Arguably, there can be no single Australian literature, just as there is no ‘one’ Australia, as John Kinsella asserts. Rather, there are many Australian literatures, each reflective of their own times and places. As the regions of Australia have been colonised and become diversely populated, the emerging voices of their writers proved themselves to be equally so. Yet, we can say that the literary traditions of modern Australia are linked together in certain ways, not least by the haunting presence of a colonial past. While each region is distinctive and the histories of first contact between original inhabitants and colonists differ in their accounts of speed, intensity and violence, the capture of Australian country and alienation of its traditional inhabitants have left traces in the preoccupations and anxieties of contemporary writing, in ways that continue to call into question the idea of national literary tradition itself.

Paul Kane, writing in 1993 with reference to Peter Carey’s fiction, identified the emblematic space between the two words that make up the term ‘Australian Literature’ as a gap that represents the two linked but separate ideas of Australia and its English language literature (521). Recognising this gap is one way, perhaps, of acknowledging ‘the connection between language and history’ that has shaped Australian writing, as ‘a lens through which a people can view themselves and by which others can know them’ (521). Decades later, the multiplicities of perspective that have become yet more complex should also serve to remind us that Australia has a regionally and linguistically diverse heritage, which is marked, nevertheless, by a common colonial history.

Margaret Turner argues that the (post)colonial demand for literary tradition rests on ‘the terms of the new culture rather than the old’ in ways that ‘both exhibit and act upon their perceptual and cognitive placement in the new world,’ to interrogate and construct new ways of knowing (16). The very idea of a (post)colonial Australian literature is defined by how we engage with a colonial past which shadows the places, events and characters of Australia’s writing and its production. This is as true for creative works considered to be of a collectively national importance as for those marked out for their regional or vernacular characteristics. Australia’s most internationally recognised writers, for instance, draw on regional themes, cultures and settings (among the many are Henry Lawson, Miles Franklin, Christina Stead, Patrick White, Judith Wright, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, David Malouf, Peter Carey, John Kinsella, Mudrooroo, Christos Tsiolkas, and Alexis Wright).

Regional influences continue to dominate our contemporary writing in relation to a heightened awareness of Australia as a (post)colonial society whose wealth has been derived mainly from regional industry production – primarily wool and mining. The unity of the term ‘Australian Literature’ remains problematic, however, in its overwriting of a longer and more diverse cultural
heritage of First Peoples, whose existence, Tony Hughes-d’Aeth observes, ‘the settler, at the deepest level of their ideology, could not countenance’ (27). The need for recognition of the brutal legacies of colonisation and white occupation is now a well-established theme in Australian writing, particularly notable in fiction that is set in less populated states, such as Tasmania, Western Australia, and Queensland. However, the centuries-old refusal to acknowledge this history continues to shadow contemporary debates about writing and culture. Whether configured within an urban, suburban or rural context, this awareness remains as a kind of haunting which, as Jessica Gildersleeve remarks with reference to Vivienne Cleven’s novel *Her Sister’s Eye* (2001), expresses ‘the insistent cry of dispossessed populations’ (213). This voicing of the particularity of suffering and loss is widely reflected in Australian fictional narrative. Works by Elizabeth Jolley, Julia Leigh, Andrew McGahan, Kim Scott and others will be referenced in this discussion as examples of writing that reveal the impact of colonialism in regional Australia. Among the layers of influence shared by these works is a prevailing sense of anxiety leading to horror, at least partly situating them within the broader cultural tradition of Australian Gothic. This cultural theme operates in terms of a confrontation between human and non-human forces, within an overwhelming, indeed sublime, sense of the power of country and the destructive force of invasive alienation.

**Reading Country in Elizabeth Jolley’s *The Well***

Reflecting on the substantial body of criticism that has been written about Jolley’s *The Well* since its publication in 1986, Dolores Herrero describes the novel as ‘one of the most celebrated examples of the Australian female Gothic’ (201). Herrero focuses her discussion on the multifaceted elaboration of the theme of trauma. This plays out in various ways through Hester’s repressed childhood memory of Hilde’s miscarriage and Katharine’s guilt at the death of an itinerant worker whom she strikes down on the road one dark night as she is driving home through Western Australian farmland. To protect Katharine, Hester attempts to hide this second event, to literally suppress it, by pushing the body into a disused, covered well. Both traumas are metaphors for a deeper anxiety, Herrero points out with reference to Germaine Greer, arising from a legacy of dislocation: ‘Hester’s transgenerational trauma represents that of most white settlers in Australia, since it is “the trauma of never having belonged”’ (215), while the ‘phantom in the well’ is a plea from the silenced voice of the other to be heard (Caruth qtd in Herrero 215).

The novel does not make any explicit reference to indigeneity and the itinerant worker is not characterised in any way, except in Katharine’s projected fantasies of his survival. However, in relation to Hester as the landowner’s daughter, the novel deals constantly with matters of land occupation and inheritance, the fragility of possession, female dislocation from a romanticised European heritage, and the mysterious miscarriage of an illegitimate child. The trauma that unsettles the two women leaves a gap in the story, an uncertain and conflicted outcome, that opens the way for other stories to develop and alerts us to the ethical necessity of narratives which may allow us to begin ‘opening ourselves up to the experience of alterity’ (Herrero 214). Intimations of trauma in *The Well* are never explicit in terms of racial or sexual violence, but awareness of the dislocation imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples by colonisation is certainly implied. As Cornelis Martin Renes observes, the novel leaves off with an open-endedness that may be located in the uncanny absence of a vital Australian link between the body, identity and the land. It is this absence that haunts the Gothic text, inspires the protagonists’ fear by making the familiar strange, and uncannily forestalls closure. (‘Fathoming (Post)Colonial Depths’ 18)
One of the ways in which Hester begins this opening to new perspectives is the ontological shift she makes when she puts into action her long-held dream of walking through the country. Renes sees this in terms of finding a way to accommodate being in Australia as a white settler. ‘Despite her lameness, towards the end of the novel she tentatively starts out on such a healing journey, which ends with the start of her horror tale’ (17). The engagement with alterity, for Hester, however, is also suggested by her brief encounters with a woman writer – a newcomer to the rural district – who admires her deft consumption of a lamington roll (Jolley 156). When Hester is challenged to tell her own gothic tale to the Borden children, the writer’s explanation of her project is evoked: ‘a perfectly horrid little drama set, do you see, in a remote corner of the wheat. Very regional’ (156).

The literariness of The Well cannot be overlooked, therefore, in terms of authorial engagement with the dialogical momentarity of literary construction. Gerry Turcotte suggests that the novel ‘narrates the variability of story-telling and the relativity of systems of meaning,’ thus problematising authorial authenticity as a strategy for speaking back to ‘a repressive symbolic order’ (200). Delys Bird, similarly, points to the formal experimentation of Jolley’s later work The Orchard Thieves (1995) (122). This is foreshadowed in The Well when the figure of the writer is introduced into the text as a newcomer to the country town, with ambitious notions about how a story might be composed. ‘“I think it’s going to be an epic,” she said. “A sort of contemporary Song of Solomon”’ (Jolley 156), referring to the love poems of the Old Testament. ‘I am looking for a narrator with experiences,’ she continues, peering closely at Hester with apparent intent (157).

At the end of The Well, Hester has indeed gained experiences and a choice of ‘monster stories’ to tell. The novel ends with a short journey home in which she entertains the children of the neighbouring farmers with a story about dark nights and scary monsters (174–176). The scene resonates with the foregoing events of the novel in relation to the figure of the orphaned (possibly mistreated) child, echoing the well-established trope of the literary Gothic tradition. In this vein, the darkness of the story is left unresolved at the novel’s conclusion, foregrounding the devices of its narrativity. The intruder remains in the well, nailed below the surface. The adopted orphan remains trapped in the castle of unknowing. The structure of the story is repeated – but as a ‘jolly’ fictional account of the horror episode when the intruder is struck by the moving vehicle in the night (174–176). Simultaneously, Hester is looking forward to the prospect of another conversation with the woman writer, whose recipe for a scary story she has just adopted and in a sense rewritten for herself.

The idea of rewriting always works in other ways in The Well. Maureen Bettle points out that Jolley undertakes a revisioning of female relations in terms of both motherhood and lesbian desire by presenting women who, Bronwen Levy remarks, ‘live insistently at the centre of their own worlds’ (111). The Well captures, further, an ambivalence about white narratives of rural existence which alludes eloquently to the importance of story itself in relation to the past and to future possibility. Stephen Slemon observes that colonialism is inherently complicated, constituted in ambiguity: the condition of (post)coloniality is ‘the space of questioning – itself an effect of colonialist discourse – where colonial subjects become agents of resistance and change’ (24). Levy suggests this stance of ambivalence may be seen as an essential precondition for writing itself in Australia (119). It is also, perhaps, a precondition for white dwelling on a stolen continent.

Unsettling Possession in Andrew McGahan’s The White Earth

If the use of Gothic tropes to unsettle assumptions of colonial occupation is somewhat implicit in Jolley’s The Well, McGahan’s The White Earth (2004) tackles issues of regionalism and (post)colonial culture in Australia head on. His novel dramatises and interrogates cultural and spatial politics in rural Queensland by engaging clearly identifiable tropes from an established British Gothic
tradition. Told through the eyes of a boy, William, whose maladies are partly caused by his weak, suffering mother, the novel addresses the problems of colonial inheritance and disavowal. At the centre of the story is a crumbling mansion, Kuran House, owned by the McIvor family who long ago appropriated the house and its land from colonial pastoralists aptly named the Whites. None of the generations of Whites are ultimately able to maintain a grasp on the land, which repeatedly unseats their superimposition of a transplanted European rural romanticism.

The story is impelled by a dramatic event at the outset, a tractor accident which kills William’s father. Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman interpret this scene as the echo of British imperial brutality which ‘folds its Gothic visions and fantasies into a position on rural settlement that makes its connection to contemporary Australian political realities crystal clear’ (24). The shocked boy witnesses the rising traces of his father’s death above the farm horizon, smoke from the fire caused by the tractor accident. He is dazed, only half able to comprehend what he sees:

he looked out from the back verandah and saw, huge in the sky, the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. He stared at it, wondering. The thunderhead was dirty black, streaked with billows of grey. It rolled and boiled as it climbed into the clear blue day, casting a vast shadow upon the hills beyond. But there was no sound, no rumble of an explosion. Hot silence lay across the wheat fields, and the air was perfectly still. (McGahan 1)

Fire is an important motif in the novel, which McGahan uses to convey the destructiveness of rural industrial occupation and a sense of the power of nature to claim the land back to itself. The tractor fire is the trigger for the story to unfold, as the legacy of white ownership begins to unravel, anticipating the moment when Kuran mansion and the farm’s outbuildings are all burned to the ground. At this moment, Norman Saadi Nikro remarks, ‘history itself seems to be on fire’ (10) and McIvor’s claims of white indigeneity are destroyed, as if by a numinous uprising of the land itself.

Emily Potter describes the figure of crumbling Kuran mansion as a metaphor for the legacy of British colonial rule, suggesting that the mansion has become a ‘white ruin’ of colonial aristocratic delusion, containing ‘something hidden and horrible’ (179), occupied by an unrelenting tyrant who dominates a local political group with white supremacist leanings. Kuran station as a whole thus stands for the region’s harsh history of occupation, unsettling McIvor’s already-disintegrating regional political rhetoric of progress built on the pioneer enterprise. The gothicised portrait of the great house in decline, with its ‘dank odour … an underlay of rotting wood’ (McGahan 17), is linked with the novel’s sustained critique of landscape spectatorship as romanticist imposition. Adopting a key characteristic of the (post)colonial Gothic literary mode, the narrative perspective gradually shifts from distanced surveillance to one that is aligned with place and its story (Kulperger 135). Restless and curious, William escapes the confining house and starts to become familiar with the surrounding country. At the same time, he is disorientated by illness and confusion: ‘nothing was solid, not the land, and even less so its history. He had been told so many stories – but which ones was he to believe?’ (McGahan 285). His family loyalties are unsettled by neglect and fevered delirium.

As the assumed male heir of the estate, William represents the haunted legacy of white ownership in (post)colonial Australia, since he is a boy too young and too much of a victim himself to accept his inheritance from McIvor, or to shoulder the ethical responsibilities of reconciliation. Indeed, Kerry Munnery points out that another of the key Gothic themes in this novel is the ‘subversion of primogeniture expressed in the theme of usurpation’ (23). At the end of the story, the McIvor family’s grip on the land is released by the rebellious daughter, Ruth, in attempt at generational recompense. William remains a bewildered bystander, seriously damaged by lack of care, but with the possibility of healing and repair. McGahan thus employs key Gothic tropes to
challenge the imperialist imperative of pastoral lament and to counter aestheticised nostalgia for ‘the passing, the dying-out of indigenous subjects’ which, as Nikro observes, still frames some of the ways in which stolen possession is explained away (3). The Gothic renders this perspective itself as haunted by uncanny reminders of ancient habitation and tradition.

Katrin Althans reminds us that, as a subversive counter-discourse, the Gothic ‘has long been a means of critiquing the imperial and incorporating local elements to create new cultural modes’ (15). This is a well-established feature of the Gothic, as Katharine Ferguson Ellis explains with reference to traditional British fiction, in which the Gothic mode enabled the contradictions of power to be exposed and addressed (xii). In this way, *The White Earth* points to ways in which the ideology of whiteness can be, in turn, occupied by the vitality of Australia’s First Peoples, whose culture once more flares through recognition and repair.

**Natural Knowing in Julia Leigh’s *The Hunter***

Leigh’s novel *The Hunter* (1999) also unsettles (post)colonial presumptions of ownership and control through its portrait of a destructive encounter between human and non-human worlds. Primarily set in Tasmanian mountain wilderness, as with *The White Earth*, this novel also adapts elements of the Gothic to destabilise expectations and to render its critique of species supremacy. The central character, M (Martin David), is in pursuit of the putative last remaining Thylacine, having been commissioned by a biotechnology corporation to bring back the animal’s DNA from Tasmania. The story follows his hunting preparations: special protective clothing and equipment – accoutrements of late twentieth-century bushwalking tourist consumerism – his bush-craft, and his philosophy of never losing sight of the goal. Leigh evokes a strong sense of the ruthless Thylacine hunting campaigns of past generations, and the terrible irony of Martin’s final solo hunt – the damaging imperative entailed in the brutal gathering of genetic capital for corporate gain. The finality of the hunt inevitably echoes Tasmania’s colonial history during the first half of the 1800s, with the mythologies of its Indigenous peoples cast into extinction, associated with a ruthless campaign for the colonial-era Van Diemen’s Land company to take possession of the island’s fertile lands (Ryan 25–44). The rhetorical power of historically specific terms such as ‘the last Indigenous Tasmanian’ still has popular resonance, for example in relation to accounts of Truganini’s life (Morris). Murray Johnson and Ian McFarlane have shown, however, that the traditional peoples of Tasmania did not become extinct. They suffered a harsh fate, pursued, captured and exiled to islands in the Furneaux Group, where they survived the early-mid 1800s in small communities. The ‘Tasmanian tiger’ was similarly subjected to an extermination campaign but, even in the remote mountain forest, did not survive. It is this devastating history that Leigh addresses in her novel.

The action of *The Hunter* takes place against the remote regional setting of the Tasmanian high country. The texture of the writing is imbued with a strong sense of locale as Leigh conveys the decaying colonial bluestone cottage where M’s host family reside and the thick mountain bush through which he must negotiate failure and success. Leigh filters her account of M’s determined campaign to kill and capture the last remaining Thylacine through occasional gothic allusion, beginning with the unsettling of the protagonist’s expectations. M has been provided with somewhere to base himself during the hunt by his corporate client, a rented room with a local family among the foothills of the mountains, where he must negotiate unfamiliar beliefs and customs. These are occasionally comical, but unnerving, nonetheless. For instance, as M arrives at the bluestone house where the front door ‘swings open of its own accord. Nobody greets him and he hesitates, baffled; a supernatural door?’ (Leigh 6). The place is in disarray. The vegetarian meal, provided by the children that evening, is different from the kind of food to which he is used. He is momentarily disturbed, unsure of himself. His host does not initially appear, seemingly crazed.
by grief. Her husband, Jarrah Armstrong, has disappeared somewhere in the mountains. The children still hope he will be found alive, ‘somewhere up on the plateau,’ as if his disappearance is a spell that could be broken (22). The story is conveyed to M by another hunter, who describes it opaquely as a ‘nasty business’ (12), an uncanny portent that M refuses to accept as he immerses himself in his plans.

M is one of a kind, like the surviving Thylacine he pursues: a loner, ‘anchored by neither wife, nor home, nor by a lover nor even a single friend’ (15). His abbreviated appellation, the one lonely letter M, reinforces this sense of isolation from the human community. Chare points to this as a condition of M’s hunting strategy. As a lone hunter he is free to improvise, becoming animal in pursuit of its prey, depending for survival on his bush tucker skills. But this has an uncanny effect, for M can never fully become Other: he cannot give up the goal of possession. His loneliness becomes, rather, an epistemological strategy, a way of discovering, learning and knowing the patterns of the wilderness, all the better to capture the prey for himself. ‘What differentiates M from those thylacine hunters who preceded him is this self-awareness. He knows he too is the last of a breed’ (Chare 146). Although at first he experiences characteristic discomforts of gothic disorientation and displacement as he first enters the challenging landscape, while the Thylacine haunts M like an elusive ghost, by the end of the novel M is beyond empathy or vulnerability, a hunter definitively in possession of himself.

Turner’s discussion of the importance of (post)colonial literatures for finding new ‘ways of knowing’ culture and history suggests possibilities for the recasting of literary history itself (15), which, Leigh suggests, are never realised in relation to Tasmanian regionality. Pursuing the Thylacine leads M to inhabit a different epistemology. This shift makes it possible for him to hunt the Thylacine successfully, but he does not fundamentally question the purpose of the hunt or learn new possibilities for a human–animal coexistence. In spite of a moment of prevarication close to the end of the story – clutching at the possibility of a ‘will to failure’ (Leigh 121) – in the full moment of his becoming the hunter he is finally unrelenting as ‘the only one’ who survives (167). He has gone further than anyone before him, but in fact he has gone too far. There is now no possibility of recovery or repair for the Thylacines, or the humans who hunted them to extinction.

Fred Botting points to excess as a key characteristic of the Gothic, a trope which also includes boundary anxiety and mental disintegration (1–4). Its generic elements can also serve as a warning, he suggests, of the consequences of transgression. In The Hunter, however, the warning fails. Transgression becomes, at least for M, a condition of being as he refuses the limits of his humanity. Crossing the line, metaphorically, leads M to a pervasive sense of loss. Disasters befall the Armstrong family and the small intimacies and familiarities of his time with them seem just part of a fabric of this loss, as an imperative of his larger enterprise. At a moment of crisis, M turns back towards his prey seeking an unhappy talisman, a ‘reminder not of the way things might be, but the way they really are’ (Leigh 143). The hunt drags on and he loses himself to it. Only then, when he becomes ‘the natural man, who can hear and see and smell what other men cannot’ (161) does the Thylacine appear to him, thin and tattered, nose buried in the blood of its prey, as the novel shudders to its rapid conclusion. In the end, M cherishes nothing. The wilderness is empty to him now, except as a kind of background noise, a medium for discovery, a proof of the hunter’s lonely will to survive.

Helen Tiffin has discussed ways in which (post)colonial literatures entail a ‘refusal of finality,’ a rejection of a totalising colonial impost on occupied and appropriated traditional cultures (29). Here, Leigh does not set out to offer a recuperative account of the exploitative force of (post)colonial ideology. She does not use the Gothic merely as parody, nor to unsettle the apparatus of remote corporate power. Rather, she subsumes alienated horror within the ontological condition of colonial definition. For Leigh, in the context of Tasmanian extinction, there is no (post)
colonial possibility, no refiguration of the imperial project that can lead to repair. The only possible outcome of colonial invasion, at least for the Thylacine, is death. Slemon reminds us that the discourses of (post)colonialism are themselves ideological and that academic territoriality can be seen as part of an ongoing facet of adaptive colonisation (15–44). In The Hunter, M’s attitude to the hunt suggests a contemporary colonialist subject position, but the questioning entailed in the shift from imperialist excess to the ambiguity of a hybrid (post)colonial identity never fully arises. Leigh has been criticised for her apparent critique of regional identity (Flanagan qtd in Brewer), but the thrust of Leigh’s critique is not urban arrogance directed at regional in/difference. Rather, The Hunter sets up an ideological apparatus that is imbued with assumptions of human species supremacy and dismantles it by example, exposing ‘both place and ecological consciousness to their shared limit in extinction’ (Brewer).

Non-Coloniality: The Need for First Peoples Perspectives

Leigh’s novel is less optimistic, perhaps, than Jolley’s or McGahan’s, yet together these works speak clearly from a white (post)colonial perspective. They offer glimpses of critical possibility for ways of knowing and understanding Australia’s dominant culture and history after first- and second-wave colonisation. However, it is the work of major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, such as Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, among others, which perhaps most successfully demonstrate the importance of non-colonial ways of knowing through writing.

Both Scott’s Benang (1999) and Wright’s Carpentaria (2006) tell stories of familial/cultural inheritance, shifting the perspective of white presumption and ‘making space for the coexistence of multiple ontologies and epistemologies’ (Slater 38), to produce a sense of ‘Indigenous belonging that is not fixed within a colonialist reiteration’ (Griffiths 171). Benang works through shifting perspectives, polyphony, discontinuous or nonlinear narrative elements, breaking away from literary realism to convey a complexly confronting story which, as Renes points out with reference to Homi K. Bhabha, ‘may be seen to circulate publicly as a token of “strange cultural survival” within the historical, linguistic, racial and gendered margins of the Australian land and text-scape’ (‘Kim Scott’s Fiction’ 184–185). Significantly, as a story of place, he adds, Benang ‘refuses to acknowledge an overarching White patriarchal narrative that organises kinship relations according to the hierarchical rigidities and sequencing of oedipal conflict; instead, it simultaneously speaks to the past, present and future of Aboriginality’ (187).

Wright’s Carpentaria is similarly complex:

five hundred pages of labyrinthine narrative that opens onto one scene and then onto another, one story folded between others as if in parenthesis. Past and present intermingle in the space of a page or even less: time expands into the cracks and crevices of the here-and-now. (Ravenscroft 205)

It is a novel of encounters between two traditions which are incomprehensible to each other, told from multiple, complexly interrelated, points of view. In Wright’s novel, the lived, dreamed and imagined experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters are woven together to make one fabric of knowing and understanding, while the colonists have arrived like empty ghosts with ‘no name and no memory’ dreams to haunt their ancient places, disrupting family relationships and traditions. (203). Wright’s fiction portrays colonisation in Australia as an ongoing failure to address brutality and injustice, an ideology that, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, remains a present force. Kinsella’s stance against the notion of a canonical Australian literature, referenced at the outset of this discussion, is founded on a similar recognition of the problem posed by a collective national identity: who we are as a nation, he observes,
is often violent, racist, environmentally destructive, and collectively, thieves.' Each of the novels discussed here is set in regional Australia – Darling Downs, Carpentaria, the south of Western Australia, rural Tasmania – and as this discussion shows in each the legacy of colonial invasion continues to resonate. As the new creative writers of Australia begin to ask the question ‘who are we’ for themselves, it is worth keeping in mind the poet Lionel Fogarty’s words, ‘something must tell / Am I me or you am us’ (‘Am I’ lines 32–33).

**Works Cited**


