said and only later wonder or think through their implications. My white colleagues saw me as under-experienced and overly enthusiastic. These are somewhat painful realisations to make about how you’re viewed by others. There are likely worse impressions

¹⁰⁶ American academic and educator Robin DiAngelo coined the term in 2011 and she has since written a book: *White Fragility, Why It's So Hard To Talk To White People About Racism* (2018) to interrogate the defensiveness of white people when challenged about their views about race and racism. It looks at pervasive race conditioning and examines features of white fragility such as white women’s tears, a concept that has been recently discussed by writers such as Ruby Hamad (2018, May 7) in *The Guardian Australia*. 
that I could collect and if the writer's blade is to become sharp, sometimes the most revealing incisions are made on the self. This is not meant to reposition my privilege into "victimhood", but rather to acknowledge a truth about the way that I was viewed, and my starting point for exploring through story.

A lot of material in 'Place' that was factually drawn from what people had expressed to me directly about their feelings about recognition, treaty or even the Mabo decision were removed in final iterations. I didn't want to add fragments of representation without proper context. I didn't want to presume that I would be able to convey the complexity of feelings about issues that are so often talked about at a distance from the people these conversations impact. To use Giacometti’s final question as a point of investigation on whether I had the right to tell the story, I did come to realise that I couldn't adequately reflect Aboriginal perspectives in fiction. I could, however, support the outcomes of conversations happening within the Indigenous community, by for instance whole-heartedly supporting the Uluru Statement.

There is more of my own voice in this particular story; it remains, however, fictional. This story draws on a painterly language that I have previously used in short stories set in suburban Australia and overseas. I use this language in hurried surface brushstrokes that reflect my desire to “catch up” – and the impossibility of that task. It is contrasted in the story with the sophistications of Aboriginal artistry – a comparison that could also be seen as essentialising and reductive or worse fetishistic – but it reflected my genuine experience of the artworks and performance that I did encounter. In the end, this story was further fragmented. Interspersed with parts of the fiction based on mythology ('Story') and my legal training ('Artforms').

The story begins with her as an observer, on the outer and distant from the landscape:
She was glued to the porthole framing her arrival at the heart of a country that she could never quite feel was her own, and yet she didn’t know where else to call home. Home is where the heart is. Here was the stretched-out blood pumping stone muscle of her identity.

Throughout the story, as she travels away from a bureaucratic circle of bewilderment and into the landscape beyond, she begins to feel energised, moved and inevitably changed by the experience. Slowly becoming aware of her crushing, embarrassing naivety.

The overlapping wings are hectic, wavering. A kaleidoscope of beauty and brutality. Flowing in all directions. [...] She is not home. She is not unwelcome. She is a surface spectator to a much bigger match.

This piece attempts to grapple with an Australian twist on the sublime. Milbank (2009) suggests that Burke equated the sublime “with fear, power, vastness and magnificence and terror”, or masculine properties, as opposed to the passive/feminine concept of beauty (p. 76) – yet, these are all words often used to define the feminised space of the Australian outback.

The narrator in this piece is no Radcliffean genius, more a bumbling if honest fool (linking temperamentally with Fortune’s Dr Elveston). This story as ‘Place’ attempts to blur boundaries as the ‘she’ is a speaking agent and a subject-in-process (after Kristeva). A wash of wings and colours and shapes overlap within her, and this mirrors the porous and blurred borders between fiction and other modes of writing. In turn this reflects an overt unease (as opposed to Gilbert and Gubar’s repressed “dis-ease”) – and an awareness of writer-ego. The Gothic elements in this story are a product of her own fears and anger about her lack of
knowledge, not a result of her engagement with the land or its custodians and owners.

This story could draw criticism that the writer inserts themselves narcissistically into the centre of the story instead of recognising the stories of people who have been silenced and oppressed by forces and structures of colonisation that stemmed from a violent act of invasion. This criticism would have merit, and writing this story has been a large part of my own educational journey and development as a writer, Australian and person. I hope that my initial lack and my bumbling process would however not be used to discourage other writers of all backgrounds – Indigenous and non-Indigenous - from their own creative explorations of place, history and in the case of white Australia, potential complicity.
In 2015, I was working in the Northern Territory on a community legal education project. At around this time, a young woman was allegedly killed by her not normally abusive, but drunk and out of control partner. The town I was in had the air sucked out of it. The experience was reflected in an absence of noise and protest, in a powerful pulsing undercurrent in the community that was built of pain and anger and sadness and shame. I do not name her here out of respect for her family, his family and the wider community. It is not a case like Meagher’s that has already been plastered across the media. It is however at its baseline a set of circumstances that has been repeated in communities all over Australia.

The rape and murder of Lynette Daley and her family's struggle for justice exposed how some crimes often do not prompt an immediate outcry. My experience in the Territory did however link in my mind to so many other stories all across Australia, both like and unlike Jill Meagher, Lynette Daley or Tracy Connelly, just as it represented a unique and horrific tragedy for a specific community and a particular response to that tragedy. ‘Story’ was written after I had left the Territory and it was an attempt to grapple with incidences of domestic violence that occurred while I was there and back in Sydney and Melbourne.

I realised that I wanted ‘Story’ to reflect something of the idea of woman in ancient mythology – whether in classical Greece, early Christendom or a fictional Australia. Initially I tried to write a main character as Aboriginal Australian; the original iterations sounded false. Her character was initially inspired after a work trip where a colleague, Dennis Braun, and myself had

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107 This story was again brought to light by the ABC’s Four Corners (May 2016) program ‘Callous Disregard’ which prompted a review of the DPP’s decision not to prosecute and that later resulted in convictions.
indulged in eating some blachan; he told me later that his Aunt made the best blachan. In the end only the first name and the condiment were included in the story and reflect my desire to mark this friendship. The characterisation, the events of the story and the tone and message originated elsewhere. I had to change the character and story to better reflect this and admit to myself that I did not have the skillset to characterise an Indigenous character from a first-person perspective.

My story was informed by my witness to and experience of acts of violence in the Territory and around Australia and my Catholic upbringing and my education. I had, it appeared, turned full circle - right back to Joseph Campbell’s repository of myths, but sieved through my imagination and experience. I found that by writing three parts – the mythological, the contemporary and a reimagined future – I was attempting to disrupt and collapse a presentation of woman as object of myth, rather than as creator of it.

Christos Tsiolkas (2018, p. 58) notes that works that address “political concerns and furies” can be “overwhelmed by the inexorable rush of history”. Tsiolkas writing about Patrick White’s attempts at imagining a national mythology, suggests that “The only Australian writers who can now follow on from this novel [Voss] are Aboriginal writers” (p. 55) and cites Kim Scott’s Benang (1999) and Alexis Wright’s Carpentaria (2006) as examples of works that have “gone beyond” (p. 56). This story was not attempting such grand aims, but had arguably written itself unwittingly right into this fault line. What I was attempting was a mythological rewrite of Woman, and naively perhaps from an “all woman” perspective. This fragmented short story was a creative risk and a space of experimentation to explore this aim, but its intention was never to offend or mythologise for Aboriginal Australian women. I just wanted a story that allowed woman the role of creator not object. For these reasons the character developed in iterations to further embrace the sources outlined above.
The use of non-linear narratives by women writers, and women short-story writers, is not a new strategy. Ellen Harrington suggests the “spatial form of the short story, in de-emphasizing plotline and resolution, undermines a simple linear narrative of culture and progress by demonstrating the underlying complexity of apparently simple relationships” (2008, p. 8). Non-linear and fragmented (Gothic) stories are deployed to investigate experiences outside of the status quo.

I found in Chi Vu’s story *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* (2012) similar themes and structures, if from a completely different perspective. Chi Vu is a Melbourne-based writer, dramaturge, playwright and performance artist. Her work has featured in local and international festivals and draws from her experience as a Vietnamese Australian writer and as a Gothic Studies creative practitioner. I read Vu’s deliberate use of the Gothic as subversive in intent and practice.

This story can be categorised as a novella or a long short story; I recognise it here as a long short story that includes a disrupted but interconnected narrative structure, a unified tone, key motifs and images and arguably a single main protagonist named Đào. To suggest it is Gothic is less problematic. It is a self-identified Gothic work; the title is not a gesture nor used ironically. Vu has commented on the uncanny nature of being an “author who writes about migration” (2013, p. 65) and who “faces the twin tasks of addressing alienation and form” when:

> Given the double blow of cultural and linguistic displacement (both the ‘content’ and ‘form’ of one’s life becomes unfamiliar as a result of migration), it then follows that the self is also experienced as uncanny. (2013, p. 69).
The author has self-consciously and actively chosen to write into this genre for her story *Anguli Ma* and other works that test and re-imagine Gothic conventions.

It is a story that exemplifies a contemporary Australian Gothic that reflects a ‘globalgothic’ sensibility. Botting suggests that we live in a world:

> in which, ideologically or technologically, differences between humanity and monstrosity are more reversible and difficult to define. Bodies separating self and other wear thin in the face of rapid and extensive flows of capital, information, commodities and bodies. Binary oppositions (West-East/North-South) lose definition, geopolitical structures break up, diverse ethnic groupings emerge. (2013, p. 189).

In *Anguli Ma* Chi Vu explores flow, merging and emergence in a contemporary Australian Gothic landscape. Eastern and Western Gothic ‘tropes and strategies’ are threaded to explore the mirroring/multiplying of a Gothic cycle that is “inflected by specific histories and belief systems” (Byron, 2013, p. 3). This is a ‘de-centered’ gothic that draws from a fusion of histories and specific details and that still reflects deeply embedded human fears and anxieties.

Andrew Ng (2007, p.156) says contemporary “Australasian writers [who deploy Gothic tropes] are, on the one hand, suggesting that a new identity does not always set one free from painful pasts, and on the other hand refusing to comply with any white ideology’s version of who or what they are or ought to be”. *Anguli Ma* is set in the 1980s and tells of three women refugees of different ages and backgrounds (Đào, Bác and Sinh) who arrived in Melbourne from Vietnam, and an intruder in their midst (Anguli Ma). This narrative is interspersed by a cyclical journey presented as the story of “The Brown Man” and “The Monk”. Vu disrupts linear narrative and creates a new fusion of meaning that impacts all its parts.
Religion (Buddhism) and contemporary identity are threads in the stories that link and separate the individual characters. Anguli Ma is "the central figure in a traditional Buddhist folktale, a deranged killer who wears his victims' fingers in a garland around his neck" (Vu, Giramondo/book publicity material, 2012). In Vu’s story, this figure is reinterpreted in multiple ways – as an abattoir worker whose bloody day job and nocturnal excursions are contemporary manifestations of the traditional figure; as an essence or spirit that is at once opposite to and also innately part of the life drive; as a balancing force that destroys and creates; and as the embodiment of a folktale warning.

The text is a commentary on casual racism and the experiences of refugee communities and those features are woven into the narrative. Water is a central motif throughout her text. "The monk" and "the brown man" confront each other by a river, a waterfall is the site of a young woman’s (Sinh’s) disappearance, and Đào’s house that she and her boarders (Bác and Sinh) live in is constantly described in terms of dampness and mildew.

Water also features as a threshold. The refugees literally arrived by boat across a body of water; Đào imagines “things she did not bring with her to Australia. It was as though they had somehow floated up to the surface from forgotten crevices deep below. Somehow time had returned to the beginning, as though the past and the present had been shipwrecked against one another" (p. 92). The river that the monk and "the brown man” sit beside is also reflective of internal as much as external division, the waterfall both captivates and then is the inferred burial ground for another character. Water in all its manifestations in the text reflects the flow of time as a multiplicity.

The binary formulas of the Gothic (good vs. evil, spirit vs. material, nature vs. human nature) are here subverted to reveal the multiple nature and
connectedness of all things. Grief, loss, death and human connection are not opposed but interwoven. As Bác says after she witnesses the events in Đào’s life, “She had seen this depth of grief many times before, and knew that Đào would wallow in the circle of pain for years before she would become aware of her animal situation” (p. 94). By unleashing the animal within one character, Vu also explores what activates, represses and energises different individuals, and the animal within every human.

The character that is the villain originally doesn’t stay static and his motivation is complex, “there is no going back, you must do the job thoroughly because the thing in-between is worse off than the thing living or dead” (p. 71). The theme that each character is living and dead further complicate this. The past and present are “shipwrecked against one another” and each character represents something in-between. This reflects, perhaps, a Buddhist philosophy that embraces change as the only constant; a similar concept also underpins writing theorist Lajos Egri’s emphasis on the necessity for a character to experience transitions, growth and change in a text. No character starts and ends at the same point in Vu’s story and yet all are unified by the story’s end into a mosaic-whole.

Gothic tropes are used with gusto (dream sequences, dead animals, decay, a house divided into parts, hoarding, blood and meat, the garland of fingers, the murder and its hallucinatory descriptions) that contrasts the extremely clear (as crystal water) storytelling language and tone. This contradiction or friction between overt themes (time, connectedness of all things, the animal within), image (water and blood and body parts) and the calm, precise language choices creates an ability for the author to use banality and the everyday to shock as much as the overt Gothic moments. Bác describes, “Đào’s heart drying up like a piece of beef jerky.” The commonplace is given multiple meanings linking to images of destruction, decay and dismemberment.
The voices of the three main women characters are resolutely different to one another but also mirror the triplicate created by Anguli Ma and his physical manifestations in the text ("the monk", "the brown man" and the abattoir worker). This mirroring is in turn reflected in the structure – the past, present and future are as interconnected as the characters.

This story generates multiples by transmuting the binary into both the universal and its many parts – not in an "elitist" or "ahistorical" manner but rather informed by personal experiences, myth, spirituality and historical facts. *Anguli Ma* points to new directions for contemporary Australian Gothic (long) short stories that I have tried to emulate by using cycles, time fragmentation and connections to a quasi-mythological narrative in an Australian-anchored setting. It reflects the shift in the Australian Gothic from its Eurocentric colonial beginnings to a rich tapestry that draws from multiple sources, experiences and reflections. These stories have the transformative potential to be a force of reckoning, a site of exploring difference, change and, paradoxically but most importantly, connection.
5
The Short Story

Context

The short story has been described with reference to its length, its denouement and moments of epiphany, its intensity, compactness and capacity for ambiguity, and also for its emphasis on “closure, fragments and frames” and elliptical storytelling methods (Patel, 2012, p. 8). It is often viewed as an experimental form for writers or a form in perennial comparison or competition with the novel.\(^{108}\)

The short story is often only differentiated in terms of its length; as Lee suggests, “the only characteristic, then, on which all critics are agreed, is brevity” (2009, p. 4). From a creative practice perspective, I was interested in how other writers differentiate the short story in terms of its content and structure.

Poe’s original emphasis and contributions to criticism and literary theory are well recognised as being “responsible for the birth of the short story” (Patel, 2012, p. 3). In his 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice Told Tales*, Edgar Allan Poe emphasised the characteristics of brevity, totality, a single effect and a single sitting (of under an hour) to complete the reading of the short story. Poe boldly suggested that the highest literary craftsmanship (outside of poetry) could only be found in the prose tale.

Australian short story writer Cate Kennedy\textsuperscript{109} (\textit{The Novella}, panel, 2014) commented that the short story has one driving point and protagonist and few, if any, subplots and characters.\textsuperscript{110} American writer Joyce Carol Oates (2009, p. 122) suggests that, “longer fiction has the distinct advantage of involving the reader emotionally, while minimalist fiction [the short story] has the advantage of short, sharp, declarative art: surprise and revelation.” Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer (in May, 1994, p. 264) beautifully describes short stories as like “the flash of fireflies”, suggesting that: “A discrete moment of truth is aimed at – not the moment of truth, because the short story doesn’t deal in cumulatives” (p. 265). It has also been linked with a variety of art forms such as film, the visual arts and the letter (Patel, V, 2012, p. 7). This relationship and dialogue between forms is expressed in this project by the juxtaposition of my short stories alongside my short film \textit{Twitch Gothic} (2018).

A character in my research short film describes Barbara Baynton’s short fiction:

\begin{quote}
Her stories are like opening the door onto a butterfly enclosure. All the sentences that hover, and flit and quiver with this … force. It propels the reader across the page. […] A butterfly enclosure where they’re all eventually pinned to the walls. A short story does that, doesn’t it? It pins something quite sharply, a moment in time. And what’s life but a series of sharp pins? (\textit{Twitch Gothic}, 2018)
\end{quote}

Perhaps lacking the grace of Gordimer’s fireflies, this Gothic description does suggest the simultaneously fleeting and exact nature of the short-story reading experience. This differs with the length of time writing, editing and polishing every word, over several iterations, to get a story to the point where it can deliver the reader just such a unified and sharp experience.


\textsuperscript{110} Kennedy further contrasted the novella as a form that has similar constraints on subplots and characters, but allowed extra space to flesh out characters and setting. \textit{The Novella: Forgotten Stories}, panel discussion, Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, 2014.
In short-story theory, there is recognition of a “bifurcation” between anecdotal stories and sketches and the “high art” of the compressed original short story written with a plan and designed for a unity of effect on the reader (drawing from Brander Matthews (1912), cited in Harrington, 2008, p. 5; in May 1994, p. 75). This compressed artistic form, when executed properly, can offer the reader a thrilling experience. Mary Rohrberger (n.d.) states:

All of the characteristic devices of the short story finally relate to this end: juxtapositions that create montage patterns, the accumulation of details forming networks of images that become metaphors, the layering of time and place, the meshing of antitheses [...] and of course, the epiphany, a point of frozen energy operating just beyond understanding. (in Harrington, 2008, p. 7).

Although nominated as the “child” of last century by the writer Elizabeth Bowen (Hanson, 1989, p. 5) the art form draws from historical origins. Scholars such as Liggins, Maunder and Robbins (2011, p. 5) suggest the short story draws from older forms such as Aesop’s Fables, the Gospels, Boccaccio’s Decameron and Perrault’s fairy tales.

Charles May notes the importance of the “romance, fairy tale, [and] folktale form by the German romantics” on Poe’s (and other short-story writers’) conceptions of and innovations in the short story (1994, p. xvi) but May importantly also distinguishes this from the short story as art form. Adopting Wittgenstein’s concept of “family resemblances”, May notes that short stories are “closer to poetry and more ‘artistic’” [than the novel] because:

in their very shortness, short stories have remained close to the original source of narrative in myth, folktale, fable and fairy tale. They therefore, are more likely to focus on basic desires, dreams, anxieties, and fears than novels are and are thus more aligned with the original religious nature of narrative [...] are more apt to embody a timeless
theme [...] more likely to identify characters in archetypal terms and are more patterned and aesthetically unified than novels are. (1994, p. xxvi, my ellipses)

As an artistic form, the modern short story draws from but differs from the origins of the short-storytelling form. Drawing from theorists such as Charles May, Britain-based “publisher and champion of the short story” Comma Press suggests (here paraphrased) that there are three variants of the form: the Epical (stories with a twist or revelation) such as in stories by Poe, Bierce, Joyce, Chekhov, and exemplified in Carver’s short story ‘Cathedral’ (1981); the Lyrical (stories with a central image and flexible meaning), for example, Katherine Mansfield’s ‘The Fly’ (1922); and the Artifice (deliberately intertwined incongruity), such as Kafka’s Metamorphosis (1915).111

Yet, short-storytelling as a shared, communal activity has a continued role in society as a common practice and is arguably as old as human experience. An egalitarian ethos rings out in Stead’s statement (1968, p. 444) that “what is unique about the short story is that we can all tell one, live one, even write one down; that story is steeped in our view and emotion”. Reconsideration of the oral and anecdotal roots of storytelling is occurring in postcolonial critiques of the form (Awadalla & March-Russel, 2013). The ‘art form’ itself is fragmenting and fusing in new directions including: new technological-hybrid forms of narrative delivery (such as transmedia storytelling, hypertexts and/or interactive story podcasts), an emphasis on categorisation of form (for example micro-fiction, flash-fiction, ‘literary’ short stories, fairy tale rewrites, novellas) and a simultaneous move towards fusion genres (for example dystopian-gothic-sci fi short stories).112

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111 This information is directly drawn from the Comma Press website, which cites theorist Charles May as informing their content.
112 This is arguably a trend across literary art forms. Gerry Turcotte has recently explored the fusion of genres (detective, crime, sci fi, cyberpunk and gothic) and content (Indigenous Australian spirituality/issues of ownership; ceremony and voodoo; and a dystopian future replete with media conspiracies and cyber viruses to name some of the ground covered) in the Parrish
Short stories as a written art form remain a "communal" affair. Australian short-story theorist and academic Bruce Bennett (2009, p. 156) writes:

More than other literary genres, short stories are dependent on newspapers and magazines and anthologies for first publication. The literary activity of short story writers may therefore be represented as an individual struggling for self-expression, but a more comprehensive and realistic view includes writers, editors, publishers and readers in a continual process of interaction – each adjusting or readjusting their role in relation to the others’ needs and requirements.

The short story is the result of a creative practice that involves growth and shedding, overlaps and repetitions, omissions and revelations. This practice is then embodied in a narrative art form of compression, brevity, omission and fragmentation. There is so much action behind the scenes that it is the very picture of Hemingway’s iceberg theory\textsuperscript{113} in both the creative practice process and, hopefully, its resulting form.

\textsuperscript{113} Ernest Hemingway famously suggested that a good short story was like an iceberg; only a small amount on the surface was visible, the rest remained below. His was a theory where less is more.
The Gothic short story

Joyce Carol Oates suggests that “the surreal, raised to the level of poetry, is the very essence of the ‘gothic’: that which displays the range, depth, audacity and fantastical extravagance of the human imagination” (Oates, 1996, p. 9). By emphasising the dream state, the surreal and the poetic, Oates here echoes Poe’s original hopes for the short-story form. When reading stories by Barbara Baynton, Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter or Edgar Allan Poe, I was reminded of the capacity of the short story. When reading works by these writers I experienced, as a reader, the full piercing torrent of a [Gothic] literary experience: escape, catharsis, pleasure, awe, terror and relief. The notion of intensity and surprise in a short story is brought to bear on often violent, extreme, taboo or mysterious events in the Gothic short story. It is a facet that can be linked to the original commercial success of the Gothic short story.

Luke Thurston (2016, p. 173) highlights the apogee of the fin de siècle Gothic occurring simultaneously with the “industrial transformation of publication and communication”. Around this time, in England and Europe, many publications began printing and circulating short stories (Grove, 1997). Added to this were the pamphlets and anthologies and the “Christmas Crawlers”, “penny dreadfuls”, “shilling shockers” and Gothic blue books (Hoeverler, 2011; Mighall, 2002; Haining, 1995). Mayo (1942) highlights the importance of the magazine trade not only for distribution of Gothic tales but as a way to track the general interest in this form and genre from the reading public, rather than relying on potentially unfavourable critical reviews or incomplete indexes. Hoeveler (2011) notes the role of circulating libraries in allowing these chapbooks and short tales to reach

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114 *Bush Studies* (1902).
115 See 'The Lottery', *The New Yorker* (1948, June 26), and *Shirley Jackson Novels and Stories* (2010).
117 For example, 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), 'Berenice' (1835) or 'The Fall of The House of Usher' (1839) available in any number of Poe's collected works.
readers across regions, classes, ages and sexes. The Gothic short story was able to reach a wide readership through this explosion in inexpensive small press publications, perhaps creating an association between “cheapness” and the Gothic short story that has never completely shifted.

The 19th-century spread of small-press publications and an expanding readership coincided with “an increase of leisure time for women of the upper and middle classes [who] fed this demand and perhaps accounts for the burgeoning of literature by, for and about women” (Patrick, 1995, p. 75). Hensher (2015) notes that the development of the short story in Britain, coinciding with the availability of small press and other publishing outlets, meant that “literature could be engaged and argumentative, and relevant to the front pages” and that there was a “conviction among editors that something interesting, unusual and new might find a readership” in the pages of the periodicals, papers and magazines of early 19th century Britain. This capacity to shock, rattle, disturb and speak to the moment exists in short fiction today.

Some realist writers or others working across many genres and forms have deployed the Gothic genre as a part of their short-story practice. For example, Canadian writers Margaret Atwood118 and Alice Munro119 write short stories infused with the Gothic, and this was encouragement to explore the short-story form for someone who had previously attempted fantasy, magical realism and realist fiction. Other celebrated short story writers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and M.R. James focused on ghost stories and gothic tropes in their works.120 It was, however, reading Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories as a young adult (and those of

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118 For example Atwood’s collection Stone mattress: Nine tales (2014).
119 See for instance Munro’s short story collections Friend of My Youth (1990) and Too Much Happiness (2009) as examples of Munro’s Southern Ontario Gothic short fiction.
120 Collections include for instance Elizabeth Gaskell’s Tales of Mystery and the Macabre (2008), and M.R. James’ Collected Ghost Stories (2007). Both authors are regularly featured in short story, ghost and gothic story anthologies.
Stephen King, *the* horror writer of today) that originally embedded the Gothic short story as a permanent fixture in my reading and later writing experiments.

Arguably the greatest Gothic short-story writer of all time, Poe published in many American journals and periodicals. His short stories established the foundations for science fiction, detective stories and murder mysteries (Nicol, 2012, p. 265). Poe drew from Gothic writers such as Radcliffe when he began exploring denouement, the ("explained") supernatural and the intuitive in his own gothic, crime and mystery tales. Poe's tales emphasise the importance of mood, setting and explore the psychological instability of his characters. Short-story theorists, writers and critics cite Poe as the father of the modern short story and as the father of the Gothic tale.121 Poe's review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* is often cited as the first attempt at theorising about the modern short story (Harrington, 2008, pp. 4–5). This further blurs the birth of the modern short story and the Gothic short story into at once singular and multiple events; monstrous fraternal twins.

In his reviews and writings such as "The Philosophy of Composition"122 (1846) and 'The Poetic Principle'123 (1848–1850), Poe identified the importance of the length of the story (or reading experience) as a key attribute and elaborated on his concept of unity of effect. Poe (1841/2018, p. 197) suggested that a short story “may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric”. This

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121 Poe has also been called the 'father of the detective story' (Docherty, 1988, p. 4).
122 This essay details Poe's supposed approach to the creation of one of his best-known narrative poems, *The Raven* (1845, p. 18): "Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning — at the end, where all works of art should begin ..." Poe suggests: "Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention." (pp. 3–4).
123 This opinion piece discusses poetry in terms of its emphasis on truth, beauty, and the importance of rhythm and the ideal length to explore these ambitious themes.
underscores the writing skills of the short-story craftsperson and draws attention to the overall impact or effect of the story on the reader.

Haggerty writes that the central question for the Gothic is, "What manner of prose narrative most effectively embodies a nightmare vision?" (1989, p. 4). Haggerty's argument is that the short story or, as he describes it, Gothic tale, "can answer the ontological and epistemological, as well as the structural demands of the Gothicists" (p. 14) by resolving one of the "basic problem[s] inherent in the Gothic between novelistic structure and affective intention" (p. 65). The novel, he argues, cannot maintain the intensity of effect that the best Gothic works achieve. The short story, as Poe demonstrated, showed how "the momentary flashes of real power in the Gothic novel could come to inform and sustain entire works [in the short story]" (p. 86). Poe, Haggerty says, rejected "traditional" (novelistic) notions of character, setting and plot that were detrimental to the affective force of a tale (p. 88). This doesn't mean that character, setting and plot were not as integral to the short story – rather they worked for different ends in the reading experience.

Lasseter (in a review of Haggerty) suggests "[w]e can hardly disagree that any literature that is inherently affective will 'mean' differently to readers whose 'affects' differ. It is obvious then, that Gothic fiction invites a reader-response approach" (1990, p. 115). Haggerty argues that an emphasis on reader engagement is intensified when the Gothic genre and the short-story form collide because the manipulation of the reader's emotions was, for Poe (1989, p. 85) and other Gothic short story writers, a primary aim.

The intentions of the writer and the reception by the reader are key to enacting the Gothic, an approach, Xavier Aldana Reyes (2015) argues, that does not diminish the importance of continuing tropes and themes nor the catharsis offered by Gothic texts. Aldana Reyes's recent work on an "affective approach" to
the Gothic sees a focus on affect “as a process of psychological engagement recognising and celebrating the physiology at stake in this mode’s fictional translations” (2015, p. 20). This approach highlights that texts that “do not “look” but “act” the part” (p. 20) can still be Gothic in impact or reception. The affective nature of the Gothic is part of what makes the genre malleable and pervasive. The reader and the writer are both practically and conceptually intertwined in the creation and reception of the text.

By Edgar Allan Poe’s implied standards, it is the (imagined) reader in mind that the writer has present over his shoulder from the very start to the finish when creating a short story. Apart from a nascent theoretical concept for the short-story form, a Gothic image of ghostly apparition or uncanny intrusion at the elbow of the writer has appeared as a trope in stories by writers such as Marcus Clarke124 and Lucy Sussex125, among others. Poe’s detective character Dupin, too, is characterised as “double” in his voice (treble/tenor), his approaches to his work (imaginative and scientific) and his relationship to the ‘Other’ (the criminal) (Docherty, 1988, pp. 7–8). The double theme that runs through Poe’s work mirrors another complex relationship in the Gothic genre – a “double helix” dialogue between theory and practice. In Gothic Studies it is recognised that critical theory impacts further theory and (short-story) creative practice and that creative practice also informs the theory and other creative works.

There is a popular belief that short stories must provide a “bang” or a “twist” but this notion has been challenged even within the Epical short-story variant. The shock-twist developed into epiphany, revelation and lyricism in works by writers including Joyce, Chekhov and Hemingway (CommaPress, 2018). It has a widely different meaning and impact when compared to, for example, the wrap-up endings of a colonial Australian Gothic ghost story. Arguably, the American

124 ‘The Haunted Author’ (1884).
125 ‘Kay and Phil’ in Matilda Told Such Dreadful Lies (2011).
Gothic short story elevated the shudder or twist, and retrospective revelation, into its own art form.

Haggerty’s analysis contrasts the modern short story as a distinct form of experimentation with the novel. He suggests techniques such as the use of fragmentation and framing devices in Victorian Gothic novels reflects the genre’s unwieldiness in this form, its desire to be liberated from the “draining ties of the novel form” (1989, p. 105). Further, the unreliability of the narrator (p. 105) and a multiplicity of interpretations are crucial to the genre (p. 10), which are reflected in the ambiguity and open-ended possibilities available in the short-story form.

The importance of tone, imagery and atmosphere is heightened by and accented further in the Gothic. Cox (2005, p.2) states that:

Because short stories are self-contained, they also display a dramatic unity, building swiftly towards resolution. Poe allies the short story with poetry and painting, referring to a ‘unity of language and impression’ created by the close integration of language, imagery and form.

Stephanie Branson (1995, p. 63) notes that setting becomes “a living character” of a story in the fantastic and/or Gothic modes. Botting (2014, p. 113) suggests that Poe consciously used “conventional gothic devices like the old castle, the life-like portrait and discovered manuscript” and that “Poe’s use of gothic images and effects draws out the darker moods of setting and psyche and, moreover, draws them to the surface” (p. 111). Foreshadowing, pathetic fallacy and personification, as well as framing devices and recurring motifs, are techniques that can do the work of detailing a character’s internal mood. These techniques are used in Gothic stories as signposts of foreboding. They establish
recognised elliptical detours and operate as thematic shorthand for the reader, and they layer and/or flesh-out character.

On one view, the Gothic actually predates some of the techniques and devices that are now viewed as contemporary and experimental; including metafiction, intertextual dialogues, framing devices, non-linear storytelling, fragments and microfictions. The Gothic short-story form has long deployed epistolary techniques and the use of fragmented sources and deliciously unreliable narrators.

Grove emphasises “[A]fter all, almost universally Gothic texts are fragmented, interrupted, unreadable, or presented through multiple frames or narrators” (1997, p. 2). These narrative techniques are exemplified in the use of a diary (used in Stevenson’s 1886 work The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde); the manuscript detailing the paintings in an abandoned mansion (The Oval Portrait (1842) by Poe); and the charmed portrait (such as in Hume Nisbet’s story The Old Portrait (1890) and Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890). Henry James uses the fireside gathering that opens The Turn of the Screw (1898) as a narrative framing device to tell his uncanny tale that focuses on an unreliable protagonist. The reader is positioned as voyeur to the spectacle unfolding in the story, perhaps made even more complicit because of this position. These techniques ratchet up the tension between what the reader thinks they know and the potentially limited awareness enjoyed by the story’s characters or the protagonist.

These narrative devices can be used to create gaps and ambiguity, to hasten or prolong the time between events in a story, as in a diary entry selection of interconnected vignettes (such as employed in my story ‘Place’). Patrick (1995, p. 82) suggests that along with humour and irony, “the writer of tales of terror, the literary terrorist, if you will” explores “what might be real if we have the courage
to suspend habitual modes of thought and action” and that the courage and creativity of women writers sees the use of techniques such as gaps, absences, apparitions, horror, anger and irony (p. 83) to protest “the narrowness of women’s roles and limitations on women’s influence” (p. 75). Abundance seethes below cracked or fractured surfaces.

The mode of the short story – its craft, characters and affect on a reader – will, obviously, be influenced by the focus of the author. Barbara Patrick (1995, pp. 73–74) writes that the American writers of a distinctive “feminine Gothic mode”:

Differ from their male counterparts in that the women’s tales are not so much about what we cannot know (epistemological doubt) or the fact that people frighten themselves with chimeras (psychodramas): Their supernatural tales address a world in which things are frightening – not least of which are the silencing and marginalization of women”.

These worlds of things that “are frightening” are put under the microscope of precision within the short story. No word is wasted; no fragment of description is irrelevant. What is there is suggestive, partial, momentary, yet still connected to an historic web of symbolic meanings. For women readers and writers, this may include an exploration of “social evils, systematically perpetrated against women” (Patrick, 1995, p. 74). Allusions and symbols work overtime in specific contexts and also provoke a grand conversation between similar short stories and archetypes across the Gothic genre and about representations of “femaleness”.

Mary Eagleton notes both the “subversive potential of women’s writing” and that

Feminist criticism tends to be divided between those who see the shift from hero to heroine as an important political move, and those who doubt whether a
change of personnel alters fundamentally the aesthetic and social values of the form. (In Hanson (Ed.) 1989, p. 58)

This is an especially acute observation when considering a form and genre collision that has often been used to explore degradation of and violence towards female protagonists. The short story form and its protagonists – their contributions to the expression of gender issues and concepts – are impacted by the genre and its tropes and conventions; the author's intentions and craftsmanship; the sociopolitical environment of its creation and its networks of distribution.

Writers such as Frank O'Connor in *The Lonely Voice* (1962/2011, p. 18) have emphasised short-story characters as “outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society”. If, as O'Connor (1962/2011) and May (1994) suggest, short stories lean towards the archetypal character and the timeless theme, these features are further emphasised in the Gothic short story where the writer is writing either to or against some established character traits. Botting (2014, p. 111) proposes that in Poe's stories:

> Women, especially, figure the fatal and sexual intensities of emotional disturbances made almost solid and then returned to a phantasmal state. Their lack of substance – pale evanescent, ghostly, dead – like the uncertain animation of decor and storytelling, mirrors the lack of consistency and assurance assumed by male protagonists, narrators and tales themselves.

This amplifies the role that context, framing devices, atmosphere and tone have in allowing for a character to leave restrictive binaries and upset archetypal functions and roles. It puts greater emphasis on what is included in characterisation choices and the relationships (or 'orchestration') with other
characters. The short-story form and the Gothic genre combination offer an opportunity to experiment in the liminal spaces inherent to the short story.

The Gothic short story explores new voices in narration and exploits the fragmented, fairy-tale, epistolary narratives and found-object devices to explore terrain that is at once "outlawed" and the necessary site of narrative (and real) change. Angela Carter writes, "I do believe that a fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is not a logbook of events) can help to transform reality itself" (1979/2006, p. ix). Carter’s unique weaving of genre and style foreshadows contemporary short-fictions’ efforts to interrupt assumptions about genre and form, and to self-consciously explore "rounded" characters and new voices.
Gothic hybrid short stories: Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*

A detour on my research journey allowed me to examine up close the work of celebrated writer Angela Carter. Carter, certainly a “literary terrorist”, wickedly challenged both form and genre.\(^{126}\) Reading some of the manuscripts of *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) in the British Library, I was struck by the exacting ritual manipulation of almost every single word to extract maximum symbolic meaning and sensual pleasure for the reader. In ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, Carter changed “white and unmarked as a wedding dress” to “as a spilled bolt of bridal satin”. She constantly revised and contracted descriptions for instance “this man with the head and arms of a lion” became “this leonine apparition”. As with many writers, in the drafting and editing process she cut unnecessary words, corrected typos, changed passive to active verbs and chose evermore-evocative language. The impact of each successive change built on her exquisitely rendered miniatures. I was allowed, by this engagement with Carter’s drafts, to see how this Velazquez-like writer painted her short-story masterpieces.

In Carter’s relentless drafting process, it was often the title and first and last lines of a story that underwent the most change. Carter has described the Gothic tale as interpreting “everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience” (1979/2006, p. xx) in contrast with “fragments of epiphanic experience” that to her exemplified 20th century short stories. In a sense, Carter was also articulating “femaleness” in her Gothic-infused creative practice and outlook.

“Everyday experience” is something that women had long learned to communicate through subterranean imagery – either because it involves communicating experiences people don’t (want to) understand (menstruation,\

\(^{126}\) For a recent discussion of the grotesque in Carter’s longer form works see Duffy, 2016.
pregnancy, birth, motherhood, female sexuality, miscarriage, loss of a child, the female body and/or psyche) or that readers were told was either too mundane or shocking (the lived experience of being a woman, as existing predominantly outside the sphere of power and politics). I combine a Gothic approach and the horror of losing a child in the story originally titled 'Polly Likes to Play' (now 'Loss') and incorporated layers of mundane detail to anchor an otherworldly experience in the everyday world.

Creative practice decisions in genre and form can be linked to feminist discourse. As Branson suggests, “both feminism as a sociopolitical project and fantasy [Gothic genre] as a literary mode require imaginative departures from conventional interpretations of society and reality” (1995, p. 70). Carter’s approach counters a binary of entrapment (woman as invisible or disgusting) by elevating the quotidian into shocking, sexual, vibrant and brutal visibility.

Her work can, paradoxically perhaps, be viewed as a model of restraint and complete control. Carter’s style is baroque, voluptuous and excessive. The amount of sieving, and control, needed to ensure the smooth flow of the reader’s experience through her ornate landscapes puts “dun-coloured” realist storytelling in the shade. Every word is fine tuned, even if the effect is of a voluminous orgy of language. Carter wove fairy tale and Gothic and magical realist styles together to create her unique voice. In doing so she created a “multi-faceted glittering diamond reflecting and refracting a variety of desire and sexuality – heterosexual female sexuality – which unusually for the time, 1979, are told from a heterosexual female viewpoint” (Simpson, 2006, p.viii).

Carter used the violent sexual imagery that abounded in fairy tales and conventional Gothic stories and subverted its meaning through challenging the narrative point of view (often it is the female protagonist who narrates an intensely subjective experience), structural interventions (such as switching
tenses in ‘The Erl-King’) and Gothic trope reversals (the final character transformation in ‘The Tiger’s Bride’).

*The Bloody Chamber* is arguably a precursor to some of the short-story fiction (not necessarily Gothic) now enjoying resonance such as Carmen Maria Machado’s fascinating ‘The Husband Stitch’ (2014) and Angela Slatter’s award winning dark fantasy story collections such as *The Bitterwood Bible and Other Recountings* (2014). Carter’s no-holds-barred female point of view echoes in contemporary works describing sexuality and, importantly, sexual violence from the female protagonist’s perspective.\(^\text{127}\) This influence is evident in my fiction, for example in the ordering, structure and narrative point-of-view choices in ‘Degustation’.

\(^{127}\) Such as: Roxanne Gay’s provocative short stories, including her collection *Difficult Women* (2017), Beejay Silcox’s investigations of pungent teenage sexuality in her short story ‘Slut Trouble’ (commended in the Australian Book Review’s 2016 Elizabeth Jolley Short Story Prize) and the candid point-of-view detail during sex, in Kristin Roupenian’s 2017 *New Yorker* Magazine Story ‘Cat Person’.
The Australian (Gothic) Short Story

Short stories have been inextricably linked in Australia with the Gothic. Early writers such as Marcus Clarke, Barbara Baynton and Rosa Praed used the short story form to explore aspects of this genre. Early Gothic works appeared in magazines such as the *Centennial Magazine*, the *Australian Town and Country Journal* and in collections such as the 1891 publication of *Coo-ee: Tales of Australian Life by Australian Ladies* (Gelder, 2007, pp. 117–18) and of course in *The Bulletin* magazine. These works helped to establish the new ‘national’ Australian literature, and were claimed as firmly in the realist tradition, yet these works are imbued with repetition, fear, anxiety, brutal and violent realities and Gothic tropes and motifs. Nature itself is at times depicted as an almost supernatural entity.

*The Bulletin* short story style, explored above in relation to Lawson, was short, nationalistic and embraced “distinctively Australian” themes and settings (O’Neill, 2015, pp. 82–83). This type of realist short story has arguably ended up dominating short fiction in Australia up until the 1960s (and beyond). *The Bulletin* helped glorify frontier encounters and entrenched a grim view of the outback in the collective imagination. Although it perhaps helped to entrench a view of the Gothic as feminine and frivolous, *The Bulletin* published some of the developing genre’s best examples, including works by Barbara Baynton. Yet, many Australian women writers of the short story exist at a blurry spot, a place of invisibility where the short story and the female writer are doubly marginalised. As a form, it mirrors much that has been repressed in the national fictions, and national history, of Australia.
The Australian short-story form generally appears to be in a healthy place for both experimentation and craft. Writers continue to re-energise the form, if not the Gothic, experimental and fantastic genres more specifically. Collections and annual 'best of' anthologies remain popular and in print and the "first national event to focus exclusively on the short story form" (ASSF website, 2018) the Australian Short Story Festival held its first festival in 2016 and is an annual event.

Craig Bolland (2016) has noted a contemporary trend towards open-ended stories, suggesting:

> The twist-in-the-tale ending is decades out of fashion, and even endings that tie everything up neatly may be robbing the reader of one of the great pleasures of the form. The short story is an ideal place for an ending that opens up, that lingers, that lands on a note or a feeling or impression rather than a plot point. (Bolland, 2016).

This sentiment is also reflected in contemporary short-story practice in the US. Bolland (2016), however, warns against an “almost Gothic malaise” that can infect the print-friendly and pervasive “pared back” Australian realist short story. His concern points to a persistent reliance on a “weird melancholy” outback or pastoral setting in Australian short fiction. The Gothic short story typifies this inner paradox at the heart of Australian short literature more generally; it is capable of shock and revelation and, due to its particular history in Australia, it

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128 Including the case studies for this PhD as well as the much lauded story-cycles of Frank Moorhouse and recently, award-winning collections by Ceridwen Dovey, Moreno Giovannoni, Tony Birch, Cate Kennedy, Nam Le, Ryan O'Neill, Fiona McFarlane, Krissy Kneen and Ellen van Neerven,

129 For some examples: The Australian Short Story (Hergenhan (Ed.), 6th edn, 2018), The Faber Book of Contemporary Australian Short Stories (Bail (Ed.), 1988), and Black Inc’s annual The Best Australian Short Stories – although this series moved to a new format and title of Best Summer Stories in 2018.
can perversely bore and perpetuate caricatures and stereotypes, rather than challenge them.


In critical approaches there is often a nod to women writers from the 1980s, and more recently there has been an effort to include stories by contemporary Aboriginal Australian writers and writers with diverse cultural backgrounds.\(^\text{130}\) The short story is an area of criticism that has excluded women writers. Julie Brown (1995) recognised this blind-spot in American short fiction and notes the way that traditional short-story criticism seems to roughly track through the same steps in definition, theory, examples and origins of the form that perpetually highlight the same voices, theorists and examples of “masters” of the genre.\(^\text{131}\) In Australia, there remains a significant focus on the same repeated histories, writers, stories and Australia’s strong tradition of (occasionally soporific) social realism.

Anthologies such as *Joyful Strains, Making Australia Home* (2013), the *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (Heiss and Minter (Eds.), 2008) and *The

\(^{130}\) See also Wilding (1994) for his survey of the Australian short story that references the emerging voices of Aboriginal, migrant and women writers that had largely been repressed or excluded in the years leading up to his critical review.

\(^{131}\) British and American (and other national literatures) have published critical books focusing on women short story writers including Bailey & Young (Eds.) (2015) *British Women Short Story Writers: the New Woman to Now*, and collections edited respectively by Julie Brown (1995) and Elizabeth Harrington (2008). I did not discover a book of critical essays on Australian women short story writers, although there are anthologies of short stories by women writers such as some of the collections named in this thesis.
Penguin Anthology of Australian Women’s Writing (Spender (Ed.), 1988) are important for this reason. One of the aims of my project was to place some less-known names of short-story writers alongside those long accepted as being part of the tradition. There are many more names and stories that could be included. There isn’t the space here to contextualise all the old, emerging and new trends in the Australian (Gothic) short story landscape. Exploring these pathways further will reveal more about the impact of global influences and technological changes on social and cultural shifts in contemporary storytelling.

My final case study perhaps continues the critical trend in highlighting a well-known male contributor to the Australian short story, a respected and canonical “master” of the form. Peter Carey’s ‘Peeling’ does investigate areas of silence, oppression and rebellion in the art form. These are the very spaces that contemporary women writers are exploiting in their short fiction to provocative effect.

I would argue inclusion (of Australian: women’s writing/ feminist short fiction/ gender fluid stories) in international collections such as in Figes (Ed.) (1996) The Penguin Book of International Women’s Stories could also provide an important way to connect into a wider/global dialogue. The inclusion of these collections is only to suggest their importance to the short story’s ability to linger in the (national and international) conversation and in contributing to a building/sharing/distribution of diverse voices in the form itself – although these collections can also perversely reinforce assumptions about “canonical” texts and act as forces of exclusion.
In Peter Carey’s London-set ‘Peeling’ from *The Fat Man in History* (1974), a female character and the short-story form are both unravelled. Carey is the award-winning author of many novels including *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *The True History of Kelly Gang* (2000); his short fiction is as sharp and arguably even more provocative.

‘Peeling’ opens with a male character’s first-person perspective engaged in some self-reflective mental masturbation from the centre of his dirty nest of bed sheets. He can look beyond his small world but if he were to it would only be, he tells us, to look for his own reflection. A female character, object of his desire, lives upstairs. In the first line we are introduced to her by an overly emphasised, textured physicality – her “soft slow feet” that are “padding softly above me”. It is, however, her strange preoccupation with white dolls that captivates the male protagonist and sets up the metaphor within the metaphor of this story – his peeling of her.

The use of the dolls in Carey’s story reflects not only the protagonist’s actions of peeling, and a deconstruction and undressing of woman within the patriarchy, but also the female character’s job as abortion support worker, and the act of reading this story. The white dolls are a specific motif evoking associations with madness and exsanguination, and draw on the intertextual history of this uncanny symbol for, in this case, woman and identity.

Early in the story the male protagonist refers to a friend who comments that the protagonist’s relationship with his female neighbour has an almost “boyscout flavour about it”. There is something of the “boys will be boys” and disturbing...
undercurrent in this exchange. Before any meeting of the female protagonist, the reader is introduced to the male protagonist's description of her and to this secondary male perspective.

The story starts in the protagonist's bed, head, and thoughts, and never really leaves this proto-erotic zone of mealy-mouthed imprisonment. It can be read as enacted in the liminal spaces between fantasy and reality (Rubik, 2005). This, however, does little to displace the shock at the raw and overt destruction of the female character. Arguably the narrative actually frustrates reading this as only a projection of male fantasy – if only because of the (undesired) “intrusion” of the female character’s voice.

Carey’s protagonist entreats us, “Let me describe my darling. Shall I call her that? An adventure I had planned to keep, but now it is said. Let me describe her to you” (1974/1993, p. 36). By using the word “describe” to introduce the female character, Carey explicitly invokes the male gaze as the perspective of the main character and makes the reader complicit in this act of voyeurism – his words and projections and the reader’s imagination and projections. The story reveals how a heterosexual male point of view can frame female characters, female sexuality and the reading of ‘woman’.

The characters share an occasional meal and very few personal details, as is his desire. He wants to explore this woman on his own terms, at his own pace. The male ‘I’ becomes rattled at the points in the story when she subverts his narration of her. For instance:

She says, I help do abortions.
She may as well have kicked me in the stomach, I would have preferred it. She has come back to abortions again. I did not wish to discuss anything so ... deep?
I say, we all have our jobs to do, should we be so lucky as to have a job, which as you know

[...] She says, I made up George and my son ... they were daydreams.
I say, you could have kept that for next year. You could have told me at Christmas, it would have been something to look forward to.
She says, how can you look forward to something you don’t know is coming? (pp. 39–41).

“She” is called Nile and is contextualised by what the narrator presumes are her trips to the market, from where she returns with her bags of dolls. At home these dolls and her “monopoly money” surround her, which serve to infantilise her. These dolls are stripped by the woman, “Those that have hair she plucks bald, and those with eyes lose them, and those with teeth have them removed and she paints them, slowly, white” (p. 35). This is a key and disturbing image embedded in the short story's structure and in its explicit and implicit content: stripping, embalming, silencing, erasing.

When Nile speaks about her job and starts undermining his picture of her, this is the only textual “justification” for his act of annihilation of her selfhood. Tate (1987, p. 398) argues:

[...] she is a woman who kills babies. The earth-mother myth is invoked ironically: Nile, named for the river that brings forth life and fertility, procures death as an abortionist. In the context of the story, her death is not represented as a loss because she represents no life.

However, the narrator doesn’t appear to judge her for her job, rather for the timing of her telling him. Carey is preying on the reader’s discomfort, as much as using her job as a way of further distancing her from the protagonist's projected ideal. This story raises uncomfortable questions about the emphasis we place on
the aspects of identity we choose to foreground, and those we choose to relegate.¹³⁴

Tate (1987) suggests, “Nile’s body is a text of femininity, waiting to be unravelled and explained. The narrator peels away her textual surfaces (represented by her clothing and multiple bodies) to find what lies beneath.” (p. 398) It is “she” that hastens the physical connection between them, “it seems silly ... to wait” but she asks him to stop at a critical juncture; after undressing her, he reaches for an earring, she asks him to stop (similar in ways to Machado’s ‘The Husband Stitch’ (2014), which importantly gives a female perspective on just such an action). He doesn’t stop.

He sets about a total destruction of her sense of self through his actions to destroy her exterior and hidden and protected selves – her body and her sexuality, her work, her identity, and the revealing of the parts of self that she didn’t even know made her who she is, or those that he projects onto her. All the ‘work’ of luring, ignoring, dismissing, framing her for the reader implicitly and for himself explicitly, the undressing and objectifying of Nile, was leading up to this – his gratification, and her total annihilation. A different kind of ‘climax’ to that of Lawson’s ‘Drover’s Wife’ throwing the snake on the fire.

After layers of her artistic clothing and accoutrements are peeled, the protagonist and Nile are both shocked to discover inside of her – an unexpected layer – “a male of some twenty odd years. His face is the same as her face, his hair the same. But the breasts have gone, and the hips; they lie in a soft spongy heap beside the discarded pendant.” (p. 42) She becomes, “too preoccupied with the penis to see me reach for the second earring and give it a sharp pull” (p. 43).

¹³⁴ I reflect on what it might be like to lose a child in the short story ‘Loss’ – an act of imagination of what many describe as the impossible to describe.
These actions, the peelings and pullings, are violently described with overt masculine emphasis.

The next unexpected layer reveals a younger, slimmer woman. As the protagonist touches this body, parts of her disappear (like Gwen’s face in my story ‘Lotion’), “until headless, armless, legless, I carelessly lose my grip and she falls to the floor.” What is finally revealed is “a small doll, hairless, eyeless, and white from head to toe” (p. 43). This loss of grip comes at the end of the story as the writer leaves the shattered image in the reader’s mind to continue its work, beyond his grip and out of his control. The conclusion of ‘Peeling’ almost parodies H. G. Wells’ masculinely wrought description of the short story form:

[a] short story is, or should be, a simple thing; it aims at producing one single effect; it has to seize the attention at the outset, and never relaxing, gather together more and more until the climax is reached. (Wells, 1911, ‘The Contemporary Novel’, speech summarily quoted in Brown, 2014, p. xviii)

Tate describes the protagonist’s frenzied peeling as profiting “the male reader” who “gains, for he has uncovered the secret of woman and, uncovered, she is no threat to his masculinity” (1987, p. 398). The woman’s vagina (by contrast to the described fascination with the penis), as Tate notes (p. 397), is never mentioned – just her soft fleshy hips and disappearing legs.

The story does, however, offer complicated if disturbing readings of gender, sex, desire and difference. This doesn’t always occur in story and media today. For instance, the practice to read “lesbian or bisexual” as a paraphrase for male heterosexual desire is a commonly blurred area in media representations of desire, as is the confusion some readers may have with a character who doesn’t present to them as a typical gender, and another who actively assumes a non-prototypical performance of gender.
Psychoanalytic approaches that express ideas about the incorporation of the masculine and feminine in human identity can be misappropriated to suggest that a woman who is “strange” must be understood in relation to the metaphorical penis; as repressed, male-gendered, or have “penis envy”.

‘Peeling’ is far from a simple story of a bad man and a victim woman. Carey’s transcendence of this reductive binary is partly achieved through his complicating the narrative in the “She said, I said” dialogue that snakes like a crooked spine throughout the story, and the way that he implicates the reader in Nile’s destruction.

‘Peeling’ is a reminder of the many “frames” and layers that are deployed within the short-story form. Mary Shelley deployed frames within frames in Frankenstein, which shifted “the burden of interpretive responsibility” (Haggerty, 1989, p. 43) to the reader. In his works, Poe emphasised the role of the “teller” of the story (Haggerty, 1989, p. 89) and the emotions and response from the reader. In writing a short story, in order to arrive at a “unity of effect” in a conversation with a reader, there are spaces elided, things left unsaid, and also, layers deliberately, consciously, peeled back as Carey does in his short story.

Female-anchored perspectives that are emerging in contemporary short fiction are privileging the female/feminine points of view across a spectrum of experiences. Like Carter’s and Carey’s short stories, the short-story form, and a Gothic or Gothic-inspired hybrid genre, can deploy narrative techniques that disrupt conventions to explore a less paradigmatic way of storytelling. Stories that explore from a female-centred perspective may also further disrupt notions of character as well as gender, desire, sexuality, power and identity.
**Practice reflection: ‘Justify’**

The sense of being persecuted and also of being the persecutor pervades the story ‘Justify’. In this story, millions of viewers of a court program are active in the process of condemnation and interact via an imagined type of Twitter-bot.\textsuperscript{135}

Gothic short-story writer Shirley Jackson has cautioned that storytelling craft is involved when using symbolism, imagery and motifs. Jackson (2015, pp. 395–406) advises to use these literary devices as a “garlic”-like addition to the short-story recipe; success lies in not being overly generous in their application and distribution. Compression in a short story can mean that an overuse of a motif becomes heavy-handed, and risks shaking a reader out of their absorption or interest in a short story. ‘Justify’ was an example in my work of exactly what Jackson might have described as “too much garlic”.

It was initially a failed experiment in terms of control and unity of effect but it did, as a part of the practice, help me to engage with multiple viewpoints of the persecuted and persecutors, and the idea of violence as a state-sanctioned social activity. In the editing process, a chunky removal of authorial intrusion meant that the story was better able to emerge and the narrative tension was somewhat restored.

‘Justify’ asks us to question whether new, more globalised and especially online, attitudes towards women are entrenching or fragmenting old codes. The central conceit of the piece and its violent ending are used to explore this issue. The “sense-battering” of the victim Vee portrays our furious and feverish ability to

\textsuperscript{135} This maniacal aspect of social media/global shaming was also portrayed in the UK Black Mirror series in their extraordinary episode ‘Hated in the Nation’ (Netflix, October, 2016). My story was submitted a year earlier and I don’t pretend to that standard, though I do believe my story shares a great similarity in theme, and with the impact of the raging "bot"-like killers, (drone-like message beetles that kill Vee in my story and robotic bees in 'Hated in the Nation') as an embodiment of social media hatred that pervades Australian and global online cultures.
swiftly shame and condemn a woman who steps outside her place. It asks us to question narrative, and who is telling the story?

In 'Justify', silence is enforced on Vee. She is resistant to this. Enforced silence is not a sign of stoic empowerment (for instance drawing on the archetype of the silent but suffering bush-woman) but rather a symbol of a sick society. This story asks who is framing this woman’s story? How are we complicit as “viewers/readers”? Without her subjective voice, can we ever really be informed by just images and second-party commentary? Do the framers have vested interests in shaping a particular narrative?

This story also attempts to engage the reader in an analysis of The Producer and her role in perpetuating the violence and stereotyping of women in general. The loss of Vee’s eyes and her collapse and death are representative of the blindness not only of The Producer to her role in this, but also of our deeply embedded and psychologically complex attitudes towards women, and women who appear different to the norm more generally. Perhaps, The Producer also reflects the role of the writer/creator but instead of a mirror or double she acts as an intermediary (in this instance a negative influence) between the writer and the character, and between the audience and the representation.

Vee is subjected to messages of abuse throughout her trial from people offended by her life choices: getting pregnant “out of allocation”, choosing to enjoy her body through sexuality, dance, creativity when “unallocated”. In a society that would herd and limit the expression of the individual, we are left with selecting people for ridicule and denigration in order to enforce a normative way of life. In the piece, a clock is counting backwards to dial up narrative tension and the social media-type messages punctuate the ruminations of the Court Judges and The Producer. These intrusions are violent
and disrupt the textual narrative to co-opt the reader as viewer in a (perhaps uncomfortable or even enthusiastic) complicit denigration of Vee.

Justify asks the reader to query why they find certain attitudes so shocking, or certain characters, such as the "uncontrollable" woman, fear-inducing. By peeling back layers, and by using disruptive narrative techniques and allowing for ambiguous interpretation, short-story writers can challenge reductive binaries and the operation of repressive symbols in our communal discourse.
6

Conclusion

“first the piece of cake is eaten, then it is cut”

(Cixous and Cohen, 1974, p. 402)

It is now October 2018 and in Australia 48 women have been recorded as killed due to violence this year. However, movements such as #metoo have arisen to combat workplace sexual harassment and to counter sexual assault. In addition, the Australian Federal Government has passed new laws to stop a victim of domestic violence being questioned by her assailant in court.

Nonetheless, on 13 June 2018 Melbourne comedian Eurydice Dixon was raped and killed walking home from a performance. The country mourned the loss of a smart, gifted woman – another smart, gifted, dead Australian woman.

Gothic short fiction has been my key to understanding or making sense of these past four-plus years. It has shadowed my tumultuous creative-practice-embedded life. There have been personal beginnings and endings. I have lost both my grandmothers in the past four-odd years. They both had rich impacts on my life and on my writing. My grandmothers also protected and cared for me as a child and have motivated me as an adult. Their voices, too, are embedded in

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136 The Destroy the Joint facebook count as at 4 October 2018.
137 For instance the global #metoo movement is manifesting in Australia in the Sex Discrimination Commission National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).
138 After many years of lobbying by community organisations, high level meetings and significant community concern about assailants causing further harm to victims of domestic violence in the court process (Doran, 2018), The Family Law Amendment (Family Violence and Cross-examination of Parties) Act 2018 (Cth) was passed through parliament in September, 2018.
139 There were numerous media reports on this tragic event (such as Fox Koob, 2018), for further examples most major newspapers reported on the murder and later, the vigil that was held at Melbourne’s Princes Park.
the threads of this work. They were my original encounters with a powerful matriarchy that continues to live within me.

There are no definitive answers in this PhD, only more questions. I would have written this differently five years ago. I would write this differently five years from now. I am filled with doubt. I am in a process of flux. I am a subject-in-process and a dissident woman (after Julia Kristeva). My enquiry feels permanently incomplete. I’m told that this doubt is a part of the process. These experiments do, however, contemplate being a woman, being a writer, writing femaleness across a spectrum of experiences, being a human being, and being an Australian at this time in this place.

As my PhD ends, a chapter in my life ends. This methodology and approach produced this particular body of work: 15 short stories, three unfinished short stories, some failed experiments and several thousand words of a story that would not be contained. I also wrote and produced a 20-minute creative practice Gothic “mockumentary” – a tool for communicating my research – and I wrote review essays and papers that looked at aspects of the practice and research.

I am more attuned to the ways that the Gothic appears to have fused with narratives about the growing role of technology in our lives and the distortions caused by climate change. I perceive the ever-hastening speed of globalisation, in ways good, banal and perverse. These are facets of the world that have been drawn through and been made clear to me in my own writing practice. I look for similarities, inspirations, and connections to works pushing genre boundaries and creating exciting characters, such as by Ellen van Neerven.\textsuperscript{140} Texts that may not be classified as Gothic texts but that do use genre collisions to explore,

\textsuperscript{140} For instance: Van Neerven’s long-short story ‘Water’ in \textit{Heat and Light} (2014, pp. 67–124); this collection won the 2016 NSW Premier’s Literary Award. It was roundly applauded for its ‘intriguing’, ‘breathtaking’ fiction. I argue that it also broke new ground in the Australian short story, for its content, storytelling and style/genre fusion.
interpret and imagine post-human narratives that speak provocatively to our present moment. This perhaps is not just the start of my next practice-led journey but rather the recognition, as I emerge from the lessons the Gothic short story has taught me, of a dominant note being explored across contemporary Australian short fiction.

The Gothic, as with much else politically and socially, is being drawn into a fragmentation process: of extremely polarised and reductive categorisation and simultaneously, overwhelming moments of rupture and fusion. Hybrid genres, experiments in voice and form, contemplation of a precarious future world and the role of humans and technology are appearing in short fiction such as Krissy Kneen’s compelling stories collected in An Uncertain Grace (2017).

Attempts to unyoke character from the machinery of a repressive homogeneity are not new; they are a part of a larger creative struggle. As I finish writing this exegesis, Cixous and Cohen (1974, p. 389) remind me that there have long been “Poets of Subversion, deposers of conservative narcissism, breakers of yokes and shackles”. Some have made it through and gone beyond. In my case, I may never break through or go beyond but I have been lucky. The wild things inside of me cannot be wrangled, bled dry, or tamed. I am less afraid and more aware of the many possibilities for my writing-life. I feel sure “there will always be extra meaning, space enough for everyone, for each more-than-one, and for each one of me” (Cixous and Cohen, 1974, p. 402). There are new boundaries and this means new types of transgressions and changing taboos. It means experiments to capture characters emerging from new and old fault lines, colliding head-on with the moment.

My exploration continues ...
For now, I imagine my protagonists swapping stories between themselves, as people have done for centuries. Stories that drive stakes through our hearts or unleash terror and catharsis. Stories that wrap fear, and love, in its human skin. I conjure up these characters – a community of voices across these short stories. There will always be stories to tell. And so, too, will women’s faces continue to grace newspapers, bulletins, films and online sites, for many reasons, good and bad. Each face reveals interesting, perplexing, mundane, awful and extraordinary human stories. This will not cease. After all, I live here, for now – in this utterly decadent 21st century.
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An online copy of H.G. Wells' speech is located on Every Writer (2010, December 6) available at: https://www.everywritersresource.com/the-contemporary-novel-by-h-g-wells/


# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Story submission grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story title</th>
<th>Written &amp; first draft submitted to supervisors</th>
<th>Short synopsis</th>
<th>Experiment section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Glass Eye</td>
<td>Was a concept &amp; draft from 2009. I made several unsuccessful attempts to turn it into a short story for the PhD.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Chambers) ‘Artsforms’</td>
<td>March 2014</td>
<td>In a chamber of privilege where lives are weighed in the balance, Anita must battle her challenging surroundings, the history that led her there and her own private moral code.</td>
<td>Section 3 – The Sublime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Olivia &amp; Harry’</td>
<td>Apr–May 2014</td>
<td>Olivia and Harry are having a baby. It’s non-negotiable. This next phase of achievement comes with some compromises.</td>
<td>Section 4 – The Uncanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Lotion’</td>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Gwen Jameson didn’t realise what she would have to give up to feel and look young again.</td>
<td>Section 4 – The Uncanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘A Game’</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>Claire’s new computer game is taking over her life.</td>
<td>Section 4 – The Uncanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The Octagon’</td>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Welcome to the Octagon, a process to un/make you.</td>
<td>Section 1 – The Abject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Mumma Nursey’</td>
<td>Sep–Nov 2014</td>
<td>Laura Hamer is trapped ... by her life, her choices, and ... her neighbours.</td>
<td>Section 4 – The Uncanny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Urban Anniversaries) ‘Urban’</td>
<td>Dec 2014–Jan 2015</td>
<td>Not every late-night ambulance shift involves horror, but this All Soul’s Eve proves a real nightmare</td>
<td>Section 2 – The Fantastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Polly ... Likes to Play) ‘Loss’</td>
<td>Dec 2014–Jan 2015</td>
<td>Polly is playing with her mother, Lisa, who just isn’t sure what’s real anymore.</td>
<td>Section 2 – The Fantastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Flower Girls) ‘Blood’</td>
<td>Dec 2014–Jan 2015</td>
<td>Mia just wanted to fit in. She never thought the game of ritual and sacrifice would end this way.</td>
<td>Section 2 – The Fantastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>Section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Wake Mid Flight) 'Place'</td>
<td>Mar–Apr 2015</td>
<td>A blow-in to the Territory is challenged and surrenders.</td>
<td>Section 3 – The Sublime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Justify'</td>
<td>Sept 2015</td>
<td>Vee has transgressed against The Way. She must be punished. Primetime.</td>
<td>Section 1 – The Abject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Ruby/Theia’s Story) 'Story 1', 'Story 2' &amp; 'Story 3'</td>
<td>Dec 2015–Jan 2016</td>
<td>A tale as old as time, told in three parts.</td>
<td>Section 3 – The Sublime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ratatatat'</td>
<td>Feb–Mar 2016</td>
<td>Marty has returned. Not all of Marty has returned. Marty is not well.</td>
<td>Section 1 – The Abject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Degustation'</td>
<td>Mar–Apr 2016</td>
<td>Wes’s wife is dead to him, but he has not gotten his final revenge yet. Neither has she.</td>
<td>Section 1 – The Abject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'The Interview'</td>
<td>First draft 2013; submitted May 2016</td>
<td>She goes for an interview, but her anxiety spreads throughout her day.</td>
<td>Section 4 – The Uncanny</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Story collection editing.

Unfinished shorts:
- Last Minutes Boutique
- Esmey Walters
- Svenarina & the acorns

Other:
4 x short film scripts

Shorts submitted but not in dissertation:
- It doesn’t always start with flowers
- The fall of the house of Usher


2014
2015
2017

Feb/Mar 2016
Mar/Apr 2016
Appendix 2 Research uses to date:

RMIT milestone presentations at the 2014 Graduate Research Conference, 2015 Graduate Research Conference and in 2017 (not as part of a formal research conference).


Twitch Gothic (2018), short film, presented as part of the flip lecture series for Reading Space and Place, Media and Communications, Semester 2, 2018, RMIT, Melbourne.