Unsettling Fictions:
Contemporary White Writing from South Africa and Australia

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Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

SIGNED: [Signature] - DATE: 08/05/08
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Abstract

This thesis examines recent white writing from South Africa and Australia that can be seen to undertake critical postcolonial engagements with the contemporary settler site. The six texts it analyses consider the settler nation’s ‘bad’ past and ongoing legacies, unearth colonialist crimes, interrogate colonial and settler-nationalist discourse, and attempt to conceive of new or different models for relating to black or indigenous others, imagining the nation, seeing and approaching the landscape, and belonging in place. The two ‘Southern spaces’ of South Africa and Australia share many links, especially as former settler colonies that have in recent years attempted to come to terms with a heritage of colonial and neocolonial violence. All of the texts examined in this thesis reflect on, and to varying degrees participate in, the historical ‘excavations’ and discourses of reconciliation that were prominent in both nations during the 1990s. In particular, they address the ‘crisis’ of settler identity and belonging: a crisis that has apparently become more pronounced in the wake of postcolonial revelations, which have also underlined the contemporary settler subject’s status as a beneficiary of neo/colonialism. Complicity is the inescapable condition of the settler site, and the critiques put forward in these texts are inevitably advanced from this position. The postcolonial oppositionality of white writing is thus not straightforward. It is often described as ambivalent, but what this means in practice, and how the ambivalence of settler writing might ‘work’, is less frequently investigated. This thesis is precisely such an investigation. Through close readings of a selection of texts, it explores the ambivalence of their negotiations of settler belonging and representations of the other. I conclude that the ambivalence of white writing itself functions ambivalently, to variously undermine or facilitate the text’s postcolonial practice, in complex and often surprising ways.
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A note on style and spelling in quotations

Most theses incorporate quotations of material written in accordance with a style different to that of the thesis itself, but a thesis on postcolonial literature is particularly plagued by variations on words such as 'colonise/colonize'. In writing this thesis I have attempted to preserve the original style and spelling of each quotation. Much of the material cited here varies from the Australian English standard to which the thesis adheres, and employing the parenthetical insertion *sic* to point to each instance of this would become clumsy and repetitive. In addition, although *sic* does not necessarily imply an error or anomaly in the original form, there is a risk it could be read this way in some cases. For these reasons I do not employ *sic* for this purpose. I hope this note will serve to advise the reader that where there is a discrepancy between the style and/or spelling of a quotation and that of the thesis itself, this reflects a true difference between the original, quoted text and the conventions followed by the thesis. I do still use *sic* to indicate any anomaly in original quotations.
When Eugene Terre'Blanche said, “This country is drenched with blood”—he didn’t know how right he was.

*Country of My Skull*, 311

The official report of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission devotes a chapter to the TRC’s efforts to exhume the remains of apartheid victims in order to provide closure to their families. These exhumations went some way toward revealing the terrible violence of victim deaths. For example, in the case of Ntombikayise Priscilla Khubeka, an alleged anti-apartheid activist who died, according to perpetrators, of a heart attack post-interrogation, uncovering and examining her remains led to the discovery of a ‘spent 7.65 bullet’ in the skull, ‘indicating that she had been shot in the head...contrary to the perpetrators’ account of her death’ (*TRC Report Vol 6* 550). This apartheid crime finds some parallel in the accounts of Aboriginal massacres in colonial Queensland. In *Colonial Genocide* Alison Palmer cites the ‘advice’ of an 1875 Darling Downs squatter that ‘nothing is more dangerous in the presence of wild blacks than to fire a gun unless you are sure of killing’ (41). She notes articles in the local paper reporting that Aborigines ‘were commonly “shot on sight”’ (Palmer 42). ‘Evidence’ of these massacres was often burned (Palmer 56)—a method also used by the secret police of the apartheid state to destroy the bodies of their murdered victims.
In *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog writes of the Commission’s excavations of apartheid ‘death farms’ that ‘this one image…hang[s] in the mind: the discoloured bones being packed out, one by one, next to the fresh mound of earth’ (310). The image is echoed in the Australian novel *The White Earth*, in which the ‘dark secret’ of its Darling Downs pastoral station is represented by the Aboriginal skeletons that have lain concealed in the bed of a waterhole for over 75 years—the last evidence of a settler massacre. In *The Custodians*, an ancient Aboriginal burial ground is desecrated by a boys’ school expedition group at the pastoral property of Whitepeeper in a repetition of colonialist crimes. When the site is rediscovered some 30 years later, it brings the contested status of the land’s possession to the fore. The unearthing of skeletal remains is a recurrent motif in the white writing examined in this thesis. In these texts, unearthed bones become emblematic of a revelation of the dark side of the foundations of the settler nation and non-indigenous placement on the land, in particular the violent murder, dispossession, and disenfranchisement of the settler’s black or indigenous other. Beneath the ground on which the settler stands, just under the earth that is so fundamental to his or her sense of identity and conception of belonging, are the bodies of settler colonialism’s victims.

The metaphor of unearthed bones also reflects the unprecedented postcolonial developments and ‘excavations’ that were taking place in South Africa and Australia in the period in which these texts were written and published, that is, the 1990s and early 2000s. From 1990 to 1993 in South Africa, apartheid was dismantled in a series of negotiations, and ‘the structures of the new political order’ began to be ‘earnestly hammered into shape’ (Darian-Smith et al 1). The country’s first democratic elections were held in 1994; Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress came to power in a landslide victory. Meanwhile, the High Court of
Australia had in 1992 overturned the doctrine of *Terra Nullius*, recognising the prior claims of indigenous people to land colonised by the British and white settlers. Soon afterward, the Native Title Act was passed. The *Mabo* case was followed by the *Wik* decision in 1996, which suggested, for the first time, that pastoral leases might not necessarily extinguish Native Title. Around this same time in the ‘newly democratic’ South Africa, provisions were being put in place for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The goal of the TRC was to advance national reconciliation through public testimonies of human rights violations (Attwell and Harlow 2). It provided a space in which apartheid’s (and thus settler colonialism’s) victims were able to testify and be publicly heard. In doing this, and in compelling perpetrators to make full disclosures about their acts, the TRC went some way toward revealing the extent and degree of apartheid crimes. The TRC had some parallel in Australia in the *Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation from their Families and Communities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children*, released in 1997. *Bringing them Home*, as the report became known, drew on testimonies of hundreds of members of the ‘Stolen Generation’.

What made its revelations even more shocking was the location of these traumatic removals not in the distant past, but well within the lifetimes of many Australians. These developments have had a profound impact in each nation, where debates about reparation, reconciliation and ‘bad’ histories continue to circulate. Excavations of the nation’s colonial and neo-colonial past, which also cast light on their legacies in the present, are deeply unsettling of settler nationalism and white/settler subjects in South Africa and Australia. One fallout has been described as a postcolonial crisis of settler identity and belonging (see for example Probyn ‘Unsettling’; Gelder and Jacobs; Gooder and Jacobs; Read).
The impact of these events has also been felt in South African and Australian literary culture. In both countries, literature has reflected and responded to these developments and debates; it has contributed to discourses of reconciliation, violence, trauma, complicity, memory, reparation, and the postcolonial/post-apartheid nation. Regarding South Africa, Attwell and Harlow suggest that post-apartheid literature has ‘taken upon itself’ a ‘task of articulating [the] larger predicament’ of the ambiguity of a transitional country (3). Michiel Heyns, Zoë Wicomb and Georgina Horrell also chart new directions in South African writing produced after the TRC, for example identifying a surge in confessional narratives (see Heyns ‘The Whole Country’s Truth’). Sue Kossew notes the proliferation in South Africa and Australia of ‘autobiographical works by indigenous writers that flesh out…the official TRC report and the Bringing them Home document’ (Writing Woman 12), while Gillian Whitlock has shown how recent women’s memoir from both sites seeks to bear witness to victim testimonies (see ‘Consuming Passions’).

Within South African and Australian literatures, white writing, or the literature of the ‘settler subject’, has also sought to engage with these revelations and the larger conditions of the nation’s postcoloniality. In some cases, as in the sample of white writing that is read here, it can be seen to participate in national processes of historical re-evaluation through excavations of its own, for example of colonial discourse and settler nationalist historical mythologies. The texts analysed in this thesis are also concerned with attending to the story and experience of the other and acknowledging the victims of colonialism and settler nationalism. In these respects,
this sample of white writing can be identified as postcolonial literature, as defined by Elleke Boehmer:¹

Rather than simply being the writing which ‘came after’ empire, postcolonial literature is generally defined as that which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives. As well as a change in power, decolonization demanded—and still demands—symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings. Postcolonial literature forms part of the process of overhaul. To give expression to colonized experience, postcolonial writers [seek] to undercut thematically and formally the discourses which supported colonization—the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination. (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 4, emphasis in original)

Postcolonialism and postcolonial literature are often defined as discourses of resistance, but in the instance of the white writing examined in this thesis, its literary oppositionalty is not clear-cut. The problem of complicity arises for the settler in a way that it may not for others, and this is not a literature of unambiguous anti-colonialist struggle and triumph. One of the ‘cores’ of its ambivalence is the issue of postcolonial settler belonging. The white writing examined in this thesis is overtly *unsettling* of the white settler subject, in the sense that it represents colonialist models of belonging as untenable or illegitimate by reference to the violence on which they are based. It also critiques the discourses and mythologies that have fed into these models, for example, the *terra nullius* mentality. Yet these texts may also be resecuring of the white settler subject, since they generally seek to propose new or different models of belonging and even, in some cases, to ‘rehabilitate’ or recast the settler as a sympathetic, anti-colonial figure who is thus more entitled to return to belonging.

This is not to say that these projects are necessarily problematic, since in some cases,

¹ *The Empire Writes Back* poses a much broader definition of postcolonial literature, in which it is essentially the writing of people ‘formerly colonized’ (1). It thus includes ‘the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island Countries, and Sri Lanka’ as well as ‘the USA’ (2). In this thesis, however, I have found it useful to use Boehmer’s narrower definition, in the recognition that not all literature from former colonies is primarily concerned with colonial or imperial power and its legacies, nor is it necessarily ‘resistant’.
as in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, the models of belonging that are proffered constitute radical departures from colonialist alternatives and may still be (and this may seem paradoxical) decidedly unsettling. But I do suggest that the ambivalence of white writing has the potential to undercut the postcolonialism of the text, just as it has the potential to bolster it. This becomes apparent in regards to the negotiations of settler belonging undertaken in the sample of texts examined here, but also in relation to other ambivalences of the works, for example, those surrounding the appropriations of indigenous stories or victim testimonies.

Of course, identifying postcolonial settler writing as ambivalent is not new. Stephen Slemon, an important advocate of postcolonial study of the settler site and its literature, cites its ambivalence—and the ambivalent position of the settler post/colony or ‘Second World’ in relation to colonialism—as one of its key points of interest and value for ‘theory’. He rightly rejects simple models of ‘transparent’ or ‘pure’ literary oppositionality to argue, following in the steps of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, that literary resistance is always ambivalent, since it operates in a space ‘between systems, between discursive worlds, implicit and complicit in both of them’ (‘Unsettling’ 36, 37). Further, this ambivalence is

the ‘always already’ condition of Second-World settler and post-colonial literary writing, for in the white literatures of Australia, or New Zealand, or Canada, or southern Africa, anti-colonialist resistance has never been directed at an object or a discursive structure which can be seen as purely external to the self. (Slemon ‘Unsettling’ 38)

Slemon’s article implicitly underlines the valorisation of ambivalence that has been prevalent in postcolonial theory, in which it is commonly seen as crucial to, or perhaps inextricable from, literary resistance. His theoretical argument is widely embraced within the field of postcolonial settler studies, and has informed this study
from the moment of its inception. However, ‘Unsettling the Empire’ does not itself undertake an analysis of the ambivalence of settler literary texts. This thesis does: specifically, it sets out to examine the productivity and effects of ambivalence at a textual level through close readings of contemporary settler literary texts. What it discovers is that the rich ambivalence of this writing has the potential to undermine the text’s postcolonial impact—its ‘unsettling’ function—though as my analysis will also show, this does not have to be so. White writing may also harness ambivalence to counter-colonial ends.

The settler site

It is in fact controversial to call the settler site and its literature ‘postcolonial’. As Gillian Whitlock notes, it has been ‘deeply unfashionable’ to ‘[think] about settlers…in postcolonial criticism’ (The Intimate Empire 41). Although critics such as Stephen Slemon, Alan Lawson and Diana Brydon valorise settler sites and writing as a particularly rich topic for research and one with much to offer to theory, there are arguments in the field about whether the settler society and its literature should be considered postcolonial at all (see for example Williams and Chrisman 4; see also Whitlock’s comments in The Intimate Empire 41). The debate stems in part from disagreements about the meaning of the term ‘postcolonial’. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to unpack all the ways in which ‘postcolonial’ has been used and defined, and the various arguments that have surrounded the term. However, the crux of one significant dispute relevant to the inclusion (or exclusion) of settler post/colonies within the field is that, for some, postcolonial is a word that implies an ‘end’ to colonialism and should only be applied to those sites in which European colonisers came and went (for example India, the West Indies, and many African
nations). One problem with this definition of the postcolonial is that it may occlude or overlook the emergence of neo-colonial and other, related forms of power and exploitation in decolonised countries. My main objection, however, comes from a recognition that, as Bart Moore-Gilbert puts it, ‘there many different degrees, forms and (characteristically intertwined) histories of colonization and there are going to be many different degrees, forms and histories of postcoloniality as a result’ (12). To exclude settier sites from the field on the grounds that they do not fit binary models of ‘the postcolonial’ is to reject this difference and foreclose on a productive field of research that may illuminate the variance and complexity of colonial and postcolonial experience. Perhaps we can see the development of postcolonial settier studies as ‘attest[ing] to the increasing success of the manifold struggles against neo-colonialism’, as Moore-Gilbert does (12). Certainly there has been a great deal of constructive and valuable work done in the field in the last few decades (Probyn ‘Unsettling’ 7).

The settler site has been hailed as a particularly rich and productive one by a number of prominent literary critics and postcolonial scholars. Stephen Slemon, Alan Lawson and Diana Brydon are among the most influential voices here. Their argument is that the ‘second world’ or settier society is an especially vital and interesting area for postcolonial study because of its complex, ambivalent position in relation to colonialism. Slemon writes that ‘the radically compromised literatures of this undefinable Second World have an enormous amount yet to tell to “theory” about the nature of literary resistance’ (‘Unsettling’ 39, emphasis in original), while Lawson argues for the ‘political and ethical necessity’ of examining the ‘settler site’ (20). Brydon, writing about Canada, suggests that postcolonial criticism which recognizes the complicity of white settlers in ‘current, continued...imperial patterns of
domination’ might finally initiate ‘a radical change in the way our society is organised and understood’ (8). Mindful of Leela Gandhi’s words of caution about the tendency for postcolonial literary scholars to ‘[replace] politics with textuality’ (see Postcolonial Theory 156), I am less optimistic about this than Brydon. But I agree with Kossew’s case for studying settler writing:

It seems to me to be a crucial project of post-colonial theory to examine the ways in which such ‘unsettled settlers’ (in J.M. Coetzee’s memorable phrase) inscribe, through their literary practices, their shifting and ambivalent identities and subjectivities, illuminating as it does the complex nature of resistance, complicity and representation. (Writing Woman 1)

Caution is certainly appropriate when examining settler literature from a postcolonial perspective, as Kossew and Whitlock underline (Writing Woman 11; The Intimate Empire 143). It is important to recognise that the experience and history of colonialism in a ‘settler-invader’ setting like Australia is very different to that of an ‘invaded’ colony like India (Hodge and Mishra xii). As noted, there can also be a tendency to read ‘postcolonial’ as indicating an end to colonialism and forms of colonialist power. When used in this sense, it does become ‘prematurely celebratory’ and an ‘affront’ to indigenous subjects in former settler colonies (McClintock 12). In this thesis I use the term as it has been defined by Bill Ashcroft:

Post-colonialism...means the dynamic of opposition, the discourse of resistance to colonialism which begins from the first moment of colonization. I most definitely do not mean “after colonialism” because that would be to suppose an end to the imperial process. But neither is it simply anti-colonialism—it is a movement away from the certainties of a simple binary opposition, a movement into an ambivalent space beyond an oppositional reaction that may itself be controlled by imperial power. (‘Post-Colonial Connection’ 162)

Within this framework, ‘postcolonial’ need not imply that colonialism is a thing of the past, resolved and ‘over’. This definition is also able to account for the white writing to be reviewed in this thesis, which, as I have been suggesting, does not fit into simple models of literary opposition or anti-colonialist resistance.
Despite the controversy over its postcolonial status, I have already begun to suggest that the settler site has been fruitfully examined within such frameworks. There have been many important analyses of settler writing that are informed by postcolonial theory; further, various critics have argued authoritatively for a recognition of the postcolonialism of some contemporary white writing. It is not possible to review all of this material here; instead, I offer a brief selection with an emphasis on South Africa and Australia, and in a later section I will examine in greater detail the critical literature that directly precedes this thesis, that is, comparative studies of South African and Australian white writing. J.M. Coetzee’s *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) is generally considered to be the foundational study of South African settler literature. It incorporates an examination of the ‘great intellectual schemes…through which South Africa has been thought by Europe’ and an analysis of a sample of colonial and neo-colonial-period South African writing, especially that of pastoral (*White Writing* 10). Coetzee’s study reveals anxieties about land, miscegenation, and degeneration in the writing of these ‘unsettled settlers’, as well as the strategies by which they attempted to secure themselves in South Africa. On the Australian side, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra’s *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1990), though very different from *White Writing*, performs a similar task of examining the nation’s literature (mostly white, though it also looks at Aboriginal texts) with an attention to the prejudices and anxieties its reveals around constructions of the ‘Australian character’ and nation (1). They identify a ‘bastard complex’, obsession with ‘foundations’, uneasy awareness of the ‘repressed’ of Australian colonisation, and attraction to certain key mythological figures—the bushman, explorer and so on—as its hallmarks (Hodge and Mishra 23, 50, 131, 157).
In both *White Writing* and *Dark Side of the Dream*, the emphasis is on writing of the colonial and (neo-colonial) post-independence period rather than contemporary works. Coetzee, Hodge, and Mishra read these texts with an awareness of postcolonial theory, rather than analysing identifiably postcolonial settler texts, for example Coetzee’s own fiction. But there are of course dozens of journal articles and book chapters exploring the postcolonialism of Coetzee’s work, as well as that of various of his South African peers, and many also on Australian white writers whose work is often labelled postcolonial, such as David Malouf, Peter Carey, and Thea Astley. Graham Huggan’s *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* (2007) is a rare example of a longer study that explores the postcolonialism of Australian writing, including settler literature. In South Africa too there are not many major (book-length) studies of the country’s white writing that explicitly consider it as postcolonial, as Sue Kossew has remarked (*Pen 7*). This may be due, in part, to the especially ambiguous status of South Africa prior to the dismantling of apartheid (*Kossew Pen 7*). Kossew’s *Pen and Power: A Post-colonial Reading of JM Coetzee and Andre Brink* (1996) has thus been an important work, examining as it does the oppositionality of these two authors’ texts within a postcolonial framework; Kossew argues that Coetzee and Brink represent ‘two different kinds of “colonisers who refuse”’ (*Pen 7*). Rosemary Jolly’s *Colonization, Violence and Narration in White South African Writing* (1996) is similarly, if less overtly, informed by postcolonial theory in its exploration of violence in textual representation in the work of Coetzee, Andre Brink, and Breyten Breytenbach. As in *Pen and Power*, a key theme is the problem of complicity for the white writer.

I have noted several key studies of settler literature that are informed by postcolonial theory (or colonial discourse analysis), but they are all focused on one
site. This is a reflection of the fact that there is a limited number of comparative studies in the field. (One of the few, which is oft-cited, is Terry Goldie’s Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures; I return to it later.) Yet appeals for more work of this sort are prevalent in this setting, where comparative methods are often hailed as an antidote to earlier, nation-based approaches deemed insular by some critics. In Australia there have been a number of such calls since the 1990s. Appearing with them are expressions of dissatisfaction with what has been the more common approach: Susan Sheridan and Gillian Whitlock, amongst others, have noted the extent to which Australia (and its cultural productions) tends to be thought of and examined as a separate and isolated entity.

Gillian Whitlock observes that there has been a ‘preference’ among literary scholars to think about the Australian nation and its literature as somehow ‘apart’ or ‘on its own’, ‘or to configure its relations elsewhere in terms of binary oppositions between home and away, the national and the cosmopolitan (‘Points for Departure’ 153). But as literary critics, historians, cultural studies scholars, and others increasingly recognise, Australia—as contemporary nation and colonial entity—is linked in all manner of ways with all manner of other sites around the globe. Its connections with the ‘mother country’ Britain have been considered extensively; less frequently examined are its relationships and connections with other colonies, including settler colonies. As Whitlock remarks, an exclusive focus on ‘national identity and national distinctiveness’ has ‘masked and denied’ these interrelationships (‘Points for Departure’ 155). She cites Terry Goldie’s Fear and Temptation as an example of what a comparative study can achieve. Not only does Goldie’s study suggest patterns across settler colonies, but what is presented about each individual site sheds light on the
others. Bill Ashcroft underlines this same point when he writes, regarding Africa and Australia, that

An understanding of the heterogeneous nature of both societies, so convincingly essentialized by the words ‘Africa’ and ‘Australia,’ may provide a way of differently conceiving the politics, the history and the social possibilities of both places. (‘Post-Colonial Connection’ 169).

Why consider the links between Australia and South Africa in particular? At first glance, these two settler sites may seem to have less in common than many others. Comparative studies of Australian literature have tended to consider it with New Zealand or Canadian writing (see for example *Australi/Canadian Literatures in English* and *Fear and Temptation*). There is far less on South Africa and Australia, but in recent years many of the same critics who advocate a comparative approach to Australian literature have pointed to the suitability of Africa or South Africa as a counterpart.² Ashcroft and Whitlock are two prominent examples. For Whitlock, it is reconciliation itself that prompts a comparative approach and which makes links with Africa a promising topic of research:

One response to reconciliation is (as we have seen) to rethink the origins of the nation, to step back and insert a first, prior, nation and to use this as a way of reorienting our personal and cultural histories. Another response is to move beyond the boundaries of the nation and to pursue a comparative approach. This too alters the sense of time and place, and reconfigures the moral universe and historical trajectory which anchors ideas of Australian culture and identity. Rather than turning aside from the past, it retrieves connections and affinities that have been fundamental to notions of race, settlement and identity here. This is to challenge some of the distinctions that are endemic to ways of thinking about Australia, most specifically connections to Africa… (‘Points of Departure’ 155)

In many ways I have taken this passage as a jumping-point. This thesis is also prompted by a recognition of what Sue Kossew describes as ‘the renewed sense in [both South Africa and Australia] of coming to terms with the past’ in the last two

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² Most calls for and efforts at comparative work on South African and Australian writing have come from within the Australian academic community. However, South African critics including Mark Sanders and Dorothy Driver express an increasing interest in the field.
decades (*Writing Woman* 11). In each country this has been a time of postcolonial revelation, increasingly vocal and authoritative black and indigenous activism, and prominent public discussions about history, memory, reparation and reconciliation. The texts examined here can be seen to participate in the first response to reconciliation: a rethinking of the origins of the nation, a reorienting of personal and cultural histories. My approach in this thesis entails, I hope, something of the ‘second response’ of which Whitlock writes: a move beyond the boundaries of the nation, with an object being to turn to the past and retrieve connections and affinities that have been important in conceptions of race, settlement, and identity in settler post/colonies and their literature, specifically that of Australia and South Africa.

**Southern spaces**

Analyses of South African and Australian settler literature are uncommon, despite the many calls for such work to be undertaken. The edited volume *Text, Theory, Space* (1996) was one of the first publications to engage connections between these two settler sites. Its introduction highlights the many historical and literary links between the two settler post/colonies, and its key points have been echoed and built upon in subsequent work in the field. South Africa and Australia are both former white settler colonies and are thus, to use Stephen Slemon’s term, ‘second world’ sites. As *Text, Theory, Space* points out, these two ‘Southern spaces, once part of the British Empire’ are similar in terms of latitudinal position and physical geography, and in both countries settler myths of *terra nullius* or *terra incognita* have held sway (Darian-Smith et al 1). In a related point, Ashcroft elaborates that Africa and Australia have held ‘a similar place in the European imagination’ and reveals striking similarities in the colonial discourse produced in relation to the two colonial sites.
('Post-Colonial Connection' 162). In both discourses themes of empty or unknown land and heroic white exploration and conquest are prominent, and landscapes are often feminised in order to legitimise their colonisation by a ‘masculine’ European power (see McClintock *Imperial Leather*, Schaffer *Women and the Bush*, Coetzee *White Writing*). South Africa and Australia also share a record of ‘white racial domination’ (Darian-Smith et al 1), a commonality that Australia has at times been reluctant to acknowledge, particularly during apartheid (Probyn ‘Unsettling’ 4). In more recent years, however, the ‘parallels’ between South Africa and Australia have become ‘less and less resistible’ (D. Carter 136) as both countries have embarked on projects of national reconciliation, beginning a process of ‘coming to terms with their often violent colonial pasts and…re-evaluating and re-examining the history of white privilege and indigenous dispossession’ (Kossew *Writing Woman* i). The editors of *Text, Theory, Space* claim that as a collection, their essays ‘demonstrate that in spite of the limited extent of any comparative examinations to date, the shared study of South African and Australian cultural and literary history is indeed a rich and intellectually rewarding one’ (Darian-Smith et al 2). In 1996 the book offered a valuable beginning and impetus for further work. However, not all of its chapters address literature, and only one considers South African and Australian texts together: Liz Gunner’s paper comparing oral poetry of ‘belonging and unbelonging’ from Aboriginal and black South African writers. *Text, Theory, Space* contains no side-by-side analyses of discrete bodies of white writing from South African and Australian contexts, although Whitlock does make a strong case for ‘reading “across” Australian and South African texts’ in her chapter in the book, ‘Across the “South” with Lady Barker’ (65). In 2008 its call for further research has been taken up by only a handful of scholars.
One such scholar is Sarah Nuttall, whose 1997 article ‘Nationalism, Literature and Identity in South Africa and Australia’ examines trends in literature that have emerged from a newly democratic South Africa and a post-Mabo Australia. After acknowledging the two countries’ shared history of British and settler colonialism, Nuttall turns her attention to a ‘third and most recent moment’, the 1990s, which was one in which reconciliation and multiculturalism were national priorities in South Africa and Australia (‘Nationalism’ 59). It is a moment to which both countries’ literary cultures can be seen to respond, though it is done differently in either case: ‘If in South Africa there has been an ongoing preoccupation with History and with inheritance,’ Nuttall writes, ‘then what is noticeable in Australian literary activity is a concern with romanticism and renewal’ (‘Nationalism’ 62). As Kossew remarks with reference to Nuttall, the push to break with the past and herald a ‘freer’ future in South African literature, similar to the emphasis on idealism and reconciliation in some Australian writing, runs the risk of ‘a closing down of contradictions and a construction of the past as knowable’ (Writing Woman 11). Nuttall also suggests that consciously ‘postcolonial’ texts—that is, works that seem dedicated to a destabilising of colonialism, such as the fiction of David Malouf—may fall prey to a smoothing over of the violent colonial past and its legacies in the contemporary settler nation (‘Nationalism’ 63). Nuttall’s article signals key (and somewhat parallel) themes in post-apartheid and post-Mabo fiction that are reflected in the texts I examine here. It is a brief piece that does not give white writing a sustained analysis, however. This thesis traces these themes further and with explicit attention to settler literature.

Gillian Whitlock is a prominent commentator on African and Australian settler postcolonialism, and a key advocate and practitioner of comparative approaches (see for example Australian/Canadian Literatures in English, ‘Points for
Departure’, and The Intimate Empire). Much of her work on the settler site examines autobiographical writing of women writers, most notably, Susannah Moodie and Doris Lessing; she has also written about black women’s writing from the ‘fourth world’ of the settler postcolony (see for example The Intimate Empire 142-178). Highly relevant to this thesis is her 2004 article ‘Consuming Passions: Reconciliation in Women’s Intellectual Memoir’, which illuminates common threads across the diverse settler sites of Australia, Canada and South Africa. Linking all of these sites, as Whitlock notes, is their hosting, within the previous ten to fifteen years, of ‘institutional arrangements (such as inquiries and commissions)’ that have allowed victims of settler colonialism to testify and be publicly heard (‘Consuming Passions’ 13). Her article examines three contemporary ‘texts of autobiographical criticism’ by white women writers that can be seen to ‘witness’ and reflect upon these public testimonies (Whitlock ‘Consuming Passions’ 13). One is Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull, a work examined here; another, Inga Clendinnen’s Tiger’s Eye. Whitlock considers how each woman writer ‘draws on discourses of reconciliation to perform a witnessing’ as well as ‘to model and experiment with ethical and accountable styles of intellectual work in the light of recent testimonials about nationally sanctioned racism’ (‘Consuming Passions’ 13). Drawing on Dominick LaCapra’s notion of ‘empathetic unsettlement as a practice and a duty in current scholarship’, she suggests that the texts employ an autobiographical mode that tests various ways of locating the self in this position (Whitlock ‘Consuming Passions’ 14). The paper concludes with remarks that are strikingly relevant to the texts under review here:

How can ‘the white palate’ move beyond its passion to commodify and consume? How can justice be done to narratives of trauma? How can we listen to these narratives without moving inappropriately to an empathetic identification? (Whitlock ‘Consuming Passions’ 26)
Whitlock acknowledges the ethical quandaries many white writers encounter as they attempt a postcolonial practice and seek to respond, in their literature, to the call for reconciliation. It is not possible for these writers to escape their own privilege, which is one of race and, for some, gender. How then does one write from a position of complicity? Is it possible to write about trauma and colonial violence without trivialising it? Can one tell the story of an/other’s pain and suffering without doing violence to that narrative and/or appropriating from the victim in some way? These are questions that appear recurrently in relation to all of the texts examined in this thesis, and to which, ultimately, there may be no clear answers. However, this thesis does aim to extend Whitlock’s consideration of them. The decision to include two texts of autobiographical ‘non-fiction’ (however uneasily categorised) is also informed by her article, and by the prominence of memoir (especially women’s memoir, it would seem) within the body of recent postcolonial writing produced in South Africa and Australia.

Though unpublished, Fiona Probyn’s PhD thesis ‘Unsettling Postcolonial Representations of the White Woman’ is an important work in a sparsely-populated field. A feminist analysis of the representation of white women in the fiction of Australian Liam Davison and South Africans J.M. Coetzee and Andre Brink, white writers all, the thesis brings into sharp relief the question of uneasy postcolonial settler identity and belonging. Probyn suggests that the novels she examines ‘express the crisis of settler postcoloniality by negotiating the uneasy space between rigorously pointing to the injustices of colonialism and expressing a profound sense of complicity in them’ (‘Unsettling’ 10). (The ‘crisis’ to which she refers is another commonality between South African and Australian settler sites that supports the case for their examination in a comparative framework, and I will elaborate on it
shortly.) In brief, Probyn finds that Davison, Coetzee and Brink essentially make recourse to the figure of the white woman in order to facilitate that negotiation. In doing so she underlines the enormous importance of gender and, in particular, the ambiguous position of white women in relation to power and colonialism in South Africa and Australia. In both sites, the white woman is identified as ‘colonised and colonising’: though under the authority of male colonial orders, she was placed above indigenous peoples and often contributed to their subjugation (see McClintock 6; Dalziell 74-75). As ‘(subversive) agents’ of Empire and settler nationalism, white women were more inclined to sympathise with these projects’ victims than white men and, as Probyn notes, ‘are often attributed with the position of “medium”…between black and white’ (‘Unsettling’ 13, 14). Especially important for this thesis is Probyn’s demonstration of how Brink’s novel *Imaginings of Sand* makes an effort to ‘re-home’ the Afrikaner in post-apartheid South Africa ‘through a sympathetic portrayal of Afrikaner women’ (‘Unsettling’ 69). Literary efforts to rehabilitate and resecure the white postcolonial settler subject emerge as a key theme in this thesis. I build on Probyn’s argument regarding Brink to examine these attempts to resecure the settler in the white writing of men and women writers, and to consider the various strategies by which it is done. This study is also more deliberately comparative than Probyn’s predominantly South African one, so it is better able to trace threads across Australian and South African texts and contexts.\(^3\)

Concerning large-scale, published, and explicitly comparative analyses of South African and Australian literature, Sue Kossew’s *Writing Woman, Writing Place: Contemporary Australian and South African Fiction* (2004) is to my knowledge the only

\(^3\) ‘Unsettling Postcolonial Representations’ is not intended to be a comparative study of South African and Australian fiction, at least not in a strict sense.
one in the field. Kossew’s focus is on contemporary white women writers and their literary engagements with concepts of self and identity, race, themes of historical violence, and belonging and place. Like Probyn’s thesis, Kossew’s book reflects the significance of gender in South African and Australian settler colonial contexts. As she notes, the colonial and nationalist orders and historical mythologies of both settler sites are predominantly masculine; at the level of discourse, they privilege the white male figure and often entrap and alienate women (see also Lake; Driver ‘Woman as Sign’; Moran; Schaffer Women and the Bush). The historically “‘in-between” subjectivity’ of settler women in relation to these discourses is reflected in contemporary white women’s writing, which can be seen to revisit and interrogate them and explore the issue of complicity (Kossew Writing Woman 1). Writing Woman also acknowledges the profound importance of place in both sets of writing, in particular, the rural spaces of the nation: the bush, the outback, the farm. It is attentive to the ‘share[d] sense of anxiety about belonging’ that haunts postcolonial settler cultures, and the problematic reach for indiginity that seems to accompany it, particularly in Australia (Kossew Writing Woman 73). The relation between black and white is another concern in this white women’s writing, as Whitlock’s ‘Consuming Passions’ also indicates. It is one that appears repeatedly in contemporary settler literature as a whole; these writers and texts are troubled, as Kossew also underscores, by the issue of the ‘violence of representation’, specifically the question of how to ethically represent the other and the other’s story (Writing Woman 1).

Kossew examines a considerable range of texts in her study, from works by renowned award-winning authors such as Nadine Gordimer to novels by less well-known and/or emerging writers. At the time of this writing, Writing Woman, Writing Place is the only published book-length comparative study of Australian and South
African fiction. While it is remarkably wide-ranging, Kossew’s study does leave room for this thesis’s analysis, which examines a smaller number of texts at greater length, considers works by both men and women writers, and which looks beyond fiction in its exploration of South African and Australian literature.

This review suggests some of the compelling links between South Africa and Australia and the white writing of each site, but there are many more connections that have received relatively minimal attention. (Some of these themes do feature in critical work that examines South African or Australian white writing separately, but they are less prominent in the comparative studies reviewed above.) One concerns the resurgence of conservatism in Australia from the late 1990s and the dissolution of hope and optimism for a more truly ‘postcolonial’ South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Though these developments are noted by Probyn and Kossew, this study can go further in exploring them simply by virtue of its later date. They are reflected in two texts examined in the thesis, The White Earth and Disgrace; in fact The White Earth overtly attempts to put reconciliation and historical redress back on the table at a time of government opposition to what some conservatives, including former Prime Minister John Howard, called ‘black armband’ history and politics (see Howard 13). Another feature common to white South African (especially Afrikaner) and settler Australian historical mythologies that is not well considered by previous studies is their emphasis on embattlement and victimhood. In both settings, constructions of the settler as historically beleaguered and victimised inhibits recognition of the settler’s own victimisation of others, most notably indigenous people. In Ann Curthoy’s words, the ‘victimological’ narrative ‘works against substantial acknowledgement and understanding of a colonial past’ (‘Expulsion’ 4). This aspect of settler discourse is referenced in most of the texts.
examined here, most notably *Country of My Skull* and *The White Earth*, and is given
sustained consideration throughout the thesis. A related issue is that of class, which
in Australia is linked to the victimological narrative (see Curthoys 'Explusion'). Class
is also important in South African contexts, but is often overlooked since the
emphasis has tended to be on race. (In South Africa the embattlement narrative
appears to be ethnically located: that is, it features most prominently in Afrikaner
culture.) The final point I will make is that the issue of appropriation of black or
Aboriginal culture and identity has not received a great deal of attention, although
Kossew does explore connections between indigenity and constructions of belonging
in an Australian context in *Writing Women*. Yet the problem of appropriation—
whether of the other’s suffering or pain, story, culture, and/or blackness—appears
repeatedly in white writing of the settler site. This thesis seeks to examine the
phenomenon more closely, and to compare and contrast the appropriations found in
South African and Australian white writing to a degree not yet seen elsewhere. As we
will see, in the texts under review appropriation is often tied up with the crisis of
settler identity and belonging that has been noted by Probyn, Kossew, and many
other commentators. This crisis is another major point of comparison between South
Africa and Australia and informs my attention to representations of settler belonging.

**The crisis of postcolonial identity and belonging**

For Probyn, the ‘crisis of the settler postcolonial identity...refers to the
instability of the position of the white settler in a postcolonial country’ (‘Unsettling’
6, emphasis in original). As settler post/colonies, South Africa and Australia are seen
to be ‘unsettled’ by the violence of the colonial past, its continuing manifestations
and legacies, and questions of legitimacy. Hodge and Mishra argue, for example, that
the ‘repressed legitimatising of colonial history and the relations of domination’
(Kossew Writing Woman 87) in Australia has resulted in ‘an acute anxiety at the core
of the national self-image, and an obsession with the issue of legitimacy’ (x). Zoë
Wicomb observes that in post-apartheid South Africa ‘[w]hiteness...[is a]
condition...no longer...to be cherished’ (‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 363), while Georgina
Horrell speaks of a ‘crisis in identity and subjectivity for whites’ that is linked to
questions about their place in the country (‘A Whiter Shade’ 765). The contemporary
settler subject is in effect ‘tainted’ by colonial (and sometimes settler-nationalist)
crimes, and this status as an inheritor of colonialism holds implications for his/her
belonging in the nation: complicity with colonialism becomes an ‘obstacle to settler
belonging’ (Probyn ‘Settler’ 76). It follows that the settler’s postcolonial
‘unsettlement’ is generally more psychological than physical: the condition is
described by Ken Gelder, Jane Jacobs, and Haydie Gooder as entailing a sense of
unease and illegitimacy, and a deep sense of insecurity about the ‘rightness’ of one’s
place in the country (see Uncanny Australia; ‘Belonging and Non-belonging’). It is
frequently linked to an increased understanding of, for example, the dispossession of
Aboriginal people and the violence of colonisation—an awareness facilitated in part
by the revelations of the 1990s noted earlier. (This is not to say such an awareness
did not precede this period, as in fact it did.) In Australia, the phenomenon is
described by commentators such as Peter Read, Gelder and Jacobs, and Hodge and
Mishra. In South Africa, it is suggested by Coetzee, Rian Malan and Grant Farred,
amongst others, and appears recurrently in the popular press both inside and outside
the country. The Afrikaner poet Antjie Krog, whose work I examine in this thesis,
references settler unease about place and belonging in her autobiographical writing,
especially A Change of Tongue. The extent to which ‘ordinary’ South Africans and
Australians actually experience this ‘crisis of belonging’ is debatable, but what is clear is that white anxiety about identity and belonging is a recurrent theme in public discourse and critical and literary writing from these two settler sites.

This postcolonial crisis of settler identity and belonging has a protracted genealogy in settler culture. In South Africa, for example, the settler has long been obsessed with the potential impermanence of his/her placement. J.M. Coetzee has described the whites of his home country as ‘unsettled settlers with so unsure a future’ (White Writing 4) and notes the strong negative response of white South Africans to the descriptor ‘settler’, for to black and white South Africans alike, ‘a settler is a transient, no matter what the dictionary says’ (Giving Offence 1). Terry Goldie’s study of the ‘image of the indigene’ in Canadian, Australian and New Zealand literatures traces this settler insecurity about belonging to works written as early as the nineteenth century. He illuminates in all three sites an expression of a need for the white settler to ‘become “native”, to belong’ (Goldie 13). How is this achieved? The settler becomes engaged in a process of ‘indigenisation’ (Goldie 13) that is inextricably linked with aboriginal peoples. In settler-invader colonies this ‘Other’ has always been on the ‘inside’, which creates a problem for the settler.

Goldie writes with reference to Canada

The Indian is ‘Other’ and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the [white] Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada? (12)

By way of resolution, Goldie argues, white culture attempts to ‘incorporate’ the indigene, either ‘superficially’ or with ‘sophistication’ (12-13). Such ‘incorporations’ are visible in Australian settler culture, for example in the Jindyworobak movement,
or in Gelder's words, in 'fantasies about “white blackfellows” in the 1930s and 1940s, in art and, in particular, in poetry' ('Imaginary' n.p.).

Goldie also describes a second, alternative method of indigenisation: settler culture may reject or ignore the aboriginal so that the settler’s own belonging may become (apparently) unproblematic, unstained and 'primary'. This is another tactic seen in South African and Australian settler literature. In *White Writing*, for example, Coetzee describes how the South African farm novel occludes the black man because his labour on the land threatens the legitimacy of the settler’s possession of and belonging on it. The 'vanishing race' myth that was prevalent in many settler colonies (including the United States), and which held great sway in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, functioned in a similar way to 'disappear' the indigene and naturalise settler dominance even as it concealed frontier violence (see Brantlinger *Dark Vanishing*; McGregor *Imagined Destinies*).

Critical and literary engagements with the problem of settler (non-)belonging in the present day may reflect similar tendencies, though on the whole they are more complex and subtle about it: in a postcolonial era it is no longer possible to deny the existence of the indigenous subject, and efforts to appropriate indigeneity are less likely to go uncriticised. What has remained relatively constant over time is the settler subject’s inclination to measure white belonging against aboriginal belonging, to find it somehow wanting by comparison, and to attempt to conceive of how the settler might belong more legitimately and authentically in place. As Probyn writes, in the postcolonial nation

> [t]he question ‘How does the settler belong?’ is met by a pressing need for strategies which interrogate this old issue in new ways, particularly in regards to the discursive production of settler ‘belonging’ in relation to Indigenous people. (‘Settler’ 75)
Probyn’s remark prompts another question: what are the strategies by which the issue is interrogated today? How is the problem of settler belonging articulated and negotiated in the public, critical and literary discourse of the contemporary nation?

Of all the commentary on postcolonial settler belonging in Australia, historian Peter Read’s work is perhaps the best-known. In *Belonging* Read ‘confronts’ ‘[t]he problem’ of settler placement on the land: ‘those places we loved…were wrested from the Indigenous people who loved them, lost them and grieve for them still’ (2). Read asks whether he too has a ‘right to belong in…[Aboriginal] soul-country’ (9). At the same time he questions conceptions of non-indigenous belonging as less meaningful than that of Aboriginal people (Read 4, 9). Read finally concludes that settler belonging can be ‘deep’ too, but it should not be based on an appropriation of Aboriginality (see for example 15, 21, 204, 223). Yet the irony is that Read’s book is entirely preoccupied with Aboriginality and Aboriginal belonging. As Gelder writes, *Belonging* betrays that for Read, to be non-indigenous

is to lack the very thing Aboriginal people are seen (or were seen, before dispossession) to have: a ‘deep relationship’ to country. Read’s task, then, is to take away the negative connotation: to remove the ‘non-’ from ‘non-Aboriginal’ and to do away with those differences—but on one side only. Aboriginal people remain Aboriginal, but settlers become indigenous. (‘Imaginary’ n.p.)

This is achieved not through an appropriation of Aboriginality *per se*, but rather through a continual insistence on the depth of settler’s own belonging, partly through sentimental appeals and partly through recourse to the concept of ‘deep time’ elaborated by Tom Griffiths (see *Hunters and Collectors*). *Belonging* thus shows a variation of the indigenising impulse described by Goldie, and in a sense it is still haunted by appropriation, especially if one considers Read’s continual and highly problematic association of indigenous dispossession (which is material) with settler
dispossession (which is ethical-psychological). Probyn finds a more ‘substantial contribution’ to the discussion about settler belonging in *Body/Landscape Journals* by Margaret Sommerville (‘Settler’ 76). Rather than skirting the issue of appropriating Aboriginality, Probyn suggests, Sommerville’s text ‘explicitly interrogate[s] the writer’s subject position’ and suggests ‘the risk of cultural appropriation and complicity as white writing’s inexorable point of departure’ (‘Settler’ 76) As Probyn goes on to clarify, her praise of *Body/Landscape Journals* in this respect is not to say that ‘cultural appropriation is a good thing’, but rather to acknowledge ‘that it is a feature of such questions of belonging and must be included as a genuine problem for settler writers concerns to express their “belonging” to country’ (‘Settler’ 76, emphasis in original). We will see just such an engagement with this ‘problem’ in *Craft for a Dry Lake*, one of the texts examined in this thesis.

My emphasis thus far has admittedly been on Australian commentators, but similar concerns and negotiations around settler belonging circulate in South African public and literary culture. Breyten Breytenbach’s memoir *Dog Heart* suggests that traditional models of white belonging in South Africa are no longer tenable, and proposes a new model premised on hybridity and nomadism (*Coetzee Stranger Shores* 312), while critics Michiel Heyns, Zoë Wicomb and Georgina Horrell underline the drive for a ‘rehabilitation’ of the white settler in South Africa following apartheid and, in particular, the TRC (see ‘The Whole Country’s Truth, ‘Five Afrikaner Texts’, and ‘A Whiter Shade’). This is often attempted through confession narratives, a ‘melanisation’ of the Afrikaner whereby racial hybridity is uncovered (or invented) in the family line, and/or the white South African is re-written as a more sympathetic and/or remorseful figure. These projects are linked to the TRC, of course, and to an

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4 For a fuller critique of Read’s *Belonging*, see Probyn ‘Settler’ and Gelder ‘Imaginary’.
attempt to find a place for the white in a post-apartheid nation (see for example Horrell ‘A Whiter Shade’ and C. Coetzee’s argument in ‘They Never Wept’). The review of the crisis of settler belonging and identity provided here will be fleshed out further in individual chapters, but even this preliminary account suggests the prominence of non-indigenous, especially white, belonging as an issue in the settler post/colony and the contested nature of the discussions and negotiations around it. This crisis of identity and belonging is taken up in the texts explored in this thesis, in which, I argue, a range of attempts and strategies to examine and re-conceive settler belonging are evident. This is the first study to examine this theme so explicitly across a diverse selection of South African and Australian literary texts.

Unsettling fictions

This thesis, then, investigates the ambivalent postcolonialism of recent white writing from the settler sites of South Africa and Australia, with an emphasis on its treatment of the crisis of belonging and identity. It does this through readings of six literary texts: three South African, three Australian. The texts I have selected for analysis do not necessarily constitute a representative sample of contemporary white writing from South Africa and Australia, but they have been chosen carefully and deliberately for their critique of settler colonialism as well as their capacity to illuminate aspects of the negotiation of the crisis of settler subjectivity with which I am concerned in this thesis. They are, in order of their appearance in this study, *The Folly* by Ivan Vladislavic, *The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan, *The Custodians* by Nicholas Jose, *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog, *Craft for a Dry Lake* by Kim Mahood, and *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee. All were published during the 1990s and early 2000s, and in this their selection is informed by my view that this was a period of
unprecedented postcolonial upheaval in South Africa and Australia, to which these texts can be seen to respond. For the most part, the men and women writers whose work I examine might be identified as ‘white liberals’, and I do not suggest that they are representative of white settlers (or even white writers) in South Africa and Australia as a larger population. However, their work does constitute an exemplary engagement with the historical ‘excavations’ of the 1990s and its implications for contemporary white settler subjects.

Although the majority of texts are novels, the thesis also examines two works that are classified as ‘memoir’ and ‘non-fiction’ (this latter descriptor is somewhat uneasily applied, since both may contain fictional elements). The six texts are of variable popularity and literary quality, with the South African ones almost undisputedly better-known within and beyond their country of origin. I am not trying to make any specific claims about the impact of these books on ‘the nation’ or settler society at large, so popularity has not been a primary consideration in their selection. (However, I have been mindful that in the South African case it would be hard to pass by *Country of My Skull*, for example, because it is so widely regarded as ‘the’ text of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.) Nor is it the object of this study to assess the aesthetic or literary merit of the books under review. Rather, I echo Kossew’s remarks regarding her text selections for *Writing Woman, Writing Place*, since her priorities match my own:

What is important, then, about all the texts discussed is their engagement with contemporary dilemmas at a time when both nations are undergoing continuing processes of social and political change. (2)

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5 This is a trend also seen in Sue Kossew’s study and in Fiona Probyn’s thesis, and it likely reflects the different status and history of literary culture in South Africa. I will discuss this point a little further at the end of the Introduction.
All of the texts examined in this thesis can be seen to undertake such engagements. All consider the traumatic colonial past, but none are historical fiction (or non-fiction, in the case of the memoirs); instead, their reflection on the past is always from a place in the contemporary moment. These texts consider the legacies of colonialism and settler-nationalism and explore the problem of complicity for present-day settler subjects. They critique Western colonialis...
informed by postcolonial theory and colonial discourse analysis, though I have been wary of the way in which heavily theoretical postcolonial analyses of literary works risk flattening texts and overlooking those aspects that do not fit the frame. In addition, the thesis was completed in an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research program rather than an English department, and has been influenced by my exposure to a range of methodologies from the disciplines of history, anthropology, and cultural studies. It is about literary texts but is not, strictly speaking, a traditional English thesis. My method is also comparative in that, in addition to reading each text individually, I am concerned with reading them together, and with identifying patterns, links and departures across the selection. Of course, any study of South African and Australian literatures together must also acknowledge the many important differences between these two settler sites and the writing that emerges from them. It must be alert to, and accommodating of, the complexity and specificity of each. I have endeavoured to be attentive to divergences as well as convergences in my readings, and remain mindful of historical specificity. In seeking to avoid collapsing difference, I have once again been informed by Sue Kossew’s approach in *Writing Woman*. In an effort to avoid ‘over-simplifying or essentialising’, common pitfalls in comparative approaches, Kossew places analyses of South African and Australian works in separate sections (*Writing Woman* 15). I do not divide the thesis into South African and Australian sections in quite the same way, but my decision to allocate each text a chapter of its own is inspired partly by Kossew’s example.

The thesis is structured in six chapters, over which I make the argument that the ambivalence of contemporary white writing itself functions ambivalently, to variously undermine or facilitate the text’s postcolonial practice. Chapter one demonstrates through a close reading of Ivan Vladislavic’s postcolonial satire *The
Folly the capacity of contemporary white writing to engage in a postcolonial critique of South Africa as a settler site, its representation in colonial discourse, and its historical settler mythologies. Chapter two identifies a similar attention to white ‘foundation discourse’ and its colonialist approaches to landscape and models of belonging in Andrew McGahan’s Australian novel *The White Earth*. The text puts Gothic to work to unearth the ‘repressed’ of the settler colony, in particular, the murder and dispossession of Aboriginal people, and to reveal the falsity of triumphalist nationalist accounts of the past. It also casts into question settler appropriations of indigeneity. However, here we begin to glimpse the potential double-edgedness of the ambivalence of white writing, and of postcolonial co-options of genre: *The White Earth* resists Gothic’s drive to closure, but does fall prey to its adherence to formula in its simplification and, arguably, commodification of Queensland’s violent colonial past.

In chapter three I complicate the argument further with reference to the Australian novel *The Custodians* by Nicholas Jose, a text that draws on the conventions of ‘postcolonial pastoral’ to critically revisit Australia’s rural sites and dominant white narratives of the nation’s past. The novel offers a fictionalised ‘social history’ that opens another, long-suppressed aspect of that past: the indigenous side. However, the text then proceeds to resolve the discomforting issues it has raised, closing with a scene in which re-educated and repentant settler characters essentially ‘come home’ under the watchful and approving gaze of Aboriginal custodians. *The Custodians*’ appropriation of the story of an historical Aboriginal man who died in custody and its direct and unselfconscious representations of Aboriginal characters are also problematic, especially given that these are fitted into a larger narrative of reconciliation and resecured settler belonging. Similar dilemmas are visible in relation
to *Country of My Skull*, Antjie Krog’s renowned memoir of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, examined in chapter four. This important book engages closely with TRC victim testimony and has been a major disseminator of that material to a large reading audience. It also offers a sustained and, for Afrikaners especially, deeply troubling meditation on questions of whiteness, complicity, and the ‘price’ of privilege, including the privilege of calling the farm ‘home’. Nevertheless, *Country of My Skull* has been charged with appropriating victim testimony, which it may also be seen to commodify. And despite its disparaging representations of Afrikaner culture, the text may also attempt to ‘rehabilitate’ or rewrite the Afrikaner as a penitent worthy of a return to belonging in the country.

Chapter five is the beginning of my exploration of white writing that may be seen to negotiate these problems more successfully. The texts examined in chapters five and six are ones in which ambivalence contributes to, rather than detracts from, their postcolonial oppositionality. *Craft for a Dry Lake* by Kim Mahood is, like Krog’s text, an example of women’s memoir. A travel narrative that relates her return to the country of her childhood, the Tanami, *Craft for a Dry Lake* hosts an interrogation of Australian settler mythologies and representations of the ‘frontier’. Its portrait of the white settler subject’s desire to belong in place is as intimate as Krog’s, but here, a strategic harnessing of self-reflexive ambivalence allows for an acknowledgement of the pull to appropriate Aboriginal culture and identity and a critique of this impulse. Ultimately, it is rejected as a legitimate means by which settlers can belong, and this subject is not reconciled or returned to belonging. A similar refusal of comfortable resolution is found in the bleak post-apartheid novel *Disgrace*, in which, I argue in chapter six, author J.M. Coetzee proffers some options for a changed white belonging and a (moderate) redemption of the complicit settler. But the ‘price’ is so
high that these are more likely to unsettle than reassure the white South African. Refusing the historical transcendence of TRC rhetoric, Disgrace also denies the adequacy of white apology without lived ‘follow-through’, insisting instead on a flattening of historical privilege and power. Disgrace and Craft for a Dry Lake thus undertake a particularly sophisticated negotiation of the postcolonial settler site and the place of the complicit white subject in it. Here ambivalence actually facilitates the texts’ evasions of many of the pitfalls of postcolonial white writing identified in other works.

Over the course of this thesis I will also be illuminating the multiple links and divergences between these South African and Australian white texts, to suggest, finally, that the South African works are on the whole more sophisticated, nuanced, and less politically obvious or ‘clumsy’ than the Australian ones in their representations of the settler site and settler subject. (The exception is Craft for a Dry Lake.) It must be conceded that they have been selected from a much larger corpus: it would seem that postcolonial white writing that examines the past from a position in the contemporary moment is both more common and more popular in South Africa than in Australia. The South African texts examined here are also—this time without exception—more widely read than the Australian works: Country of My Skull and Disgrace were even domestic and international bestsellers. In many ways this is a remarkable achievement, given their confronting subject matter; certainly their Australian counterparts have not had anything like their commercial success. This situation may derive, in part, from the fact that many oppositional South African writers had to seek publication ‘off-shore’ during the apartheid years, going through the larger international publishing centres of London and New York, for example. It may also have something to do with the sheer visibility and ‘audacity’ of apartheid,
which was an unavoidable presence in the life of every South African and attracted the attention of the world in the scale and systematicness of its implementation of racial separation and inequality. In South Africa it has perhaps never been as easy to ignore the black or indigenous other, or the injustices of white colonialist nationalism, as it may have been in Australia, where indigenous Australians make up a small percentage of the population and colonialist crimes are often relegated to the distant past. Is Australia as a society perhaps less compelled to turn to literature for what it might say about the nation, its past and the possibility of reconciliation? My remarks here must remain speculative. What is clear is that the South African and Australian white writing examined here shares many common themes and preoccupations, weaknesses and strengths, in their ambivalent engagements with the contemporary settler post/colony. The process of excavation is ongoing.

\[6\] In referring to the ‘audacity’ of apartheid, I am of course indebted to J.M. Coetzee’s description of apartheid as an ‘audacious and well-planned crime against Africa’ (Doubling the Point 342).
Mr and Mrs Malgas enjoy a comfortable, if uneventful, existence in a South African suburb. The country is in a ‘State of Emergency’, yet these circumstances barely touch them: they watch townships ablaze on television with the sound on mute, listening only to the weather and advertisements. Disrupting their complacency is the arrival of a vagrant on the scrubby plot next door. This is Nieuwenhuizen, an eccentric schemer with a plan to erect a mansion on this patch of what he calls ‘virgin bushveld’ (*Folly* 45). Malgas befriends Nieuwenhuizen, to his wife’s consternation, and is soon helping him with the layout and construction of the house. In a twist reminiscent of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’, however, the great mansion is purely imaginary. Malgas loses sight of this as he is drawn into the grandeur of Nieuwenhuizen’s vision and rhetoric.

These are the bare bones of the novel *The Folly* (1993) by South African writer Ivan Vladislavic. Their apparent simplicity belies the power and subtlety of the text’s engagement with the settler mythological discourses and hierarchies of power that have been so important in white South African, particularly Afrikaner, culture.

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1 In general, references to quotations from *The Folly* will appear only as page numbers in parenthesis, except when it is not clear that the quotation comes from this text and not another. This approach to quotations from primary texts (that is, the creative works under investigation) is replicated in the other chapters.
This chapter offers a reading of *The Folly* that suggests the potential of white writing to critique settler colonialism, the discourses that attend and support it, and its ongoing legacies and contemporary manifestations. More specifically, it argues that the text’s satirical representations of South African settler history, contemporary society and colonialist discourses constitute a concerted postcolonial practice in which settler historical mythologies especially are interrogated and undermined. With its emphasis on an imaginary dwelling that reflects European fantasies about the conquest of ‘exotic’ foreign territory, the novel also foregrounds the centrality of land and belonging in settler colonialism and contemporary South Africa.

*The Folly* was Vladislavic’s first published novel. It is also the most critically neglected, and has generally only been noted briefly and in retrospect by critics who have discovered his later works. Vladislavic’s profile in the world of South African letters is rising, but critics were initially slow to read and recognise his work. Warnes speculates that this is because his corpus has a reputation for being ‘playful, surreal, and at times bizarre’ (‘History’ 69). His texts often employ satire and fantasy (Killam and Rowe; de Kok 125), which creates interpretative challenges. The subtext of his fiction, and of *The Folly* in particular, is indicated by several published misreadings of the text. For example, Ina Gräbe suggests that the character of Nieuwenhuizen illuminates the plight of the homeless poor white in contemporary South Africa. Her analysis seemingly ignores the many indications that Nieuwenhuizen is a representative figure of the archetypal colonial Afrikaner patriarch. Another example comes from the *South African Review of Books*, in a piece by Peter Horn which reads the novel as ‘building a house [for] the imagination’ and concludes with the remark that ‘building real houses for the millions of shack dwellers will be of more immediate concern to many’ (Horn 10). Gräbe’s and Horn’s readings are betrayed by
their literal interpretations. They have also overlooked many historical, political and cultural references in *The Folly* that point to its postcolonialism.

This oversight is not entirely surprising, given that Vladislavic, like J.M. Coetzee, has not subscribed to the realism and overt engagement with socio-politics embraced by other prominent white South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer. As Tony Morphet remarks, Vladislavic is ‘an unusual figure in South African writing, because his chief interests...lie at a remove from the socio-political landscape which has dominated fiction for so long’ (444). Yet far from being divorced from South African contexts, much of his writing contains ‘political or social subtexts’ though these may be ‘addressed in...peripheral ways’ (Warnes, ‘Interview’ 275). His fiction ‘spans the transition between apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa’ and, as Warnes argues, it ‘can be fruitfully investigated in the context of the political, cultural and historical milieu in which it was written and with which it is in dialogue’ (‘History’ 68-69). Thus informed, this chapter attempts an analysis of *The Folly* within a postcolonial framework.

Critical work on *The Folly* is limited, and most available readings of the text are naïve in the sense that they do not recognise its irony. There are passing references to the novel in journal articles, and several reviews (for example Barnett), but few critics have delved deeply into the text. Misreadings are common, as we have seen in relation to Ina Gräbe’s ‘Voices in Contemporary South African Narrative’. But Gräbe is right to bring a consideration of class to the analysis. That she can read Nieuwenhuizen as being simply one of the homeless poor—a person at the very bottom of society—when so much of the text shows the character assuming for himself an almost aristocratic role, testifies to the playful irony and multiple, shifting
representations of the character. A fuller, more authoritative analysis of *The Folly* is found in Sabina Moeller’s unpublished ‘Novel Farms: Textual Memory and Spatial Imagination’ (1998). This Master’s thesis examines how contemporary South African texts expose and subvert the genre of the South African ‘farm novel’. Approaching the project from her positioning at the intersection of postcolonial theory and geography studies, Moeller argues that these texts attempt to open a space ‘for the inscription of new myths about South Africa’ that are ‘premised upon the self-reflexive, responsible use of language’ (n.p., see thesis abstract). Moeller’s analysis of *The Folly* is exemplary for its attention to the detail of the text. It is also one of the few readings to recognise the novel’s historical referentiality. But it is constrained by an almost exclusive focus on race and gender, and so misses what the book has to say about class. My reading attempts to address that gap, in addition to reading the novel more coherently on its own and moving beyond ‘the farm’ in its consideration of the text’s deconstructive action.

This chapter also contributes to the literature on *The Folly* in its consideration of the text as a postcolonial satire. Vladislavic’s fiction is widely recognised as satirical, but only one critic, Gerald Gaylard, has examined this aspect of his work in any detail. In an article in *Current Writing*, Gaylard suggests that for Vladislavic, satire is ‘an answer to the question of postcolonial political commitment’ (129). The writer’s dry irony and ‘playful insurrection[ism]’ allows political engagement but does not ‘sacrifice the specific, apparently irrelevant, idiosyncratic or humourous to a cause’ (129). This argument presages mine. Gaylard analyses Vladislavic’s short stories and *The Restless Supermarket*, and his emphasis throughout is on Vladislavic’s deflation of ‘monumental power’ (129). While colonial and apartheid discourses may fall under this rubric—and Gaylard does briefly consider how one short story
critiques 'monumental representations of the colonial encounter' (137)—these are not his focus; in addition, only two sentences are devoted to *The Folly*. Critical consideration of how Vladislavic’s fiction is specifically postcolonial in its satire is lacking; *The Folly* is the ideal text for such an investigation and suggests that satire can facilitate a political and postcolonial practice.

**Satire and the postcolonial text**

As John Clement Ball observes, satire is everywhere in postcolonial literature, but it remains a ‘largely untheorized mode of representation’ (ix). This is surprising not only because satire is so prevalent in the work of Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe and other prominent postcolonial writers, but also because satire and postcolonial writing ‘share certain foundational assumptions’, which Ball identifies as oppositionality and referentiality (2). Satire is generally held to take aim at ‘an object of attack’ located in the ‘real’ or historical world (Frye 224)—though its representations need not be mimetic or realist (Ball 2). Similarly, postcolonial literatures ‘emerge out of a concrete social reality and history’ and typically challenge colonial and imperial power and constructions (Ball 2). These commonalities between satire and the postcolonial do not justify their conflation, but a mindfulness of what they share is useful for the critic approaching instances of the satiric in the postcolonial text. It has informed my identification of *The Folly* as postcolonial satire, and this chapter demonstrates that satire can be a tool of critique for settler

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8 These commonalities should not be taken as reason to conflate the oppositionality and referentiality of satire with that of postcolonialism, especially given that satire and its theorising has its ‘roots in European cultural and critical traditions’ (Ball 4). As many postcolonial critics argue, there is a risk that the application of such theories and systems to ‘colonial and postcolonial realities’ and texts could result in the suppression of their difference and specificity (Ball 4). This is perhaps less of a concern in the analysis of white writing than it would be in the examination of, for example, Aboriginal Australian texts. Nevertheless, I remain mindful of this critique.
cultures in the hands of a white writer, for whom the ‘object of attack’ may not be far removed—if at all removed—from the self.

Exploring some of the key features of satire further suggests the suitability of the satiric mode to postcolonial fiction. It also facilitates my sign-posting, throughout the chapter, of the ways in which *The Folly* works to destabilise historical settler mythologies and settler subjects. As I have begun to indicate, historicality and referentiality are considered to be important features of satire (see Rosenheim 323), although their ‘precise nature’ is contested (Ball 29). Some critics insist that satire’s referentiality be very particular (Rosenheim, for example) while others, such as Gerard O’Conner, suggest it may be either specific or quite general (9-10). Dustin Griffin reminds us that ‘satires vary, in the degree and kind of referentiality’ (120). In *The Folly*, the events of the narrative take place during the period of the State of Emergency; through the figure of Nieuwenhuizen in particular the text refers to white settlement of the Cape and launches an ‘attack’ on the historical mythological discourses of Afrikaner settler society and apartheid culture. The setting is the suburbs, where most white South Africans live, but the vacant plot becomes symbolic of the country’s rural spaces, which are so important in settler mythology. Its critique is irreverent and sharp, but for some readers quite subtle, and in this *The Folly* is not atypical. As Kernan and Test suggest, satire is aggressive in the sense that it has a target—be it a person, institution or body of discourse. It is not always straightforward in its ‘denunciation’, however, and Ball writes that the ‘play’ of satire may make its aggression more ‘palatable’ to the reader (30). (Indeed satire has allowed writers to slip under the radar of censorship, and this is no more true than in Africa where, as Gaylard notes, it has been a ‘useful political tool…as few other tools have been available due to state oppression’ (131).) Satire’s ‘play’ and methods of
indirection may involve allegory, fantasy, imagery, wordplay, and caricature (Test 19-23), all of which are present in *The Folly*, in addition to irony, which Ball identifies as another 'chief...mode of indirection used by satiric texts’ (22). Satire is also said to be characterised by a lack of closure (Palmeri; Kernan) and Ball points to its ambivalence and ‘multidirectional resistance’ (38). Many of these features make satire amenable to postcolonial co-option, where it can facilitate critiques of power, repressive political structures and colonialist discourses and epistemologies. As will become more apparent as the thesis progresses, *The Folly* resists tidy resolution, deterministic positions and/or reductive representations more successfully than many of the other novels under investigation, most of which also draw on literary genres or modes (such as pastoral and gothic) for postcolonial purposes. Might this not be at least partly attributable to *The Folly*’s employment of a mode that is innately oppositional and resistant to closure and fixity?

For all this praise of satire, a caveat is that it is often misread. The ‘message’ of the satiric text may be lost because ‘its irony is not understood or appreciated’ (Ball 27). In *The Folly*, depictions of settler subjects and mythologies are characteristically ironic; irony might be said to be paramount among Vladislavic’s satiric tools. As noted, many readers have missed this irony and thus failed to recognise the text’s referentiality and postcolonial relevance. Such failures of recognition are not unusual; a common and not entirely invalid critique of irony is that it is elitist, for it works through the ‘assumption of mutual intellectual superiority by the ironist and the knowing reader’ (Tonkin 33). The irony of the text (whether satirical or not) is often only available to the intelligent, educated reader, and may only be discernable if the reader and writer share similar values and perspectives (Tonkin 33). With regard to *The Folly*, then, one criticism might be that its reliance on
satirical irony renders its critique of settler-colonialist discourses invisible to all but the most sympathetic and ‘knowing’ readers. This would not be an entirely fair criticism, however, because the ‘clues’ to this reading are not inaccessible. They are there for the willing reader to pluck out. This is the other, more progressive side to irony. The slipperiness or indeterminacy of the ironic text presses the reader to construct meaning for him or her self by examining the text’s incongruities, contradictions and gaps (Tonkin 36, Ball 27). Reader agency is thus acknowledged and invited, and the extensive use of parody and irony in *The Folly* opens the possibility of a dialectical process. This is not didactic satire.

**Nieuwenhuizen: Satirising the settler-colonial**

Vladislavic’s satiric strategy is no more apparent than in the character of Nieuwenhuizen, the vagrant who arrives on the plot next door to the Malgases. Allegory and irony, two of satire’s key ‘methods of indirection’, are harnessed here in a critique of settler colonialism and historical mythological discourses. Nieuwenhuizen is a parodic representation of a colonial type: the patriarchal white settler. Through him, *The Folly* engages with the history of colonial settlement in South Africa and the mythological narratives that attended and supported white dominance—narratives that still hold resonance for settler subjects today. Vladislavic’s treatment of this figure is so ironic that for some reader-critics, as we have seen, Nieuwenhuizen is not recognisable as a central protagonist of colonial and settler discourses. The clues are present, however, and *The Folly* subjects the various tropes and discourses associated with this figure and his projects to scrutiny. Vladislavic highlights the gaps between fantasy and ‘reality’, and colonial tropes and myths are rendered absurd as they are literalised—often hilariously—in the text. *The
Polly does not lose sight of the damaging effects of settler colonialism and apartheid, however—an illustration of Bell’s point that ‘[a]s a form of critique, satire is primarily concerned with the potentially harmful effects of the conditions it exposes’ (52). The heroic white male explorer-settler is ridiculed and demythologised in The Folly, though his historical impact is not denied. That Nieuwenhuizen’s speech and behaviour evokes that of Afrikaner nationalists at various points means that the text indicts not only historical settlers but also contemporary white South Africans.

Nieuwenhuizen’s status as an allegorical colonial settler figure is signalled many times over. Because this has often been overlooked by some critics, I begin by unpacking Nieuwenhuizen’s referentiality before showing the ways in which Vladislavic’s satirical, ironic representations undermine this figure and the discourses on which he draws. His name alone is suggestive: as Barnett informs us, ‘Nieuwenhuizen’ means ‘new house’, ‘not in a current language in South Africa but in the Dutch of its early conquerors’ (Barnett 872). Like them, Nieuwenhuizen ‘left [his] home far away and came here to start over’ (Folly 23). The alternative name for himself that Nieuwenhuizen provides Malgas with is ‘Father’ (22), which signals his claim to the mantle and authority of the Dutch patriarchs who led early Afrikaner settlers. The Folly’s historicality—in particular, its reference to the white settlement of the Cape and surrounding areas—is further indicated by the ‘prefabricated wall with panels in the shape of wagon-wheels’ (1) that borders the land on which Nieuwenhuizen takes up residence. The ox-wagon is a foundational symbol in Afrikaner culture of the ‘Great Trek’ and other ‘Boer’ endeavours to expand the frontier and settle in regions beyond the Cape; these treks are vital in Afrikaner nationalist narratives (see McClintock 370-378). A later reference to the ‘wagon-
wheel frontier’ (51) again points to the allegorism of the events of the novel, and Nieuwenhuizen’s activities on the plot in particular.

In an approach which reflects that of many historical white settlers in the colonies, Nieuwenhuizen claims the piece of land next to the Malgas house immediately, thinking it his ‘inheritance’ (2) and right, coming upon it ‘salivating, swallowing’ as if ready to devour it (1). His are the ‘imperial eyes’ described by critics such as Mary Louise Pratt, for as Nieuwenhuizen approaches the plot for the first time, he takes up ‘the elevated point of view typical of the colonial gaze’ (van Eeden 26) to survey it, ‘[standing] on top of [a] hill and turn[ing] his face ceremoniously’ towards it (Folly 2), his eyes seeking the horizon (1). He judges and measures the landscape:

...[H]e lift[ed] his eyes to survey his new dominion.

He liked it. Its contours and dimensions were just right, and so too were its colour schemes and coordinates, not to mention its vistas and vantage-points. The sheer cliffs of the hedge towering at his back, dappled with gold and amber, tapering into the far-off haze on either side; the vast and empty sky, baby-blue on the horizon, and sky-blue in the middle distance, and navy-blue in the dome above; the veld rolling away before him in a long blond swell, reeded by the shadows of the hedge and stirred by a breath of wind, swirling now through thickets of shrubs and weeds, spilling now over rocks, boiling into heathery foam, spending itself at last against the wagon-wheel wall in the distance—all these things pleased him enormously. (7)

In her work on Victorian explorers’ travel writing about Africa, which she considers part of the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ genre (201), Pratt identifies three key features of the discourse: aesthetisation of landscape; the creation of a ‘density of meaning’ in various passages; and an assumption of ‘mastery predicated between seer and the seen’ (204). Most notable for my purposes here are the first and last features. Aesthetisation of landscape involves seeing a landscape ‘as a painting’ with the description ‘ordered in terms of background, foreground, symmetries between foam-flecked water and mist-flecked hills, and so on’ (Pratt 204). The above passage
depicts such an envisioning—Nieuwenhuizen’s envisioning—with the scene described in terms of ‘distance’, ‘middle distance’ and proximity (the veld rolls away from him). Echoing Pratt’s ‘foam-flecked water and mist-flecked hills’ are its hedge ‘dappled with gold and amber’ and ‘thickets of shrubs...spilling’ and ‘boiling into heather foam’ over rocks. Even Nieuwenhuizen’s ‘enormous pleasure’ (6) over what he sees follows Pratt’s theorising: Pratt writes that ‘within the text’s own terms the esthetic pleasure of the sight...constitutes the value and significance of the journey’ (204). By ‘seeing’ and ‘reading’ the land in this way, *The Folly* suggests, Nieuwenhuizen is empowered to take control of it, just as many European explorers and settlers were able to do after rendering colonial space ‘familiar and manageable’ by domesticating and presenting nature ‘according to Western scheme[s] of representation’ (van Eeden 27). The passage reveals Nieuwenhuizen’s reliance on a distinctly Western, colonialist way of managing and controlling space.

Nieuwenhuizen sees the plot as empty, describing it (rather grandly) as ‘virgin bushveld’ (38). Becoming visible here is his subscription to what Delmont and Dubow call ‘that...well-rehearsed trope of European pre-eminence’, the myth of the empty landscape, ‘the colony as tabula rasa, a virgin space waiting and willing to admit fantasies of domination’ (12). Despite his romantic envisioning of the plot, and in keeping with a ‘fantasy of domination’, Nieuwenhuizen’s approach to the land is aggressive. His boots ‘[smash] down’ on the earth, the soles ‘brand[ing] crosses and arrows on the tender skin of the soil’ (9), ‘signposting’ it (67)—bringing to mind historical colonists’ markings on maps. The scrubby patch seems to be a microcosm of a much larger landscape, the South African veld:

Nieuwenhuizen raised his head and squinted at the topsoil under his nose. His ear pressing against the sand had created a small relief map, a flat-topped
mountain surrounded by whorled hillocks and vales... Some pebbles assumed the appearance of boulders piled at the foot of the mountain; then his nostrils stirred up a dust-storm; and that blew over, leaving in its wake a dry blade of grass that looked just like a wind-wracked palm-frond. (81)

Nieuwenhuizen’s mapping method reflects the scientific ideals of cartography that were embraced by nineteenth century colonialism (van Eeden 29). He divides the plot into a grid, ‘ruling[ing] lines with his eyes, from one little landmark to another…so that his territory lay enmeshed in a handsome grid’; then he numbers ‘the blocks methodically’ with ‘Roman numerals down one side and capital letters down another’ (13). His actions suggest an effort to subscribe to the dominant model of thought about maps, in which they are ‘scaled representation[s] of the real…based on a one-to-one correspondence of the world and the message sent and received’ (Pickles 194). Ostensibly cartography may be thought of as a neutral discipline, but various critics have highlighted the ways in which maps and mapping projects are implicated in power relations.9 Even empirical maps are not neutral; for example, Benedict Anderson has suggested that the European longitudinal map was used to divide the globe into measurable squares which could then be surveyed and brought under control (173). And maps do not simply reflect ‘reality,’ they construct it (Pickles 194); these constructions are influenced by cultural and political contexts, religious and social values and ideologies (Harley 236). In some instances maps deliberately seek to distort information or propagandize in the service of an institution of power, as Van Eeden expounds with reference to Michel Foucault:

Maps are believed to function hegemonically to legitimate power structures, which can be traced back to Foucault’s discursive triangle of knowledge, space and power. Thus, not only does power inform map-making, but power emanates from maps. (29)  

9 A notable example of a critical work that engages questions about mapping and fiction in colonial and postcolonial literature is *Mapping Men and Empire.*
Crucially, maps and mapping projects are implicated in the exercise of colonial power (Bowen; Anderson). Edward Said has written about the ways in which Europeans charted and then colonised the world in cartographic and literary maps (*Culture and Imperialism*). As Richard Phillips observes, ‘[I]mpirialism went hand-in-hand with mapping, by which Europeans imaginatively and materially possessed much of the rest of the world’ (6). Maps enabled control, possession and ‘surveillance’ of colonial territories (Harley 244), and Nieuwenhuizen’s mapping of the plot is performed for a similar purpose, for once he has finished, he proceeds to claim the bounty of the land, going on to ‘[spend] hours plundering each [block in the grid] until it delivered up its riches’ (13). ‘Plundering’ recalls colonialism’s ‘spoils’ in Africa: gold, ivory, diamonds.

*The Folly* also refers to the endemic colonial feminisation of foreign or exotic land in its portrayal of Nieuwenhuizen. In particular, it engages with tropes in which land is described as woman, alternatively threatening or nurturing, but always to be brought under the control of the European explorer-settler. Nieuwenhuizen confesses a fear of ‘sinking through the crust of the earth’ (81) and demonstrates a simultaneous, seemingly contradictory, wish to penetrate it. White colonial masculine fear of being engulfed by an ‘exotic’ land has been widely written about and theorised (see for example McClintock; Pratt). One of texts best known for expressing this masculine terror is Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which a ‘savage’ continent and landscape threatens to overwhelm ‘civilised’ man. Marianna Torgovnick discusses this phenomenon in *Primitive Passions*, in which she undertakes case studies of a varied sample of European men and women who travelled to places then considered by the West to be ‘primitive’: Africa, Ceylon, Australia, a then-predominantly Native American New Mexico. Torgovnick considers the life histories of Andre Gide, Jung,
D.H. Lawrence, Isak Dinesan (Karen Blixen) and Dian Fossey, amongst others, and identifies the anxiety about engulfment as gendered. Although the men Torgovnick examined tended to be attracted to ‘the experience of merging with landscape’, they resisted and finally retreated from it, ‘perceiving it as a danger to…the mature European self’” (16). White women, on the other hand, tended to cultivate ‘strong attachments to, even identification with,…the land’ (Torgovnick 16). Nieuwenhuizen exhibits the classical European male terror of being ‘swallowed up’ by the African landscape. His obsession with penetration is also linked to his representation as a colonial pioneer or ‘father’. As I have suggested in relation to Nieuwenhuizen’s reference to the ‘virgin land’ trope, colonising Western men tended to construct the African landscape (and other ‘exotic’ places) as feminine. (There are few more blatant examples of this than those found in the novels of H. Rider Haggard, as McClintock discusses at length in Imperial Leather.) This pervasive colonial trope ‘enabl[ed] mastery’ (Torgovnick 86), justifying their dominance. In South Africa it also gave rise to mythologies of farmer as husband to the land, which figured as wife, as well as equations of the plough and the phallus (Coetzee White Writing 7). The trope of land as woman—wife/mother, nourishing or harsh—presented it as simultaneously threatening and holding the promise of continuing the coloniser’s legacy. But Africa’s earth was dry and unyielding, requiring a strong hand to break its resistance (Coetzee White Writing 7). Consistent with this, and with his own excessive, aggressive approach, Nieuwenhuizen overcompensates in his response to the plot. In what seems a vicarious effort to both penetrate the land and secure himself upon it, he punches the ground full of so many nails that it appears ‘stubbled’ (57). This is a

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10 See especially McClintock’s discussion of the sketched map of the route to ‘King Solomon’s Mines’ in the novel of the same name, which when turned upside down resembles unmistakably the body of a woman (1-4).
wounded earth, as suggested by the narrator’s observation that ‘[i]t was an affecting
sight—the...earth with its ordered rows of mounds like so many graves’ (56), and the
sight of it prompts a rather cryptic exchange between Nieuwenhuizen and Malgas:

‘How many?’ Malgas wondered, while Nieuwenhuizen counted them under
his breath.
A few meaningful glances were exchanged. (56)

Just what is ‘meaningful’ about these glances is not explained, but the text’s likening
of the plot’s mounded earth to graves can be read as a reference to the human
casualties of white settlement in the Cape. Thus, even in its satire The Folly remains
mindful of colonialism’s harmful effects on landscapes and on people. Indeed this
passage also casts question on colonialist constructions of the land as uninhabited
and therefore claimable.

Thus far this analysis of Nieuwenhuizen has focused on his historical
referentiality—the way in which the character opens up a consideration of settler
history and colonial discourses in South Africa. But the text’s representation of
Nieuwenhuizen is characterised not just by allegory, and The Folly does more than
open a space for the consideration of colonialism and its discourses: it actively
undermines them. Vladislavic’s deconstructive tools include parody, irony and a
strategic literalization of colonial metaphors and tropes. Nieuwenhuizen is not simply
a representative colonial settler-patriarch—he is a parody of that figure, as is indicated
by, for a start, his appearance. His ‘khaki suit’ (9) and ‘big-game hunter’s hat with a
leopard-skin band’ (54) caricature clothing famously worn by colonial explorers and
authorities. That ‘caricature’ is the correct reading is suggested by the way
Nieuwenhuizen’s ‘dirty grey hair [juts] out’ from under the hat ‘like a scorched tuft of
grass’ (54); his suit is ‘a few sizes too big for him’ and, in combination with his
'home-made boots with tyre treads', it only '[accentuates] how long and stringy his legs were' (9). He does not fit the role: this is a comical figure; Nieuwenhuizen is all the more laughable for his concerted effort to look the part of an intrepid colonial explorer. It is not just Nieuwenhuizen who is ridiculed here: the mythology of the heroic explorer-settler who sets out bravely to find and conquer new territory is also derided by its association with this clumsy scavenger.

Like parody, irony exposes 'gaps' and is a key tool in the satirist's arsenal. In *The Folly*, the use of irony highlights the discrepancies between myth and 'real' conditions, to ultimately suggest the fictitiousness of historical mythological discourses, particularly those concerning white settlement and belonging on the land. The text contrasts his romantic, high-minded colonialist idealisations and perceptions with the much less glorious reality, with comic effect. To return to Nieuwenhuizen's survey of the plot from a 'lofty point', for example, the reader knows he is standing on an 'anthill' (1). Far from plundering 'treasure' from his grid-worked patch of earth, Nieuwenhuizen turns up only rubbish: 'beer bottles and cold-drink tins, inner tubes...scribbles of wire, plastic bags' (13). The 'virgin bushveld' (38) is a scrubby, trash-littered piece of land; Nieuwenhuizen's 'field-glasses' are 'two brown beer bottles tied together with wire' (147). The largest gap is between the fantasy and the reality of 'the plan'. Where Nieuwenhuizen and Malgas come to see a 'gleaming' (119) mansion that includes such features as an 'ornate fireplace', 'decorative mouldings in the traditional style' and 'alabaster plinths' (120), there is really only a 'bristly macramé' (103) of thread and nails laid out in the dust; the 'guestroom' is an 'ash-heap' (123). Vladislavic's irony here exposes the discourses on which Nieuwenhuizen relies as fictions, and with regard to the imaginary mansion, *The Folly*
suggests the fanciful and unrealistic nature of an exclusive, privileged and secure white belonging on the land.

Another tactic Vladislavic employs to devastating effect is a kind of strategic literalization of ‘imperial spatial metaphors’ (Moeller 66) that undermines their power for the imagination. The most humorous instance of this is in the text’s representation of Nieuwenhuizen’s preoccupation with penetrating the earth, in which metaphors of a masculine conquest of (feminised) land are literalised. Mrs (as she is called in the text) describes Nieuwenhuizen’s strange behaviour on the plot next door (that is, the pounding into the earth of the nails) to her husband in sexual terms:

[Without warning He flung himself down face first, and started to heave and thump this way and that in the throes of an ungovernable lust, as if He meant to penetrate the very earth upon which we stand...He was thrusting and thumping nineteen to the dozen! You can still see the dust...Afterwards, He hurled Himself to His feet again, and strutted up and down as immodestly as ever. (80)

Verifying Mrs’s interpretation, the narrator remarks that ‘Nieuwenhuizen was still waddling in circles, with his chest puffed up and his feet turned out’ (80). The absurdity of the scene (the recollections of which run for several paragraphs) dispels the romance that is typically attached to colonial abstractions of white male ‘love’ for, and dominance over, land. It becomes ludicrous, even a little obscene. This ‘play’ with the literal may be significant on a broader level, as a direct hit on Afrikaner discourse, which is characterised by literalism (Delmont and Dubow 15).

Commenting on Afrikaner nationalist landscape painting, Delmont and Dubow write:

Literalism is, of course, the very quality that has rendered them so effective as illustrations in Apartheid’s history books. Literalism is also what makes them
There is a suggestion in this usage of the word ‘hamstrung’ that a thoughtful, ‘textured’ criticism is difficult in the face of such bald, even ‘banal’ literalism (Delmont and Dubow 15). Has Vladislavic found a way forward, using literalization as a weapon against a discourse that has relied on the literal? All of these tactics—parody, irony, literalization—come together to ensure that Nieuwenhuizen, who might otherwise appear powerful and sinister, comes across as ridiculous; by extension, historical colonists and colonial mentalities are mocked and denigrated.

Not only does the text critique historical settlers; *The Folly* also, though more subtly, aligns Nieuwenhuizen with Afrikaner nationalists, who are discredited by their association with him. This alignment becomes apparent as Nieuwenhuizen tells Malgas that the new house will be

...double-storey...to raise us up above the mire of the everyday...to enable surveillance of creeping dangers. Make that triple-storey... All tried and tested stuff, bricks and mortar... Nothing tin-pot! Everything cast-iron! Bullet-proof—we have to think of these things I’m afraid—with storage space for two years’ rations. (75)

His concerns about bullets, ‘creeping dangers’ and siege recall the ‘at war’ apartheid rhetoric that surrounded the State of Emergency (Thompson 235) and the sense of embattled resistance that has long been a prominent feature of Afrikaner culture. As O’Meara writes, there is a dominant ‘mythology’ of Afrikanerdom which conceives of it as a ‘discrete, embattled nation, determined through a long history of struggle against external enemies’ (4). In this figuring the Afrikaner volk or community ‘was shaped by its 300-year struggle to implant itself in the hostile South African soil, its roots constantly under attack from both the primitive inhabitants of the region and
the relentless enmity of British imperialism’ (O’Meara 4). Nieuwenhuizen echoes this ideology in his plans for the house.

Another ironic strategy that undermines white authority and placement on the land might best be described as inversion. Given his straggly appearance and the ram-shackle nature of his abode on the plot, it is not surprising that Nieuwenhuizen’s arrival initially makes Malgas and Mrs think of the disarray of the townships. The smell of his fire brings to Malgas’s mind the image of ‘[a] burning shack cav[ing] in’ that he has seen on TV (4), while Mrs worries aloud,

Is he one of these squatters we’ve been hearing so much about? Will he put up a shack and bring hundreds of his cronies to do the same? ‘Extended families.’ What do you think? Will they hammer together tomato boxes and rubbish bags, bits of supermarket trolleys and motor cars, notice-boards and yield signs, gunny sacks and jungle gyms, plastic, paper, polystyrene...? (11)

This reference to housing constructed out of what might euphemistically be called ‘recycled materials’ recalls the shanties of the townships, which were often put together out of rubbish, while ‘extended families’ are less a feature of white South African society than of black African communities. Yet I have argued that Nieuwenhuizen is a representative white male colonial figure. What does it mean, then, that he seems to remind the Malgases—especially Mrs—of underprivileged black South Africans? Sabina Moeller observes that ‘[s]hantydwellers are commonly referred to as squatters’ (122, see endnote 161), and goes on to assert that ‘Vladislavic suggests it is whites who are the squatters in South Africa’ (122). (For the Australian reader, there is a special resonance here with the term used to describe the great pastoralists, who together made up an elite group commonly called the ‘squattocracy’.) In other words, Moeller implies that the text’s alignments of Nieuwenhuizen with disenfranchised, township-residing blacks serve to challenge or
even invert apartheid rules and ideas about who could legitimately claim, and live freely on, the land.

Nieuwenhuizen's portrayal as a vagrant also undercuts his claims to the classed positions of 'landlord' and 'architect' (133) and signals the novel's attention to historical class hierarchies in South Africa. Black-white tensions and racial inequality have generally been more visible, and have garnered more attention and commentary, than many other kinds of social division in the country. It is less well-recognised that white settler society has been plagued by marked socio-economic inequalities from at least the nineteenth century.\(^{11}\) (The discourse of 'poor-whiteism' was perhaps the most obvious manifestation of a recognition of this problem by the authorities.) At a class level, Nieuwenhuizen is an ambivalent figure: although he sees himself as a man of authority and entitlement and exhibits many of the associated snobberies, his appearance suggests he is one of the homeless poor. *The Folly*’s engagement with class is most apparent in the character of Malgas and in his relationship with Nieuwenhuizen.

**Malgas: Class and complicity**

*The Folly* is not only concerned with colonial discourse but also with the hierarchies of power in colonial and apartheid South Africa. Class is a key concern in *The Folly*, and Mr Malgas is the locus of this engagement. While Nieuwenhuizen is a character who opens a space for a critique of colonialisit historical narratives and settler discourses about land, through the character of Malgas *The Folly* examines and rejects simplistic myths of white unity and equality and South Africa, and points to

\(^{11}\) This is not to deny the growing body of academic work on South Africa’s white working class. See for example Simons and Simons; Johnstone; Katz; Davies; van Onselen; Yudelman; Shula and Trapido; Bozzoli; Morrell; and Lange.
the complicity of the white working class in the suppression and disenfranchisement of the country’s non-white others. Just as Nieuwenhuizen is an allegorical figure of the colonial patriarch, Malgas—a hardware salesman and practical, friendly fellow who is immediately intrigued by Nieuwenhuizen—is representative of a working or lower middle class white South African. He becomes supplier and builder to Nieuwenhuizen’s ‘architect’, a position in which he is exploited, yet he is also energised and empowered by the alliance. In this *The Folly* refers to the exploitation of labouring whites within colonial and apartheid systems, but the text hardly offers a sympathetic portrait of Malgas. Although its treatment of Nieuwenhuizen, the colonial ‘master’, is more satirical and ferocious, the text also derides Malgas, who is depicted as a fool and partly to blame for the situation in which he ends up.

Furthermore, in its portrayal of Malgas *The Folly* suggests that responsibility for violent colonial acts in South Africa—from settlement to apartheid—lies not only with those at the top, but also with those who bought into the rhetoric and ‘co-operated’ or ‘collaborated’ with the powerful. While Nieuwenhuizen is a comment on the leaders, the politicians, the architects, the text also underlines the complicity of the followers—the ‘builders’ and ‘guardians’, including poor and lower-middle-class whites—who were, historically, major supporters of Afrikaner nationalism, of the National Party and/or other more right-wing groups (see Harrison; O’Meara). In addition, although it is not explicitly addressed in *The Folly*, these groups were some of the greatest beneficiaries of the racist policies of white governments and apartheid governments especially. Their ascendance from what was in some cases severe poverty was due in large part to the exclusion of non-white others from economic opportunities and the exploitation and unfair treatment of Africans in particular. *The Folly* reveals socio-economic differences within white South African society but also
shows, mainly through its relating of items on the TV news, that beyond it all—at the outer edges, both figuratively and literally—are the country’s Africans, living in poverty in the townships.

Nieuwenhuizen’s interactions with Malgas highlight a marked social hierarchy within white society. He denigrates Malgas, both in his own thoughts and to the other man’s face, in ways that suggest his class prejudice. His chief worry about the Malgases reflects concerns about racial degeneracy that were widely held by Europeans and the upper classes about the working class and settler subjects: that is, he believes the Malgases are not ‘properly’ white. The appearance of their house bothers him:

The house behind the wall pleased him less. It was of a pasty, pock-marked complexion, and there were rashes of pink shale around the windows, which were too close together and overhung by beetle-browed eaves. (7-8)

He later wonders to himself, ‘would its plastered features pass for white? More like off-white…’ (15). Moeller suggests that Nieuwenhuizen’s distaste for the Malgas’s not-quite-white walls indicates an anxiety about their racial lineage (107), which is supported by the later reference to ‘features’ and ‘passing’ and Nieuwenhuizen’s offering to Malgas of a tea, Tisane, which he says ‘purifies the blood and builds you up’ (37).

Nieuwenhuizen’s concerns can be located in a historical context, in that racial anxieties about ‘purity’ were common in South Africa from the early days of settlement. In regard to this and other settler colonies, especially after Darwin, fears that settler subjects would regress into a ‘different race’ were widespread (Dalziell 5). Cut off from ‘civilisation’, exposed to a hot climate and contact with ‘natives’, the settler’s whiteness came under question. In South Africa in particular there
developed a paranoia about miscegenation and the ‘taint’ of African blood in apparently white stock (Coetzee *White Writing*, see chapter 6). The apartheid obsession with separation and purity was institutionalised in, amongst other policies, the banning of interracial marriages and unions. Yet there is also a class component to Nieuwenhuizen’s doubts about the Malgases’ whiteness. Settlers were not the only ones who were thought to be ‘degenerating’; Europe’s labouring classes were also regularly postulated in public discourses as being of another, inferior, race to that of the middle and upper classes.¹² Class and race were often collapsed in the popular and even scientific discourses of the time, and in relating Nieuwenhuizen’s feelings about Malgas *The Folly* references these conflations.

Nieuwenhuizen repeatedly demonstrates in ‘classed’ terms his belief that Mr is beneath him and worth relating to only insofar as it will benefit him. In Nieuwenhuizen’s mind Malgas is a ‘clod’ (56) who is not worthy to be a true ‘collaborator’ (54), but he’s the ‘salt of the earth’, ‘an eager beaver and a busy bee’, and so ‘[h]e’ll do’ (56). Here Nieuwenhuizen’s exploitative intentions are signalled, and it becomes apparent that he desires Malgas’s presence only for the purposes of supplies and labour. Mr, as Malgas is typically called in the text, is soon ‘doing everything’ (54) while Nieuwenhuizen takes up a directorial position. The narrator notes wryly of the two men’s efforts to clear the plot, ‘A jaundiced eye may have observed that Nieuwenhuizen did a great deal of pointing and waving, whereas Malgas wielded the fork and pushed the barrow’ (57). When Malgas tries to offer some advice for the plan—to speak his own thoughts—Nieuwenhuizen silences him ‘crossly’, and thinks ‘[t]he fellow was already getting too big for his boots’ (73). He is

¹² For an example, see McClintock’s work on the popular figuring of working class mining women as a ‘race apart’, and particularly as black, in Victorian England (104-116).
paternalistic and patronising, deriding Malgas's ideas and then, when the other man is suitably penitent, telling him, 'I've expected too much of you, I thought you'd pick things up on your own, without guidance' (74). When Mr again oversteps the boundaries by expressing his disapproval of Nieuwenhuizen's activities on the plan, the other man retorts:

"Who the hell do you think you are?...The architect? The landlord?'...

"This is my house,' [he] went on. 'My namesake. You're just a visitor...not even that, some sort of janitor—a junior one, with no qualifications and precious little experience, and damned lucky to have a broom cupboard all to yourself. What were you when I discovered you and took an interest in your welfare? A DIY good-for-nothing, that's what, a tongue-tied nobody. What I say around here goes, is that clear? Look at me when I'm talking to you.' (133)

The words 'architect', 'landlord', and 'janitor' are all markers of a discourse of class. The text thus presents the two men up as coming from different social positions, with Nieuwenhuizen claiming an upper hand and expecting all the associated entitlements, while Mr agrees to be the 'grovelling' underdog (132).

Nieuwenhuizen dislikes that Malgas, though 'eager to serve', is 'full of questions' (43) and his own thoughts and ideas; what he wants is a mindless follower. He eventually manipulates Malgas into almost exactly that. The 'hardware man' becomes a cog in the machine; as Moeller writes, eventually he is 'the proverbial colonial puppet' (57). Instead of depicting this as a situation that arises purely out of Nieuwenhuizen's own cunning—with Malgas the hapless dupe—*The Folly* reveals the ways in which Malgas makes himself vulnerable to it, and even contributes to its perpetuation. In the words of Mrs, 'What made Nieuwenhuizen's trickery all the more despicable was that Mr was so glad to be of service, and therefore so easy to exploit' (56). Malgas is not let off the hook as an exploited victim; instead, he has agency and becomes responsible, with Nieuwenhuizen, for the violence on the plot.
Moreover, Vladislavic shows that Mr’s own racism, nostalgic attraction to Afrikaner discourse, and subscription to a kind of Calvinist ‘ethic’ of work contribute to his ‘folly’ (54). The text offers no excuses for Malgas, and by extension, I suggest, no excuses for the many working and lower middle class whites who in various ways, and for various reasons, supported apartheid.

Malgas’s own prejudices and foibles contribute to his being drawn to Nieuwenhuizen. While Mrs wonders if the new arrival is a ‘dangerous criminal’, Mr remarks positively: ‘Just look at the head he’s got…! When I behold that head I must say it gives me a good feeling about him’ (11). This admiration of the ‘proportions of [Nieuwenhuizen’s] head’ (24) references the intersections of social Darwinism and racism that became prevalent in the nineteenth century and enjoyed particularly wide circulation in South Africa, at least until 1945. J.M. Coetzee, amongst others, has noted the incredible ‘nakedness’ and ‘shamelessness’ of the discourse of racism in South Africa prior to the revelations of the Nuremberg trials (White Writing 137). A common preoccupation of social Darwinists (and those who had similar ideas about race) was head shape. Numerous posters and other publications from the nineteenth century and later depict a range of hominid heads, which are typically presented in a continuum that runs from ‘pure primate’ to ‘pure man’. ‘Pure’ man appears with a classically Grecian profile. He is white and European. People of other ethnicities and races, especially Africans, are depicted as sharing ape-like features. In these illustrations, as McClintock remarks, ‘anatomy becomes an allegory of progress’ and superiority (38). Thus Malgas, perhaps unconsciously, appears to be as concerned

13 Then, although the white government elected in 1948 ‘set about a program of racial legislation whose precursor if not model was the legislation of Nazi Germany’, for political reasons they avoided justifications for apartheid and white dominance that were expressed in terms of eugenics and ‘biological destiny’ (Coetzee White Writing 137).
14 For an example see McClintock (39, Figures 1.6 and 1.7).
with race—and as admiring of ‘pure’ whiteness—as Nieuwenhuizen. The historical parallel to this is that working class and lower middle class Afrikaners were more likely to remain staunchly conservative about segregation and other apartheid policies than their urban, white-collar peers, who became more liberal over time (van Rooyen 30, 34). As seductive to Malgas as the shape of Nieuwenhuizen’s head, is the shape of his ideas. The Folly suggests that Malgas has a weakness for romantic colonialist idealisations of a pastoral lifestyle—he is ‘shaken by a thrill of suppressed excitement’ about the building project from the moment he hears about it (32)—and shows him employing phrases and ideas that echo Afrikaner discourse, for example early on:

He took a childlike delight in the signs he found everywhere that the plot had become lived in, that the newcomer had made himself at home. ‘A dwelling-place carved out of the veld,’ Malgas thought happily… (34, emphasis in original)

and later, as he nostaligically pledges,

We’ll keep the camp just as it is, for the generations who come after us. We’ll declare it a monument, an open-air museum. We’ll never forget where we came from. (57)

Malgas is also made vulnerable to Nieuwenhuizen by his belief in social hierarchy. He has accepted ‘the division of labour’ (84) which relegates him to a position of ‘janitor’ (133). Further, he ascribes work with virtue, associating it even with social redemption. For example, while setting out for and cheerfully contemplating a day of work for Nieuwenhuizen on the plot (51), Mr looks to his own house and finds it not ‘pasty’ or discoloured but rather ‘clean and complete’, its walls ‘as white as paper, the windows in them blinding mirrors’ (52). There is an implicit link between Malgas’s work and the brightening of his home, for he sees his house in this light only after Nieuwenhuizen has allowed him to join the project (50). In addition, the sight of the newly beautified—and critically, whitened—house only adds to his enthusiasm about
'the splendour of [the] new working day' (52). As I have noted, popular fears about the ‘degeneration’ of settler subjects and the working class were frequently expressed in racial terms. Malgas’s belief in the power of labour to ‘whiten’ his house may be read as reflecting these conflations of race and social status and as evidence of his will to move up the ranks by labouring for a ‘master’ (85). In another passage, it is Mrs who ascribes Malgas’s work on the land and for Nieuwenhuizen with ‘nobility’ (55).

In both Malgas and Mrs we see a subscription, then, to an ‘ideology of work’ that came about after the Reformation (see Anthony), and which was particularly promoted by Protestantism (see Weber). Beginning in Germany but spreading to most of protestant Europe, ‘preachers placed increasing emphasis on work’ as a ‘fundamental divine edict’ (Coetzee *White Writing* 19-20). In Calvinism especially, ‘waste of time’ was labelled a grave sin (Weber 157). This religiously-charged rhetoric justified, as Coetzee notes, ‘class warfare in Europe’, especially against the homeless and unemployed (*White Writing* 21). It was also drawn upon as European industrialisation got under way, where, in order to convince the ‘labouring classes to embrace the principle that one should work harder than is required to maintain the level of material existence one is born into’ a programme of ‘ideological indoctrination’ was commenced to persuade them that work was ‘necessary or noble’ (Coetzee *White Writing* 27; Anthony 22). The connection between class and an ideology of work as moral and dignified is clear, but what is the link to the South African situation? Part of the answer is that both the description of a ‘scandalous’ problem of idleness and an effort to deal with it were major undertakings in colonial South Africa. From the first days of settlement in the Cape, Europeans (long-term visitors, travel writers, missionaries, and others) observed and wrote critically of the
‘slothfulness’ of the Khoi (‘Hottentots’), and then, from the nineteenth century, of the ‘indolence’ of the ‘Boers of the Frontier’—who, it was widely thought, had been ‘tainted’ in this regard by close contact with Africans (Coetzee White Writing 29). Efforts to ‘re-form’ both the ‘native’ and the Boer character to become more industrious were made, as in Europe, through the church (notably, the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church is a major institution in South Africa), schools and the popular press (Coetzee White Writing 27). Afrikaner leaders intent on promoting their own interests (and in principle those of their people) were as invested in this project as anyone: having found Afrikaner workers to be ‘less than the ideal’—that is, unaccustomed to labour—they made a goal of ‘inculcat[ing] discipline’ in them (O’Meara 160). They drew heavily on a Calvinist conception of labour as moral and a divine duty (O’Meara 159). As O’Meara points out, this rhetoric enabled the exploitation of working class whites by Afrikaner business owners and others in positions of power. Malgas and Mrs are shown as having accepted this ideology of work, and instead of resisting his exploitation by Nieuwenhuizen, Malgas offers himself up for it, captured by dreams of a lifestyle—represented in some ways by Nieuwenhuizen’s (imaginary) mansion—which will never be his, but towards which he strives with hard work. Even Mrs, who recognises the ‘folly’ (54) of her husband’s actions, falls prey to the discourse.

By labouring for Nieuwenhuizen, Malgas becomes an ‘accomplice’ (96). The Folly’s treatment of the problem of complicity is variably serious and comic: on the one hand, it shows the gravity of the crime in which Malgas is implicated; on the other, Mr is ridiculed for being such a foolish, mindless follower and for becoming involved. The violence of Nieuwenhuizen’s project is underlined in a passage that
also foreshadows Malgas’s complicity. Looking at the plot the morning after Nieuwenhuizen has begun to ‘clear the land’ (45), Malgas sees...

...[g]rass and weeds mown down, fractured stems and lacerated leaves, flayed boles and bulbs, dismembered trunks and dislocated roots [which] told a moving tale of cruelty and kindness in the name of progress. The carpet underfoot was steeped in dew and its own spilt fluids... [Malgas’s] eyes... caressed the bruised skin of the horizon, and then snagged on the protruding tip of his own roof-top. It was stained, he noticed, with the blood of the dawn. (52)

The devastation is described with words that evoke injuries to a human body: fractured, lacerated, flayed, dismembered, dislocated, bruised. The plot is even covered in its own ‘spilt fluids’: it is a wounded, bleeding body. By personifying the damaged landscape Vladislavic stresses not only to the ecological havoc but also to the human destruction wreaked by colonizers in South Africa. In this passage, Malgas is revealed to be implicated in the carnage, for though he has barely begun to assist Nieuwenhuizen, already his rooftop is ‘stained’ with blood; this foreshadows his shift from ‘co-operation to collaboration’ with Nieuwenhuizen (50). Eventually, Malgas comes into his own as maintainer and guardian of ‘The Plan’ (104); he declares himself its ‘custodian’, without which ‘it is doomed’ (109) and imagines himself to be a good and ‘faithful’ son (119), watching over his father’s property and interests.

Satire and the strategy of literalization come to the fore to mock this filial devotion as Malgas calls Nieuwenhuizen ‘Daddy!’ (110). Malgas is also denigrated as he is increasingly lured into Nieuwenhuizen’s fantasy-world, which advances to the point where he cannot distinguish between reality and the imaginary. For weeks he struggles to envision the plan; that he finally manages it is a testament to blind willpower and the suspension of all critical faculties—perhaps even sheer craziness, as suggested in the following passage, in which Mr seems almost to be having a seizure:
Malgas...launched himself across the plan in an ecstasy, whooping with joy and bellowing to wake the dead, 'I can see! I can see!'...

Round and round went Mr, leaping in the air and waving his fists, drumming on his thighs, tearing his hair, laughing and crying, smearing his tears into mud on his cheeks, frothing at the mouth, rolling head over heels, swallowing his tongue, collapsing...(114-115)

However, the illusion cannot hold, and when Nieuwenhuizen abandons the plan, Malgas finds that everything has dissolved on him. 'I imagined it all...none of it was real,' he is forced to admit (144-145). In a text published before the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Nieuwenhuizen’s betrayal of Mr and his departure from the plot is uncannily prophetic of the refusal of many apartheid leaders to take responsibility for apartheid’s human toll, and their failure to concede that they misled and manipulated their supporters about the extent of what was done in their name—an issue that Antjie Krog takes up in Country of My Skull. 'I don’t owe you anything,' Nieuwenhuizen tells a nearly tearful Malgas near the end of the book (131). Certainly Malgas is another one of Nieuwenhuizen’s victims (144), but he is not a passive, blameless one. The Folly emphasises his gullibility and culpability, and through its depiction and treatment of Malgas critiques those historical and contemporary settler subjects who have subscribed to the notion of an exclusive, privileged belonging in South Africa—at the expense of black South Africans and other non-whites—and supported the powers that attempted to enforce the dream.

Mrs: Gender and collusion

The third significant character in The Folly is Mrs Malgas, and through her the text engages with the gendered nature of the colonial enterprise of claiming and ‘subduing’ territory as well as the persistent patriarchalism of South African society (black and white). In examining Mrs we see less satire, but the character is highly
referential and suggests complexities of white women’s relationships to colonial projects. It is well-established that imperialism and colonialism were primarily white male endeavours; as Anne McClintock writes, ‘One might think it could go without saying by now that European men were the most direct agents of empire’ (5). Yet women were not absent from the processes of empire, nor were they insignificant figures in the settler colonies. There has been a tendency among some critics, including feminist ones, to let white women ‘off the hook’ and re-place blame firmly on men (Haggis ‘Gendering Colonialism’ 105-105), but critics such as Susan Sheridan, Sue Kossew and Gillian Whitlock have sought to more carefully examine the complex roles and multi-layered experiences of women in imperial and colonial projects and settings. McClintock notes that ‘colonial women were...ambiguously placed’ within imperial processes: though they were ‘[b]arred from the corridors of formal power’ and had different experiences of imperialism than men, many white women were still in positions of ‘decided—if borrowed—power’ over colonised peoples (6). Far from being ‘helpless onlookers’, she writes, white women were ‘ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting’ (McClintock 6).

This ambiguous position of western women in relation to colonialism and white dominance is apparent in the historical South African case, and particularly within Afrikaner culture. Hofmeyer has described how, in the early part of the twentieth century, Afrikaners attempted to pull themselves together into a unified community of the volk (95). The discourse they invented for themselves was overtly gendered: formal power was placed firmly in the masculine domain. A white

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15 In this discussion I draw mainly on the work of Anne McClintock, because she summarises the larger arguments in the literature so well and applies these ideas to the historical South African situation.
woman’s role was demarcated as one of domestic servitude but also—perhaps paradoxically—domestic authority. If man was master of the farm and the nation, a leader in political and military spheres, woman was mistress of the home. She was wife, mother, home-keeper: *Volksmoeder*—literally, mother of the volk/mother of the nation. This was not a politically insignificant role. As Louise Vincent and Marijke du Toit point out, the *Volksmoeder* icon was not simply constructed by men for women (du Toit 155) and many Afrikaner women embraced, shaped and used it to extend their authority from a purely domestic sphere to an active involvement in social policy (Vincent 61). In addition, white women were also held up as symbols of racial purity in apartheid and white nationalist discourses: they were what white men claimed to be defending (McClintock 369, see also figures on 370 and 374). Although white women were certainly subjugated to the patriarchy in South Africa, they were not without agency—or culpability. McClintock concludes:

White women were not the weeping bystanders of apartheid history but active, if decidedly disempowered, participants in the invention of Afrikaner identity. As such they were complicit in deploying the power of motherhood in the exercise and legitimation of white domination. Certainly, white women were jealously and brutally denied any formal political power but were compensated by their limited authority in the household. Clutching this small power, they became implicated in the racism that suffuses Afrikaner nationalism. … White women are both colonized and colonizers, ambiguously complicit in the history of African dispossession. (379)

In Mrs we glimpse the ambiguity of historical white women’s ambivalent position in South Africa.¹⁶ On one hand Mrs, unlike her husband, has insight into the folly of Nieuwenhuizen’s plan. She recognises Nieuwenhuizen for what he is: a ‘squatter’ (11), who with his ‘clodhoppers’ is ‘turn[ing] the environment into a wasteland’, ‘beating it senseless’, so that ‘[n]othing will ever grow again’ (67). She realises the illegitimacy of a white male occupation of the land, thinking

¹⁶ This is a situation that is reflected in other settler colonies, including Australia, and the ambiguous position of the white women appears as a theme in all of the texts examined in this thesis.
Nieuwenhuizen a ‘criminal’ (11) and a ‘contagion’ (123), thus resisting the image of the coloniser as healer and saviour of indigenous peoples. As Moeller observes, ‘Mrs is key to undermining imperial discourses’ (66). Her scepticism is a stark contrast to her husband’s gullibility. In contrast to one of Malgas’s first statements about Nieuwenhuizen that he and his camp ‘[look] quite jolly’, and Malgas secretly thinks ‘that it looked almost—what?...Brave’, Mrs labels Nieuwenhuizen’s antics as lunacy (17). Mrs refuses to call Nieuwenhuizen by the names he has offered, denying him the authority of the title ‘Father’ (43). The acrimony between them is mutual, with Nieuwenhuizen deriding Mrs as ‘flimsy’ and ‘invisible’, a ‘scrap of tissue paper’ who does not matter at all (57). Both men deliberately exclude her from their activities. When Mrs comes to the site to ask her husband why he is not going to work, for example, he orders her to ‘get back in the house’ (53). Malgas frets that Mrs will upset Nieuwenhuizen’s order, thinking that her ‘instru[sions]’ will ‘drive him’ away ‘for good’ (66). As time goes on, Malgas listens less and less to Mrs’ opinions: ‘although Mrs continued to speak to [Malgas], pointing out the folly of his ways, and the guile of [Nieuwenhuizen’s]...he ignored her and after a while she went away’ (54). This treatment of Mrs worsens as Malgas himself is ‘put in his place’ by the higher authority, Nieuwenhuizen. Mrs is excluded from participation in their planning and building endeavour in much the same way that women were marginalised from formal power in South Africa.

*The Folly* also indicates that Mrs may be more aware of the nation’s political circumstances and the lot of less privileged others than her husband. She lectures Malgas, ‘Terrible times we’re living in. Death on every corner. The forces of destruction unleashed upon an unsuspecting public’ (95). In a scene near the end of the novel, Mrs actually listens to report of unrest on television and watches the
accompanying film of ‘a woman being burnt alive’ (127)—an instance of, and reference to, the incidents of necklacing in the townships. This is as close as Mrs gets to an encounter with another. Yet here, as elsewhere, the ambivalence of her position emerges:

There was a warning that sensitive viewers might find the following scenes distressing, and Mrs shut her eyes responsibly. But when the screen cast its light upon her lids, it came to her that she had been waiting for nothing so much as this moment, and she felt obliged to open her eyes again, and saw the burning woman running… (127)

Mrs takes in this information and the scene more readily than before, but she is little more than a voyeur. The sight of a woman ‘at flame’ is something she has been ‘waiting for’, and though the image stays with her like ‘two coals under her eyelids’ after she has turned the set off, her only response is to congratulate herself on ‘the fact that she was sensitive’ (128). She sees, but does not act. Her protests to Malgas are ineffectual because they are weak. Obeying his orders, she backs down and retreats into domesticity: hiding behind the curtains (15, 25), turning her mind to stain removal (16), household inventories (29) and ‘scrubbing bric-a-brac’ (106). Mrs may be brow-beaten in this novel, but she is not powerless. Her insights could potentially disrupt the men’s ‘nonsense’ (90). However, she fails to effectively question them because she accepts their authority. In addition, her refusal to face and engage with Nieuwenhuizen means that she inadvertently elevates him. This suggested by her address of him as ‘He’ (instead of ‘Father’ or ‘Nieuwenhuizen’), always with a capitalised, god-like H; there is a curious slippage in this naming that ascribes Nieuwenhuizen with a certain authority. The Folly thus points to women’s

17 ‘Necklacing’ or ‘necklace killings’ are expressions used to refer to the human burnings that occurred in the townships during the period of the State of Emergency. These were usually instigated by young black activists as punishment for members of their own communities who were suspected police collaborators, and the method often involved slinging a flaming car tyre over the victim’s head.
complicity with male imperial/colonial projects, with the broader implication being that female subservience may collude with male aggression and dominance.

In its portrayal of Mrs, the text also suggests the historical reality of many white women’s sentimentality about colonial projects, and the ways in which this has inspired them to lend support to these masculine endeavours. The tendency of white women to defend and romanticise settler colonialism while overlooking or even concealing indigenous subjectivity, labour and suffering has been illuminated in a number of studies of white women’s colonial writing. Gillian Whitlock’s study The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography, for example, reveals the reliance of white women’s memoirs of colonial Kenya on romance and valorisation of the ‘white hunter’ figure. She examines Out of Africa by Karen Blixen, I Dreamed of Africa by Kuki Gallmann and The Flame Trees of Thika by Elspeth Huxley, amongst other texts. Whitlock identifies several tendencies across her sample, such as a recurrent use of the trope of the buried white hunter—through burial, the white male hero takes possession of the land—and set-ups of a romantic liaison between the author/self and a European man who ‘possesses an innate nobility that…find[s] its most authentic expression in Africa’ and through whom she finds ‘a sensual expression of herself’ (Whitlock The Intimate Empire 113). The woman author glorifies the European male, presenting him as heroic (Whitlock The Intimate Empire 121). Overall, Whitlock finds that these texts draw upon ‘a series of oppositions, tropes, figures and metaphors which are the circuitry of colonialist representations of Kenya’ (The Intimate Empire 116). As she notes, it is ironic that it is white women who have represented ‘the White Man’s Country’ (that is, colonial Kenya) ‘most powerfully’ (Whitlock The Intimate Empire 116). Whitlock points both to the influence of women’s

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18 See for example Chauduri and Strobel; Ware; Suleri; Stoler ‘Making’; and Strobel.
words and to their tendency to glorify settler colonialism and uphold its primary agents. Her analysis suggests some of the ways in which western women have colluded with white masculine colonial projects and participated in the dissemination of masculinest colonial mythologies of land, exploration and conquest. Although Whitlock does not address class explicitly, it is there in the subtext through the references to the trope of the ‘white hunter’—an elite colonial figure—and the ‘innate nobility’ of the colonizing male. Like these women writers, Mrs is shown as vulnerable to romanticising her husband’s work with Nieuwenhuizen, against her better judgement:

Her husband’s part in the charade unfolding on the plot struck her as ridiculous and she very nearly laughed; yet as the day advanced and he toiled on with the same diligence, she felt obliged to take him seriously. It was as if a mantle of nobility had settled over him. She tried to brush this impression aside but it persisted, and she gazed upon him with new eyes, eyes which refused to distinguish between the man and what he was doing. She found herself becoming tearful. (55)

As I implied in the previous section, there is a class component to this romanticising: Mrs appears to believe that Mr’s labour for the colonial-patriarch ‘master’ is somehow ennobling or elevating. This possibility strikes a deep emotional chord in her and for the first time she herself is seduced by Nieuwenhuizen’s project. And at the end of it all, once Nieuwenhuizen has disappeared and Malgas has ‘come to his senses’, Mrs wants only to ‘get on with [their] lives’ (151). Like the men, Mrs betrays those who have suffered under apartheid and white settlement—most notably the Africans of the townships—not so much because of her own actions, but because of her passivity and will to forget. She is all too ready to embrace amnesia in order to return to normal life.
Conclusion

It is not well-recognised in the existing body of work on *The Folly*, but this is a highly referential text that engages closely with the white colonial settlement of South Africa, its ongoing legacy, and the ideologies and mythological narratives which attended and supported it. As we have seen, each of the three main characters opens a consideration of historical and contemporary socio-political issues in the country. Vladislavic’s approach to these, however, is consistent with his comment that his ‘inclination is to shy away from the obvious, to be slightly obscure or tangential’ in his literary ‘dealing[s] with questions of politics and power’ (Vladislavic cited in Warnes ‘Interview’ 275). His representations are ironical and sometimes oblique, and the text is bitingly funny even as it references colonial crimes and tragedy. Gaylard’s argument about Vladislavic’s fiction generally holds in regard to this work specifically: that is, here as elsewhere, it is possible to see that satire enables a ‘postcolonial political’ engagement (129). *The Folly* is ‘postcolonial satire’ in the sense that it is a text that draws on a satirical mode in its questioning and destabilising of colonial discourses and historical mythologies of settler nationalism. This action is most apparent in its treatment of the allegorical settler-colonial figure of Nieuwenhuizen, for whom Vladislavic has no mercy.

This chapter’s reading of *The Folly* suggests white writing’s postcolonial potential and illustrates satire’s capacity to facilitate its critique—as has also been demonstrated by Bell’s *Satire and the Postcolonial Novel*, though with primary reference to texts from former ‘invaded’ colonies. Having pointed to this, it is clear that satire is not always the most appropriate vehicle for addressing postcolonial conditions. Gaylard hints at this in his remarks about ‘African satire’, which he describes as
generally rather ‘quiet’ when compared to the ‘ludic luridity’ of Asian or South American forms (147). He writes, ‘this [quietness] seems to be because the social that African writers satirise is often too tragic to laugh at’ (147). It is certainly difficult to imagine an ethical satirical treatment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and perhaps a novel like *The Folly* could not have been written after revelations of the TRC. Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, both published after the TRC (and at least partly in response to it), exhibit none or little of *The Folly’s* playfulness. These texts draw on different conventions in their critical representations of postcolonial South Africa. But *The Folly* is exemplary in its exploration and interrogation of settler-colonialism and its narratives, particularly in the way it encourages the reader, through the use of irony, to engage dialogically with the ‘message’. A slippery text, *The Folly* evades many of the problematic representations and appropriations of the other white writing examined here, examples of which emerge in the next chapter, on the Australian novel *The White Earth*. 
Chapter Two

Unearthing the Repressed: Gothic Excavations in *The White Earth* by Andrew McGahan

My reading of the South African novel *The Folly* demonstrated the postcolonial potential of white writing from the settler site. In this chapter I extend the argument to an Australian context and text: *The White Earth* (2004) by Andrew McGahan. Though far less subtle and 'literary' than *The Folly*, *The White Earth* is occupied with similar themes and tasks. Like all of the texts under examination in this thesis, the novel critically addresses settler historical mythological narratives, especially foundational discourse, and underlines the violence of settler nationalism. It is attentive to, and prominently depicts, the legacies of the ‘bad’ past, including the ruptured relation between indigenous and settler subjects. Similarly to *The Custodians* and *Disgrace* (examined in chapter three and chapter six, respectively) the text is concerned with the country’s pastoral spaces; differently from those novels, the literary mode it adopts in approaching them is Gothic. As we have seen in relation to *The Folly* and satire, genre can become a frame for postcolonial critique. *The White Earth* deploys the conventions of Gothic—its fascination with otherness and the repressed, and its drive to uncover buried secrets—to expose the ‘repressed’ of the conquest of Australia’s rural and pastoral sites. In doing so, it casts into question conservative models of white belonging and reveals their elisions of the Aboriginal other. In this novel, however, the double-edged functions of the ambivalence of the
postcolonial settler text become visible, as do the risks involved in postcolonial co-options of genre. The text resists Gothic's drive to closure, but does fall prey to simplification and, arguably, commodification of Queensland's violent colonial past.

_The White Earth_ offers dual narratives, those of a young boy and his great-uncle, that shift between a 1990s present and the period of the old man's youth and middle age. After eight-year-old William's father is killed in a farming accident, he and his mother go to live with a previously estranged relative, John McIvor, on Kuran Station. The property is a remnant of what was once a sprawling pastoral lease on the Darling Downs. The once-great Kuran House is crumbling; many of its rooms are barred to him, its shadowy halls guarded by a bad-tempered spinster housekeeper. But he has been invited there because John desires an heir, and the old man soon begins to groom him for the role. The process is one of indoctrination: John relates an idealised version of the Station's history and attempts to instil in him a demand for exclusive possession, pride in his settler heritage, and right-wing politics of embattlement and grievance. William is drawn to the land and seduced by the idea of owning it one day, but he becomes increasingly unsure of his uncle's stories and gradually realises that the Station has a 'malevolent history' (361). As the effects of the federal debate about Native Title start to ripple through the community, John denies Aboriginal claims to the land more stridently than ever. Yet the past will not remain forever buried. Kuran Station's darkest secret lies at the bottom of a waterhole that has never gone dry, until a long summer drought allows its contents to be yielded up to William.

The events of the novel unfold primarily during the period 1992 to 1993, at the height of an ongoing public debate about the nation's colonial origins and indigenous land rights, but _The White Earth_ also references the conservative backlash that took place in the second half of the 1990s, once John Howard's Coalition government was in power and the
One Nation party was gaining attention. The text itself appeared at a time when historical redress and postcolonial reconciliation were no longer at the top of the government’s agenda. Yet since the era of Native Title, Australia’s colonial history and the violence of settlement have entered and remained in the public arena. In the 2000s, for example, the ‘History Wars’ have been ongoing. Debate about the country’s colonial past and what it means for Australians today continued (and still continues) to circulate in academic and public domains, however much John Howard encouraged Australians to feel ‘comfortable and relaxed’ about the nation’s past, present and future.\(^\text{19}\) The White Earth was published into this climate, and can be seen to host two disparate historical narratives of the nation: narratives popularly described as ‘white blindfold’ and ‘black armband’, respectively.\(^\text{20}\) The text enters the fray with arguments of its own, framed in fiction, regarding which narrative is most valid and the implications of a violent past for contemporary non-indigenous Australians and their claims to belonging on the land.

The White Earth enjoyed solid sales and was generally well-received, despite some gripes by commentators about its lacking literary quality and overt politics. The text was widely reviewed in Australia, and in 2005 won the Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best Book (Asia and Pacific Region). To date relatively few literary critics have examined the text; those that have applaud its effort to address contemporary Australian times. Bill Ashcroft praises The White Earth for ‘tak[ing] seriously’ the indigenous sacred—defined here as the ‘Aboriginal experience of sacred sites, spirit presence, and the location of dreaming’ (‘Horizonal Sublime’ 149). McGahan’s approach is a departure from that of many of his predecessors, Ashcroft suggests, in whose work

\(^{19}\) Potter’s remark that The White Earth was published at a time of ‘comparative silence’ about these issues is therefore rather arguable (177).

\(^{20}\) As Ann Curthoys points out, ‘both versions of Australian history are narratives, stories about the past that make sense to those who tell and receive them’ (‘Expulsion’ 4).
Aboriginal culture is rarely 'more than a set of signs to be used in the service of national differentiation' ('Horizontal Sublime' 150). James Ley points out that while a number of public intellectuals have bemoaned the failure of recent Australian literature to 'address in worldly, adult ways the country and time in which [Australians] live' (Marr cited in Ley 2), The White Earth 'stands as a notable exception' (2). In the words of Emily Potter, '[t]he novel's refusal to consign the consequences of colonization to history makes it timely in [multiple] ways' (177). However, various reviewers questioned the book's aesthetic value and found its political engagements clumsy. Geoff Nicholson of the New York Times Book Review comments on 'purple...heavy-handed' prose, concluding that McGahan's 'fictional universe is devoid of a great many things; lightness of touch, irony, and...humor among them' (17), while A. Digger Stolz in Antipodes remarks that 'at times the characters seem little more than awkward mouthpieces' (179). Neither criticism is unjustified, and I will have more to say about the text's simplifications. But The White Earth's dramatically compelling engagement with postcolonial anxieties and the 'bad' settler past, as well as its critique of colonial-nationalist mythologies of white belonging, warrant further examination. Ashcroft's analysis is relatively brief, while Ley's essay is necessarily constrained (both in terms of length and mode of literary criticism) by the prescriptions of the Australian Book Review. Emily Potter's otherwise excellent article risks overlooking the text's flaws in its enthusiastic embrace of McGahan's subject matter and postcolonial aims.

In addition, although almost all reviewers remark on The White Earth's Gothicism, there has been little sustained analysis of how Gothic functions in the text. In the relative absence of detailed analyses of the novel, there is plenty of scope for an extended critical piece that considers, in particular, the text's status as 'Gothic'.

This chapter examines The White Earth with special reference to its use of Gothic in representing the violence of the settler nation's past and its ongoing effects. In doing so
it draws on critical literature about Gothic which identifies it as a literary mode that ‘stages an encounter with difference’ and possesses a ‘certain critical impulse’ that may be used in an ‘implicit critique of colonialism’ (McCann 399, 400). I read *The White Earth* as postcolonial Gothic: the novel exhibits Gothic’s characteristic drive to reveal the ‘dark secret’, to unearth the repressed—here, a ‘bad’ history that ‘haunts’ the settler nation. Gothic also becomes a tool in the text’s critique of the dominant discourses and mythologies of settler nationalism, for which John McIvor is a mouthpiece. Crucially, the text does not bring a bad history to light in order to lay it to rest, nor does it offer redemption for settler Australians. Yet *The White Earth* as classic popular Gothic does succumb to its own adherence to genre in some respects. Gothic dramatisation may undermine its capacity to represent its subject matter in a critical and nuanced way; replacing one mythology of the past with another, equally simplistic one, arguably does little to challenge the conventions of Australian settler historical discourse. The text’s popularly entertaining representation of the colonial past may also open the text to charges of commodification—a potential pitfall of ‘reconciliation literature’, as Graham Huggan notes (101).

**Post/Colonial Gothic**

Gothic is an enduring and popular genre. It has undertaken many shifts since its appearance in the eighteenth century, but is still defined by several key features, among them a preoccupation with the past, especially repressed pasts and their ‘disturbing return…upon [the present]’ (Botting 1). The Gothic is also fascinated by difference (McCann 399) and celebrates the fantastical, the excessive, the irrational, the supernatural (see Botting 1-17). Its prominence in colonial fiction is thus not surprising, but in addition, the gothic novel has relevance for colonial contexts for
the very reason that its historical period of production, the late eighteenth and
nineteenth century, coincided with the height of the British Empire. It was frequently
enlisted in support of imperial projects and the racial hierarchies of imperial-colonial
discourse. Of ‘Victorian imaginative discourse’ about Africa, for example, Patrick
Brantlinger observes that it
tended toward discredited forms, Gothic romance and boy’s adventure story. For
the most part, fiction writers imitated the explorers, producing quest romances with
Gothic overtones in which the heroic white penetration of the Dark Continent is the
central theme. (Rule of Darkness 189)

This work falls into a subgenre Brantlinger calls ‘imperial gothic’ (Rule of Darkness
227) and describes as operating to consolidate racist and/or Orientalist views of
otherness, even as it glorified colonial projects of exploring and claiming foreign land
and subduing its occupants. Imperial gothic was also taken up in ‘a spate of…novels
written in and about Australia’, as Robert Dixon shows in Writing the Colonial
Adventure (63). Here, it functioned in similar ways to bolster imperialist projects and,
for Australian producers of Gothic texts, colonial nationalism (Dixon Writing 12). It
informed and inspired fantastic tales of exploration of the unknown interior and
encounters with Aboriginal and/or Asian others, who were rendered ‘grotesque’ and
against whom the colonist-settler’s whiteness and superiority were marked (Dixon
Writing 64). These narratives of exploration and discovery, as I will also suggest in
chapter five on Craft for a Dry Lake, contributed in important ways to settler
nationalist discourse and the claiming of space for white settlers. Thus, as
Brantlinger’s African example and Dixon’s Australian one suggest, Gothic was
implicated in colonial and imperial discourse and power.

Yet the Gothic is a notoriously ambivalent genre, and Victorians writing
about Africa and other ‘far-off places’ were not the only writers of colonial Gothic
texts, as I have begun to suggest in referring to Dixon’s work. Writers of the settler colony, such as Marcus Clarke, Rosa Praed, J.D. Hennessey, Ernest Favenc and many others, were also attracted to the genre (McCann 399, Dixon Writing 63). Andrew McCann has suggested that Gothic had disruptive potential in these contexts, which is also supported by Dixon’s observation that Australian imperial Gothic betrays anxieties about race, nation and empire that undermine its own ‘comforting myth[s] of empire and renovation of Englishness’ (Writing 63). McCann argues in particular that Gothic’s seeking out of the repressed meant that in the settler-colony it could potentially ‘unearth the “repressed” of colonization: collective guilt, the memory of violence and dispossession, and the struggle for mastery in which the insecurity of the settler-colony is revealed’ (McCann 400). Marcus Clarke’s The Mystery of Major Moulineux (1881) is a case in point, as McCann shows. The novel approaches a recognition of the violence underpinning white ownership of Tasmanian land, but in the end it veers away from ‘revelation’ toward more sensationalist, market-friendly material (McCann 401). Nevertheless, McCann’s analysis suggests that Gothic has counter-colonial potential.

Gothic has undertaken many shifts and diversifications since its appearance in the eighteenth century, with Colonial Gothic only one of many forms. A contemporary and increasingly recognised variation is the Postcolonial Gothic (see Punter Postcolonial Imaginings). While the genre’s association with colonial discourse is well-established, the link between the Gothic and the postcolonial may not be so apparent, for, as Smith and Hughes point out,

[They] appear to be the product[s] of rather different intellectual, cultural, and historical traditions. The Gothic, a fantastical literary form that had its heyday in the

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21 See Botting, Gothic, for an extensive account of the genre’s historical evolution and multiple manifestations. Among those he describes are ‘homely gothic’ and ‘postmodern gothic’.
late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries might seem to inhabit a different world than that confronted by writers working in postcolonial contexts in the twenty-first century. (1)

But Gothic and the postcolonial are both interested in ‘challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality’ and, in particular, the Cartesian subject of Western humanism, which is defined by what it is not (Smith and Hughes 1; Gandhi 30). This commonality has attracted critical attention in recent years, and there is a growing body of work on the Gothic by postcolonial scholars.22 One significant development has been the re-examination of literature written in the colonialist context, such as Bram Stoker’s Dracula (Smith and Hughes 4). Another, more relevant to this chapter, is the identification of certain postcolonial texts as engaging with the Gothic in order to subvert colonial orders and discourses and/or address the ‘traumas of the nation’s colonial past’ (Davison 137; see also Punter’s Postcolonial Imaginings). Jean Rhys’s novel Wide Sargasso Sea, which critically revisits Charlotte Bronte’s classic Jane Eyre, is a well-known case in point.23 There are many others; as Judie Newman writes, ‘Gothic motifs are exceptionally prevalent in postcolonial fiction, even from very different locations’ (85). These are visible, for example, in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things and Toni Morrison’s Beloved.24 The prevalence of Gothic in postcolonial fiction makes sense if one considers that, as David Punter suggests, ‘postcolonial spaces, worldviews, writers, writings and reading are inevitably Gothic’ because they are ‘haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past’ (Wisker 402).

22 In addition to Smith and Hughes’ edited collection Empire and the Gothic, see for example Punter Postcolonial Imaginings; Smith; Wisker, Paravissini-Gebert; Castricano; Newman; and Dayan.
23 Numerous articles examine Wide Sargasso Sea with reference to Jane Eyre and highlight Jean Rhys’s postcolonial revision of Charlotte Bronte’s classic. Two notable examples are Spivak ‘Three Women’s Texts’ and Ciolkowski. For further examples see Wisker and, in particular, Punter Postcolonial Imaginings.
I have noted that while many reviewers remark that *The White Earth* is Gothic, few consider the literary significance of this in any great depth. James Ley comes closest in his discussion of McGahan’s ‘[turn] toward genre’ when he suggests that such a move can ‘open the possibility of transcendence’ (38). That is, use of genre can reveal the ways in which history exceeds certain prescribed narratives or frameworks, so that ‘it becomes possible to understand history in...more realistic and nuanced ways’ (Ley 38). As I will elaborate, *The White Earth* fails to facilitate such a view of history precisely because it adheres so closely to genre and does not acknowledge that the past it represents is more specified and complex than the Gothic can allow. However, the novel does harness Gothic to postcolonial ends, and in doing this it is not without precedent, as suggested by the review of the genre that follows. Surely few texts adhere to genre as closely as *The White Earth*, in which it is once again possible to see Gothic’s potential for ‘generat[ing] critical knowledge of [settler] colonialism and reveal[ing] what lies buried under...its establishment of property relations’ (McCann 401). *The White Earth* makes such an excavation its explicit purpose. It explores not only the dark past but also the ways in which colonialisist prejudices and denial continue to circulate in contemporary Australian society, in part through historical mythologies of the nation that continue colonial crimes at an epistemological level.

**Dark times, excluded bodies**

I have been underlining the Gothic’s preoccupation with repressed pasts, and David Punter has more to tell us about the Gothic and history. He invites us to see the Gothic as representing ‘a specific view of history’, one in which the past is, to some degree, inescapable and continually reappearing to ‘exact a necessary price’
(Punter ‘House’ 193). Punter refers to this, then, as ‘history written according to a certain logic: a logic of the phantom, the revenant, a logic of haunting’, and he points out that this view of history is frequently ‘emblematised, as in classic Gothic fiction, in the form of the house’ (‘House’ 193). *The White Earth* features such a house, and, in keeping with Gothic tradition, it is an enormous, derelict place, with a hint of former aristocracy about it. Built by a family William’s mother calls ‘great folk’ (20), members of the squattocracy, Kuran House was once ‘the shining light of the Downs’ (24). In the 1990s, 130 years after it was built, the House (William thinks of it with a capitalised *h* throughout the text) has much in common with the imaginary mansion in *The Folly*. Although it is real in the sense that it exists physically, it is in danger of disintegration: it is crumbling, ‘sway[ed]’ (281) with ‘collapsing chimneys’ and ‘missing’ roof-tiles (64). As we will see, like the farmhouses in *Disgrace* and *Country of My Skull*, in a postcolonial age the House seems vulnerable. It is, in the Freudian sense, an uncanny symbol of belonging for William, in that it is at once reassuring and deeply unsettling: while the House represents home and his own future inheritance, looking at it gives him a ‘cold sensation of loss’ (64). It is both a testament to white presence on the land, and a reminder of the potential impermanence and precariousness of white belonging. That the House is broadly symbolic is flagged early on by the name of the ‘great family’ that established and originally ran the pastoral property: the Whites.

McCann reminds us that the ‘selling point of the Gothic text is its dark secret’ (400). The (White) House, this symbol of Australian settler history and belonging on the land, has its own dark secret. The House’s own walls allude to it: William’s first exposure comes through his sighting of a fresco in his uncle’s study. Although it is ‘indistinct’ and faded, he discerns that it depicts an Australian
landscape (46). Painted in muted colours rather than the brilliant green of an English
countryside, the landscape is dotted with a ‘flock of sheep’ guarded by men on
horseback (46). William realises he can ‘discern the vague outline of the House itself;
then he sees that

off in one corner of the painting, so faded as to be almost invisible, was a
collection of shapes recognisable as people only because of their white eyes and
teeth. Black men, looking on from the shadows, their expressions impossible to
read. Hostile? Fearful?
Phantoms. He blinked and the vision was gone. (46-47)

The secret is that the land had prior inhabitants who were pushed to the edges of
Kuran Station and beyond; those who survived the ‘dispersals’ were relocated to
missions. William approaches this repressed history again when he sneaks into his
uncle’s secret room, which is barred with a ‘padlock’ (153). Inside is John McIvor’s
shrine to the Downs’ settler past. Tellingly, the room’s walls are ‘blood red’ (153) and
the space smells of gunpowder (154).

Within the locked room is a locked chest, the contents of which include, as
Will discovers, an old police uniform. Donning the hat without knowing its
significance, Will still feels ‘a power working in him’ (155). The text goes on to clarify
that the uniform is that of the Queensland Mounted Police; specifically, it is that of a
(white) officer of the Queensland Native Police, a force enlisted in the mid-
nineteenth century for the express purpose of ‘resolving “the Aboriginal problem”’
(Palmer 6). This involved—in euphemistic terms, which *The White Earth* references—
‘dispersing’ indigenous ‘trespassers’ and troublemakers (445). Later John’s adult
daughter Ruth will educate William about the violence involved in such dispersals:

[N]o one ever...defined what ‘disperse’ might mean...The word itself means to
break up, to scatter, to chase away. And sometimes that’s all the Native Police did.
Ran the blacks off, or arrested them. Other times...they just shot them all. (335)
That John has locked the uniform away because he is uneasy about the history it represents (rather than simply desiring to protect the garment) is suggested by the text’s juxtaposition of his treatment of the uniform with his proud display of the more fragile items that belonged to the explorer. As I will elaborate later, this depiction of John as desiring to ‘lock up’ bad pasts in this way is somewhat problematic, since it obscures the fact that many white colonial-nationalists may acknowledge the violence of the past but feel no shame about it. This passage also begins to suggest the text’s shortcomings with respect to representing the complexity of Queensland’s colonial history. Despite its many references to the Queensland Mounted Police, *The White Earth* barely acknowledges that the troopers (as opposed to the officers) in the Native Police were indigenous. The one point at which it does so is on page 335, when Ruth notes, ‘The private troopers were all Aborigines…trained and armed. Who better to hunt down and kill blacks than other blacks, right?’. The text thus largely misses the historically and morally complex issue of black on black violence in the Australian colonial context. Significantly, this has not been acknowledged in the critical literature on the novel. I will have more to say about the text’s historical simplifications and the pitfalls of genre. But to return now to the most apparently intended implications of John’s actions as they are depicted by McGahan, Potter suggests that ‘[t]he lock and key that hide the uniform away indicate the necessary imaginary upon which colonial culture rests—discursively containing and repressing events and their memory’ (179). John is in fact a mouthpiece of settler colonial culture and discourse in the novel, and the views and narratives he relates to William are representative of many modern manifestations of that discourse in Australia. It is a mythology that, like that of South African pastoral described in the previous chapter, conceals the violence of settlement, plays down
the prior presence of others on the land and constructs a narrative that legitimises the settler’s placement. John’s is the account of the past—and the model of belonging—against which Gothic is put to work.

**A proud history of ‘heroic achievement’**

Within the framework of the Gothic, *The White Earth* sets up two dissonant historical narratives of the settler nation, of which the first is John McIvor’s proud nationalist account. It reflects the dream of a ‘fair go’ country that rewards hard work and resourcefulness. In John’s schema, white ‘battlers’ are the successors of ‘long-gone’ Aborigines and, having settled the land, can appropriate indigenous modes of belonging to arrive at deep, spiritual connections to place. The other narrative of the nation’s past is one of dispossession, violence and concealed crimes. It starts out as barely a whisper but becomes progressively insistent, until it can counteract the first. As I will go on to show, *The White Earth* is structured in such a way that the second narrative comes to have authority and credence, while the first view of the past is shown to be a self-justifying account that is distorted and incomplete.

John McIvor voices the long-dominant narrative of Australian settler history. His is what Ann Curthoys calls ‘[t]he “positive” view’: ‘the older and still warmly supported idea that the British colonisation of the Australian continent was a worthy enterprise’ (‘Expulsion’ 1). This is opposed to a ‘negative’ account that has become prominent only over the last few decades, an account that ‘tells an alternative and profoundly discomforting story of invasion, colonisation, dispossession, exploitation, institutionalisation, and attempted genocide’ (Curthoys ‘Expulsion’ 1). The positive

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25 This heading is inspired by a quotation from John Howard’s 1996 Sir Robert Menzies lecture.
view of Australian history is widely embraced by the nation's conservative politicians and by a much larger group of non-Aboriginal Australians who do not want to see themselves as 'beneficiaries of colonialism', and who may regard themselves as victims rather than oppressors (Curthoys 'Expulsion' 2). As Curthoys points out, many non-indigenous Australians express a desire to put the 'badness' of the past behind them and 'reassert pride in their history, institutions, and culture' ('Expulsion' 2). Politicians, including former Prime Minister John Howard, expressed public support for this position (Curthoys 'Expulsion' 2; Brett 8). From the Coalition's rise to power in 1996 to their electoral defeat in November 2007, reconciliation and indigenous rights were not highly ranked on the national agenda. During this time opposition to 'black armband history' was articulated from the highest government office (Brett 21). Through the character of John McIvor, the text references the language of settler colonialism and nationalism, as well as the conservative politics and discourse of John Howard's Coalition, and right wing groups such as One Nation. Along the way the text reveals certain continuities between them.

John's colonialist perspective is shown through his terra nullius mentality, also seen in Nieuwenhuizen in The Folly, in which land is presumed to be empty and is claimed first by the eyes, usually from an elevated point on the land. John takes William up into the mountains soon after the boy arrives on Kuran Station, and as they gaze over it together, John declares that it is '[t]he land I own' (85). The action has historical precedents, which William later acknowledges to Ruth: as they stand on high ground and look over the Station, he tells her, '[T]his is what the settlers did. They stood up here and everything they could see, that's what they got' (276). John refuses to acknowledge an indigenous presence and an Aboriginal shaping of landscape, telling William that the plain is treeless because the rich black soil won't
support trees, rather than admitting that Aborigines maintained the savannah through use of fire in order to encourage animals to graze there (80, 277). This denial of Aboriginal labour on the land is connected to a Western conception of property rights that was widely applied in colonial contexts: specifically, the Lockean theory of property in which those who work the land deserve to inherit it. We have seen this concept at work in South African contexts, as noted in the previous chapter. Coetzee has written that ‘in order to justify its conquests colonialism has to demonstrate that the colonist is a better steward of the earth than the native’ (White Writing 31). South African white writing has typically concealed the labour of the black man as part of its project to naturalise settler placement on and possession of the land. John’s refusal to recognise Aboriginal use of fire to shape landscape and derive food from it stems from a similar insecurity about his right to own and belong on the land. 26

John’s mental occlusions of Aborigines permeate all his story-telling about the region and its past. For him, the history of the Darling Downs begins with its discovery and naming by a white explorer (81), even though, as his daughter Ruth later tells William, the place was hardly empty when the explorer arrived (276). His narrative is a blustery tale of adventure, full of heroic explorers and valiant settlers who succeeded against the odds (129). That John’s narrative obscures indigenous

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26 The treatment of the issue is somewhat simplified in The White Earth, because it was not necessary for settlers to entirely deny indigenous work on and shaping of the land in order to justify (within a colonialisit framework) their takeover of it; rather, they could make the case that theirs was a better, more advanced and productive use of it. In Australia this was an argument that drew on what has been called the stadial theory of human development, which is similar to Locke’s labour theory of property but poses ‘a sequential movement through four distinct stages and the definition of property interests in each’ (McCarthy 63). In this framework, certain types of land cultivation are deemed to be of a ‘higher’ level than others, reflecting the ‘several stages as society was seen to progress from an economy or mode of subsistence based upon hunting, to pastoralism, then agriculture and finally the highest commercial stage’ (McCarthy 61). The more ‘advanced’ the cultivation of land, the more rightful its possession. Though these ideas had radical implications in Europe, where they could be used to undermine the aristocracy, in the settler colony they were frequently invoked to justify European or settler appropriation of land occupied by indigenes whose cultivation practices were labelled ‘simple’ or even ‘savage’ (McCarthy 62).
presence is made apparent as he tutors William in his version of the past. Standing in front of the fresco of Kuran Station, he places his hand over the ‘dark figures gathered in the lower corner of the painting’, literally hiding them from view as he finishes, ‘…that’s how Australia began’ (129). Although John does not entirely deny that Aborigines once lived in the area and claims to respect their culture, they are always displaced to the distant past. He refuses to acknowledge their continuing presence, telling William, ‘They [are] gone and [won’t] be coming back’ (100). As James Ley points out, John’s repeated insistence that Aboriginal people are ‘gone’ echoes the popular myth of the dying race (37). This notion obscured the violence involved in settler colonialism and facilitated another fiction, that of ‘extinction discourse’ (Brantlinger *Dark Vanishings*) 2, by which settler dominance was naturalised.  

John’s settler nationalist version of the past excludes not only the indigenous; it is also masculinised, as is his victimhood. In this *The White Earth* repeats *The Folly’s* underscoring of the gendered nature of settler discourses and nationalism. Decolonising nationalisms are frequently bound up with ‘injured masculinities’ (Lake 41), as Cynthia Enloe suggests:

Nationalism typically has sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope. Anger at being ‘emasculated’—or turned into a ‘nation of busboys’—has been presumed to be the natural fuel for igniting a nationalist movement. (44)

In the settler colony, nationalism was a largely masculine project spurred in part by stories of unjust treatment at the hands of the colonial authority (usually Britain). Australian nationalist mythology typically features heroic male endeavours, such as claiming and taming the land and fighting in wars, more prominently than women’s

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27 Later in the chapter I will undertake a more sustained examination of the text’s treatment of the ‘dying race’ myth.
activities. Here also male sacrifice, whether sustained in battle or exploration (Moran 1024), as well as collective suffering or victimhood, has helped to energise settler nation-building projects (Curthoys ‘Expulsion’ 3). *The White Earth* acknowledges these dynamics in the character of John. Replicating the biases of Australian historical mythology and nationalist discourse, John is always on the side of, and most interested in, the (labouring) white male. The settler characters he valorises are not pastoralists, but working people who have been (historically) denied access to property and opportunity. This group includes men and women, but John mentions only the men as he relates the story of the white settlement of the Darling Downs to William—‘self-reliant...many of them died...but they made it work somehow’ (129). Gender is fore-grounded further when John muses that land possession may be ‘fundamentally a male concern’ (341) and indicates to William that concealing the means by which white ownership of indigenous land is secured is ‘a man’s business’ (105). The novel thus references the widespread colonial notion that white women were unable to cope with the (perhaps necessary) nastiness of empire, a theme that is famously prominent in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. John goes so far as to label women the ‘enemy’ (240), warning William not to trust either his mother or Ruth, whom he views as threats to his legacy. In doing so he echoes the popular nineteenth and twentieth century discourses that promoted the ‘bushman’ and other independent male figures as an ideal type embodying an Australian national identity, for as Marilyn Lake points out, in these conceptions women ‘were necessarily invisible or positioned as the enemy’ (42). This antagonism to women in nationalist discourse is not isolated to Australia, and John’s hostility to the women

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28 This is not to suggest that women’s activities did not contribute in important ways to settler nation-building, or that women did not participate in nation-building projects.
characters in the book resonates with that of Nieuwenhuizen’s to Mrs Malgas in *The Folly*.

John’s attitudes reflect tendencies not only in historical but also in contemporary white settler nationalism. His political views are reminiscent of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and emerge most clearly in his work for the Australian Independence League (AIL), a group that opposes migrant and indigenous rights and calls for a national ‘unity’ that insidiously rejects difference (see 133). In a clear echo of Pauline Hanson’s statement ‘Like most Australians, I worked for my land, no-one gave it to me’ (cited in Brett 14), John tells William ‘No one handed me anything...I had to fight my whole life to get [this property]’ (138). AIL members see themselves as battling against ‘large economic forces, middle class elites, and powerful nations overseas’ (Curthoys ‘Expulsion’ 2). They are opposed to mainstream government, and especially Keating’s Labor government, which, John says, ‘[doesn’t give] a damn about you unless you [are]...a migrant, or black, or homosexual’ (138). The group draws on a discourse of class inequality, figuring themselves as ‘ordinary’ working Australians, while indigenous and non-Anglo Australians are ‘elites’ (133, 136). All of these things reference the ‘politics of grievance’ that came to the fore—thanks in part to Pauline Hanson—during the early period of Howard’s government (Brett 7).

Though it was not without its unique aspects, this politics of grievance is linked to a broader, older discourse, and this continuity is suggested by *The White Earth* as it shows AIL drawing on an early Australian nationalism, taking the Eureka flag and ‘Waltzing Matilda’ as its flag and anthem, respectively. Both the flag and the song represent a story of an underdog—or a group of underdogs—fighting against an oppressive imperialist power. John McIvor and AIL thus tap an extremely important aspect of Australian popular historical mythology: victimhood and embattlement.
Underlying the foundational story of the convicts (who are generally figured as ordinary working-class people punished beyond all proportion by an inhumane British system), the tales of struggling pioneers who battled a harsh and unforgiving land, and more recently the revitalized commemoration of the ANZAC troops who fought and died at Gallipoli, is a powerful ‘victimological narrative’ (Curthoys, ‘Expulsion’ 6). White Australians are presented as heroic strugglers, persisting doggedly against the odds, if only to fail (defiantly) in the end. Although this narrative is not without its historical referents, to cite Curthoys’s argument,

[The emphasis in white Australian popular historical mythology on the settler as victim works against substantial acknowledgement and understanding of a colonial past, and informs and inflames white racial discourse (‘Expulsion’ 4).

For John and other AIL members, the grievance and embattlement discourse feeds into their myopia and belligerence. They are unable to recognize the pain of others; much less are they willing to concede that they, working and middle class settler stock, themselves historically oppressed, could oppress others. They fail to acknowledge their position of privilege and own colonizing status, or that Aborigines are among the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups in Australia.

At the same time, John McIvor’s working class roots are undeniable, and *The White Earth*, like *The Folly*, traces a thread between class and the quest for property in the settler colony. John, the son of a Kuran Station manager who gave him hopes of inheriting the station through a marriage with the daughter of the land-owning White family, is crushed when that same young woman tells his father, ‘You were only ever an employee, Mr McIvor...Your son was only ever an employee. I think you might have forgotten that’ (55). Over the course of the novel, John’s obsessive drive to

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29 There are similarities here with what *White Writing* describes in South African pastoral as the ‘myth of natural right’ which comes about through hard slog, toil, and suffering on the land—noted in the previous chapter.
secure land is tied to this early experience of denial and dispossession. When he considers his future son (never actually born—John has a single daughter only), for example, he is determined that the boy 'have no uncertainty...none of the doubts and disasters that had afflicted his own youth. His son must grow up knowing without question that Kuran Station was his' (192). *The White Earth* is not the only recent novel to foreground a link between class, property and settler violence in an Australian context. This same theme is taken up in *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville, which tells the story of an emancipist settler who comes to claim a piece of land on the Hawkesbury. The feeling of owning property at last, and of having prospects as a result, is so good after a lifetime of toil and insecurity that the principal character, William Thornhill, is willing to participate in a violent reprisal against the Aborigines who challenge his and other settlers' ownership of the stretch of land along the river. In the Australian context, as in the South African-Afrikaner that we will see referenced by Krog in *Country of My Skull* in chapter four, past deprivations and mistreatment feed into a discourse of justified land ownership and the need to defend by force 'hard-won' rights, often against the perceived threats posed by less-privileged indigenous peoples. John's own class-based insecurity and sense that he has unfairly 'lost' his inheritance early in life fuel his quest to claim, and then belligerently defend, an 'absolute' possession of the Station (192).

**Mythologies to belong by**

Part of the appeal for John of settler historical mythologies and conservative accounts of the past is that they serve his interests as white owner of Kuran Station.

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30 I am not examining *The Secret River* in the thesis because it is a historical novel and my focus is on texts set in contemporary times.
It is worth looking more closely at how these myths operate to secure the settler, and their representation in the text. *The White Earth*, as part of its excavation of settler-nationalist discourse, hones in on three: the mythological figure of the doomed explorer; the dying race theory; and the issue of settler appropriations of indigenous culture. Examined together, these three key threads in the discourse can be seen to feed into an elaborate rhetoric by which white possession of the land is claimed and justified, and settler nationalism is given a bedrock in time and place. *The White Earth* reveals how via the explorer mythology, the land is claimed for white possession; via the dying race theory, Aboriginal dispossession is justified; finally, via the appropriation of indigenous imagery, the history of white Australia is extended through time and white belonging is cemented on the back of Aboriginal dispossession. *The White Earth* points to the falsity of these narratives; it also works to uncover the ‘repressed’ of these mythologies, as I begin to show here and explore further in the next section, which returns to Gothic.

The explorer is a recurrent motif in *The White Earth* and in colonial and settler discourse, reflecting the crucial role explorers played in colonisation. An essential part of this role was their ‘marking [of]...the landscape with European imaginative frameworks’ and mapping of the country ‘[t]hrough discrete acts of naming’ (Moran 1023). In the previous chapter I noted that explorers and their mapping projects enabled real and imaginary colonial appropriations of space. *The White Earth* brings another dimension of the explorer mythology to the fore: that of the disastrous or doomed endeavour. Not only explorer successes but *failures* were important in Australian settler culture; perhaps the best-remembered and most-valorised explorers were those who never made it back, for example Burke and Wills and Ludwig
Leichhardt. These tragedies served their own purpose in the national imaginary. As Moran elaborates,

[Explorer] failings...were used later as powerful narratives explaining the nature of the national quest, and of the development of the Australian mystique. Those who died or disappeared...became heroes whose blood fused with the soil, through their acts of suffering and sacrifice...In the absence of celebrated defensive battles on Australian soil, such explorer deaths and other deaths resulting from the effort to subdue the wilderness, together with children lost in the bush, served the purpose of sacralizing the national landscape. (1023-24)

*The White Earth* makes frequent reference to the historical explorer Allan Cunningham, who is credited with discovering and naming the Darling Downs and whom John McIvor acknowledges as a key figure in the early history of the place. Cunningham’s importance is overshadowed by the novel’s fictional doomed explorer: Alfred Kirchmeyer. Kirchmeyer was ‘the first white man to set foot’ on the land that was to become Kuran Station, but he died there alone without having been able to assert his claim to the discovery (162). Years later his remains were found by a settler, along with his ‘compass, a watch, a journal’ (162). John displays these items in the glass case in his special room, and the memory of the fallen explorer is one he worships: William has an ‘image...of his uncle bowed before [the objects], as if the room was a hidden chapel’ (154). That Kirchmeyer functions as a sacred figure for John is clear, and he is depicted somewhat sympathetically in the text. But the mythological explorer does not escape the novel entirely unscathed. Ruth’s derogatory remarks about the explorer undermine his revered position (see for example 276), and by placing the Kirchmeyer’s items in proximity to those of the Mounted Police in John’s blood-red room the text points to his role in opening spaces to violent settler conquest.

Once the land has been charted, claimed, and even ‘sacralised’ by the explorer, it is opened up to settler conquest. However, the presence of its prior
occupants (Aboriginal people) constituted a challenge to white settlement projects that, in most settler colonies, were dealt with through violence and dispossession. In the Australian version of the ‘myth of natural right’, rapidly reduced post-settlement Aboriginal populations must be explained without recourse to white-led atrocity. How might this be done? The solution in many settler societies as whites became dominant and indigenous populations diminished was the myth of the dying race. Despite the fact that violence, warfare and disease were major factors in declining indigenous numbers, ‘extinction discourse’ usually emphasised that native peoples were doomed on the basis of their ‘savage customs’ (Brantlinger, Dark Vanishings 2) and, especially after Darwinism, their supposed biological inferiority (McGregor 59). This ‘fantasy of auto-genocide or racial suicide’, Patrick Brantlinger tells us, placed the blame on the victim, and ‘helped to rationalize or occlude the genocidal aspects of European conquest and colonization’ (Dark Vanishings 2). Within ‘dying race’ frameworks, the ‘disappearance’ of indigenous peoples was often romanticised as a tragic inevitability. The myth also facilitated white denial of indigenous agency and the possibility of a future for indigenous people and gave rise to nostalgic conceptions of the ‘native’ as a childlike, Edenic figure from an earlier, pristine and primitive time—a person without a place in the contemporary world (Batty 2). As in other settings, in Australia the discourse was also embraced by many who saw themselves as humanitarians and advocates of the welfare of Aborigines (McGregor 17-18).

*The White Earth* depicts John McIvor as a mouthpiece of the myth; throughout the novel he declares that the Aborigines are ‘gone’, though when it comes to Native Title he is forced to concede their existence (see 136). That the text shows there are so few indigenous Australians in the area and that the signs of their
presence are old might at first seem to lend credence to John’s claims. However, characters who are more knowledgeable about the history of the place than John continually remark that Aborigines with ongoing connections to the land are still alive. For example, the young research student John and William encounter in the hills early in the novel says that he has spoken to ‘old men and woman in places like Cherbourg [a former Aboriginal mission] [who]...remember a thing or two’ (91, 92). John’s daughter Ruth confirms that at Cherbourg ‘[t]here are people...who came from this property’ (353). The novel further undercuts the myth with its suggestion that the near-disappearance of Aborigines was not some Darwinian act of nature, but a result of colonial violence. In the case of the Kuran men and boys who kept returning to the Station, it is revealed that they did not simply ‘vanish’ or disappear of their own accord, but were killed while trying to maintain their connection to a sacred place. The text prompts a consideration of why it might be difficult for indigenous Australians to prove an ongoing presence on the land. John’s daughter Ruth says,

They continued their presence on the land as best they could...It was so important to them that they broke the law repeatedly to return. They made every effort...to stay in contact, and...[were] slaughtered for [it]. Then they stopped coming. (354, emphasis in original)

In this respect The White Earth interrogates not only the myth of the dying race, but also the Native Title requirement that Aboriginal claimants demonstrate a ‘continuing presence on the land’ (White Earth 353)—a requirement that stems from a Western conception of property rights and which we will also see questioned in The Custodians (examined in the next chapter).

The myth of the dying race also opens the way for white appropriations of Aboriginality, as is suggested by the text in its portrayal of John’s claims to
indigenous knowledge. John regards this as a natural inheritance coming through the
land and from ages past, and as further securing his place on Kuran Station. As
discussed in the thesis introduction, white appropriations of indigenous culture and
identity are widespread in colonial contexts and continue in a more ‘postcolonial’ era.
This holds for Australia, where despite the racism of the settler colony and nation’s
past, and despite white disparagement of Aborigines and Aboriginal culture, there
has long been a yearning, on the part of Europeans and non-indigenous Australians,
for Aboriginality. Curthoys, for example, notes that ‘[t]here is a longstanding feeling
that it is Aboriginal people who are the most truly Australian (‘Entangled Histories’
124). Often this admiration has turned exploitative, manifesting in appropriations of
Aboriginal culture which are put to work for non-indigenous causes and which
disregard Aborigines themselves. Anthony Moran has described how settler
nationalism has marshalled Aboriginal culture in a quest to ‘more firmly root…settler
culture in Australian soil’ (1032), and Mitchell Rolls identifies literary appropriations
made toward similar ends, for example in the work of the Jindyworobaks and, more
recently, in Les Murray’s poetry. The Jindyworobaks harnessed indigenous culture in
support of an independent Australian nationalism and distinctive national culture; in
a more contemporary period, Murray has employed Aboriginal motifs and mythology
to elaborate on and ‘graft an Aboriginal depth’ to his ‘sense of place and spiritual
belonging’ to his surroundings (Rolls 118-19). The White Earth is a rare example of a
white Australian text that engages explicitly and critically with the widespread
practice of non-indigenous appropriations of Aboriginal culture and modes of
belonging. It critiques the attitudes and tendencies Rolls describes in these
appropriations, especially the assumption that Aboriginal culture is a ‘resource’ that
can be drawn upon (apparently un-problematically) by settler subjects in the service
of ‘non-Aboriginal needs’ (119). Rolls identifies as chief among these the desire to belong deeply in place and not be alienated from the Australian landscape (119).

Thus, what is ‘at stake’ in the work of even the most sympathetic writers is, as Rolls points out, ‘the implications of a literary appropriation based on the needs of the appropriator’ (119-20, my emphasis).

Foregrounding this, *The White Earth* presents John’s use of indigenous culture as deeply self-serving. He grasps at it in order to feel that Kuran Station is rightfully his, and attempts to incorporate ‘Aboriginal knowledge’ in his own brand of settler nationalism. His decision that the AIL rally will be held around a stone circle in the hills, which he believes to be a ‘bora ring’ (179), an Aboriginal sacred site, is made ‘partly out of respect [for Aborigines], but partly as a protest too’ (181). The protest comes out of John’s resentment over what he sees as a failure of recognition on the part of those who would question his feeling of being intimately connected to the land. He tells William:

> There are folk out there who believe that the Aborigines are the only ones who understand the land, that only the blacks could have found a place like this and appreciated what it was. They think that the blacks have some magical connection that whites can never have, that we’re just stumbling around here without any idea, that we don’t understand the country, that we just want to exploit it. But that’s not true. We can have connections to the land too, our own kind of magic. This land talks to me. It doesn’t care what colour I am, all that matters is that I’m here. And I understand what it says, just as well as anyone before me, black or white. I found this ring, didn’t I? So I deserve respect too. (181)

John’s remarks have great currency in contemporary Australian society, and open valid questions: can white Australians not have deep, meaningful connections to place? Are they somehow barred from a kind of psychic, spiritual understanding of the land? Is the Aboriginal sacred the only sacred; is theirs the only ‘magic’? And to what degree can non-indigenous Australians understand and draw on the Aboriginal sacred? (Peter Read asks similar questions in *Belonging*, as noted in the introduction.)
His musings there, and the quotations from interviews with other Australians that he presents, attest to the lack of simple answers.) John’s rationale is that because he too recognises the sacred on the land, *knows* the land—like the Aborigines of old—he has a right to claim ‘Native Title’ (294). But white Australian appropriations of indigenous culture are seriously challenged as the text reveals that John has *failed* to recognise the Aboriginal sacred sites on Kuran Station. His identification of the ring of stones as sacred and as a former Aboriginal meeting place, for example, is utterly incorrect. When William encounters a manifestation of a Bunyip, a mythological creature from Aboriginal lore, it is to be told by it, contemptuously, that ‘[t]he old man is blind’ (317). As James Ley writes, ‘[John] believes he understands the land, but almost everything he says about it turns out to be wrong’ (38). *The White Earth* ultimately denies that white settlers can lay legitimate claim to country through a (specious) appropriation of Aboriginality, though the text also suggests, through the character of William, the possibility of an un-appropriative *recognition* of the indigenous sacred.

The speciousness of John’s claim to Aboriginal knowledge is also indicated by the artificiality of the so-called indigenous culture he draws upon. Where does it come from? He and William figure it as a natural inheritance: in taking possession of the land, John comes into the knowledge of the land; William decides after listening to his uncle that ‘[k]nowledge was the essence of ownership...The black men, it seemed, had held the knowledge when they had owned the land. His uncle held it now’ (181). Under close examination, however, John’s notions of indigenous culture—‘bora rings’ (179), ‘corroborees’ (178)—appear to derive from a romanticised, anachronistic and rather generic Aboriginality. Rolls points out that the indigenous knowledge appropriated by non-indigenous Australians usually comes not
from contemporary Aboriginality, but from a constructed traditional Aboriginality, often as it has been depicted and/or recorded in anthropological works—thus filtered through a white, European consciousness (122). The acquisition of ‘wisdom’ is thus not based on a true exchange or personal contact with Aboriginal people. Consistent with this, the Aborigines John admires are those who no longer exist, and/or who perhaps never existed as they do in his imagination. There is no indication that he has ever met or known indigenous Australians, let alone developed relationships out of which knowledge sharing could occur. The novel thus exposes the falsity of John’s ‘Aboriginality’ and, in turn, the falsity of white Australian claims to an ‘inheritance’ of the land and the indigenous sacred that is premised on the myth of their ‘natural’ supplanting of the continent’s original inhabitants.

The eruption of the repressed

John’s narrative of the past and the settler mythologies that inform his mode of belonging are given a prominent place but certainly not privileged in The White Earth. The very things they repress—Aboriginal dispossession and dispersal—are shown to unravel these foundational white myths. With time, and in accordance with the conventions of Gothic, the repressed breaks forth to reveal an alternative narrative of Australia’s settler history. Increasingly insistent and ascendant, this second narrative ultimately overturns the first. Despite John’s best efforts to indoctrinate his heir, William becomes an unwitting witness to this second narrative. The voices that testify to it are multiple, including those of John’s daughter Ruth, the Bunyip, and history’s whisper in his ear. William’s ear infection begins as a dull ache soon after his arrival at Kuran Station and worsens the longer he stays; it flares up at those times when the first narrative of the past is pressed upon him most forcefully.
At the AIL rally, for example, he becomes nauseous and is newly aware of a 'bad smell' that seems to be following him: ‘His... ear was still aching. And he’d become aware of...[t]he smell of something rotten. It reminded him of a dead animal’ (201). The odour of death signals the nature of the crimes committed on Kuran Station: chiefly, the 1917 massacre of a group of Aboriginal men and boys instigated by John’s father. It also suggests that the AIL’s right-wing rhetoric and denial of the indigenous is an epistemological perpetuation of the crime.

William is further troubled by the account of the Station’s past that is provided by his visiting cousin Ruth. Women’s voices have been historically marginalised in nationalist narratives, so Ruth’s status in the text as a key oppositional figure (and voice) to John is significant. (It also reflects the position of Mrs Malgas in relation to Nieuwenhuizen and her husband in The Folly.) Here is another instance in which an eruption of the repressed—here, woman’s voice—becomes visible. A victim of her father's obsessive quest to own Kuran Station, Ruth is embittered and suspicious of his grand stories and proud nationalism. Following in the tradition of the ‘sympathetic white woman’ outlined in previous chapters, she is something of an Aboriginal advocate.31 Having researched the history of the Station, she shares her discoveries with William: the land was not empty when the settlers arrived; Aborigines shaped and managed the landscape long before the arrival of the white man and were displaced from it forcefully, even murderously, as the settlers made their claims (277, 282, 334). For example, she relates

When I was a girl, I used to help my father on our old farm. Sometimes the plough would dig up sharpened stones. But what were they doing in the middle of a black

31 The character of Ruth also suggests the ambiguity of the 'sympathetic white woman', as it transpires that she is combating her father more in a quest for personal vengeance than in solidarity with the dispossessed Aboriginal people she has met (see 354).
soil plain, where there should be no stones at all? My father said they were axes. The Aborigines had carried them there... But he didn't seem very interested...

Now a stone axe would have been important to its owner. They didn't grow on trees. They took time to make. And yet they're lying all over the plains, as if they were just thrown away like Coke cans. Why do you think that is? (282)

It is a powerful question. Though William has been warned against her 'lies' (292), he cannot discount her words, which seem to be inextricably linked to the feverish throbbing in his ear: 'The doubts were embedded in his mind now. They were one and the same as his illness' (293). He begins to question his uncle's stories and believe that there is something 'warped' in John's assertion 'I claim Native Title...for both of us' (294).

The most powerful undermining of the first narrative comes through William's experience of the indigenous sacred. Gothic is, as noted, highly receptive to the fantastic and the magical, and in *The White Earth* this facilitates the text's representations of cultural-spiritual and supernatural dimensions of the Australian landscape. What William sees, hears and feels while out on the Station is not rational or empirically verifiable, yet it is the key to his realisation that John's story of the past and the land cannot be trusted. When his uncle sends him out on a trek across the station to the waterhole, telling him that the country will speak to him and reassure him of his rightful placement on it (295-96), quite the opposite occurs. William becomes lost and feverish, and experiences hallucinations. He is visited by the ghost of, among others, the lost explorer. Then, suddenly, he encounters the indigenous sacred:

It was a patch of scrub as unremarkable as any other...yet there was a weight upon him, a deep vibration in the air...William found it was hard to breathe. What was it? What was here?...He began backing away...Every pale tree trunk, every...clump of grass, even the chorus of the cicadas—they were nothing, and yet they were something unspeakable. He was trembling...He withdrew from [this place where]...he was not supposed to be. (315)
A Bunyip, which William senses has ‘guard[ed] [the site]...for thousands of years’, meets him at the periphery of the sacred area (316). The creature is hostile but guides William in the direction of the water hole. Thus the indigenous sacred points William to the place where the victims of a massacre have been interred in a direct revelation of past crimes: ‘The dead are ready for you now’, the Bunyip says (317, italics in original). But there is another way in which the encounter with the indigenous sacred operates. William’s experience of it is, in itself, an affront to the first narrative of Australian settler history and nationalist discourse, which discounts Aboriginal lives and ways of knowing. Having recognised the sacred space for what it is, William realises he cannot trust his uncle’s account:

[For if John] had passed it by...if his uncle did not know that such a place existed—if instead he had been fooled by an empty stone circle—then what did the old man really know about the property at all? (326-27)

This is what Ashcroft means when he says that the novel takes the indigenous sacred seriously: it has transformative power and ‘is seen to be real’ (‘Horizonal Sublime’ 150). More than Ruth’s account, it is the encounter with the ‘spirit of an Aboriginal sacred site’ that changes William’s thinking (Ashcroft ‘Horizonal Sublime’ 150).

The repressed of Kuran Station is finally unearthed—literally—once William realises what he has seen at the waterhole and he and his uncle go to excavate from its dry bed the bones of the Aborigines who were murdered there 75 years previously (359, 364). Here is evidence to support Ruth’s history of the station, and John McIvor’s narrative of the past is shattered. John’s response to being confronted with this ‘proof’ of the second narrative (364), which he sees as threatening his claim to the land, is to destroy the evidence with fire.
Gothic conflagrations

Fire appears recurrently throughout *The White Earth*, linking the novel to other Gothic texts and postcolonial novels, including those examined in this thesis. Most notable is the burning figure John and William see (variously in dreams or visions), and then at novel’s end, the fiery destruction of Kuran House. The efforts of John McIvor’s father to destroy the evidence of the massacre he led against a group of Aboriginal men by burning the bodies (not very successfully) is reminiscent of Krog’s recounting of the methods apartheid death squads used to get rid of the bodies of murdered black activists. The burning figure in *The White Earth* echoes both the burning woman who appears in the Malgas’s living room via their television screen, and, as we shall see, Lurie of *Disgrace*, who is set alight (albeit briefly, and not mortally) by the violent intruders to his daughter’s farm. Kuran House aflame also recalls both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the English manor house Thornfield Hall is reduced to blackened rubble. And fire has special significance in the Australian context; though destructive, fire is ultimately a force of life and renewal in the landscape that has been well-utilised by Aboriginal people. How do these various symbolic resonances of fire come together in *The White Earth*?

First, as noted, William and John are both haunted by an apparition of a burning figure. William witnesses this ‘unearthly’ (214) being moving in the hills at night:

> [T]he flame paused in its progress...It was aware of him...William [stared and...] [f]inally, irrevocably, he saw. It wasn’t a man carrying a fire, as he’d first thought—it was a man on fire...[i]t didn’t scream or struggle...William could discern...[l]imbs wrapped in flame, a torso that streamed silent fire. And a head, titled calmly to one side, as if to ask a question while it burned. (214-15)
The same image appears to John in recurrent dreams, the meaning of which he cannot grasp (217). For both characters, the vision of the burning man is disturbing; William thinks it a ‘warning’ (230). The burning man foreshadows John’s death and echoes the burning of the bodies of the Aborigines massacred at the waterhole. It might also be read as an intertextual reference to the dream of the burning child recounted by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (509-11) that is widely theorised within trauma studies and, in turn, taken up in work on ‘postcolonial mourning’ (see for example Durrant *Postcolonial Narrative*). Jacques Lacan has interpreted the dream as being about ‘listening to the address of another'; Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* highlights in the dream a ‘plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, [a] call by which the other commands us to awaken (to awaken, indeed, to a burning’) (9). For John, the burning figure is a portent of his death, but it is also a haunting apparition of a suffering other whose pain he has witnessed. Although he has suppressed it, John was present at the massacre led by his father. A passage early in the text relates an enigmatic fragment of this childhood memory:

Smoke... He was outside somewhere. A greasy cloud drifted against a blue sky. And he was crying...His mother’s arms were around him, tight and fearful. She was afraid, and so was he...but of what? The images were always elusive, at the very limit of consciousness, and beyond them there was nothing at all. (22)

Paradoxically, perhaps, it is in sleep that John approaches a ‘traumatic awakening’ to this suppressed memory. In life, he refuses to awaken, and it is his downfall.

The fire John has lit to destroy the Aboriginal bones engulfs not only him, but all of Kuran House in a ‘symbolic conflagration’ (Ashcroft ‘Horizonal Sublime’)

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32 The story of the dream of the burning child is as follows: a father loses his child to fever. After the death he sleeps in a room next to where his child’s body has been laid out, surrounded by candles and watched over by an old man. While sleeping, he dreams that his child is standing beside his bed, catching at his arm and whispering ‘reproachfully’, ‘“Father, don’t you see I’m burning?”’ (Freud 509). He awakens to realise that the old man has fallen asleep, and one of the candles has tipped over and ignited the wrappings on the child’s body.
His effort to erase the Station’s ‘malevolent history’ (361) once and for all is the very act that brings about the destruction of the House. The ‘destruction by fire of the...ancestral home’ is not an uncommon theme in the Gothic (Wheatley 134); as noted, this scene of fiery obliteration recalls both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In all three texts the burning house becomes emblematic of a violent return or revenge of history. In Bronte’s and Rhys’s novels, Thornfield Hall, an English manor, is set alight by the owner’s Creole wife, Antoinette/Bertha, who has been deemed a madwoman and locked in the attic for many years. Thornfield Hall is not the first great house to be destroyed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette is the descendant of a plantation owner, and when she is still a girl her childhood home on Coulibri Estate is set on fire by emancipated slaves. Victim agency is not featured in *The White Earth* in this way, but in all texts we see a revisiting of the crimes of the past on the abode of power that culminates in its demise. In Gothic, history returns to exact its necessary price (Punter ‘House’ 193); in postcolonial Gothic, that history is one of colonial violence.

It is only once Kuran House and all that it represents are burning that long-awaited, cleansing rains begin to fall (368). Fire, in some frameworks, is not only destructive: it also heralds rebirth. This is true with regard to the Australian environment, in which fire is essential to the continuation of many plant species and the animals that depend on them. Fire has also been instrumental in human (especially Aboriginal) survival, as the novel itself makes clear. The arrival of rain after the burning in *The White Earth* suggests the promise of a new beginning, and Gothic is inclined to offer ‘narrative closure’ once hidden crimes have been revealed (McGahan 399). But *The White Earth* rejects this particular convention of the genre:

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33 Here I borrow Ashcroft’s phrase out of context.
just as the past cannot be erased or entirely contained in this novel, nor can it be transcended. No more than a qualified rebirth is signalled here, for even after the violent past has been unearthed there is no resolution in sight for Kuran Station or the people connected to it. ‘[T]he property [now] lay open to any number of claims’ (374) Ruth realises, and ‘[i]n this world…fifteen thousand acres of prime grazing country…wasn’t just given back’ (375). The novel resists a celebratory ending, refusing (in Sam Durrant’s words) ‘easy notions of catharsis and reconciliation’ (‘Invention’ 448) such as we will see in The Custodians. In this way, The White Earth acknowledges ongoing legacies of colonial oppression and injustice in Australia and gestures at the impossibility of putting that trauma to rest.

Gothic ambivalence

I have been arguing that The White Earth is an example of postcolonial Gothic, one that excavates Australia’s violent white settlement and examines modern-day anxieties about, and refusals to engage with, this past. Yet the novel sometimes falls short in its interrogations of colonial tropes and representations of the settler nation and its past. These shortcomings derive in part from the text’s adherence to genre and related simplifications that provide dramatic effect at the expense of specificity and nuance. It does not, for example—and as I have noted—explore the moral ambiguity of the Queensland Native Police, instead focusing on a simpler narrative of white violence against blacks. Its romantic and overdetermined representations of a ‘dark past’ might also be seen to commodify colonial history and even, perhaps, accounts of colonial massacre. The driving force of the Gothic may be to reveal the repressed and expiate disavowed crimes (McCann 399), but this does not preclude it from concealments or obfuscations of its own, even in—or perhaps
as part of—its orientation to popular entertainment. The ambivalence of Gothic is on display in *The White Earth*, a text that conforms closely to the classic formulas of the genre. In this particular case, the text’s ambivalence diminishes its postcolonial impact.

The first problem is that *The White Earth*’s Gothicising of the nation’s colonial past and postcolonial present results in simplified representations of the settler site and its history. For example, the Gothic must have its ‘dark secret’, and in *The White Earth* the extent to which the violent past is a secret is over-determined. Certainly settler violence was suppressed in popular historical settler discourse, but even before Native Title it was hardly unknown. The novel’s representation of it as a ‘secret’, though dramatically compelling, elides the extent to which settler Australians may recognise the ‘badness’ of the colonial past but consider it justified and/or refuse responsibility for it. The depiction of John as desiring to lock away a bad past suggests an uneasy postcolonial awareness on his part that is not characteristic of all subscribers to conservative settler nationalism. As I have begun to suggest, the simplifications inherent in these representations are tied up with dramatic effect: that is, they make the (hi)story more exciting and entertaining. McCann underlines the link between simplification and/or exaggeration and entertainment in the Gothic:

> The genre is...fundamentally overdetermined: its orientation to consumerist pleasure brings it into proximity to the repressed, the other, the abject...but the repressed is itself prone to the logic of commodity, through which it is reified, reproduced, circulated and consumed. (411)

McCann’s remarks, which are supported by Botting (see 9), raise the troubling question of whether the postcolonial Gothic might risk commodifying repressed histories of violence, as *The White Earth* may do in its construction of a ‘second narrative’ of Australia’s past. In addition, the revised narrative of the past that *The
White Earth advances does not necessarily promote a radical new perspective of the settler site. The risk is that simply replacing the ‘positive’ view of the nation’s past with a ‘bad’ settlement story may still leave room for a re-mythologising of the national history in which the violence of the past is acknowledged, but then reconciled through reference to Native Title and non-indigenous apology (see Hage). Within such a framework, suitably sympathetic and apologetic whites (or non-indigenes more broadly) are essentially let off the hook. This is not to say that The White Earth actually promotes such a ‘re-mythologising’—which may, however, be detected in The Custodians and possibly even Country of My Skull. Rather, I suggest that this text’s ‘second narrative’ may not go far enough to deny it, in contrast to Disgrace, for example, which overtly emphasises the inadequacy of ‘saying sorry’ without paying a further price.

Demonstrating another risk inherent in Gothic dramatization, that of undercutting the form’s own potential for a critique of colonialism and colonial discourse, is the novel’s treatment of the explorer figure. In The White Earth the doomed explorer is represented in the immensely marketable convention of romantic tragedy. Although the text has early on suggested a link between the explorer and violent white settlement, a critical treatment of the colonial explorer is not extended when an apparition of Kirchmeyer appears to William while the boy is on his journey across the property. The novel’s portrayal of the explorer as a tragic, bedraggled figure of ‘bones and rags’ leading an emaciated, heavily burdened ghost-horse and eventually heading into a blaze of fire on the horizon does little to diminish the romance of the trope (309, 312). (Vladislavic’s outright ridicule of the heroic explorer in The Folly is more potent, as is J.M. Coetzee’s demonizing of the explorer-mentality in Dusklands.) Thus, those same elements that make The White Earth an enjoyable
read and popularly appealing—and which in turn, facilitate the dissemination of its overtly political postcolonial message to a wide audience—may undermine its critical engagements with colonial tropes or mythologies.

Conclusion

I have been discussing the ambivalence of *The White Earth* in terms of its use of genre, but the novel also reflects the ambivalence of postcolonial white writing at large. On the one hand the novel seeks to excavate, to bring to light, the violence of Queensland’s (and the nation’s) colonial history and reveal its indigenous victims. In placing these within the framework of a suspenseful, plot-driven narrative it represents them in such a way as to potentially attract a wider readership, and indisputably, the novel subjects historical mythologies to a critical postcolonial treatment. On the other hand, *The White Earth* arguably obscures as much as it reveals, and ‘packages’ this terrible history and pain in a romantic, entertaining, even ‘palatable’ (if still unsettling) form. Postcolonial white writing wrestles with how to ‘properly’ represent the other and histories of trauma, and always runs the risk of trivialising or commodifying the other’s suffering and violent colonial pasts. These challenges can be better illuminated with reference to *The Custodians* and *Country of My Skull*, two texts which re-assess settler nationalism, engage with the story of its victims (suffering indigenous/black others), and attempt to negotiate new models of settler identity and belonging. In reading these texts we see more clearly again the complex effects of ambivalence within the postcolonial settler text.
Chapter Three

Taking Custody: Troubling Postcolonial Pastoral in *The Custodians* by Nicholas Jose

My readings of *The Folly* and *The White Earth* suggest that contemporary white writing can participate in a postcolonial project within the ‘settler site’. However, as my analysis of *The White Earth* began to show, the ambivalence of white writing may undercut its postcolonial impact. This chapter expands and complicates the argument with reference to another Australian work, *The Custodians* by Nicholas Jose (1997). A sprawling novel that spans forty years, settings around and beyond Australia, and more than half a dozen significant characters, *The Custodians* displays little of *The Folly*’s allusiveness and post-modernist style. In this it more closely resembles *The White Earth*, but it is far less concerned than either of these novels with representations, mythologies and discourse. This is a realist novel, a ‘social history’, but it shares with *The Folly* and *The White Earth* a preoccupation with the epistemological and physical violence of settler colonialism and its legacies. Similarly to Vladislavic and McGahan, Jose draws on an established literary mode, the pastoral, which becomes a frame for the text’s meditations on settler nationalism, colonial crimes, indigenous land rights and reconciliation. The mode or genre of pastoral is historically deeply implicated in settler colonialism in a way that satire is not, but as a number of critics have argued, and as this reading of *The Custodians* verifies, pastoral can also be marshalled in counter-colonial, counter-hegemonic
ways. The oppositionality of Jose’s text goes beyond its treatment of pastoral, as I will show, but *The Custodians* also raises questions about postcolonial white writing. These include what I call a postcolonial dilemma of representation—that is, how can a white writer ethically represent a less privileged other?—as well as the problem of white appropriations of the indigenous and the posing of resolutions that serve the settler subject. Although these are less prominent issues in relation to *The Folly*, or even the flawed *The White Earth*, there are striking links here with the South African text *Country of My Skull*, examined in chapter four. *The Custodians*, like Krog’s book, is empathetic to and hosts the unsettling testimony of the suffering and disenfranchised other, but falls prey to problematic appropriations and offers a prematurely celebratory conclusion.

*The Custodians* follows a group of Australian childhood acquaintances as their lives diverge and reconnect throughout early and middle adulthood, finally converging again at the pastoral property of Whitepeeper. The characters are diverse: variously of settler, European refugee and Aboriginal stock; Catholic, Protestant, Jewish; their socio-economic status ranges from working class to wealthy pastoral landowners. The most important in this reading are Alex, Cleve, Danny and Elspeth. As in *The Folly*, each character opens issues related to the contemporary and historical nation. Alex, intelligent and ambitious but haunted by his mother’s suicide, pursues a successful political career and prioritises the ‘national interest’. It is a job which places him in opposition to Cleve, an Aboriginal activist removed from his family during early childhood. Following a different trajectory and separate narrative thread is the life of Cleve’s twin brother Danny, who is profoundly damaged by experiences 36 Gothic’s status in relation to colonialism is more ambiguous than that of satire, as noted in chapter two.
of racism and incarceration. Elspeth, meanwhile, wrestles with her heritage as a great-granddaughter of a ruthless pastoralist, an ‘Emperor of the Bush’ (53). Drawing Alex, Cleve and Elspeth together again is an ancient burial site of great historical, cultural and archaeological significance. Located in the dry bed of Lake Moorna at Whitepeeper, its discovery brings the land’s contested status to the fore as government, Aboriginal and pastoral interests vie over what should become of the site and to whom it belongs.

Reviewers of *The Custodians* have commented on the text’s overt engagement with Australian socio-political and historical contexts, and Jose has said that he intended to write a novel that combined fiction and history to open another side to the nation’s past: the Aboriginal side (Jose ‘Any Resemblance is Unintended’).

Having visited, in 1991, the historical and archaeological site of Lake Mungo in New South Wales’ Willandra Lakes Region, which inspired the fictional Lake Moorna of the text, Jose remarked on how having passed it by on earlier drives through the area made him consider a broader oversight: ‘the way white Australia in recent decades has turned its back on the Aboriginal presence so completely’ (Jose quoted in Barrowclough n.p.). This image of ‘driving past’ without stopping is replicated in the novel as the university-age white characters pass by both Lake Moorna and a hitchhiking Danny en route to Canberra (127, 128). Elsewhere the text goes further to show the ways in which Aboriginal people and culture have been overlooked or denigrated by white society. The novel casts question on conservative and white nationalist accounts of the nation’s history, and its reflection on the past is staged from a location in the present—an unusual approach in Australia, where novelists
have tended to gravitate to the historical novel. For Jose, writing about contemporary Australia necessitates an attention to the ‘facts’ of the nation including its past:

[Y]ou need a strong realistic dimension, almost a social history, that looks at the facts of this country. But you also need a powerful poetic or symbolic dimension to encompass all these things there really haven’t been words for, to somehow embrace all the different kinds of experiences the place offers. (Jose quoted in Barrowclough n.p.)

Jose advocates bringing together the social-historical and political with the aesthetic, an approach that is evident in *The Custodians* and which literary critic Robert Beardwood praises: “[T]he success of [the novel] lies in its foregrounding of the ways in which ethics and politics are utterly inseparable from questions of “literary” or aesthetic quality” (16, emphasis in original).

Not everyone agrees. *The Custodians’* reception was mixed. Reviewers commented on its complexity and ambition, but—in something of an echo of criticisms of *The White Earth*—some complained that the novel’s politics damaged its aesthetics (see Wolfe, Steinberg and Reimer). Andrew Reimer of the *Australian Book Review* wrote that ‘*The Custodians* marks... a welcome return of significant preoccupations to mainstream fiction’ but concluded, ‘Jose’s ethical and even perhaps political commitments... prevent this fine and important work from being exceptional’ (33). He noted particular ‘misgivings’ over the book’s focus on ‘the burning issues of the day’:

*[T]he question of land rights and of the ownership of what is buried beneath it; the rights of pastoral lease-holders and of the traditional occupants of a so-called wilderness; the fate of Aboriginal children removed by force from their families; the death in prison of so many young Aboriginal men; as well as the personal, social and political conflicts such conundrums inevitably generate.* (Reimer 33)

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37 Drusilla Modjeska has remarked that recent Australian fiction seems to have ‘retreat[ed] into history’ (*Timepieces* 208).
Reimer criticises the book for being overly concerned with transitory issues. Yet a
decade after the publication of *The Custodians*, those ‘of the moment’ matters that
Reimer mentions remain unresolved and continue to circulate in Australia.

Very little literary criticism has appeared on *The Custodians*. The most
significant pieces are Cathy Greenfield and Peter Williams’s ‘What’s Policy Got To
Both applaud the novel’s consideration of issues not often taken up by Australian
fiction. Greenfield and Williams remark on the text’s deployment of a ‘socially
inclusive rhetoric’ that is both nationalist and welcoming of multiculturalism and
diversity (37). The novel’s participation in the debate over ‘what counts as Australian
history’, they suggest, ‘challenge[s] the reactionary emphasis of the debate’ and
acknowledges the importance of the past to the present and future (Greenfield and
Williams 39). Robert Beardwood writes that Jose ‘entangles and enfolds’ the pastoral
property, its ‘inhabitants’ desires to belong…and anxieties about the national as well
as private identities’ in ways which raise questions of ethics and politics in
contemporary Australia (16). The pastoral is presented as holding the potential to be
opened out from the privileged, exclusive space it has been. When figured and
approached differently, *The Custodians* suggests, it becomes a site over which
Australians can bond in ‘shared possession and habitation’ (Beardwood 18). This
chapter builds on Beardwood’s argument, exploring the ambivalence of the pastoral
and the ways in which Jose engages it to re-conceive the contested spaces of the
outback and farm. *The Custodians*’ preoccupation with pastoral is shared by *Disgrace*,

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38 Both papers appeared as chapters in published proceedings from Association for the Study of
Australian Literature (ASAL) annual conferences.
Country of My Skull and The White Earth, and as we shall see in chapter six, Jose is far more optimistic about pastoral than Coetzee.

Though useful, the literary reviews of The Custodians are brief and look at it with other Australian texts; neither undertakes an in-depth reading. Moreover, absent from previous criticism is any scrutiny of Jose’s treatment of Aboriginal voices and suffering—a surprising omission, given the prominence of indigenous characters in the text and Jose’s use of the official report on Malcolm Smith, an Aboriginal man who died in custody, to create the character Danny. Addressing this gap, the analysis offered here includes a sustained examination of the novel’s representations of indigenous characters and its use of Malcolm Smith’s life story. The text’s sympathetic foregrounding of Aboriginal experience and its dramatisation of Malcolm Smith’s suffering and tragic death are correctives to conservative white accounts of the nation, but raise questions about the ethics of representing an/other’s story and pain. I also read The Custodians as a postcolonial Australian pastoral, highlighting Jose’s concern with emplacement and his valorisation of the rural as a regenerative site—albeit one haunted by settler violence. Reconciliation is only possible, the text suggests, if non-indigenous Australians recognise Aboriginal history and make material reparations for past crimes. Ultimately, the novel makes a case for the interconnectedness of all Australians and envisions a shared, reconciled future. Its resolution is smooth, and Jose’s model for postcolonial belonging resecures the settler and involves appropriation of the indigenous. Yet the novel invites readers to engage in a series of deeply unsettling ‘imaginative acts’ that involve inhabiting “other” subjectivities and experiences (Beardwood 18), encountering difference and empathising with those who suffer. The Custodians thus exemplifies the ambivalence of postcolonial white writing.
Unsettling pastoral

*The Custodians* begins in the Adelaide suburbs, and over the course of the narrative it shifts between Canberra, northern Queensland, coastal New South Wales, and other places. The most significant setting is Whitepeeper, where the lives of various characters reconnect. It is also the site over which debates about history, nation, reparation and belonging play out. Whitepeeper’s importance (and that of Lake Moorna within it) signals *The Custodians*’ occupation with pastoral concerns of ‘emplacement and settlement’; in Beardwood’s words, the novel exhibits a ‘metropolitan expression of desire for the rural as a space in which relationships between people and place might be, or once have been, authentic and legitimate’ (Beardwood 11). The text’s engagement with a pastoral mode is notable because for many postcolonial critics, the pastoral is seen as ‘bedeviled by difficulties’ (Kane 269). Its legacy is conservative and, in settler societies, it is implicated in settler nationalism and white appropriations of indigenous land. However, as Sarah Casteel argues in her thesis on ‘New World pastoral’, pastoral may be a ‘double-edged and potentially innovative mode’ (iv). She shows that for many contemporary writers, working within a pastoral framework ‘potentially enables [the] development of an alternative spatial imaginary that retains place as a meaningful category without at the same time reinscribing mystifying and exclusionary myths of place’ (Casteel 15). This is true of *The Custodians*, which offers a ‘socially inclusive…cultural ecology’ (Greenfield and Williams 37). *The Custodians* deploys pastoral but departs from its conservative and colonial legacy in postcolonial ways.

Pastoral’s roots are in Classical and European literary traditions, but it has expanded and diversified over time and in the many places where it has been taken
up. This is so much the case that one major critic in the area uses ‘Pastoral’ to refer to all literature that celebrates an ethos of rurality or nature or wilderness over against an ethos of metropolitanism’ (Buell 439). Despite pastoral’s origins in the ‘Old World’, it appears recurrently in writing about and from the ‘new worlds’ of the settler colonies. As Casteel observes, ‘[b]ecause of its desire to domesticate the colonial landscape as well as to naturalize the European presence on it, nineteenth-century settler colonial writing proves particularly welcoming to the pastoral’ (20).

South African and Australian literature is no exception. In South Africa, the ‘farm novel’ is a major literary tradition and pastoral themes are evident in much of the nation’s settler poetry (Coetzee White Writing 63, 166). In Australia, pastoral is also prevalent in poetry—from the colonial period poems of Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall, to Judith Wright’s twentieth century writing and, more currently, in the work of Les Murray and John Kinsella. It is visible in many classic Australian novels, such as Coonardoo, The Timeless Land and Capricornia (Indyk ‘Pastoral and Priority’ 845).

In both South Africa and Australia, pastoral is linked to nationalist discourse. It is reflected in archetypal settler figures such as the pioneer and the bushman and informs settler mythologies about land. Rural spaces and/or wilderness—the ‘bushveld’, the outback—are vitally important to settler nationalism and identity, and as Beardwood writes, ‘[t]he literary mode which, more than any other, looks to non-metropolitan spaces for positive signs of the nation’s past, is the pastoral’ (12).

Pastoral is not an innocent genre. Critics have been vocal about its troubling inheritance—troubling, that is, from both class-based and postcolonial perspectives. Pastoral literature has tended to ‘[mystify] class relations and [mask] the exploitation of rural people’, as in the poetry of Ben Jonson and Thomas Carew.

See for example Williams; Barrell and Bull; Coetzee White Writing; and Glissant.
The ‘extraction of the existence of labourers’ in these poets’ work is replicated in the colonial pastoral (Williams 32); as we have noted, J.M. Coetzee has argued that the Afrikaner farm novel has concealed black presence and labour on the land (White Writing 5). In a comment about the Americas, but equally applicable to South Africa and Australia, Casteel argues that the ‘ideologically conservative’ legacy of pastoral includes

the negation of Indigenous claims to the land and the substitution of settler claims, the location of Indigenous peoples outside of history, the dehistoricization of nature, and the excision of labour from the... landscape. (32)

It is not surprising, then, that pastoral is widely rejected within postcolonial criticism (Casteel 8). Yet pastoral need not be conservative. It is a complex and multivalent form which can also be used in critical, reflective and disruptive ways. Raymond Williams observes of classical pastorals that even in those that ‘inaugurate tones and images of an ideal kind, there is almost invariably a tension with other kinds of experience’ (18). Although further developments on the form virtually ‘excised’ these ‘living tensions’ (Williams 18), pastoral can potentially bring them to the fore. Even postcolonial artists who may on the face of it repudiate pastoral can be seen to employ it subversively in their fiction; the work of the West Indian writer Derek Wolcott is an example (Handley 1). That pastoral as a genre or mode can host and represent postcolonial tensions is supported by Australian pastoral, in which it is often possible to see, even in the colonial works, a profound unease about the position of the settler and the Aborigine in relation to each other and to the land.

Australian pastoral is ambivalent. Despite its complicity with white nationalism, as a larger body of work it has not tended to occlude the tensions...
around land possession to the extent of some other forms of settler pastoral.

According to Ivor Indyk, Australian pastoral is

haunted by a...sense of violation, caused by an upheaval...of [great] magnitude—that of the displacement of an Indigenous population by the settlers of a colonizing power. Here...it is the figure of the dispossessed whose presence unsettles the affirmations of the pastoral song. ('Pastoral and Priority' 838)

Somewhat differently from the pastoral in South Africa, then, Australian pastoral has never completely effaced the Aboriginal. Indyk writes that it is the 'persistence of the Aboriginal figure which is remarkable'—whether s/he features as a 'shadowy, spectral presence' or 'as a figure arguing on its own behalf for a revision of the pastoral order' ('Pastoral and Priority' 838). Pastoral's capacity to be employed in a critique of settler colonialism becomes most apparent in white writing published from the late 1920s, when novelists such as Eleanor Dark, Katherine Susannah Prichard and Xavier Herbert used pastoral to '[develop] their critiques of the exploitative, dominating, and repressive tendencies inherent in the white settlement of Australia' (Indyk 'Pastoral and Priority' 845). This work is generally sympathetic to Aboriginal people, though it often depicts them as passive and/or childlike, and 'postcolonial or nationalist versions' regularly have 'the land facilitating a romance between [Aboriginal and white]' in which a sexual union produces an ideal hybrid race that is uniquely equipped to successfully and legitimately claim the country (Indyk 'Pastoral and Priority' 846). The seeming progressiveness of this promotion of interracial partnership is undercut by the way in which it functions to indigenise the settler, as 'Aboriginal resources' are claimed 'for white Australian pastoral' (Indyk

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40 This is not to say that Australian pastoral has never effaced the Aboriginal. Rather, as a larger body of work it is not characterised by a successful effacement of the indigenous. The differences between Australian and South African pastoral may go some way toward explaining why Jose can be optimistic about it while Coetzee is not. I expand on this point in the chapter on *Disgrace*.

41 In support of this conclusion Indyk offers a brief overview of the history of pastoral in Australia. See Indyk 'Pastoral and Priority' 838-842.
‘Pastoral and Priority’ 854). Pastoral is not limited to white use, however, and in its indigenous manifestations becomes more radical. It may even exhibit a claiming of white resources for Aboriginal pastoral.42

The Custodians is a contemporary white Australian pastoral.43 Emerging ‘after Mabo’ and many years after what we might call the ‘golden age’ of Australian pastoral, it can and does reflect changes in national awareness of indigenous history and rights. The novel both follows and departs from earlier instances of Australian pastoral. Like the works written since the 1920s, it critiques settler society and examines the underside of white settlement and dominance. The Custodians also employs some recurrent tropes of the form: the eventual romance between Cleve and Elspeth echoes the black-white unions in earlier Australian pastoral texts. I will have more to say about this later. But the text’s portrayal of Aboriginal people is generally less patronising and is shaped by a postcolonial consciousness not available to writers working in an earlier time. It breaks with settler pastoral (as opposed to a specifically Australian pastoral) in seeking to affirm rather than negate pre-settler human histories, reveal rather than occlude colonial violence, and contest rather than naturalise exclusive white possession of the land. Then it proposes new ways that black and white Australians can belong together and on the land.

‘Many countries, many stories, many lies’

Beardwood writes that the pastoral may not ‘only provide reassurance or conciliation in order to cover over the “truth” of history, but also provokes an unsettled attitude’ (13). The Custodians’ commitment to ‘unsettling’ dominant

42 See Indyk ‘Pastoral and Priority’ 851 for a discussion of Aboriginal uses of pastoral.
43 Other contemporary Australian writers engaging with pastoral in their work include Les Murray and John Kinsella. Kinsella terms his practice ‘counter-pastoral’ (348).
Australian historical narratives is first signalled by its epigraph, a quotation of a statement made by the Aboriginal cameleer Tom Ljonga to anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow in 1932: ‘Many countries, many stories, many lies.’ The novel goes on to examine aspects of Australian history that have been overlooked or heavily mythologised. It is critical of European colonialist approaches to land and indigenous people, which, it suggests, have continued in various forms long after Australian independence. The most explicit undercutting of Australian historical mythologies that privilege whiteness and elide settler violence comes through the novel’s attention to Aboriginal experience and subjectivity, and the ways in which these have been disregarded and damaged by government policy and white society. In giving these issues prominent place, the text attempts to weave indigenous history back into the national narrative.

The Australia into which the novel opens is an apparently sunny, unshadowed place: the Adelaide suburbs of the 1960s. The main characters are introduced as children, and possess all the innocence and gloss of youth; most are from white, middle-class and traditional nuclear families. Undercutting this idyllic picture is the appearance of an eclipse in the first scene: the sun goes ‘dark’, the ‘schoolyard…[descends] into gloom’ (3).\footnote{According to Jose, the ‘image of the eclipse’ was one of the ‘seeds’ of the novel, and ‘seemed to do with dimensions of death and darkness that had been excluded from the bright surfaces of life in Australia’ (quoted in Barrowclough n.p.).} The eclipse is an early suggestion that there is another, darker side to Australian life, and it soon becomes apparent that this group of suburban families is not as homogenous or ‘respectable’ as it first appears. Alex’s mother eventually succumbs to her mental demons, walking into the ocean one day, never to emerge again. Jane’s father Dr Woodruff is a weapons researcher with an inappropriate interest in his daughter’s girlfriends. Elspeth’s father reveals his
prejudice (and that of the time) when he complains to his wife about his daughter playing with ‘Micks and Abos’ (37). Ziggy’s family are war refugees from Eastern Europe and hold themselves apart from Australian society, believing it to be uncivilised. Cleve, an Aboriginal ‘scholarship kid’ (37), is not entirely accepted by the community (35). He is a reminder to them of an indigenous presence in Australia, and the scars on his arms, sustained as a result of vaccines being trialled on him in early childhood, suggest both the violence committed against him by white society and the historical suffering and subjugation of Aboriginal people.

Cleve disrupts the community’s complacency with his body and words, but it is at Whitepeeper, a pastoral property held by Elspeth Masterman’s family, that the nation’s violent past becomes most visible. Although in conservative pastoral the rural is a site of escape from history, here we see a radical inversion so that the rural becomes the site at which history comes to the fore. The central characters will come together here twice over the course of the novel: at its beginning as children and at its end in middle age. In their first visit, The Custodians considers the two histories that are evident at this site: Aboriginal and settler. The novel is critical of the way that Europeans have approached, seen and taken command of land in the colonies, and draws attention to the ways in which Aboriginal history and presence have been ignored or disrespected in these processes. It suggests that historical settler and colonist methods (and the mythologies that accompany them) continue to circulate in an apparently ‘postcolonial’ Australia. These early Whitepeeper scenes also reference the overt physical violence of white settlement and the subsequent exploitation of indigenous people for labour and sex.
When the boys and masters of Alex’s school visit Whitepeeper on a school excursion, they are shown an old burial ground that likely predates the arrival of missionaries in the area (52). Encountering it, they come into contact with an old Aboriginal presence on the land, and their response to it implicates them in a long history of European imperialist approaches to indigenous peoples and colonial territory. The school headmaster Corin Pearson is caught up in an intrepid explorer-archaeologist fantasy and insists on ‘excavat[ing]’ the burial ground (45). His bluster and arrogance are similar to that of Nieuwenhuizen, and like Nieuwenhuizen, Pearson relies on a Western framework of mapping and categorizing in his effort to command the land. At one point he ‘brandishe[s] his maps and diagrams in an attempt to recover a triumphal mode’ (55); elsewhere he insists on the importance of having a ‘plan’ (45). He has no regard for the burial site’s meaning or the bodies interred there. When Alex asks ‘[D]oesn’t [it] matter if we dig them up?’, Pearson ‘proclaim[s]...‘It is our duty and privilege to do so’” (52). The Latin master, reflecting imperialist Europeans’ dehumanising views of indigenous peoples, wonders aloud whether the remains are ‘human at all’ (50), despite obvious markers of ceremonial funereal practice. The episode concludes ignobly. Despite their early enthusiasm, by the end of the day the group has lost interest and the site is abandoned, even discarded:

The bones lay labelled in pools of sand in the fruit crates. There was the problem of whether to fill in the half-dug holes or leave them. A good bushman covered his tracks, but to refill the holes seemed only to confirm the furtiveness of the exercise. The headmaster...made a last minute cheek to see that nothing was left behind but the disturbed ground. (55)

The boys wash away the dust in the shower—‘their way of washing the day off’ (56)—its red colour evoking blood. As can be seen in the responses of the few indigenous witnesses, their act has been one of violence. It is distressing to the
Aboriginal people who work at Whitepeeper. A young man named Kevin, for example, feels uneasy, and when they asked him questions, he would not answer. When they asked if the dead might belong to his people, he shook his head. What they didn't understand was that all these people were his people. (51, emphasis in original)

When Alex searches Kevin’s eyes for ‘clues’ he finds them ‘blank’, ‘as if a shadow of fear had passed over him’ (51). Cleve is sickened when he hears about the excavation—though he ‘hold[s] his face steady’, Elspeth sees ‘behind his eyes, as blood drained a little from his face, a judgment was being made: of contempt, terror and shame’ (65). Notably, Elspeth and her girlfriends are troubled by the men’s actions too (54). But there is no remorse or awareness of the crime on the part of the school excursion group, and to quote (somewhat out of context) the Latin master’s citation of Virgil, ‘Crimine ab uno, Disce omnes’ (45, italics in original). His translation is ‘From one crime you know them all’ (45, italics in original), but an alternative is ‘from one crime know the nation’ (see Morse 79)—which holds significance both for the excavation and for the way in which it resonates with the larger and more various ‘crimes’ of the settler nation. The site exists for these white men to uncover, command and exploit, like the larger continent. When the Latin master remarks of it and its contents, ‘Finders keepers’ (52), he repeats European attitudes toward the ‘new’ worlds their explorers encountered: once ‘found’, they were ripe for the taking, regardless of prior indigenous occupation. 45

The more overt, physical violence of settler history that is encountered at Whitepeeper is only recognised by Aboriginal characters and the girls in the group. The boys’ school visit and the male characters’ activities there, from late-night

45 A manifestation of this attitude in colonial approaches to Australia is referenced in a separate passage, as Danny contemplates Australia Day: ‘the anniversary of the first governor’s arrival with the English ships to occupy the land of smoke and no people...No people were his people’ (116).
hunting parties to the excavation, prompt some of them to consider the physical violence involved in white claiming of the land. Kevin ponders that

Alf [another Aboriginal man] said that there could have been a big fight out there once. Their people were the Rufus River mob in the old days, the tributary not far away where the overlanders, massacring the blacks, made the water run red with blood. (50-1)

The girls are especially alert to the ways in which the male characters’ behaviour reflects and recalls that of the colonial period. Gunshots in the night lead Wendy to declare, ‘It’s a massacre’ (51). Their chaperone refers lightly to a risk of ‘rape and pillage’ when telling the girls not to turn on the lights (51), but in this environment, and given this scene’s positioning alongside the excavation passages, the phrase seems to reference the processes of colonial conquest, including the sexual exploitation of indigenous women on the frontier. Later the girls discuss pastoral violence more explicitly: Elspeth’s friend Jane asks if it is ‘true’ that a Masterman ancestor ‘rounded up a truckload of Aborigines from his land and dumped them over a cliff’, and Elspeth, who does not reply, wonders ‘how the sins of her great-grandfather [will] be visited on her’ (53).

The importance of Aboriginal voices is addressed in the next section; for now, what is the significance of the text’s depiction of female characters as removed from, and disturbed by, the actions of the men and boys on Whitepeeper? This representation of women has parallels in almost all of the works examined in this thesis, particularly Disgrace, Country of My Skull and The White Earth. In chapter one, I discussed the ‘colonized and colonizing’ status of women in South Africa (and chapter two further underlined the gendered nature of both colonial and settler-nationalist discourse). This ambiguous, complicit position of women in relation to imperialism and colonialism is replicated in many other colonial settings including
Australia. Here, as elsewhere, white women were above indigenous people in the social order but remained subject to white patriarchal authority. Their attitudes and responses to masculine colonial projects were varied. A number of white women were drawn to the plight of Aboriginal women and children in particular, and were sometimes vocal in their condemnation of settler violence (see Sheridan Along the Faultlines, Nettelbeck ‘Christina Smith’). Yet they also contributed to the destruction of Aboriginal culture and society, often in a spirit of paternalism, whether as missionaries working to instil Christianity in indigenous populations (Nettelbeck ‘Christina Smith’ 7-8; Haggis ‘The Social Memory’) or by participating in the removal of Aboriginal children from their families under government policy (Curthoys ‘Entangled Histories’ 115; see also Huggins; Goodall). Additionally, though they were generally marginalised in nationalist discourses, constructed as an ‘other’ or even an ‘enemy’ (see Schaeffer; Lake), white women have been implicated in settler nationalism and ‘the politics of nationhood’(Sheridan Along the Faultlines 71; Curthoys ‘Identity Crisis’ 173). Elspeth and her friends do not exhibit the full complexity of the roles of white women in Australian colonial or postcolonial histories, but their discomfort with settler pasts and masculine violence aligns them with many historical ‘sympathetic white women’. As adults, they show more willingness to change their relations to land and Aboriginal people than the white male characters, such as Alex. Elspeth is the prime example: she comes to reflect upon her privilege and complicity and attempts to make redress.

The group’s first visit to the property reveals the white violence that has occurred there and the continuation of that violence after settlement, including the systematic disregard and effacement of Aboriginal people, history and culture. Their second visit occurs decades later. The narrative comes full circle, but in returning to
the beginning, everything has changed. It is a different time and the nation has advanced with regard to Aboriginal rights and postcolonial awareness. The novel suggests that the characters have only been able to approach reconciliation and a changed relation to the land and to Aboriginal people because they have first reached certain recognitions about the past, and of the other.

Out of the shadows

*The Custodians* is even more concerned with the nation’s recent history than it is with the settlement period, especially regarding white-indigenous relations and government policy toward Aborigines. These issues are examined through a lens of Aboriginal experience and subjectivity, representing Aboriginal people prominently and directly rather than as peripheral, mostly silent characters—in contrast to texts such as *The Folly* and *The White Earth.*[^46] The life-stories of Cleve and Danny, twins who were taken (at separate times) from their family during childhood, dramatise the traumatic removal experiences of many Aboriginal people living in Australia today. Danny’s life, which is spent mostly in juvenile institutions or prisons, reflects the continuing problem of disproportionate Aboriginal incarceration rates and deaths in custody.[^47] Both characters confront conservative views about the historical and current situation of Aboriginal people in Australia. Educated, articulate Cleve is able to speak his opposition at high levels of government and have an impact on national policy. In the case of the more deeply traumatised Danny, his private suffering testifies to the damage wrought on Aboriginal lives by their effacement within the

[^46]: In the case of *The Folly*, it is black rather than Aboriginal characters who are not represented directly. Even when they are peripheral and/or mostly silent, black or indigenous characters in these novels are not necessarily insignificant. Vladislavic’s woman aflame powerfully disturbs the peace of the Malgas’s living room, while the words of the Aboriginal elders in *The White Earth*, though not related directly, undermine John McIvor’s account of Kuran Station’s past.

[^47]: These are documented in the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991).
Australian social order. *The Custodians* thus illuminates the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism for Aboriginal people and challenges colonialist and/or white nationalist perspectives. Jose is deeply sympathetic in his portrayals of Cleve and Danny. However, the text’s direct and unselfconscious representations of these characters and use of a ‘true-life’ Aboriginal man’s story for its own literary purposes raise tricky ethical questions.

Almost all the characters’ narrative threads regularly cross and connect, but Danny’s is largely apart: an allusion to his exclusion from Australian society. Taken from his family as a teenager to be placed in a tightly regulated boys’ home (see 383), Danny feels the disconnection from his community keenly. As a youth he encounters racism in his daily life (119). He comes to feel that he is set up to fail, believing that ‘[e]very move he made was a wrong move….He only wanted to find out what he was supposed to do, and all they ever told him was that he done wrong’ (119). After stealing $12 to buy boots, Danny is sent to court and then to Tamworth Boys’ Home. This institution is now documented as a place of abuse and draconian punishment that left permanent psychological scars on many of its inmates (*Forgotten Australians* 54-55, 97, 106, 179, 247). Danny’s time at the Home has a profound negative impact on him, causing a ‘painful, growing inward when [he] should be growing outward’ (121). He is told that he has ‘no family’ though eventually evidence filters through that this is not true (120, 121). Like many actual Tamworth inmates, Danny goes on to spend his adult life in and out of jail. Often, it is not clear why he is there. His last internment is on a manslaughter charge for accidentally killing his sister’s (white) husband in a fight. The resultant ostracism from family and his sister’s

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48 The *Forgotten Australians* report suggests that authorities often told inmates (falsely) that their family members were dead or injured (106).
refusal of forgiveness are more traumatic to Danny than his jailing. He becomes increasingly despondent and mentally disturbed, self-mutilating and then suffering the effects of medications administered by the prison (see 439). Finally he injures himself fatally.

The character of Danny is based on Malcolm Smith, an Aboriginal man who died in Metropolitan Reception Prison (Long Bay, Sydney) after stabbing himself in the eye with a paintbrush. Smith’s case is documented in the Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Malcolm Charles Smith and the documentary film Who Killed Malcolm Smith, both of which are cited in The Custodians’ acknowledgements. Even minor details of Malcolm Smith’s life are replicated in Danny’s story: for example he, like Smith, has a one-armed mother and a father named Joe. The larger themes of Smith’s experience are prominent in Danny’s. These include restricted freedom from the time of early adolescence; limited opportunities for education leading to shame and disempowerment; disproportionate punishment for crimes committed; incarceration leading to ‘prison dependency’; alienation from a ‘home’ culture and life; and mental illness and neglect by the system. The Custodians shares this reflection upon and employment of official reports for fictional purposes with Antjie Krog’s Country of My Skull. Although Jose does not use this kind of material as frequently, extensively or reflexively as Krog, his fictionalizing of Malcolm Smith’s story raises similar questions. What is an ethical treatment of an/other’s voice or experience, especially when s/he is marginalised, suffering and/or literally unable to speak back? Is Malcolm Smith’s story appropriated here for non-indigenous interests? Can a privileged white writer help to disseminate a marginalised narrative without trivialising or silencing parts of it? Glimpsed here is a postcolonial dilemma of representation that haunts the white writing examined in this thesis.
Representing the story and/or experience of a suffering or excluded other can potentially bring it to a larger audience and help to bring it out of the shadows. The process may entail, to borrow Mark Sander’s words, ‘set[ting] to work an ethics of advocacy’ and ‘giving [over] the domain of words...to the other’ (‘Truth’ 17). But there are risks, especially when the ‘teller’ is privileged and enfranchised relative to the represented. The white writer is in a position of power, both in terms of their socio-historical position and in relation to how they relate what might be called the ‘testimony’ of the other. Within the large body of critical discussion on *Country of My Skull* indicates there is some consensus that literary use of victim testimony skates close to the edge of appropriation. Modifying or even inventing the other’s narrative or testimony opens the possibility of a further, perhaps selective, silencing and disenfranchisement of the other. Representing material of this nature thus poses a challenge to the privileged postcolonial writer: to *not* write about what Deborah Bird Rose calls ‘dark times and excluded bodies’ (‘Dark Times’ 97) may perpetuate colonialisit suppressions, but to engage with the voice and experience of a suffering other requires extreme care. This results in a tension and ambivalence that is apparent in *The Custodians* and *Country of My Skull*. In both texts, the writer seems to be attempting to overcome historical colonial violence and silence, and certainly Krog’s and Jose’s respective communications of TRC testimony and Malcolm Smith’s difficult life and tragic death assists in these accounts reaching broader recognition. (Admittedly, *Country of My Skull* has enjoyed a far wider distribution and impact.) However, the two works might also be seen to enlist these voices and accounts of trauma in a larger narrative of reconciled white identity and belonging; certainly in both texts there is a push towards celebratory resolution—past crimes are
expiated, all is well again in the world—that is a disservice to Aboriginal Australia in
the one case, and apartheid victims on the other.

Unlike the voices of apartheid victims recorded in the Truth and
Reconciliation Commission, Malcolm Smith’s own voice was never heard publicly.
The Report of the Inquiry into the Death of Malcolm Charles Smith was written by
Commissioner J.H. Wootten, and its account of Smith is based on second-hand
reports. Unlike Krog, then, Jose cannot be said to appropriate the literal words of
another. He does use Smith’s story, though. Its employment in The Custodians for the
most part serves the purpose of highlighting indigenous needs and experience. It
does not function to suggest the sensitivity of the (white) narrator, nor does the pain
or guilt of the settler subject in response to Danny become equal to Danny’s
suffering, as is a risk in Country of My Skull. But there are troubling aspects to Jose’s
representation of Danny’s death, which are addressed in the final section of this
chapter. In addition, The Custodians is not as reflexive about its incorporation of a
‘true’ narrative of Aboriginal experience as Krog’s text is about its treatment of
apartheid victim testimony. Nor is it self-conscious about its approach to Aboriginal
characters, including its representations of their internal motivations and thoughts.
Perhaps fiction does not lend itself to this kind of reflection as well as memoir or the
essay, but certainly the fiction of J.M. Coetzee is more cautious in its portrayal of
black characters and other marginalised people. The internal worlds of Coetzee’s
‘others’ remain largely obscure to the narrator and reader, reflecting their
inaccessibility to privileged white knowledge. This is not to deny the value of an
empathic imaginative engagement with otherness, or to endorse the notion that
writers should not represent alterity. Instead, it is to point to the inherent pitfalls

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49 This has not meant that Coetzee’s representations are beyond (or have escaped) criticism.
involved in such a project, particularly in a postcolonial context, and to suggest the importance of critical reflexivity. An example of such reflexivity is found in the Australian text *Craft for a Dry Lake*, as I will argue in chapter five.

Cleve is more integrated into the narrative and Australian society than Danny. Removed from his family at the age of three and then taken in by a white foster family who never let him forget he is a charity case, he becomes a remarkably well-adjusted adult. Smart, stubborn and brave, he has agency and fights successfully for Aboriginal causes in his role as a social worker and activist. He does not suffer the economic and health hardships of many Aboriginal people and communities in Australia. Despite his awareness that he is an outsider to white society—‘not quite white’ (388)—he moves within it with relative ease, navigating its structures and institutions with skill. From some conservative perspectives, his might be held up as a ‘successful’ removal policy case. *The Custodians* never gives such a view of Cleve’s situation any credence. It undermines the ‘humanitarian’ arguments for the removal policy and suggests its traumatizing effects on the ‘Stolen Generation’, their families and communities. When Elspeth asks Cleve about the multiple scars ‘down his arm’, he tells her they are from his time at the orphanage, where ‘all the vaccines were trialled on him’ (36). His foster parents’ motives are questioned as it is revealed that they took him in as ‘part of [a] bargain with God’ when their daughter was diagnosed with leukaemia (203). Once Cleve is a young adolescent he is dumped at a boarding school, where a scholarship covers his basic needs so that his foster parents are no longer required to make contributions to his support—having decided they have ‘done their duty’ (33). The ultimate questioning of the policy is communicated in the text’s attention to the consequences of removal for Cleve. First there are the childhood troubles and questions: loneliness, an outsider status, uncertainty about
identity and grief that emerges in sudden and uncontrollable bouts of tears and melancholy (33). When Alex asks Cleve about his family, he answers

‘How would I know? I’m an orphan. Don’t you know? My foster parents got me out of an orphanage. I’ve got no way of finding out who my real parents are. They could be [dead] by now. I might have heaps of brothers and sisters without even knowing. Anyone out there could be family to me for all I know…

‘You know what happens. People are just taken away… I was just a little kid.’ (74)

The effects of separation continue long past childhood. Years later, Cleve is haunted by the fact that he still does not ‘know who [his] people are’ (192). He senses a ‘barrier’ between himself and the larger Aboriginal community (193). Even after he is reunited with his father and begins to feel at home, he is more aware than ever of ‘what he had missed out on: a family’s togetherness, struggle, suffering and love; the experience of his people, over decades. He had lived differently, and felt sorely deprived’ (220). His father Joe has also been scarred by his family’s breakdown; by the time he and Cleve meet again, he is ‘too old’, ‘unable to take any more responsibility’ and feels ‘too much shame’ to give Cleve the emotional support and love he craves (219). The devastating impact of separation is ameliorated by reunion, but cannot be undone, and Cleve’s experience—which on the surface appears to offer a removal ‘success story’—shows the policy’s destructiveness across multiple levels.

Motivated at a crucial point in his university education by the story of the Freedom Fighters and a visiting Aboriginal speaker who encourages him to ‘turn things round… No point sitting around and fretting when there’s something to be done’ (162), Cleve throws himself into an activist role. He battles triumphantly against a racist town mayor in his first job, but it is on the Lake Moorna claim where he has an impact on a national level as he argues for Aboriginal ownership of the site.
He does not hesitate to confront white characters' assumptions and beliefs about the past and land rights. For example, when Elspeth states ‘I belong to the land...in the sense that it belongs to me’, he responds, ‘You don’t belong to the land, Elspeth. You’re the holder of a crown lease according to white man’s law. Your people took the land’ (340, emphasis in original). However, he does this in a way that does not, ultimately, estrange others. Notably, Cleve is optimistic about a shared future; he resists the divisions that may be brought about by adherence to identity politics. When a friend warns him against working with Elspeth, saying ‘She’s not your people’, he responds, ‘We’re all in this together...That’s the reality. That’s what we have to tell ourselves’ (217, emphasis in original). In the end Cleve is able to use these relationships and connections with white characters to achieve an ideal outcome for the traditional owners of the land.

The politics of possession

In the second half of The Custodians, Aboriginal land rights move to the fore as Lake Moorna becomes a contested space. The site is torn between competing interests after it is revealed that it contains an ancient burial ground, and two skeletons, ‘Moorna Woman’ and soon after, ‘Moorna Man’, are excavated from it. Alex, working for the federal government of the day, wants to turn Whitepeeper into a national heritage site and gain political kudos for doing so. Elspeth is current lease-owner, and regards it as ‘inalienable Masterman land’ (271) though she knows the lease on it is due to expire. Cleve realises the burial ground has great significance to Australian Aborigines, and takes it upon himself to have the land returned to the

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50 I return to this construction of Cleve as a benevolent indigene who desires a shared habitation in the final section of the thesis, because it raises the issue of white writers representing indigenes in a way that may serve settler interests.
indigenous peoples of the surrounding area. This is the site over which the politics of possession are played out in *The Custodians*. One character calls Moorna Woman a ‘test’ (262), and the characters’ various responses to her and to the burial site reveal how far they, and the nation, have come since their first visit to Whitepeeper.

The contested nature of land possession and white belonging are dealt with most directly through conversations between characters. These showcase various perspectives: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, those of pastoralists, government representatives and so on. In presenting each position, Jose channels voices that circulated (and continue to circulate) in Australia’s public sphere. The text in a sense ‘hosts’ these conversations, just as Krog hosts TRC testimony in *Country of My Skull*. As in that book, in *The Custodians* these words, communicated in an immediate way and fitted into a narrative, undermine determinist positions and allow for more nuanced representations of historical responsibility, reparations and reconciliation.

The most important and symbolic conversations over land and belonging are between Cleve and Elspeth, and to a lesser degree between Cleve and Alex. Each of these characters, as I have suggested, is representative of a group within Australian society. Cleve is Aboriginal and works for Aboriginal interests; as an indigenous person, he holds a certain authority and entitlement in the eyes of the other characters. Yet *The Custodians* resists popular figurings of ‘belonging’ in Australia in which it is ‘typically taken to apply to Aboriginal people in an uncomplicated fashion, as if Aboriginal people have no more work to do on their relationship with Australian land’ (Beardwood 10). Cleve’s relationship to Lake Moorna is conflicted. He does not know where he is from—though Whitepeeper, he says, ‘could be my place for all I know’ (203, emphasis in original). Cut off from knowledge of his
ancestry and country, raised separately from both, Cleve is estranged from country. He becomes an Aboriginal authority on Lake Moorna not by promoting his own claims, but by aligning himself with the indigenous communities in the area (400). Elspeth is representative of another societal set: the pastoralists, though she has never been entirely comfortable with this background and, as a woman, is not entirely a designated bearer of the family’s historically patriarchal power. Through her, the text acknowledges the close, even spiritual connections white settler subjects may feel to land. Alex, finally, works in the Department of the Prime Minister and claims to prioritise the ‘national interest’. Cleve’s discussions with Elspeth are often personal, while his conversations with Alex are located more at the level of government policy.

Examining first Cleve’s discussions with Elspeth, what is staged here is a finely-tuned engagement with issues of white possession of, and belonging on, the land. In these conversations The Custodians raises some of the complex ethical questions that are involved and acknowledges the importance of land to both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. It explores the tensions and splits that may occur between Australians over place—divisions into ‘my people’ and ‘your people’—and the problem of being an inheritor or beneficiary of violence. A conversation between Elspeth and Cleve is exemplary in its demonstration of these points (see 340-41). In it, Cleve questions Elspeth’s unselfconscious claim that she belongs to the land, which also belongs to her. He undercuts conflations of ownership with belonging and questions the legitimacy of Elspeth’s possession. This is relevant to contemporary Australia and other settler nations, for, as Mulgan observes, in such countries the ‘legitimacy of the regime and therefore the legitimacy of its citizens have been called into question’ as ‘[t]he assumptions that underlay
The texts raise the issue of collective historical responsibility as Cleve points out Elspeth’s own status as an inheritor and beneficiary of frontier violence. In doing this, he suggests that even as a modern-day woman sympathetic to Aboriginal causes, Elspeth holds responsibility for what has gone before. This is a direct challenge to the attitude, voiced by (now-former) Prime Minister John Howard amongst others, of ‘I’m not responsible because I wasn’t there’ (Wellings n.p.). The key word here is beneficiary: regardless of whether Elspeth actively participated in colonial violence, her privilege is derived from it, and this makes her culpable. It is a recognition that Krog, another white woman who has always placed herself in opposition to the ‘bad white men’ in South Africa, must confront at the TRC. For both women there is a deeply personal and familial connection to these crimes: for Elspeth as a descendant of a pastoralist known as the ‘Emperor of the Bush’, and for Krog who feels she holds a
sibling relationship with the Vlakplaas Five. But this is not a one-way dialogue, and Elspeth speaks back to Cleve. In response to his identification of her privilege as ‘ill-gotten gain’ (340), Elspeth counters with the observation that privilege may not be so easy to ‘give back’ (341). This is a widespread problem for white/settler subjects and for postcolonial white writers—including in Australian and South Africa. It is addressed directly by J.M. Coetzee, who has commented on the difficulty, even the impossibility, of resigning from social and historical privilege:

The masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste. Since there is no way of escaping the skin you are born with (can the leopard change its spots?), you cannot resign from the caste. You can imagine resigning, you can perform a symbolic resignation, but short of actually shaking the dust of the country off your feet, there is no way of actually doing it. (Attwell Doubling 96)

Elspeth’s caste is white and pastoralist, and she cannot refuse either—there is no ethical way to divorce herself from this heritage, this ‘burden of inheritance’ (350). But there are material reparations that can be made: Cleve tells her, ‘You could give this land away’ (341).

Thus the issue of restitution is opened. Many intellectuals writing about reconciliation in Australia point out that reparation is the essential gesture on the part of non-indigenous Australians (see for example Mulgan; Brennan). In these discourses it is often posited the answer to feelings of ‘illegitimacy’ on the part of non-indigenous Australians. Reparation potentially opens a way beyond the impasse of guilt, though most acknowledge that the violence of settler colonialism cannot be transcended or laid to rest in any simple way. Yet reparation is one of the most significant challenges for reconciliation movements, even in South Africa, where one

51 For a well-known discussion (located within the field of postcolonialism) about what to do with privilege, see Gayatri Spivak in The Post-Colonial Critic, who advocates a process of ‘unlearning privilege as one’s loss’. Mark Sanders, an academic whose research focus is on South African literature, has argued that acknowledged complicity is kind of a necessary ethical position to speak from (see Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid).
of the great failings of the TRC has been the lack of meaningful material reparations for victims of apartheid. In Australia too there is widespread opposition to the notion of economic/material reparation and return of land, with many non-indigenous Australians seemingly overestimating Aboriginal demands (Mulgan 183). (Former Prime Minister John Howard cited the possibility of opening a legal precedent for widespread reparations claims as a reason not to make an official apology.) Elspeth, facing the issue on a more personal level than most, is finally prompted to consider restitution and to ask, to whom can it, should it, be made? She takes steps to return Whitepeeper to its traditional owners, and proceeds to argue this cause with Alex, the government bureaucrat, questioning his motives when she says to him ‘I understand [the site’s] importance for Aboriginal culture. I really don’t understand its importance to you’ (393).

Alex is more resistant to Cleve’s position on Lake Moorna than Elspeth, and the two men engage in heated arguments about what should become of the site. Their interactions provide a forum for debates made at a policy level, and at every turn Cleve dominates, so that here too The Custodians makes a case for indigenous land rights. Cleve argues for the return of Moorna Woman and Moorna Man to the earth from which they came, and the return of the land to its traditional custodians. As in his talks with Elspeth, with Alex he points to the ‘bloody disgrace’ of the past (398), insisting ‘You have to acknowledge what happened’ (399). He takes Alex to task for oversights that may be seen as reflecting those of Australian governments: for example, Alex’s ‘overlooking [of] the claims of potential traditional owners’ (400). Alex, for his part, questions Cleve’s own connections to place and even the importance of the site for contemporary indigenous people (see 403) in a way that is, once again, reflective of many white responses to Aboriginal claims to land. There
aren’t any of your people at Lake Moorna,’ he tells Cleve, who replies—and in his response we see something similar to *The White Earth*’s treatment of the ‘vanishing race’ myth, noted in chapter two—‘There aren’t any at this moment, but there used to be, didn’t there, before they were got rid of’ (399). For every one of Alex’s barbs, Cleve has a retort. The conversations between these two do not so much present both sides in order to provoke thought; instead they question government positions and argue for an acknowledgement of indigenous rights—in a way that is more compelling and engaging for the reader.

‘We’re all in it together’

*The Custodians* is optimistic about a shared future in postcolonial Australia, but the path to this is represented as requiring difficult recognitions on the part of all characters. One of these involves acknowledging Aboriginal history and critically examining white settler society, as I have begun to suggest. In order to be reconciled and ‘at home’, the characters must reach a greater respect of indigenous culture and make appropriate reparations. Another key recognition and theme in the novel regards the characters’ interconnectedness with each other—and, by extension, that of all Australians. What is offered is a path beyond the potential divisions of identity politics, and in this respect José’s model of ethical interconnectedness is similar to the African concept *Ubuntu* that was so heavily drawn upon in the TRC. Finally, in tandem with both of these things, the characters must come to a new understanding of Lake Moorna, and it is here that the pastoral becomes prominent again, as Alex and Elspeth and others approach a ‘postcolonial sense of place’ in which they recognise the multiple layers of meaning and history over the site.
Most of the Anglo-Celtic characters first come to Lake Moorna without respect for indigenous history or much awareness of settler violence. They repeat colonial crimes in their treatment of the burial site they discover there. In the intervening years, some of them perpetuate omissions of thought that continue the legacy of the past, which are shown as injurious and an impediment to reconciliation: Alex’s remarks to Cleve about Lake Moorna’s importance to him are an example. *The Custodians* argues that recognising and changing these patterns of thought and behaviour is essential to improving black-white relations and in beginning an ultimately healing process of redress. Characters take little steps. Elspeth understands Cleve’s criticisms of her belief that Whitepeeper is legitimately and exclusively Masterman property. Alex realises that in his eagerness to claim Lake Moorna for national interests, he has overlooked Aboriginal ones (400). He comes to regret his own theft of a skull from the original burial site so many years ago. With the nation at large, all characters become increasingly aware of ‘what happened’ (399)—the actions and conditions that secured their placement on the continent. Having reached this recognition, they can begin to do something about it. In Elspeth’s case, as noted, this means facilitating the return of Whitepeeper to Aboriginal custodianship. For Alex, it means supporting instead of opposing the handover, and releasing his own interests. Returning the bones becomes a small ‘gesture of amends’ for his own crimes—the theft of the skull—and those of white society at large. This restitution is contingent upon recognitions about the nation’s history, and, *The Custodians* suggests, may go some way toward undoing the unease and crisis of unsettlement experienced by many non-indigenous Australians. When Alex asks Cleve if the return of the bones to the ground might remove the ‘curse’ he feels has haunted his life, Cleve responds:
You put the curse on yourself. That’s what you people have always done. You people reckon that our people are a cursed and tragic people. That’s your problem. Your doing. Always has been. You’re the accursed ones. We’re okay. We’ve had a bloody shocking time of it, but we’re okay. We’re surviving. It’s simple. What our people want has always been simple. Give it to us and there’ll be no curse. (491)

Crucial to Elspeth’s and Alex’s change of heart is their relationship with Cleve, and a theme of separation and re-connection—with links between people never fully destroyed by distance or the passage of time—is prevalent in *The Custodians*. Here a recognition of interconnectedness is shown as important to moving beyond the binary ‘my people’, ‘your people’. Jose’s model of human relationships suggests that no one person is truly separate from those around him or her. It is a concept that is also picked up by Krog in *Country of My Skull*, in which the African ethical concept of *Ubuntu*—in a nutshell, ‘people are people through other people’ (Graybill 1118)—is invoked. In *The Custodians*, the characters’ lives are deeply linked, often in ways they do not fully recognise. That this interconnectedness may provide a way beyond impasse is illustrated in the relationship between Alex and Cleve, which becomes increasingly strained as each man is positioned on opposite sides of the Lake Moorna debate. A break comes when Alex, who pursues a relationship with a single mother named Josie in the latter part of the novel, realises that Cleve is the father of her child (428). This knowledge is instrumental in Alex’s choice to finally ‘let go’ (428). Then he comes to see the return of Moorna Woman and Moorna Man to the dry lakebed—and the return of Whitepeeper to its traditional owners—as a positive and necessary course of action (474). Perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the reconciliation brought about by this recognition of ‘connection’ is located in the novel’s model for a shared postcolonial belonging, which is described as ‘custodianship’. Custodianship differs from possession: it does not require exclusive ownership and entails responsibilities of care and trust. It is a
departure from the exploitative models typical of colonialism. In Beardwood’s words, ‘The “custodians” of a place—a place within the nation, or the place of the nation itself—represent the possibility of shared possession and habitation’ (18).

The characters in *The Custodians* are connected, and in particular, they are bound together by place. Lake Moorna itself links almost mystically to other sites, times and worlds, in Cleve’s understanding:

[H]is feeling [was] that this country, separate from time immemorial, unique in all its forms, was connected in barely known ways with other continents and other worlds, as if here history was joined in one creation with all that lay beyond… (480)

Lake Moorna then is also tied up in a network of associations and relationships, which brings us back to the idea of the ‘pastoral mode’ and in particular to a ‘postcolonial sense of place’. A vital step for the characters in reapproaching Lake Moorna and attempting reconciliation is to see the place differently. The rural features as a site of retreat in the classic pastoral, and there are echoes of this in *The Custodians*. Whitepeeper is the central location in the book, a place of belonging, a site for regeneration and reunion. But it is not only a site of escape, nor is it, as in conservative pastoral, a site of escape from history. *The Custodians*’ representation of Whitepeeper, in all its complexity, suggests Jose’s postcolonial approach to pastoral and to place. The text foregrounds rather than conceals the relationship between nature and history.

In an article on the postcolonial pastoral, George Handley describes three ways of thinking about the relationship between nature and history. The first is to ‘seek out nature as an escape from history and human responsibility’ (Casteel 30), and this is often seen in the pastoral, in which the farm or the wilderness becomes a kind of timeless retreat. In ‘new world’ contexts such as those of North America and
Australia, it is 'dangerously' prone to erasing 'competing or alternative human story in the landscape' (Handley 5). The second way to conceive of nature and history is to see the natural environment exclusively in terms of economics or utilitarian purpose (Handley 2)—an approach common in colonialist perspectives on land and nature, which have tended to be exploitative. The third possibility, which Handley advocates, is to consider nature and human history as inextricable. This perspective, he suggests, is vital to a 'postcolonial sense of place', that is, a sense of place which does not 'require a negation of all previous human presences on the land in order to lay claim to it...but instead entails a recognition of the multiple human histories connected with a given landscape' (Casteel 31).

This way of seeing nature/landscape and history is also privileged by *The Custodians*. The past is all the more present, and multiple human habitations all the more evident, at Whitepeeper. Instead of scrubbing the site clean of its associations with an ancient Aboriginal occupation, settler violence and ongoing white exclusivity, *The Custodians* seeks these out. Even resistant characters come to recognise the multiplicity of the histories, narratives and inhabitations overlaying Lake Moorna. Alex, for example, has an epiphany when he returns to Whitepeeper for the re-internment ceremony:

[He] was wondering about his experience of the sundown, about how it might differ from that of others, not only the people he was with but all the other people who had occupied the place through time, whoever they were. The sky had been different once, the land had been different. Over time it had been unimaginably, inconceivably different, and people had been different too. Knowledge itself had been different. Yet those other experiences were also connected with his... (490)

This understanding of place, which is new to Alex, reflects Glissant’s argument that ‘landscape is not saturated with a single History but effervescent with intermingled histories, rushing to fuse without destroying or reducing each other’ (154). Whereas
colonial discourse has typically obscured ‘different’ histories from colonised landscapes, attempting to impose its own accounts upon the land, *The Custodians* offers the idea that Whitepeeper—and the larger continent—is immersed in a far richer and more diverse set of histories. Understanding this potentially enables a sense of belonging even for white settler subjects, Jose indicates, if they are ready to open their eyes to ‘alternative human story in the landscape’ (Handley 5).

**Suspect redemptions?**

Resolution in *The Custodians* is smooth. The characters have come full circle, though not without making great changes. This is symbolised by the way the novel begins with them as children, watching an eclipse together, and ends with them, now middle-aged, walking over Whitepeeper as the moon rises. They may not own this site, with all its historical, archaeological and cultural significance, but together they are its custodians. It is therefore possible to see *The Custodians* as ‘enfold[ing] its readers smoothly into a national imaginary which is ultimately reconciled with itself, in which internal divisions are healed by a “narrative causality” and all ghosts are laid to rest’ (Beardwood 18). As we have seen, *The Custodians* undertakes a postcolonial reassessment of settler history, Aboriginal experience and white belonging, with unsettling implications for many white Australians. As it closes, however, the novel risks undermining this work by posing comforting resolutions and giving meaning to even the most traumatic events in the novel. Nor should aspects of its proposed new model for white belonging on the land go unquestioned.

The text’s most blatant and troubling resolution comes in its final treatment of Danny’s death. This incident is the most distressing in the novel, especially given...
that it is closely based on Malcolm Smith’s death (which the attentive reader will know). Danny’s growing despair and mental unrest are related with unsentimental clarity; his self-injury and ensuing death are not romanticised. The scene describing his last, fatal action reverberates through the novel, disrupting the narrative which has up to this point been moving toward a positive moment of reconciliation. More than any other, this event testifies to the tragedy of Aboriginal suffering and death in custody. Like the official account of Malcolm Smith’s life and death, the text shows this pain as following from a heritage of dispossession, racism and colonialism. However, Danny’s death is abruptly made more manageable by what Cleve gains from it:

Choking, Cleve kissed his brother’s head, his lost brother, his twin, his darker, more vulnerable self—the soul who paid the price in suffering for the two of them, freed now from prison and earth. Known and not loved, loved and never known, Danny had given up his life, the one thing he had left with which to make amends....

The life [Danny’s life] was Cleve’s now. Cleve understood that. He took it from Danny as a trust from that time forth. (449)

In this passage, the most marginalised and disempowered body in the text becomes that on which another character learns a ‘lesson’. The unsettling impact of Danny’s story is undermined as his death is slotted into a larger narrative of self-sacrifice (for Danny) and renewal (for Cleve). In addition, Cleve’s reading of his brother’s death naturalises it as a noble, even rational, act of altruistic suicide. This conceals Danny’s extreme distress and despair, attributes intentionality (suicide rather than an accident with fatal consequences) and offers the soothing notion that Danny has found freedom at last. 52 That the incident is based on Malcolm Smith’s death makes its tidy resolution here all the more questionable.

52 The official report on Malcolm Smith’s death in custody questions that Smith’s action was a suicide attempt, suggesting that it may have been carried out as part of a psychotic episode.
As for *The Custodians’* optimism about a shared future in Australia, one of the metaphors used to describe a new ‘togetherness’ points to an appropriation. Reconciliation between black and white Australia is suggested in the novel’s final scenes, as Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians come together in a ceremony to return the bones of Moorna Woman and Moorna Man to the burial site from which they came. The event also ‘signifie[s] the return of the land’ to traditional occupiers (447). These scenes reveal the growing alliance between Cleve and Elspeth. Though they have long been partners in the quest to return Lake Moorna to traditional ownership, it is now suggested that they will become lovers. Their union seems to hold the promise of a future in which Australians can bond, rather than be divided over, land:

[Cleve] spoke in her ear. ‘It’s [Whitepeeper/Lake Moorna] not all mine. It’s ours. We’ve got to have a go at it together. Is that what you want me to say?’

Elspeth’s eyes glowed at his in the darkness. She loved him. (493)

This promise of romance between Cleve and Elspeth repeats the unions of earlier Australian pastorals such as *Coonardoo*. As in these works, it is a symbol of reconciliation and hope. By bonding with the Aboriginal, non-indigenous Australians can also lay a claim to a land that is not all ‘theirs’, but is ‘ours’. The implications of this romance also connect this novel to *Craft for a Dry Lake*, the text examined in chapter five. In that book, a young white woman ‘somewhat problematically “touches the country” through her lovemaking with an Aboriginal horsebreaker’ (Brennan 100). In both texts, then, a psychologically ‘unhomed’ white woman feels resecured to land and belonging through a sexual relationship with an Aboriginal man. There is also a suggestion of a conflation of the Aboriginal body with the land—similar to that presented in *Coonardoo*, though in that novel it was the black
woman's body that represented the Australian earth, and the white settler male who bonded to the land through her. To complicate the situation further in *The Custodians*, a connection between the land and Elspeth's body is suggested. Elspeth, who has not been able to have children, sees herself as 'barren' like the 'dry salty country' of Whitepeeper, but she believes 'Cleve could change her,...he could give her what she wanted, make her into what she craved to be. He was like a water-diviner who could find fertility in this...country' (274-75). The Aboriginal is therefore figured as a path to renewal for the non-indigenous—and once again the Aboriginal is appropriated to serve white needs. The character of Cleve thus serves varied, contradictory purposes in the text. After a period in which his is the primary voice challenging white possession, racism, denial and presumption, he is ultimately rendered a benevolent, forgiving Aborigine who invites the settler to belong.

**Conclusion**

*The Custodians* is perhaps the most overtly ambivalent text in this thesis. On the one hand, and largely through the framework of postcolonial pastoral, Jose's novel re-examines settler history and colonial crimes, portraying Aboriginal experience sympathetically and proposing a more inclusive model of belonging—one that is informed by an awareness of different histories and multiple habitations. Its attention to indigenous pain and white violence counteract colonial mythologies of settler heroism and innocence. Yet the novel appropriates the indigenous for its own literary purposes and in the interests of resecuring the settler subject. It unsettles 'official' narratives of Australian history and hosts stories and conversations that bring issues of race, complicity and responsibility to the fore—only to smooth these over again. Its comforting resolution lays the violent, traumatic past to rest and
portrays black and white Australia as reconciled. Pointing to this ambivalence, which does not appear to function in a radical way as is seen in some other texts in the thesis, is not to deny the novel’s oppositionality. Rather, it is to complicate simple notions of counter-colonial literary resistance in postcolonial settler texts. *The Custodians* illuminates to a greater extent than *The Folly* or *The White Earth* the pitfalls of white writing, particularly that which attempts to represent the indigenous directly. Problematic appropriations and closures are not isolated to *The Custodians* or even to Australian texts, however. The next chapter suggests that similar issues arise in Antjie Krog’s bestselling account of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Country of My Skull*.
Chapter Four

A ‘Scorched Skin’: Witnessing Truth and Reconciliation in *Country of My Skull* by Antjie Krog

*Country of My Skull* (1998) might well be described as the text of South Africa’s momentous Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Published even before the TRC’s report was released, Antjie Krog’s journalistic memoir was hailed as ‘one of the most moving and important works about the Truth Commission and South Africa’s violent past’ (S. Graham 21). A critical and commercial success, it became a domestic and international bestseller. For many readers, *Country of My Skull* is the most available and accessible account of the TRC; as such, it has become something of a mediator of the multi-volume official report and thousands of hearing transcripts. In its widespread sales, well-recognised contribution to post-apartheid public discourse, and ‘non-fiction’ status (however uneasily classified), *Country of My Skull* stands in contrast to *The Folly* and *The Custodians*. Yet it is concerned with many of the same themes and, as with all the works examined in this thesis, can be read as entailing a critical reassessment of settler history, belonging and mythologies. In *Country of My Skull*, this critique is located within a highly personal narrative in which the author-narrator, an Afrikaner woman, witnesses the TRC and considers her own complicity in apartheid crimes. As I began to suggest in the

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previous chapter, Krog’s close attention to the Commission’s revelations and her ‘hosting’ of the unsettling testimony of the other in *Country of My Skull* signal a major departure from a conservative and colonialist tradition of Afrikaner white writing. The text bears witness to, and excavates, the nation’s traumatic past. Like *The Custodians*, however, its postcolonialism is complicated by appropriation and premature declarations of reconciliation and resolution. In addition, Krog’s engagement with the TRC and apartheid suffering is arguably incorporated into a performance of white penitence and empathy that is marshalled in the service of white desires for redemption and belonging. This chapter traces these complex, ambiguous threads to point again to the double-edged functions of postcolonial white writing from the settler site.

*Country of My Skull* grew out of Krog’s experience as a radio journalist covering the TRC for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). An unusually ‘hybrid work’ (Sanders ‘Truth’ 16), it incorporates reportage, transcripts of testimony, and memoir. The book is much more than a first-hand account of TRC hearings, as Susan Spearey suggests in her summary:

*Country of My Skull* offers an assemblage of excerpts from the testimonies of victims and amnesty seekers themselves, interspersed with and framed by reflections upon, dialogues about, epistolary responses to and overtly fictionalised and poetic explorations of the philosophical and practical processes of working through trauma towards an emergent sense of home, belonging, and self-possession. It is a processing of the process of witnessing. (65)

The text is all the more remarkable because it is written by a white South African with strong Afrikaner ties. The daughter of staunch National Party members, Antjie Krog was raised on a farm in the Free State, the ‘centre of Afrikanerdom’ (Ruden 166). Renowned for her award-winning Afrikaans poetry (van der Merwe ‘A Poet’s

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54 This argument and its wording is shaped by Robert Clarke’s work on postcolonial white Australian travel writing (see ‘Intimate Strangers’).
Commitment’ 131), before *Country of My Skull* she had not written prose in English. Krog has been described as ‘the adored woman poet of the Afrikaans tradition’ (C. Coetzee 686), but her oppositional politics have meant she was never an Afrikaner literary darling.\(^\text{55}\) Despite her liberalism and anti-apartheid reputation, throughout *Country of My Skull* Krog is highly conscious of the position from which she writes, which is one of ‘acknowledged and troubling historical complicity’ (Sanders ‘Truth’ 16). Yet she remains attached to her family, her Afrikaner identity, and the place where she grew up. *Country of My Skull* is a dense, rich work that spans myriad material, as Spearey has indicated (65). My focus is necessarily limited, and the emphasis throughout this chapter is on the ways in which the text represents Krog’s struggle to come to terms with her connections, as an Afrikaner, to apartheid perpetrators and the realisation that the family farm—‘home’—was secured and protected by violence. These are key sites of the text’s critiques of Afrikaner mythologies of family, land and belonging.

Since 2000 *Country of My Skull* has received increasing critical attention; the body of academic work on it is now substantial.\(^\text{56}\) Much of it examines the book through the lens of the TRC, and critics have been particularly occupied with themes of testimony, witness and trauma. I draw on some of this work, and on insights offered by trauma studies more broadly, in this chapter. However, it is not possible (or entirely useful) to review all of the secondary literature on *Country of My Skull* here. My discussion is limited to those pieces most relevant to the themes explored in

\(^{55}\) P.P. van der Merwe writes that even before Krog published her first book of poems at age 18, ‘[h]er writings had attracted attention...as much for their youthful promise as for the precocious and ironic questioning of the sanctioned political, literary and sexual views of her community’ (131).

\(^{56}\) A short list of literary studies publications includes Gallagher ‘Reconciliation’; Moss; Schaeffer and Smith; Eze; Jacobs; Walker and Unterhalter; Whitlock ‘Consuming Passions’; S. Graham; Bell; Lewis; Wallmach; C. Coetzee; Cooke; Sanders ‘Truth’; Heyns ‘The Whole Country’s Truth’; Spearey; Ruden; Snyman. The book has also been examined by lawyers, philosophers, political scientists and historians.
this chapter and thesis, and is framed around a central debate to emerge about the text. I refer to the controversy about the book’s use of victim testimony, which opens up larger questions about representing the other as well as Krog’s representations of her own position relative to apartheid and the TRC.

Most critics who have written on *Country of My Skull* are highly favourable of its engagement with the TRC. Mark Sanders writes that Krog’s text replicates or ‘mimics’ the work of the TRC ‘in its own textual conduct’, especially in its setting up of a dialogue between ‘questioner and witness’ (‘Truth’ 16). He suggests the book is able to go further than the TRC in its reflections on truth, telling, questioning, and the relation between speaker and witness (Sanders ‘Truth’ 16). Drawing on Derrida, Sanders praises *Country of My Skull* for its ‘hospitality’ to the words of TRC witnesses, and in this Krog ‘points a direction for literature after apartheid’ by ‘set[ting] to work an ethics of advocacy’ and ‘giving [over] the domain of words...to the other’ (‘Truth’ 17). Shane Graham looks at *Country* with other post-apartheid literary texts and identifies Krog’s book as exploiting openings created by the TRC to ‘invent new forms of narrative’ and approach questions of agency, representation and truth in ‘new ways’ (12). He applauds Krog’s ‘nuanced’ relativist conception of truth, for example, which has been shaped by her witness of the shifting, partial nature of truth in TRC testimonies (S. Graham 23). Graham defends Krog’s handling of the testimonies as ‘sensitive’ (21) and alert to the ‘paradoxes of traumatic telling’ (26)—an ethical treatment of another’s voice.

Susan Spearey and Carli Coetzee are also interested in the text’s relation to the work of the TRC, but their (respective) articles include a consideration of a topic that has received less attention: that is, Krog’s own subject position, particularly her
Afrikaner heritage and identity. Spearey argues that the text explores ‘ways of reconstituting selfhood both individual and collective’ and attempts to renegotiate imaginary homelands ‘through the sharing of stories and working through of their implications in and for the present’ (65). Carli Coetzee offers a more in-depth analysis of the text’s representations of Krog’s Afrikaner roots and culture. She identifies Krog’s ‘sense of alienation from...her country’ and anxieties about whether there is a place for her in post-apartheid South Africa as ‘recurring themes’ (685), and observes that the text is marked by tensions: Krog tries to distance herself from her Afrikaner heritage, but acknowledges that her voice will always ‘contain traces of this past’ (C. Coetzee 685). Coetzee suggests that Krog attempts to speak not only to Afrikaner readers but also to black Africans, and to gain an ‘imagined entry’ into the ‘new’ South Africa that is contingent on apology (685). Her piece touches on instances in which Krog might be seen to attempt to claim the subjectivity or suffering of others, but does not identify them as appropriative or problematic—a position I will question.

Other commentators have been more critical. As I have begun to suggest, the main target of their attack is Krog’s management of victims’ stories. Sarah Ruden, for example, all but accuses Krog of ‘ordinary theft’ in her frequent (and often unattributed) quotations of testimony (171). Country of My Skull, she writes, may treat apartheid’s victims (and possibly even its perpetrators) as little more than ‘literary figurines’ (Ruden 171). Meira Cook suggests that Krog, in her efforts to present and sometimes rewrite the testimonies she has witnessed, risks slipping into an appropriation of the victims’ pain (73). Fiona Ross, in a generally positive review, concedes that Krog ‘takes center stage and in doing so draws attention away from the suffering of those whose fragmented stories she represents’ (Ross cited in Moss 86).
Similar concerns are echoed in Bennett, Schaeffer and Smith, and Moss; defending Krog’s methods are Graham, Ross and Sanders. Most critics would be sympathetic, though, to Moss’s remark that while some of Krog’s methods open her to criticism and should be scrutinised, ‘Krog can also be commended for showing an awareness of the ethical problems presented by her use of testimony and for exploring different ways of presenting the material that might mitigate the dangers of appropriation’ (86).

I will return to this debate. For the moment, I want to take a small sidestep to other, though related, questions that have been raised about post-apartheid Afrikaner writing. This is a body of work that has been identified as generally revisionist, inclusive, and challenging of ‘a narrow, triumphalist Afrikaner nationalism’ (Irlam 701)—like *Country of My Skull*. But as Irlam writes, ‘one might question some of the motives of exculpation and excuse embedded in these narratives’ (702). Michiel Heyns points out that narrative can ‘[serve] as a means of reinvention’ for perpetrators (‘The Whole Country’s Truth’ 44), and Zoe Wicomb alerts readers to the ‘rehabilitation of whiteness’ that operates in some contemporary Afrikaner texts (‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 363). Irlam cautions that ‘impulses to inclusion and alterity’ may ‘remain subordinated to the project of (re)writing Afrikaner identity’ (701-2). To the question *If Krog appropriates victim testimony, to what ends is it done?*, there is no simple or single answer. Yet it could be argued that one such end is the reinvention—and resecuring—of the Afrikaner through the staging of a performance of white shame and apology. This is an under-examined issue in the critical literature on *Country of My Skull*, as is the possibility that Krog appropriates the suffering and possibly even the ‘blackness’ of others (in addition to their stories).
The discussion so far might seem to suggest a highly critical reading of *Country of My Skull*. In fact this chapter acknowledges the text’s major contribution to a body of progressive post-apartheid discourse, and my analysis foregrounds Krog’s nuanced explorations of complicity and (quite courageous) critiques of Afrikaner culture, historical mythology and models of belonging. The widespread critical and popular praise for Krog is warranted. *Country of My Skull* is ‘one of the most moving and important works about the Truth Commission and South Africa’s violent past’ (S. Graham 21); it does indeed ‘[herald] a new direction in writing by white South Africans’ (C. Coetzee 685) and ‘[point] a direction for literature after apartheid’ in ‘set[ting] to work an ethics of advocacy’ (Sanders ‘Truth’ 17). There is no book quite like it in Australia. Yet recognizing the commendableness of Krog’s project and her achievement in *Country of My Skull* should not preclude a closer look at the text’s ambivalences, slippages, and ‘messiness’—which can in turn illuminate the complexities and complicities of the settler site. Questions about appropriation, commodification, representation and the resecuring functions of ‘sympathetic’ or ‘oppositional’ white writing do not arise exclusively in relation to this work, as the previous chapter has indicated, and as the larger thesis suggests.

This chapter’s argument, then, is two-part. It identifies *Country of My Skull* as an exemplary white postcolonial text. Krog self-consciously attends to and represents violent colonial and apartheid histories, including the voices of suffering and marginalised others, and explores how these challenge Afrikaner mythologies of the past and their own rightful, if embattled, belonging. Her critique of Afrikanerdom includes many of the themes and tropes taken up in *The Custodians* and/or *The Folly*, among them: the farm or pastoral as a vital space in the settler imaginary; the exposure of white violence that has been buried (literally or figuratively); the problem
of complicity; and the need for apology and/or reparations. Krog’s work might be read as postcolonial ‘trauma literature’. But the chapter also considers the ways in which *Country of My Skull* may operate to rehabilitate and repatriate the Afrikaner. The text’s sympathetic engagements with TRC testimony are sites of slippage, in which efforts to empathise with the other seem to facilitate appropriations of the other’s story and/or suffering. Further, *Country of My Skull* hosts not only the words of the other, but also a performance of liberal white shame and remorse *in response* to this testimony. At times, the former is subsumed to the latter. Krog’s critical engagements with South Africa’s traumatic colonial and apartheid past—together with her highlighting of Afrikaner complicity—are thus bound up with a rewriting of the Afrikaner that may be read as serving that subject’s desires for a return to belonging and a place in ‘the new South Africa’.

**Witnessing the Commission**

At the TRC hearings, which she is required to attend as part of her work for SABC radio, Krog is exposed to the stories of the victims and perpetrators of apartheid. The TRC opens with the stories of the victims. Listening to them is an overwhelming and estranging experience: Krog writes that the testimony ‘[fills] the head with ash’ and ‘wipes us out. Like a fire. Or a flood’ (43). It is relentless:

> [T]he deaths, the names of the dead…the infinite web of sorrow woven around them…keeps on coming and coming. A wide, barren, disconsolate landscape where the horizon keeps dropping away. (48)

Gradually, attending the hearings leaves Krog ‘tongue-tripped’ and without words (54). Trauma has been said to render the subject speechless (see Caruth), and Krog’s loss of language—‘I stammer. I freeze. I am without language’ (55)—is figured as a
reaction to the trauma that is contained in victim testimony. Witnessing itself becomes traumatic for Krog, as is signalled by the physical ailments that plague her as the hearings stretch on (see 74). Yet although this witnessing is destructive, breaking her down (54), it also enables vital recognitions. *Country of My Skull’s* ‘telling’ of this process and Krog’s increased understanding of the suffering of others, her complicity in apartheid, and the ‘price’ of the ‘privilege’ of calling the farm home, constitutes more than a personal narrative of a lesson learned. It becomes a testimony of its own.

Witnessing the TRC opens Krog, first, to a new recognition of others: apartheid’s victims, for the most part black South Africans. Though she has sympathised with anti-apartheid causes for years, in the hearings Krog is confronted with graphic accounts of apartheid crimes. Like many other South African whites, Krog reports that she did not previously realise ‘the magnitude of the outrage, the depth of the depravity’ (68). Many white South Africans, and Afrikaners in particular, denied or attempted to downplay much TRC testimony (Thompson 217), but Krog’s narrative demonstrates a striving to understand the experience of victims and empathise with their pain. Her recognition of the other is further indicated by her embrace of his/her words in her own text—or, to use Sander’s terminology, her ‘hospitality to the words of witnesses’ (16-17). As I have noted, some commentators have criticised Krog for her quotations of this testimony (an issue taken up later in the chapter), but by ‘hosting’ the words of witnesses in this way she allows long-silenced voices to be heard beyond the hearings and official coverage of the TRC.

57 Krog records some of these white rejections of the TRC in her own text. For example, she quotes a piece of hate mail that refers to her as ‘that dissatisfied bush preacher of the Crying and Lying Commission’ whose radio broadcasts ‘have the whole country in tears (or a state of rage) about the untested evidence and accusations put before the TRC’ (see 245-46).
This close attending to victim testimony is of personal cost to Krog, especially as she comes to realise she is implicated in their suffering.

‘As familiar as my brothers’

Complicity comes to the fore when the ‘second narrative’, the testimony of the perpetrators, begins to be heard (84). The cause of Krog’s seemingly psychosomatic ailments becomes clearer as she is faced with the ‘narratives of the perpetrators’ (85). Then, as the symptoms worsen to the point where Krog gets up one morning with [her] face all swollen from a rash...scalp itching so much that [she has] to empty a bottle of cortisone on it’ (145), they become recognisable not only as signs of trauma, but also of guilt and identification with the apartheid’s ‘doers’ (135). Krog has been ‘brought up with what is the best and the proudest in the Afrikaner’ (148), but in her witness of the TRC hearings is confronted with the worst, embodied (particularly) in the Vlakplaas Five, a notorious ‘death squad’ unit. There are tensions in her response to these Afrikaner men. These militant ‘killers’ (135) are undeniably recognisable: like the farm, they are ‘of her youth’ (134). Yet Krog’s first response to them is one of aversion: ‘I want to distance myself./They are nothing to me./I am not of them’ (135). She goes on to search for ‘signs that [theirs] are the faces of...The Other’ (135, capitals in original). As Krog interviews these men, however, trying to ‘understand’ them (139), she reaches a devastating realisation:

[The Vlakplaas Five] are as familiar as my brothers, cousins and school friends. Between us all distance is erased. Was there perhaps never a distance except the one I have built up with great effort within myself over the years? (144)
Here Krog underlines the intimacy of her relationship to the Vlakplaas Five: they could be—they almost are—family. She goes on to acknowledge that she is ‘caught up in their mess’ and linked to them, for ‘[i]n some way or another, all Afrikaners are related’ (144). At base, what she has in common with the Vlakplaas Five is ‘a culture’, and, as she writes, ‘part of that culture over decades hatched...abominations’ (144).

That this is the same culture which has provided Krog, an Afrikaner poet, with ‘the language of [her] heart’ (361) makes it a painful recognition. In the struggle to come to terms with it, she sometimes lapses into denial or searches for explanations or justifications for her culture’s ‘shortcomings’ (361). For example, she momentarily entertains the thought that apartheid might not have come about if it were not for derogatory treatment of Afrikaners by the British (see 361). (I will explore the text’s engagement with discourses of Afrikaner embattlement and victimhood shortly.) But Krog does not in the end attempt to slip out of complicity. Instead, she comes to emphasise it (both her own and that of ‘[her] people’ (148)) and does so most forcefully by drawing parallels between Afrikaner complicity with the apartheid regime and that of Germans with the Third Reich. This of course ties in with the book’s many references to the themes and writing of trauma studies, a body of work that has grown out of Holocaust studies and which has been used by many scholars researching the TRC and post-apartheid literature.  

The first, most explicit example of an Afrikaner-Nazi parallel is found in Krog’s identification of herself with a little girl who was photographed offering Hitler a flower (see 397). Considering the ‘admiration’ and love on the face of that

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58 See for example Bennett and Kennedy; Sanders ‘Reparation’ and ‘Truth’; and Libin. Libin’s piece includes an excellent, if brief, outline of the relevance of trauma studies to postcolonial studies, see pp 121-122. Critical literature from trauma studies has also informed work on the Australian ‘Stolen Generations’: see for example Gigliotti; Kennedy; and Whitlock ‘In the Second Person’.
child and those of the surrounding crowd, Krog recalls a childhood experience of her own in which she was part of a large group of Afrikaners who had gathered to catch a glimpse of Hendrik Verwoerd, the long-serving Prime Minister of South Africa and ‘architect of apartheid’, as he passed through their town (397). Verwoerd came so close to Krog as to ‘touch her’ arm (397), a cause for great excitement at the time.

Another example is Krog’s poem mourning apartheid trauma, ‘Litany’ (see 400-01), which employs metaphors used in Holocaust poetry and references the Jewish poet Paul Celan’s ‘Todesfuge’ (‘Death Fugue’), a poem that mourns victims of the Nazi concentration camps. Here again, albeit with more subtle references to Nazi Germany and the Shoah, Krog underlines the gravity of apartheid crimes and takes responsibility for them.

Krog quotes from ‘Todesfuge’ in a passage that relates a debate between her and a friend on the ethics of writing after trauma and atrocity (see 359-62). Though ‘Litany’ appears almost 50 pages later, and makes no explicit mention of Celan’s work, the poem clearly responds to ‘Todesfuge’. This commemorative poem is one of the best-known pieces of post-WWII literature in German. Written from the perspective of a concentration camp victim, it describes a Nazi-figure forcing Jews to dig their own graves and ordering others in their number to play music to accompany the activity. Read alongside ‘Todesfuge’, ‘Litany’ can be seen to echo but invert much of the older poem. First, Krog’s poem is narrated not by a victim but by a perpetrator. In addition, the central, paradoxical metaphor of ‘the long white shadow’ in ‘Litany’ seems like a negative of Celan’s ‘black milk of daybreak’; similarly, Celan’s ‘grave in the sky’ has a counterpart in Krog’s reference to numerous bodies buried in the earth. There are also structural echoes of ‘Todesfuge’ in ‘Litany’: the repetition of key phrases within lines, for example Krog’s
we buried many we buried without shroud or ritual
many we buried and from the grave it sprouts

compared to Celan’s

We drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
We drink and we drink

Also notable are Krog’s multiple references to ash, included in the metaphors
of the ‘white shadow’ and ‘white shudder’ that allude to apartheid and perhaps also
to a race-based Afrikaner identity. Although the only direct use of the word ‘ash’ in
Celan’s poem is contained in the ‘ashy hair’ of Shulamith, the entire poem evokes the
ashes of the dead, rising ‘in smoke to the sky’. Finally, both poems employ personal
pronouns extensively, though for different purposes and to different effect. Celan’s
most extensively used personal pronoun is ‘we’, and it insists on the humanity and
subjectivity of the victims; the poem’s ‘you’s’ address ‘Marguerite’ and ‘Shulamith’, as
well as the reader, and demand a recognition of victims suffering. In ‘Litany’
multiple uses of ‘I’, ‘my’, and especially ‘we’, tie Krog to Afrikanerdom and to
apartheid crimes, becoming markers of culpability. These parallels between ‘Litany’
and Todesfuge are compelling evidence that Krog has drawn on Celan’s poem to create
her own song of mourning for the past and for the dead. The significance of this is
that, first, as I have already suggested, it shows the degree to which the
author/speaker acknowledges the seriousness of the crimes in which she sees herself
as implicated. Secondly, it signals a commitment to writing carefully and self-
consciously about histories of trauma.

59 To quote those lines in the German (from Felstiner 249):
   wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
   wir trinken und trinken
50 Felstiner discusses the symbolic significance of Marguerite and Shulamith (see 258-60). Briefly,
   Marguerite evokes two German ideals of femininity: lyric poet Heinrich Heine’s golden-haired siren
   Lorelei, and Goethe’s embodiment of the eternal feminine, Gretchen of Faust. (Interestingly and
   perhaps ironically, Heinrich Heine was Jewish.) Shulamith, the princess of Song of Songs, is sometimes
   ‘seen as the Jewish people itself’ (Felstiner, 260).
Addressing this second point requires an examination of the context in which Krog first mentioned ‘Todesfuge’: a discussion on how to write after trauma and atrocity. As Krog notes, this was a major debate in post-WWII Germany; at its centre was a controversy about Celan’s poem (Felstiner 255). From the 1950s critics came to apply Adorno’s dictum ‘After Auschwitz, to write a poem is barbaric’ to the piece (Felstiner 255). ‘Todesfuge’, they suggested, was ‘too lyrical...too beautiful...the horror too accessible’ (Krog 359-60). (Notably, Adorno retracted his dictum after reading Celan’s poetry, which he had not seen at the time he made it.) Krog struggles with the question of representing trauma from the beginning of the TRC hearings, and initially decides that she ought to keep her ‘artist’s hands off’ it (361): ‘No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this’ (74). Especially as a white writer, she should ‘shut up for a while...[and] let the domain...belong to those who literally paid blood’ (360). Yet an artist’s reluctance (however well-intended) to engage with the past may be dangerous, as Krog’s friend reminds her: ‘[German artists] refused to take possession of their own history. So...Hollywood took it...A soap opera laid claim to...Auschwitz’ (361).\(^6\) That Krog goes on to write ‘Litany’, after ‘Todesfuge’, suggests a revision of her original, deterministic position that she must be silent. As Snyman observes, though Krog retains an awareness that literature may run the risk of ‘aesthetising’ trauma, she ‘opts for Adorno’s acknowledgement of Celan’s poem’ (293), recognising, too, that she writes from a position of historical complicity. ‘Litany’ finally suggests that for its author/speaker Afrikaner identity is a ‘white shadow’ from which she would like to be ‘free’ (401). Certainly Krog has made

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\(^6\) Ironically enough, given this line from Krog, Hollywood has now produced a disappointing film based on *Country of My Skull: In My Country* (2005).
an effort to cut herself off from her ‘blood and the heritage thereof’ (197), both in her rejection of Afrikaans as a language in which to write about apartheid trauma, and also in the writing of *Country of My Skull* itself, which can be seen as a symbolic severance of the Afrikaner ‘bloodline’ (C. Coetzee 690). Yet as J.M. Coetzee has said, one cannot entirely resign from the master ‘caste’ (Attwell *Doubling* 96). Krog acknowledges this: ‘Will I for ever be them…?’ she asks, and answers, ‘Yes’ (197).

**Excavating the farm**

What Krog learns in the TRC hearings, especially in the encounter with the Vlakplaas Five, also prompts her to re-examine the farm. In the thesis introduction and previous chapters (chapter three especially), I suggested the importance of the farm and of pastoral in settler ideology and nationalist mythologies. We have already seen the settler pastoral and farm subjected to a revisionist treatment in *The Custodians*, *The White Earth*, and, albeit more subtly, in *The Folly*. *Country of My Skull* offers an interrogation that goes further, and which operates from within a uniquely personal frame. Figuratively applying the (literal) revelations of the TRC to her own ancestral home in the Free State, Krog presents a postcolonial excavation of the Afrikaner farm. *Country of My Skull* reveals the violence and exclusion that has secured it, and considers the historical mythologies commonly used to justify colonialist and apartheid crimes in these contexts. Krog concedes the power of these narratives in the settler imagination—including her own—but ultimately discredits them as legitimate ‘excuses’ or explanations.

As for many white South Africans, and Afrikaners in particular, the farm—both the family farm and the idea of the pastoral more broadly—is central to Krog’s
sense of being at home in the country and on the land. In *Country of My Skull* it provides a starting and ending point for considerations of Afrikaner belonging. That the family farm is ‘home’ and point of origin for Krog is suggested by her reference to it as a ‘womb’ to which she wishes to retreat (6). She has always felt safe here ‘in this stinkwood bed...this sandstone house, this part of the Free State’ (6). This is the home ‘of her youth’ (6, 19, 412), Krog notes repeatedly, and her birth family still lives on this piece of land. Yet in a newly post-apartheid country the farm and all that it represents is threatened. Now the nights are ‘filled with menace’ (6) as outsiders—specifically, African stock thieves—traverse the fences in numbers ‘fivefold since the [1994] election’ (18). Krog is reduced to sitting inside a locked house, listening over the radio as her brothers chase the intruders with guns. She does not know how to feel when she hears shots (6-7). The signs of her brothers’ violence—a request that she ‘[c]all an ambulance’ for a man they have injured, and their swollen knuckles the next day (18)—disturb her. She is troubled by her brother’s expression of his ‘cold fury’ at how these trespassers supposedly ‘force’ him to shoot them (17). These are intimations of an awareness that will only grow as the narrative unfolds: that is, Krog’s awareness of the violence used to enforce the boundaries of her home. Nor is ‘home’ the safe warm place Krog once believed it to be: as Krog’s mother observes, ‘this farm, this lifelong haven, this place that has always been the safest place we know, has turned into an island under threat’ (414). This early passage in the text introduces us to an Afrikaner farm that is, like many other white farms of the time, under increasing threat from ‘without’. As *Country of My Skull* unfolds, the farm and Afrikaner belonging also come under pressure from within, as they are questioned by a person located on the ‘inside’, Krog herself.
Here I want to return briefly to ‘Litany’ to examine another layer of meaning in the poem: one that relates to the South African farm. Johan Snyman writes that in ‘Litany’ Krog ‘transpo(etici)ses Celan’s *Todesfuge* with its reminiscences of the landscape of the death camp to a Free State landscape scarred for the imagination by the memory of past suffering’ (293). That a pastoral landscape is being invoked is suggested by the poem’s frequent usage of metaphors related to, or mention of items associated with, farms: the ‘corn and chaff’ of the speaker’s past, the ‘sulphur and lime’ fertiliser, and the crops of ‘burdock and wheat’ sprouting from the same ground in which multiple bodies are buried (400). The farm is indeed ‘scarred for the imagination’ because in some way (unspecified in the poem) it is associated with the regime that tortured and killed non-whites. The nature of that association emerges in Krog’s account of her engagement with the Vlakplaas Five.

The name by which this group of policemen came to be collectively known was taken from the place where they worked: Vlakplaas, which translates to ‘shallow’ or ‘level’ farm (van Wyk Smith 19). Thus, the scene of these men’s crimes is no less familiar than the men themselves—and no less unsettling: it is the South African farm. The appearance of these men in the TRC hearings begins a metaphorical, and then literal, ‘unearthing’ of the farm. This process turns up human bones. Krog writes of the Commission’s (literal) excavations:

[T]his one image keeps hanging in the mind: the discoloured bones being packed out, one by one, next to the fresh mound of earth. At last the commission has enough evidence that missing activists were interrogated, tortured, killed and buried on farms all over the country...(310)

These excavations expose more than the crimes of apartheid. They expose the farm, which in Afrikaner culture is a key metaphor of white belonging. Beneath the soil on which so much of Afrikaner identity is based are the bodies of its victims. Following
up on the TRC findings, Krog links Vlakplaas and other death farms to apparently idyllic white South African landscapes, tacitly juxtaposing the family farm with the torture farm, the ‘death farm’ (as Vlakplaas has been called, see Gobodo-Madikizela). The two are not explicitly aligned in the text, but by examining Vlakplaas so closely, and by admitting her recognition of her family in the Vlakplaas Five, Krog points to her own farm. Beyond that, she implicates an icon of Afrikaner belonging. That the phenomenon of the death farm turns out to be so extensive only adds to the effect: the whole country is ‘drenched with blood’ (311). The spectre of Vlakplaas thus comes to haunt all South African (white) pastoral landscapes, including the piece of earth that Krog most desires to see as her own. The findings of the TRC reveal beyond doubt that the safety of the white farm—that the fact of that farm at all—has always been sustained by violence. Now Krog knows the ‘price and mortality’ of her family’s ‘privilege’, the privilege of living and belonging on the farm (413).

This revelation could hardly come as a complete surprise to any South African. Rather than revealing that violence was commonly deployed in the service of white dominance, the TRC went some way toward uncovering the extent and degree of apartheid crimes and their very human costs. But it is important to note that accompanying apartheid’s brutal repressions—and, more generally, historical white violence in South Africa—was a highly-developed rhetoric of justification. The South African apartheid state, for example, cited the threat of communism and terrorism as rationales for its treatment of anti-apartheid activists and more widespread eschewal of human rights. (Such rationales are not at all unfamiliar in these days of the US-led ‘War on Terror’, as J.M. Coetzee underlined at a 2005 book...
reading at the National Library of Australia. Within a more intimate, domestic sphere, and also within the realm of historical mythological discourse, narratives of Afrikaner suffering and embattlement have a long trajectory and have often impeded or stifled critique. Krog does not ignore or even immediately discredit these narratives in Country of My Skull. Instead, she opens them out for consideration, noting that they are also seductive to her, before refusing their legitimacy as ‘excuses’.

Popular Afrikaner historical mythological discourse presents ‘Boer’ or Afrikaner identity and placement in South Africa as under attack, or at least under threat, both from Africans and the British. (There are striking parallels here with settler narratives of victimhood and the ‘battler’ in Australian white historical mythologies, which I first explored in detail in chapter two in relation to The White Earth.) Afrikaner suffering under the British in the Boer war and the construction of their privileges—including land rights—as ‘hard fought’ for have seemingly foreclosed critical examination (from the ‘inside’, at least) of how Afrikaners made themselves dominant. A eulogy for Verwoerd written by Krog’s mother, a former freelance writer, and quoted in the text expresses this reluctance to question or condemn on the basis of past suffering:

I prayed that my hand should fall off if I ever write something for my personal honour at the cost of my people and what has been negotiated for them through years of tears and blood. (148)

Krog does not discount Afrikaner suffering. On the contrary, she acknowledges it, and reveals her own vulnerability to accepting it as an explanation or excuse for

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62 Coetzee remarked before commencing to read from Waiting for the Barbarians that ‘I used to think that the people who created (South Africa’s) laws that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know that they were just pioneers ahead of their time.’ He continued on to say that during the apartheid years South African police were able to take human rights into their own hands, commenting that ‘[a]ll of this and much more…was done in the name of the fight against terror.’ I was present at the reading, but the quotations are from The Australian (see Price 2005).
apartheid crimes. For example, she reports her rebuke of a journalist who expresses
disgust at this defence:

> When [former military commander and conservative Afrikaner politician] Viljoen
talks about how the British took away the land of the Boers, an English-speaking
journalist mutters sarcastically, ‘Ah Shame!’

> I cannot help it. I spit like a flame: ‘Shut up, you!’ (198)

Yet Krog ultimately resists appeals to silence that are made on the basis of past
injustices against Afrikaners, such as her mother’s. Having recognised—and then
confronted the reader with—the lengths to which apartheid went to secure white
placement, she refuses to allow that this was in any way ethically defensible.

**Re-conceiving Afrikaner belonging**

*Country of My Skull* dismantles and condemns traditional and conservative
paradigms of Afrikaner belonging and the rhetoric of a rightful place on the land. But
what of the present and the future? How will the Afrikaner belong *now*? More
specifically, how can Krog, as a woman of Afrikaner heritage, belong in post-
apartheid South Africa? Krog gradually moves toward a poetic suggestion of a new
model for Afrikaner belonging. Having acknowledged that her place in the country
and on the land has been secured by violence and oppression, Krog indicates a wish
to put away the exclusionary home secured for her by apartheid, to open it out to
others. In expressing these desires and her apology, Krog speaks not only to fellow
Afrikaners, but also to an/other audience. As Carli Coetzee argues, Krog
demonstrates ‘a self-conscious desire to address an audience that includes black

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63 To provide a few examples from the text: Krog recounts a visit of Queen Elizabeth II to South
Africa and notes in scathing tones that the Queen’s schedule is ‘too full’ for her to visit the Women’s
Memorial in Bloemfontein and offer an apology to Afrikaners ‘for what was done to them in the
name of the British’ (13-14). Elsewhere she discusses an Afrikaner ‘inferiority complex’ stemming
from being looked down upon by the English (see 361-62).
South Africans' (686). This emphasis on inclusion and reconciliation is also a feature of Krog's conception of a different Afrikaner belonging, which she suggests must be contingent on the invitation and mutual embrace of black South Africans. This conception is articulated most clearly in the untitled poem that closes the book:

because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within

it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
it sings, it ignites
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of my heart
shudders towards the outline
new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand
daily because of a thousand stories
I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed for ever. I want to say:
  forgive me
  forgive me
  forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you. (423)

The first 'you' in this poem refers to the TRC, following as it does a paragraph of prose praising its work (see 422). The second you, however—'You whom I have wronged'—signals an address to black South Africans, and the poem moves on to voice a plea for the speaker to be allowed to accompany them into the 'new South Africa'. Krog thus recognises the other, and ascribes to the African the authority to allow (or disallow) her re-entry into the country. In addition, the poem's conceptions of and suggestions for post-apartheid white belonging depart radically from historical
models of white placement that are based on exclusions, repressions and the silencing of others. Here the Afrikaner is penitent, not self-justifying; s/he seeks a communal belonging-in-place with black South Africans, a belonging 'with you'. Krog heralds a future in which the divisions of apartheid are over and South Africans belong together in a state of reconciliation. It is a framework with marked similarities to that offered at the end of The Custodians.

**Troubling representations**

As with The Custodians, a critical reading of Country of My Skull raises questions about prematurely celebratory closure, the postcolonial dilemma of representation, appropriations of the suffering of others, and the rehabilitation of the sympathetic white settler. The remainder of the chapter turns to examine the ways in which Country of My Skull's representations of the TRC, Afrikaner complicity, and settler and apartheid violence are held in tension with its resecuring redemption of the (repentant) white South African. It considers the various appropriations in the text, including those of victim testimony, suffering and—perhaps most controversially, though this is also my most tentative point—blackness. I will go on to suggest that many of these appropriations are implicated in the text's resecuring of the Afrikaner. The aim is not to deny the text's literary resistance. Rather, it is to challenge notions of postcolonial white writing as 'oppositional' in any simple way, to demonstrate again how it may be marked by ambivalence, its representations troubled by questions of ethics and function.

As noted in the chapter introduction, many critics have remarked on appropriations in Country of My Skull. Their attention has primarily been on Krog's
extensive quotations of victim testimony. As Moss writes, about a ‘quarter’ of the 
book is ‘direct testimony from victims, family members, and amnesty seekers’ (87). 
Quite apart from the matter of intellectual property (noted as an issue by Ruden 171) 
and Krog’s financial profit from a book that is so substantially made up of others’ 
words, most critics would agree that the crux of the debate is the manner in which 
Krog ‘distils’ and shapes those testimonies (Moss 86), with one major point of 
critique being that they are used in ways that suit her own literary ends.64 Some 
quotations of testimony are unattributed to their speaker (see for example 39-43); all 
are fitted into the larger narrative according to Krog’s wishes. In that process, they 
are often dislocated from their original contexts and/or modified in potentially 
problematic ways. Cook, for example, queries whether the ‘devices and feints of 
postmodernism’—a reference to Krog’s attempts to destabilise truth through 
fictionalising and her employment of a fragmented narrative style—might not further 
disempower those testifying subjects who are already ‘disenfranchised’ (76). More 
baldly, Ruden writes that Country treats apartheid’s victims (and possibly even its 
perpetuators) as little more than ‘literary figurines’ (171). She singles out Krog’s 
reproduction and analysis of the testimony of a poor, illiterate shepherd named 
Lekotse as an example (see Krog 328-33). Ruden is suspicious, first, of Krog’s 
enjambment of the lines of Lekotse’s testimony to turn it into poetry; further, she 
suggests that Krog’s exposition on Lekotse’s testimony ‘treats a real man’s real 
misfortune as a text for abstract interpretation’ (172-73).65 By contrast, Graham 
describes Krog’s handling of victims’ testimonies as ‘sensitive’ (21) and alert to the

64 As Shane Graham notes, we do not know whether ‘financial compensation was paid to the 
witnesses whose text [Krog] uses’ (25).
65 Lekotse’s testimony is otherwise presented unaltered in Country of My Skull. In official records his 
name is listed as Joang Likotsi and a brief summary of his testimony can be found in T.R.C. Report V. 
3. (see 382).
‘paradoxes of traumatic telling’ (26). Interestingly, he argues his point with reference to the same passages that Ruden finds objectionable: those that relate and examine the testimony of Lekotse (see S. Graham 25-27). Turning Lekotse’s testimony into poetry, Graham argues, ‘underscore[s] the dignity of [his] narrative’ and ‘acknowledges that this poor, uneducated old man has a gift of eloquence and storytelling worthy of being called poetry’ (26). Additionally, by undertaking a kind of literary analysis of the narrative, Krog points to the ‘depth and richness’ of Lekotse’s story (S. Graham 26), rather than undermining the ‘realness’ of his suffering.

Thus, while it is indisputable that Krog adapts TRC testimonies for her own literary purposes, what is less clear is the degree to which this practice might be labelled unethical and/or exploitative. The question also arises of whether it would have been better for Krog to not write the book, to not quote (and edit) TRC testimony. It would be difficult to make such a case; Country of My Skull has been an important disseminator of TRC stories, allowing marginalised voices to reach a far wider audience. This goes to the point made in the previous chapter about the postcolonial dilemma of representing the other and/or the other’s story and pain. It is a dilemma that haunts Krog, as we have seen in relation to ‘Todesfuge’ and her thoughts ‘[i]f I write this, I exploit and betray’ and ‘[n]o poetry should come forth from this’ (74). She is very aware that her whiteness and status as an ‘artist’ opens her ‘telling’ of others’ testimony to charges of exploitation, distortion, and omission (360). Her identity as an Afrikaner woman could have silenced her, and did for a time leave her ‘without words’ (74). To remain silent, however, might have been to continue a long colonial legacy in South Africa. Although there are reasons to criticise Krog’s uses and manipulations of TRC testimony, excluding the words of witnesses from the book may have been more problematic. In addition, the way in
which victim stories were edited and incorporated into a larger narrative in Country of My Skull has arguably made them more engaging and compelling for many readers than extended, direct quotations would have been, and for the most part, the text’s treatment of these materials is sensitive and self-conscious. (My own reading of Krog’s poetic treatment of Lekotse’s testimony matches Graham’s.)

**Appropriating pain and suffering**

That said, there is another issue with Country of My Skull’s treatment of victim testimony. It is signalled in Cook’s remark that Krog, in her efforts to present and sometimes rewrite the testimonies she has witnessed, risks slipping into an appropriation of the victims’ pain (73). Again, what is at stake is an appropriation of the other toward literary ends, but here the issue is less that Krog ‘edits’ and embroiders others’ testimony, and more that ‘the words of the witnesses function as backdrops for the reporter-narrator’s unsettling journey through the process of telling truth and reconciliation’ (Moss 86). In other words, as Graham writes,

> Krog’s book...threatens...to appropriate the stories of victims for her own narrative of being displaced from her country and traumatised by the knowledge of the horrible deeds committed in the name of her people. (25)

Jill Bennett, engaging with one TRC witness’s negative response to Krog’s usage of his testimony in Country, makes much the same point:

> [F]or the owner of testimony...the interaction of the stranger [Krog] with his words simply represents a colonization. The pain of testifying—his pain—is transformed into a figure, an emblem, around which a narrative of white guilt and affective transformation is elaborated. (183)

Krog’s own personal narrative binds together all the quotations of testimony, commentary on the TRC, ethical philosophising, historical and political situating, and various other assorted snippets in the text. This story of ‘the emotional turmoil of the
reporter-narrator confronting her on culpability in the history of South Africa' (Moss 87) largely subsumes the others.

Similarly, Krog’s representation of her experience of witnessing the TRC draws on the victims’ narratives of loss and pain, and her own pain as a witness sometimes overwhelms the stories and suffering of those who testify. The final, untitled poem says that the TRC’s ‘thousand stories’ have ‘scorched’ Krog; the text overall figures her witnessing as traumatic, in highly emotive and/or graphic language. The physical symptoms she describes are extreme: ‘My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out’ (74). Country of My Skull represents these not merely as signs of stress, but as manifestations of Krog’s ‘taking on’ of victim pain and experience. Early on she relates the words of a counsellor to a group of press covering the TRC: ‘You will experience the same symptoms as the victims’ (55). Later, apparently quoting a psychologist, she writes: ‘The more you empathize with the victim, the more you become the victim; you display the same kinds of symptoms—helplessness, wordlessness, anxiety, desperation’ (258). This is what Krog shows happening to her over the course of the TRC. Her somatic conditions reflect the crimes and injuries suffered by victims. The reference to her own hair loss, for example, closely follows a passage in which she relates the testimony of a man who said that all he found at the site where his son was killed were ‘pieces of...hair’ (74). Krog’s body, as Cook writes, gradually becomes ‘freighted with the accumulated pain of the stories of victims’ (87). Her psychological experience also comes to ‘mime what takes place at the hearings’ (Sanders ‘Truth’ 25). For instance, just as the witnesses testify to being forcefully ‘unhomed’, so she comes to feel a ‘stranger’ in her home, where ‘[e]verything has become unconnected and unfamiliar’ (Country 73, 71).
Sanders denies that *Country of My Skull* claim[s] any facile identification with the victims who testify, and does not criticise the ways in which Krog’s own narrative thread comes to ‘mime’ or mirror that of the victims (‘Truth’ 16, 25).

Certainly the text represents Krog’s pain as arising from transference and empathetic identification, but as Moss suggests, Krog’s suffering as a witness threatens to eclipse the pain of those who testify (86). Moss argues that this is visible, for example, in Krog’s ‘recounting of Nomonde Calata’s testimony about the death of Fort Catala’, where ‘the reporter-narrator interjects her own emotional response to the testimony’ (86). The sound of Nomonde’s crying becomes for Krog ‘the ultimate sound of what the [TRC] process is about...it will haunt me for ever and ever’ (*Country* 63-64), so that ‘[t]he focus shifts away from the victim’s story to the pained response of the listener as she is haunted by the crying’ (Moss 86). Elsewhere, Krog begins to tell of a (white) apartheid victim’s trauma about losing his family, but his account is overtaken by the relation of her own distraught emotional response:

> I flee blindly...out onto the stoep...I gasp for breath...I sit down on the steps and everything tears out of me. Flesh and blood can in the end only endure so much...Every week we are stretched thinner and thinner over different pitches of grief... (73)

These displays of empathetic suffering also go some way toward establishing Krog as deeply engaged with the TRC process and apartheid victims. Although the text identifies Krog as complicit with apartheid perpetrators, it also points repeatedly to her *difference* from them and, in particular, her difference from those Afrikaners who, post-apartheid, reject the TRC, deny responsibility, and play down or attempt to justify apartheid crimes. In noting this my purpose is not to question this representation of Krog as ‘apart’, but rather to draw attention to the way in which
the text might be seen to rewrite the Afrikaner as sympathetic and remorseful—a point to which I will return.

The critical literature on *Country of My Skull* generally recognises Krog’s appropriations of TRC testimony and victim suffering, but it has not (to my knowledge) suggested that Krog attempts to claim the blackness of the other. That argument will not be made here, at least not with any certainty, but I am struck by the final poem’s reference to a ‘new skin’—Krog’s—which is a ‘scorched’, therefore darkened, skin. Few have commented on this metaphor, and it has been excised in a later version of the piece that is incorporated as a stanza in the longer poem ‘Country of Grief and Grace’. (There are no other changes.) Yet it should not be overlooked. A white/settler desire to ‘be black’ is described by Carli Coetzee as ‘an option—problematic in many ways—that some white writers in South Africa, as elsewhere, pursue’ (695). This desire is referenced in other texts in this thesis, most notably in *Craft for a Dry Lake* (addressed in the next chapter), and Wicomb has revealed a project of ‘melanisation’ in some post-apartheid literature, in which the Afrikaner is ‘disaffiliated from whiteness’ (‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 382). A claiming of blackness is admittedly not prominent in *Country of My Skull*. Nevertheless, an alertness to the critical literature on white settler appropriations of blackness or indigenity, which identifies these as frequently enlisted in the settler subject’s quest for ‘deep’ and legitimate belonging, makes me suspicious of Krog’s skin metaphor and prompts me to read the book’s final poem more critically.

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66 Carli Coetzee precedes me in examining it, but she does not find the metaphor especially problematic. I will engage with her reception of the book’s final poem shortly.
67 ‘Country of Grief and Grace’ is included in Krog’s first volume of poetry to be published in English, *Down to My Last Skin*. 

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When examined more closely, Krog’s final poem does more than suggest a new model of Afrikaner belonging. It can be seen to oscillate between an unsettling reference to past wrongs and a resecuring claim to shared suffering and (possibly) blackness. An effort to repatriate the white settler subject—or at least Krog—in ‘the new South Africa’ is signalled by her assertion that she has been ‘scorched’ and given a ‘new skin’ by her witness of the TRC. As Carli Coetzee remarks, this metaphor of a ‘scorched skin’ is ‘not innocent’: it’s an ‘image of suffering, and scarring’ (693).

Moreover, a scorched skin is a burnt skin—and a darkened skin. The poem thus suggests that attending the TRC’s ‘thousand stories’ has somehow traumatised Krog, even (metaphorically) blackening her skin, so that her body, like those of the majority of apartheid’s victims, becomes a suffering, non-white body. One of the functions of this claim is that, as Carli Coetzee suggests, this ‘new’ skin, which is apparently earned through an empathic witness of the other, may ‘qualify Krog to be taken “with you”’ (693) into the new country. The section that follows takes this conclusion as a point of departure to suggest that Country of My Skull can be read as working to rehabilitate and ultimately resecure the penitent Afrikaner.

**Rehabilitating, resecuring the Afrikaner**

Georgina Horrell identifies in recent white South African writing a ‘crisis in [white] identity and subjectivity’ that has been brought about by a recognition of complicity in colonial and apartheid violence (‘A Whiter Shade’ 765). Such a crisis is visible in Country of My Skull, as Horrell notes and as this chapter has indicated. Whiteness, once a desirable condition, is now a tainted construct (Wicomb ‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 363). No figure is more in need of redemption than the Afrikaner: after the revelations of the TRC, ‘Afrikaner has become a disgraced category’
Zoe Wicomb identifies contemporary Afrikaners as engaged in a ‘discursive struggle’ to deconstruct their own whiteness as part of a quest for ‘rehabilitation’ (‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 363). She is not alone in suggesting that much post-apartheid white literature is concerned with a ‘detoxification’ of Afrikaner identity (Wicomb ‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 381). As others also demonstrate, it attempts to achieve this in various ways, for example through ‘melanisation’ (Wicomb’s focus), confessional narratives (see Heyns ‘The Whole Country’s Truth’), the recovery of alternative marginal Afrikaner identities (see Irlam; Horrell ‘A Whiter Shade’), and/or the outright rejection of ‘blood lineage’ (see C. Coetzee). This project to rewrite and redeem the Afrikaner is often connected, it would seem, with a desire for reconciliation (Horrell ‘A Whiter Shade’ 774) and a wish to belong again in the new country (C. Coetzee 685). While Krog’s rehabilitation of the Afrikaner does not quite fit any of these frameworks (though I will suggest that it may draw on several of these strategies), her text can certainly be read as ‘an act of redemption’ (to quote a review from the Daily Telegraph). Country of My Skull rewrites the Afrikaner as potentially penitent, conscious of complicity and humbly willing (indeed eager) to make amends. I have begun to suggest that the text not only unsettles the settler but also resecures that figure. To clarify, it works (somewhat covertly) to re-home this remorseful Afrikaner in South Africa. 

Country of My Skull is of course an indictment of Afrikanerdom, as shown in the first half of this chapter, but it is also occupied with presenting an alternative model of Afrikaner identity, one that is virtually a polar opposite to that traditional figure of Afrikanerhood, one of ‘white, masculinest superiority’ (Irlam 701). An (admittedly extreme) manifestation of this ‘type’ is referenced early in the text, in a

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68 These tactics are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
chapter titled ‘They never wept, the men of my race’. Krog describes a group of white supremacists she encounters while attending a TRC-related meeting:

Sunk low on their springs, three weathered white Sierras roar past the wrought-iron gates of Parliament. Heavy, ham-like forearms bulge through the open windows—honking, waving old Free State and Transvaal flags. Hairy fists in the air… The double doors snap open. The marching crunch of the black-clad Ystergarde—even on the carpet their boots make a noise. The Iron Guard, elite corps of the Afrikaner Weerstands beweging. Black balaclavas worn like caps, ready to be rolled down over the faces. Three-armed swastikas on the sleeves. (1-2)

Apart from the fact of their shared ‘race’, there is little resemblance between these men and Krog. Although we have seen that Krog accepts her complicity with apartheid’s henchmen (in the form of the Vlakplaas Five), the reader is never under the illusion that she was anything but opposed to them. Few South African readers, at least, could be unaware of Krog’s ‘well-established…dissident credentials’ (Wicomb ‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ 364); although she identifies her relationship with the Five as intimate, in the same paragraph she writes that she has ‘for a lifetime’ been ‘fighting against’ them and ‘all the codes’ they embody, which she also ‘grew up with’ (139). She may be associated with them by blood, but she has been disloyal from the start, a notoriously rebellious daughter to her ‘National Party’ father. It is in Country of My Skull’s representation of Krog as a different Afrikaner that we find its new model of Afrikaner identity. This Afrikaner, traumatised by the knowledge of what was done by and for ‘her people’, does weep (Krog cries frequently throughout the text); she admits culpability, facing the crimes of the past and her complicity with them. She is deeply engaged with the story of the other, does what she can to make sure it is heard, and expresses a commitment to change and to working ‘with you’—the black South African—to set things right. (There is even a passage in which she discusses financial reparations and her own willingness, even eagerness, to make them, see 439.) Krog points the direction for a reborn Afrikaner, one who, in
Coetzee’s words, ‘chooses not to continue the lineage and values of the fathers’ (689) even as she still ‘owns’ these roots.

This is actually a far more convincing and sophisticated rehabilitation of the Afrikaner than that undertaken in many other white post-apartheid texts. Krog does not attempt to invent racial hybridity in the family line (see Wicomb ‘Five Afrikaner Texts’), nor does she declare a clean break from her white heritage and pine for the embrace of a ‘Great African mother’ (see Wicomb ‘Five Afrikaner Texts’ and C. Coetzee). Even in Krog’s own confessional narrative there is little self-absolution: as noted, she rejects the stock excuses for apartheid. Yet the figure she represents is highly sympathetic, and this portrayal of a ‘changed’ Afrikaner tacitly makes a case for her worthiness to return. Certainly for Krog, distinguishing herself from the other Afrikaner enables her to feel moments of belonging. As Coetzee writes:

> It is in the moment when [Krog’s] body seems to break down in tears, distinguishes herself from the men of her race who do not weep, that—for a moment—Krog is able to imagine herself connected to the country and able to say ‘we’, ‘ours’, ‘mine’, to feel that she belongs to a black heart—is loved by a black heart. (695)

Another important point is that Krog’s Afrikaner has been a willing participant in the TRC. This is vital: Krog writes that ‘[w]hen the Truth Commission started last year, I realized instinctively: if you cut yourself off from the process, you will wake up in a foreign country—a country that you don’t know and that you will never understand’ (199). At book’s end Krog suggests it is her participation in the TRC that enables her to feel that she might belong again to ‘Africa’:

> It is mine. I belong to that continent. My gaze, my eyes are one with the thousands of others that have looked back over the centuries toward Africa. Ours. Mine… And I realize that it is the Commission alone that has brought me to these moments of fierce belonging. (421)
We have already seen this notion in the book’s final poem: it is witness of the TRC that redeems the Afrikaner, giving her a ‘new skin’ that may allow her to re-enter the country. This painful, ‘scorching’ process has been a ‘rite of passage’ (Heyns ‘The Whole Country’s Truth’ 43) through which she emerges ‘changed for ever’ (Country 423). The return to belonging is of course contingent on the invitation of the other, the black South African. Ultimately, then, Krog’s framework for a new Afrikaner belonging is similar to that posed by Jose in The Custodians, where, as we have seen, the characters who acknowledge the ‘disgrace’ of the past, make necessary reparations, and accept a different, more inclusive model of belonging are resecured in a ceremony of land return that is watched over—thus approved—by the Aboriginal owners.

Indeed The Custodians’ representation of the Aborigine as a figure of authoritative belonging, with the power to allow or disallow the settler to belong, has a parallel in Country of My Skull. Here it is the black South African who fulfils such a role. My emphasis in this chapter on the white Afrikaner and the black African, with little mention made of South Africans who do not fit these categories, has not been without cause. This is a reflection of the text itself, which all but excludes British-descended or English-speaking white South Africans and non-white non-Africans (i.e., ethnically Indian South Africans). In doing this, Krog rather problematically suggests that true reconciliation in South Africa is between Afrikaner and African. Dorothy Driver has remarked that this exclusion is based on a flawed mythology of the land, a mythology in which the Afrikaner and African are bonded over the land (‘Representing’). To draw a quotation from Krog, there is a view that ‘land is the essence’ (414) of both the Afrikaner and the African. Yet as Driver notes, this schema obscures that land was taken from Africans, and also fails to account for the
differences between Afrikaner and African ‘love’ for the land (which J.M. Coetzee has elaborated in White Writing) (‘Representing’). For Driver, African love for the land is linked to community and ancestry, and land use is shared, whereas white love for the land has expressed itself more in a desire for exclusive ownership or access, and a lack of respect and regard for its other human inhabitants. The exclusion of others from the narrative of reconciliation in Country of My Skull again betrays Krog’s preoccupation with land and desire to return to belonging.

A caveat to these critiques is that Krog’s attempts to resecure her belonging are not necessarily ‘colonialist’ and ethically problematic. Her models for a new Afrikaner identity and belonging depart from colonialist and apartheid ones, and constitute an effort to find an ethical way forward—given that she and other Afrikaners are now ‘here’, and after many generations do not have a home elsewhere. This is what Krog appears to be trying to do in a passage in which she entreats black South Africans to ‘hear us, we are from here. We will live it right—here—with you, for you’ (149). This demand for a recognition that Afrikaners are ‘from here’ may seem strident, even presumptuous. Yet at the same time, as Susan Spearey writes, ‘[t]he location of the Afrikaner in this passage, facing a mirror of shame and guilt, but emphatically “here” and engaged in the present is of no small significance’ (70).

Conclusion

I have been arguing that Country of My Skull works in complex and contradictory ways to both unsettle and resecure the settler subject. In fact, there is a interesting slippage between these two projects: Krog’s empathetic embrace of TRC testimony facilitates a recognition of complicity, but at the same time, it is through this experience of ‘witness’ that she lays claim to suffering and a different Afrikaner
identity which may allow her to be at home again in the ‘new South Africa’. Krog’s narrative is thus double-edged. It most overtly disconcerts traditional models of Afrikaner belonging that are exclusive and which rely on notions of a ‘rightful’ white placement, but in more subtle ways the text may attempt to redeem and re-home the penitent settler. Remorse and an empathetic engagement with the other thus become—at least in part—‘steps’ on a path to reconciliation. As in Jose’s The Custodians, appropriation and a celebratory ending are issues in Country of My Skull, prompting the question of how the white writer might avoid these pitfalls. The next chapter presents a reading of Kim Mahood’s Craft for a Dry Lake, another text of woman’s memoir, but one which demonstrates how self-reflexive ambivalence may enable the white writer to both entertain and critique compulsions to appropriate the other and smooth over the trauma of the past in the interest of reconciled belonging.
Chapter Five

Retracing Tracks: Reflexive Ambivalence in *Craft for a Dry Lake* by Kim Mahood

Her father’s sudden death in a helicopter accident was the impetus for the artist Kim Mahood’s return to the ‘country of her childhood’, the Tanami (Brennan 91). This journey in turn became the material for *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000), a text Bernadette Brennan describes as ‘an evocative, sensual and challenging blend of history, fiction and memoir in which...Mahood maps her physical and emotional journeys of return’ (91). Like *Country of My Skull*, *Craft for a Dry Lake* is deeply personal and autobiographical. It communicates Mahood’s passionate, almost mystical love for the place—feelings she shared with her father, a stockman who helped to open the desert to white settlement in the 1960s. But it also underlines her awareness that it is now ‘impossible to come back and belong...fully and unquestioningly’ (153). The land has returned to its traditional owners, and in adulthood Mahood is highly conscious of ‘postcolonial interpretations’ of the region’s history, including the violence that enabled white settlement (252). Again like Krog, Mahood represents herself as implicated in this violence through familial ties, especially the relationship with her father, and the text’s relation of her journey through the Tanami becomes the site of a critical revisiting of her father’s legacy and larger narratives of Australian frontier history. The text’s critiques, whether of colonial exploration projects, settler mythologies of ‘the bush’, or appropriative
models of white belonging, are all made from a position of acknowledged complicity and compromise. Following *The Custodians* and *Country of My Skull* in attempting to conceive new ways for settlers to be and belong in the country, *Craft for a Dry Lake* nevertheless manages to evade the most problematic aspects of these texts, in particular their appropriations of the other and resecuring of the sympathetic settler. Its key postcolonial strategy is the deployment of a self-reflexive ambivalence that allows Mahood to both pose and interrogate settler desires in relation to the past, place, belonging, and Aboriginality. Even at its end, the text refuses to smooth over contradictions and irresolution. Of the Australian works examined in this thesis, then, *Craft for a Dry Lake* is the most reflexive and resistant to closure, working at a similar level in these respects to *The Folly* and *Disgrace*.

*Craft for a Dry Lake* is out of print in 2007 and is regrettably not a widely recognised text in Australia or overseas. However, it has received positive reviews and some critical attention, as well as *The Age* and the New South Wales Premier’s awards for non-fiction. Drusilla Modjeska was perhaps the book’s most prominent reviewer, and commended its engagement with ‘contested stories, bitter histories’ and ‘intractable...ways of understanding the world’ (‘Refreshing’ 2). Modjeska acknowledges echoes of Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks* (1980) in the text, and suggests that Mahood is aware that the ‘kind of adventure’ undertaken and written about by Davidson ‘no longer possible—for her, or us’ (‘Refreshing’ 2). Elsewhere, Modjeska identifies *Craft for a Dry Lake* as one of several women’s texts that ‘mourn the wound John Howard left weeping’ (Modjeska *Timepieces* 182), thus reading it as a white reconciliation text, one that uses engagements with Aboriginality as a means of questioning white assumptions of history and belonging, and of formulating political and ethical critiques of white hegemony. (Clarke ‘Intimate Strangers’ 69)

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69 Robyn Davidson’s bestseller, however, is still in print and enjoys a wide circulation.
Modjeska’s remarks inform this analysis and may have helped to bring *Craft for a Dry Lake* to a wider readership, but they are not intended to be in-depth or ‘academic’ and do not address the text’s greater complexities. These are better analysed by Robert Clarke and Bernadette Brennan.

Clarke analyses *Craft for a Dry Lake* with other texts classified as contemporary Australian travel literature, seeking to ‘address the ways in which the discourse of reconciliation manifests’ in this writing (‘Intimate Strangers’ 70).

Mahood’s text is a memoir, he writes, but also a ‘hybrid’ work that ‘mobilises the conventions of travel writing’ in its ‘intense focus on the interaction between place, memory and identity’ (Clarke ‘Intimate Strangers’ 69). It is one of several recently published Australian travel narratives to ‘[focus] on race issues and the legacies of colonialism’ and reflect the ‘upheavals [of the 1990s] in the national public sphere with respect to Aboriginality’, including the ‘crisis of sympathy’ experienced by white liberals following the revelations of, for example, the *Bringing Them Home Report* (Clarke ‘Intimate Strangers’ 69, 76). Mahood’s *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Clarke writes, ‘speculate[s] upon engaging with Aboriginal Australia in ways that do not simply recognise cultural difference and provide a textual space for the voice of another, but which examine the subjective and ethical meanings of responding to the legacy of the colonial past’ (‘Intimate Strangers’ 78-79). He continues with an important qualification:

Nevertheless while [these texts] critique and eschew…colonising rhetoric, it may be argued that [they] use the engagement with Aboriginality as a trope within a performance of white benevolence and sympathy through which Aboriginality is again reified and commodified and deployed to serve white postcolonial fantasies of redemption and transformation. (‘Intimate Strangers’ 79)
Clarke does not argue that *Craft for a Dry Lake* does this; nor will I. His comment does
draw attention to the difficult—and seemingly inherent—ethical questions about
representation and function that arise in relation to postcolonial white writing, and
with which this thesis is occupied. This chapter follows Clarke’s lead in reading the
book as contemporary Australian travel literature, but looks beyond national contexts
to examine *Craft* with reference to colonial travel writing and the ways in which the
genre has been used ‘differently’ (in the words of Sara Mills) by white women.

To date, no critic has analysed *Craft for a Dry Lake* as closely as Bernadette
Brennan, who identifies ‘country but also the relationships between Aboriginal and
non-indigenous Australians and their respective claims to country’ as central to the
text. Brennan applauds Mahood’s efforts to write about these issues:

Mahood is well aware that to ‘venture into the terrain of white and Aboriginal
relationships to country is to step into a minefield located somewhere between the
high moral ground and the siege mentality’, but she attempts, by writing honestly
about her own ‘ambivalence and discomfort’ to uncover some of the complexities
involved in negotiating…belonging. The candour with which she discusses such
issues is a new and important development in Australian writing. (96)

Brennan also hints that the text promotes a sense of place that acknowledges the
multiple layers of history that may overlay any one site in her quotation of Mahood’s
line about the dry lake, ‘[Here at this place] I feel the other journeys, ancestral,
contemporary, historic, imaginary’ (103): what has previously been described in this
thesis as a postcolonial sense of place. Although Brennan does not explicitly describe
the text as postcolonial white writing, this argument is implicit in her analysis, and
this chapter builds on Brennan’s to more closely examine the nexus of ambivalence
and reflexivity in the text.

70 The quotations cited in this passage are Kim Mahood’s words and come from ‘Bearing Witness’ 25-
26.
In stark contrast to the positivity of the analyses of *Craft for a Dry Lake* thus far reviewed is Sonia Kurtzer’s negative reading, which decries the text as neither ‘transparent’ nor ‘authentic’ about settler belonging, violence and privilege. Kurtzer particularly condemns Mahood’s failure to ‘politicise her theorising of belonging’ (74) and asserts that Mahood is in denial about the role her father may have ‘played…in dispossessing [the Warlpiri]’ (76). These points warrant attention and I will return to them, but it must be said that many of Kurtzer’s criticisms are inadequately nuanced and based on distorted readings. For instance, her paper suggests that Mahood marginalises ‘others’ theories and worldviews’ (74), including those of the Warlpiri (74). However, a close reading of the passages that Kurtzer cites reveals only that the text *contrasts* Western mythologies of travelling the desert with Warlpiri ones; there is no suggestion that Mahood considers western ways to be superior. In fact Mahood repeatedly foregrounds the ‘irrelevance’ of her own knowledge and perspective in this place (210). This chapter will, I hope, indicate Kurtzer’s reading as unbalanced and poorly supported with reference to the text itself. Contrary to Kurtzer, it argues that *Craft for a Dry Lake* deliberately foregrounds issues of white complicity and a heritage of colonial violence; Mahood’s text can thus be aligned with Probyn’s argument in ‘How Does the Settler Belong’, that ‘complicity [is] white writing’s inexorable point of departure’ and ‘the question of settler belonging must be situated within the epistemic violence that gives rise to it’ (76).

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71 Kurtzer’s analysis draws on a discussion of non-indigenous Australian belonging by Lin Miller, which in turn draws on Kierkegaard’s theorising on transparency and authenticity. See Miller ‘Belonging to Country’.
‘Dreaming tracks’

_Craft for a Dry Lake_ tells of a journey back to the outback territory where its author grew up. Mahood travels the country revisiting sites which hold meaning and memory for her, and the ‘tracks’ between them are no less significant than the destinations. Travel and journey, especially across or through ‘the Centre’, the desert or the outback, are recurrent themes in Australian cultural texts including novels, film and historical mythology. _Craft for a Dry Lake_ thus continues in a tradition. Following Clarke’s lead, I suggest that it is explicitly postcolonial travel writing. Although Clarke does not discuss the extent to which the ‘contemporary Australian travel literature’ that he describes departs from its European roots (justifiably—it is outside the range of his article), in this chapter it is necessary to consider travel writing’s long association with colonialism because it makes visible _Craft for a Dry Lake_’s literary lineage and its contribution to the discourse.

The term ‘travel writing’ or ‘travel literature’ is broad: it may be used to describe narratives that are fictional, journalistic, related as diaries or memoirs, and so on. For the purposes of this historically-focused discussion I define it as ‘texts written by westerners about colonised countries’ or territories (Mills _Discourses_ 2). This, at least, is the travel writing that has attracted the most critical interest and theorising. Since the 1970s, a major body of academic work has grown up around travel writing as colonial discourse (Mills _Discourses_ 2). One of its major contributions has been to show the genre’s ‘function as a mode of subjugation paving the way for exploitation’ (Mercer 147) and ‘essentially an instrument within colonial expansion
[that also] served to reinforce colonial rule once in place’ (Mills Discourses 2). As Steve Clark writes, the ‘strong model of travel writing and empire…insist[s] that their texts promote, confirm and lament the exercise of imperial power; and that this ideology pervades their representational practices at every level’ (3). Certainly the close alliance between travel writing and imperialism gives the former a certain ‘historical taintedness’ (Clifford 39), and for some this means that the entire genre is ‘intrinsically invidious’ (Clark 3). But the picture is more complex than this, both in the case of colonial works and in relation to some contemporary forms. Clark is right in calling for critics to ‘seek to resist the reduction of cross-cultural encounter to simple relations of domination and subordination’ (3). Such approaches tend to overlook the ambivalence and subtleties of such encounters—and the texts that have emerged from them. Clark also identifies the ‘potentialities of travel writing as a form: the self-reflexivity of the journey/quest motif; its intricate layering of temporalities; and its allegorical resonances with regard to the traveller’s own culture’ (3). Women’s travel writing suggests the need for a more nuanced analysis of texts located within the genre, and a consideration of certain strands in contemporary Australian travel literature supports Clark’s statements about the ‘potentialities’ of the form. Thinking about these variations on the model also helps to reveal how Mahood can engage the conventions of travel literature toward counter-colonial ends.

There have now been so many studies of women’s travel writing and so many prominent examples of western women documenting their visits to colonial

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72 Major critics advancing this position include Edward Said, Mary Louise Pratt, Peter Hulme, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak.

73 Clark is not alone in pointing to the reflexive potential of travel writing. See for example Clarke ‘Intimate Strangers’, Lisle 69, and Holland and Huggan.
territories that it is easy to forget that travel writing ‘remained a firmly male-
dominated preserve until the nineteenth century’, and even after this stayed ‘largely in
the hands of male writers’ (Ghose 1-2; see also Bassnett 225). The prevalence and
large readership of colonial women’s travel narratives is now well-recognised,
however, and these texts and their authors have become frequent topics of both
general and scholarly study. Until relatively recently many of these studies tended to
be uncritical, often viewing women’s travel writing as proto-feminist—celebrating an
exceptional, independent female subjectivity (see Mills Discourses 4). Women’s
complicity in colonialism was given little attention until Sara Mills’ 1991 Discourses of
Difference. Mills’ study acknowledges white women’s implication in imperial projects
but argues that their writing cannot be fully explained or accounted for within
conventional colonial discourse analysis. Her point is that these writers, as women,
occupied a different position in relation to colonialism than did white men (Mills
Discourses 3). They were torn between discourses of domesticity (and passive
femininity) on one hand, and the discourse of the intrepid colonial explorer/traveller
on the other. Their work exhibits a resultant ambivalence, and ‘[t]hrough elements
such as humour, self-deprecation, statements of affiliation, and descriptions of
relationships, which stress the interpersonal nature of travel writing, these texts
constitute counter-hegemonic voices within colonial discourse’ (Mills Discourses 22-
23). This argument is supported by Ghose, for example in her analysis of Emily
Eden, a writer who wrote about India with an irony that ‘debunks colonial myths

74 Studies of women’s travel writing include (in addition to Mills Discourses and Ghose—already
mentioned), Birkett, Morgan, Robinson Wayward Women, Stevenson and McEwan, and many more. As
for an example of prominent female travellers, one might consider Mary Kingsley, Karen Blixen (Out
of Africa—the text and film) and Beryl Markham.

75 For a brief review of modern travel writing, see Hulme and Youngs.

76 See for example Birkett; Russell; Middleton; Allen; Stevenson; and S. Foster. There tends to be an
emphasis on Victorian women travellers, which is discussed by Mills (Discourses 33).
(such as a the civilizing mission)' (12). This is not to say that women’s writing did not in various ways support imperial projects or that it never exhibited colonial prejudices. Nor is it to claim that women were somehow ‘good’ travellers (and travel writers) as opposed to the ‘bad’ men. Rather, it is to suggest that colonial women’s travel writing tended to be more tentative and ambivalent than men’s, reflecting women’s more marginal positions in both imperial and nationalist frameworks (Mills Discourses 3). Women’s texts differed from male colonial forms, sometimes in ways that could undermine imperialism and colonial orders. This is a legacy that is reflected and continued in Craft for a Dry Lake.

Departures from colonialisit forms are also evident in some contemporary travel writing.77 Developments in recent Australian travel literature support Steve Clark’s remarks about the genre’s potential in terms of reflexivity and a critical (rather than self-congratulatory) re-examination of one’s own culture. As noted, Robert Clarke has explored how travel writing has become an important site for narratives of reconciliation and apology in post-Mabo Australia (‘Intimate Strangers’ 69). He notes that ‘Mahood’s book stands alongside a number of recent literary travel texts that have emerged since the 1980s that reflect different manifestations of [these] sympathetic white liberal discourses’ (‘Intimate Strangers’ 69).78 Clarke suggests that these works can be seen to ‘enact performances of a white Australian postcolonial sensibility towards Aboriginality’ and are far more interested than their colonial predecessors in the ‘lived histories of particular spaces’ (‘Intimate Stragers’ 69, 72). That such trends can be identified in these particular texts does not imply that

77 Though I will not be exploring this point here, it is worth noting Hulme and Young’s comment that ‘[l]ike the post-colonial novel, travel texts are demonstrating a “writing back”’ (10). Here they refer to texts by the ‘formerly colonised’ that describe travels in, for example, Europe.

78 Cited examples include Stephen Muecke’s Reading the Country and No Road (bitumen all the way), Nicholas Jose’s Black Sheep and Barry Hill’s The Rock.
postcolonial literary resistance is a feature of all contemporary Australian travel literature, nor do I wish to deny that this body of work may exhibit a similar ambivalence to that identified in colonial women’s writing. By no means does Australian travel writing universally resist the form’s problematic tropes, such as the figure of the intrepid explorer or the white male hero battling the wilderness. *Tracks*, for example, embraces the romanticism of the solitary adventurer and its narration is often unselfconscious and naive. However, the developments outlined above indicate that, like pastoral and Gothic, travel writing can be mobilised for postcolonial purposes.

Such a practice is visible in Mahood’s efforts to (re)map the Tanami. Travel writing has been recognised as an important participant in colonial projects of imaginative mapping and naming; *Craft for a Dry Lake* is also deeply invested in a mapping project, but it is an entirely different one to that undertaken by the white male explorer and by Mahood’s father. Similarly, the book shows that as Mahood undertakes her journey she variously encounters, or is prompted to consider, legendary settler figures and mythologies of place, and this opens a space in the text for their critical re-examination. In this way, Mahood’s text is counter-hegemonic travel writing: it interrogates ‘white assumptions of history and belonging, and...[formulates] political and ethical critiques of white hegemony’ (Clarke ‘Intimate Strangers’ 69; see also Modjeska ‘Memoir Australia’). Taken as a whole, *Craft for a Dry Lake* defies simple categorisation, whether as travel literature, memoir or spatial history. The intimacy of the father-daughter story at the heart of the book and the emphasis on a personal sense of belonging exceed the bounds of a reading based strictly on genre, and I will consider these separately.
Mapping country

Colonial travel writing produced ‘other worlds’ for Europe, and especially within the subgenre of the explorer story *mapping* was one of its key functions. Edward Said has shown how European writers tended to represent ‘the Orient’ as an exotic but ultimately inferior other. Drawing on Foucault’s ‘discursive triangle of knowledge, space and power’ (van Eeden 29), Said elucidated the ways in which European representations of the non-West served Western interests and imperialism/colonialism (see *Orientalism*). His work identified the travel writing of famous European authors such as Flaubert as crucial in ‘the apparatus of Orientalism’ (Lisle 1). Indeed travel writers were among the most significant contributors to the discourse, and the maps and mapping narratives common in their work were participants in imperial projects of dominating and possessing foreign territory. Whether ‘empiricist’—that is, created according to the conventions of the scientific discourse of cartography that became prominent in Europe in the nineteenth century—or imaginative, for example fictional adventure maps (as seen in the novels of H. Rider Haggard), the maps they produced were not apolitical. Critics have come to challenge the common understanding of (even empiricist) maps as neutral representations of space (e.g. J.B. Harley and Pickles). Benedict Anderson suggests that empiricist maps were entirely implicated in colonial power plays; he notes that the European longitudinal map was used to divide the globe into measurable squares which could then be surveyed and brought under control (173). Such critiques advance a position already noted in chapter one on *The Folly*: that is, one in which ‘[m]aps are believed to function hegemonically to legitimate power...
structures...[and] not only does power inform map-making, but power emanates from maps’ (van Eeden 29).

In chapter two on The White Earth I began to reference that the potential of cartography to serve colonialism and (settler-) nationalism is well-illustrated in Australia, where Paul Carter has suggested that ‘symbolic appropriation of space was an integral feature of colonization’ (Moran 1022). Moran summarises the argument:

According to [Carter]...the colonizers took imaginary possession of the land by filling it with their own meanings and symbolism, including the naming of places, flora and fauna, and the transformation of settled environments—the marking of the landscape with European imaginative frameworks. Through discrete acts of naming the white explorers mapped out a country as much in their own minds as in the charts that they drew up. (1022-23).

This mapping enabled both real and imaginary appropriations of space, facilitating the domestication of previously uncharted territory by settlers, for example, and feeding into a mythology of country for the collective settler-nationalist imaginary. In the Tanami, Mahood’s father was a historical participant in such projects—both as an explorer who had the power to name, and as a stockman who helped to tame ‘the frontier’. A family connection to these settler-colonial processes is underlined again as Mahood notes that a waterhole and a hill in the region the are named for her and her sister, respectively. Thus, like Krog, who acknowledges her own almost-familial link to the Vlaakplaas Five, Mahood foregrounds her place in a history of settler colonialism, land appropriation and frontier violence. She reflects critically on the explorer’s and her father’s mapping legacy. Craft for a Dry Lake’s engagement with the Western history of travel and charting of the Tanami is essentially two-pronged—one part deconstructive, it also attempts to build a new discourse of place. First, Mahood scrutinises Western and white-male-dominated mapping efforts, suggesting their implication in networks of power and control even as she shows their fallibility.
Second, the text attempts its own mapping, one that departs from masculine European and colonialist conventions and which is informed by Aboriginal models. Like Krog’s model for a different Afrikaner identity, Mahood’s effort to map differently is shaped by her ‘outsider’ status as a woman, and as a rebellious daughter. Hers is a counter-mapping of sorts; unlike earlier spatial narratives which erased Aboriginality from the landscape (Carter The Road to Botany Bay 11), for example, Mahood presents the Tanami as primarily Aboriginal space.

As Mahood journeys the Tanami she is mindful of previous European/settler mapping projects that have taken place in the region. She carries with her the journals of Allan A. Davidson, an explorer too successful and inadequately tragic to go down in posterity (see 183). She also takes with her an expedition report written by her father, who some 60 years later followed in Davidson’s footsteps while searching for a stock route from the southern Kimberleys to Central Australia. These accounts become references as she makes her own way across country. Mahood relates that Davidson’s diary—the ‘only official documentation of the previous traverse of the Tanami region’—also informed her father’s trek inland (50). As Brennan writes,

Through her incorporation of Davidson’s, Joe’s and her own journals Mahood recounts three journeys separated by time and circumstance but linked in the sense that each entry charts the individual’s imaginative response to the same vast and powerful country. (93)

A sense of connection draws Mahood into Davidson’s journal: ‘I can imagine how it was for him to see the country for the first time, this country that I am travelling through, remembering my father’s description of seeing it for the first time’ (50-51). But both Davidson’s and Joe’s expeditions are implicated in colonial and settler attempts to possess and domesticate land, and as the narrative progresses we see that
Mahood comes to ‘[demonstrate] the fallacy of such...project[s]’ (Brennan 93).

Mahood’s highlighting of Davidson’s frustration and bewilderment at the way the landscape eludes his attempts to pin it down begin to suggest the folly of his goal and method. She notes his confoundedness over the ‘habit of the country to mislead’, quoting his admission of ‘wretched failure’ and then reflecting on the way her father’s own writing reflects these sentiments (157). Joe’s journal relates that he finds Davidson’s maps inaccurate; this leaves the land party without ‘confidence in our maps for the rest of the trip’, with the only nearby landmark noted ‘position doubtful’ (158). Mahood herself is confused as she attempts to relate the maps to the landscape before her; there is little correspondence between them (171). She is puzzled by Davidson’s references to landmarks that are not present where he has advised, and she cannot follow her father’s pencilling on them (171). Then she discovers that her own internal maps, based on memory, are also unreliable:

I...look for Davidson’s name scratched on a rock at the summit...I remember it clearly... But today I can’t find it. I begin to wonder whether I imagined it. Until this moment I would have sworn to the memory... But I am no longer confident of the things my mind conjures up. (171)

There is also a suggestion here of the explorer’s name being lost: his best efforts to engrave himself and the expedition into the landscape have in a sense failed if they are not remembered and re-visited by those who come after him. This is a place that defies European-modelled efforts at description, containment and self-inscription: country in which even a National Mapping field team becomes lost (see 158). Mahood concludes, ‘The country continues to slip through the nets with which we attempt to control it’ (158).

As we have seen, and as Brennan writes, ‘Craft insists that conventional Western maps cannot offer effective means by which to know or belong to country’
Western maps, after all, are more about possessing country than belonging to it. Yet the impulse to map these spaces is still strong for Mahood, in part because the ‘journals and maps of [her] predecessors’ are inadequate (59). For a time she finds reassurance in modern maps, ‘scientific’ cartographies that help her feel ‘safe’ in this ‘dry red space’: ‘I spread out all my maps and they are cool and green, a symmetry of grids which keep the country in order’ (158). Like Vladislavic in The Folly, who describes Nieuwenhuizen’s obsession with marking off ground in a criss-crossed network of string, with this last phrase Craft for a Dry Lake references the dominant thinking about maps, in which they are considered ‘scaled representation[s] of the real’ (Pickles 194). Mahood’s ‘symmetry of grids’ also recalls Anderson’s remarks about the European mapmaker’s compulsion to subject the surface of the earth to geometric grids; in this way terra incognita was ‘squared off’ into ‘measured’ and blank boxes which were then to be ‘filled in…by explorers, surveyors, and military forces’ (173). ‘Triangulation by triangulation, war by war, treaty by treaty, the alignment of map and power proceeded,’ he writes (Anderson 173). In the ‘scaled representation of the real’ model, cartography is largely divested from political and historical contexts, but Craft for a Dry Lake points to the function of such maps as implicated in power and control, a way to make country hers and ‘keep [it] in order’ (158). Mahood realises that even modern maps do not relate to what she sees—they cannot hold the country either, and in relating her understanding of this the text suggests the limits of their power. She is prompted to (re)create them:

My maps are all green rectangles, but the space I see from where I am sitting is a red circle. I begin to draw on the clean green paper, pushing graphite and ochre and dirt into the glossy surfaces until the grid lines and names and locations are lost under a layer of earth and spit and pigment. Now the maps look more like the place I can see. (158)
Thus Mahood ‘rewrites the maps meant to guide her through country’ (Brennan 94), and she attempts to map differently from her white male predecessors and their European constructions. She draws on art to do this, and her artistic mapping, in turn, seems to be informed by her understanding of Aboriginal models. Brennan suggests as much when she notes that ‘the maps [Mahood] learns to celebrate are palimpsests…reminiscent of the mud maps sketched in the sand for temporary explanatory purposes by Aborigines prior to the coming of the Europeans’ (94). Mahood, for her part, relates of Aboriginal paintings in Balgo that many of them depict ‘stories of country’:

Some of the journeys they depict have not been travelled for a long time. But the knowledge will remain, transcribed in paint. The paintings have become the journeys they no longer make to their ancestral sites. The dots and lines and circles that describe waterholes and bush tomatoes and yams and dreaming tracks are more and more a form of imagined or remembered journeying. (155)

Mahood’s practice follows this example as she creates a piece of art intended to represent or ‘map’ country and her own journey across it. She takes a groundsheet and, after smearing her body with ochre and ash, presses herself onto the dark rectangle at its centre, which is ‘gridded to resemble a map’ (194). Her emphasis on the body-in-place, and an embodied approach to mapping and landscape, depart from the apparently dispassionate and ‘scientific’ masculine European tradition that informs Davidson’s and her father’s narratives.

Yet underlying Mahood’s efforts, ‘different’ though they are, is a compulsion to pin down country and inscribe herself on it that is reminiscent of her colonial forefathers. It is worth examining this more closely, however, because Mahood’s transparency about her desires opens them to critical examination, and her narrative increasingly reveals the futility of her efforts. Like Davidson and her father, she is
unable to capture this ‘impossible country’ (194): Mahood writes, ‘I fill in my journal… It is all I can do, to record my movements, describe the country, hope that this net of words will catch something which I cannot articulate’ (173). Of ‘[t]he Groundsheet’ she says, ‘[i]t has become a kind of map’ (194), then reveals that she cannot make herself bring it out at the Aboriginal women’s ceremony (202). She thinks about it ‘bearing the imprint of a transformative journey’, then tells herself, ‘[w]hat a pretentious notion’ (202). This critical ‘doubling back’ is a hallmark of the text that I will shortly examine more closely. It has a reflexive function and undercuts the sentimentalism and romanticism that are so often entangled with thinking about home, place and belonging. Finally, no resolutions for mapping are offered, but Mahood has posed a series of questions about both the nature of and the desire to chart colonial spaces. She has unmapped and remapped the Tanami, though her remappings are provisional and fallible, with little resemblance to the authoritative discourses of colonialism. Ultimately, the text suggests that these re-mappings may not even be relevant in this space: near the close of the book Mahood identifies the Tanami as full of intersections between old and new maps and acknowledges an ascendant Aboriginal authority in the space, saying it is ‘[t]he people who know the old maps [who are] are building the fence lines now’ (212).

Writing the frontier

Over the course of her journey Mahood considers not only the history of mapping in the Tanami, but also the way this site has been constructed in white settler mythologies. This is a colonial frontier; it is also desert space and ‘outback’. Each of these hold a significant place in the Western imagination, and have tended to be imagined or conceptualised in particular ways. With regard to the Tanami, all three
discourses come into play: it has variously been represented as the uncharted space into which the exploring white man goes searching for gold (176); the mysterious spiritual zone of the desert, which offers the possibility of self-discovery and redemption (252); and the anarchic *terra incognita* of the outback (163). *Craft for a Dry Lake* shows that these narratives hold real, ongoing power for Mahood, as they do in the national imaginary. She has identified with and ‘believed’ in them (251), despite their white masculine bias. Yet there is a tension in her treatment of ‘outback mythology’ that springs in part from her complex positioning in relation to it.

Through her experience of living as the child of a stockman in the Tanami, she has a familial connection with and deep appreciation of frontier mythologies, but as a woman Mahood is marginalised by them, and she is aware that they have also placed Aboriginal people on the periphery. *Craft for a Dry Lake*’s treatment of colonial and/or settler mythologies resembles its approach to mapping, in that the text revisits these narratives and suggests the need for their amendment and retelling (172). Mahood again mobilises a feminist consciousness in her critique, though it is a less explicit critique than we saw in the case of Western mapping projects.

Dwelling in the Tanami requires myth, according to Mahood: ‘[i]f you can’t locate yourself in some sort of narrative,’ she writes, ‘you can’t survive for too long in this country’ (203). Elsewhere she notes that mythologising is ‘endemic in this environment’ (154) and that it is ‘impossible to live in the Territory without being in some way touched by its mythology’ (35). In these and similar passages, *Craft for a Dry Lake* suggests the importance of narrative to constructions of belonging and identity. Mahood’s statement could arguably be extended to Australia at large: it is difficult to live in the nation without being impacted by its mythology. Moreover, to consider the mythologies of the outback is to consider the mythologies of the
Australian settler nation, for they are largely inextricable. As Kay Schaffer writes in the pivotal *Women and the Bush*, it is ‘the Interior, the outback, the red centre, the dead heart, the desert, a wasteland...against [which] the Australian character measures his identity’ (22). Schaffer’s use of the masculine pronoun here suggests the tendency of Australian historical mythologies to valorise white male characters and endeavours. These discourses often ignore women or label them as inferior or the ‘enemy’—a threat to the autonomy and goals of the frontier male (Lake 42). Mahood reflects on this when she writes that the ‘culture of the outback’ is ‘fundamentally masculine’ (107). She references the tendency of popular settler discourse to prioritise white male actions on the landscape when she says, ‘It was men who explored it, men who were driven to find gold and land, and by less tangible desires to penetrate into the unknown’ (232). She relates how, as a girl growing up in this setting, she ‘absorbed...a sense that to be female was to be subtly contaminated’ (107), and later expounds: ‘[W]e could not be relied upon, as women, to understand the rules properly,...our unruly bodies and emotions might force into the open things which would then have somehow to be dealt with’ (110). That women are disparaged in these narratives does not mean there is no place for ‘woman as sign’ in national or outback culture: to return to *Woman and the Bush*, for example, Schaffer highlights the way in which these mythologies conceive of landscapes as feminine, which in turn enables another construction: that of the ‘bushman-as-hero’ (22). *Craft for a Dry Lake* does not reference these tropes; they may be less prevalent in representations of the desert as opposed to those of the bush (see Phillips 81). Instead the text focuses the settler discourse of the Tanami as frontier or outback and the figure of the white male within it. But Mahood’s approach seems to be informed by an awareness that
‘woman’ poses a challenge to the inherently gendered settler mythologies of the outback.

Despite having admitted her attraction to (and occasional reliance on) outback mythology in her own thinking about the Tanami and her (and her father’s) place in it, Mahood recognises the limits and ‘traps’ of mythologising (154). Returning to Country means facing that it ‘exists apart from...the memories, the attachments, the mythology’ (49). ‘The place in my head is not and never was this place’, Mahood confesses (49), and in doing so she indicates that, like maps, these narratives of the Tanami are constructions that cannot entirely contain this place or the lives and histories in it. She expresses a commitment to relating her own story of country and the past, and as she begins to do this she also suggests the critical potential of a woman-centred engagement with the essentially masculine mythologies of country that hold such power for settler Australia. Her text has yet another layer to it in that it is a daughter’s critical engagement with her father’s story, and this resonates at a level of feminist practice—as a disloyalty to patriarchy and patriarchal discourse. At one point Mahood reflects on her journey and narrative, pondering how it may ‘displace’ the ‘focal acts’ of her father:

Slowly, deliberately, with all the skills I have, I am attempting to weave another story. It contains my father’s myth, but it has another layer that is my own, which parallels my father’s but is profoundly different in its infrastructure. Is this how I attempt to free myself, by acknowledging the parallels, and within those similarities make a story that is very different in its intention?

Or is what I am doing a kind of heresy, an unmaking? (220)

‘Unmaking’ is an apt description of the text’s treatment of the white colonial male, a central figure in frontier and Australian nationalist mythology. His influence looms large in the Tanami and in the ‘tough and macho world of the Outback’ (89), but Craft for a Dry Lake questions and de-constructs him. For example, Mahood reveals...
that few fit men fit the ‘strong and silent’ stereotype; on the contrary, her recollections of life in this place suggest that they are ‘fragile’ (86). ‘They looked the part,’ she recalls, ‘but the sense I have of most of them is of their vulnerability, their weaknesses, their unsuccessful attempts to conceal their inadequacies’ (89). Their ‘heroism’ is qualified as being ‘not of the grand gesture but of mundane perseverance’ in the face of ‘recalcitrant...machinery and weather’ (89). Mahood’s own portraits of outback men move beyond stereotype and caricature to depict more complex, fallible and diverse characters (see for example 85-86; 90-93). *Craft for a Dry Lake* also notes the impact of postcolonial ‘scrutiny’ on the ‘myth of extroversion’ embraced by the explorer Davidson and by her father, which is also so ‘deeply embedded in the cultural psyche of this country’ (251). This model, based around ‘heroism and achievement and conquest’, is no longer tenable in contemporary Australia (251). In addition, the intrepid, colonising white male is increasingly irrelevant in the ‘real-world’ Tanami, which is no longer ‘white man’s country’ but has now ‘gone to the blacks’ (128). Mahood underlines that Aboriginal women’s relation to country in particular renders this figure and his fantasies of exploration and heroism insignificant. Witnessing their dancing at a ceremony, she is prompted to consider that

This noisy, lackadaisical, unromantic horde of women flies in the face of the mythic convention of the laconic white male protagonist who moves alone through the landscape, reading its mystery and responding to its imperatives with stoicism and competence. I recognise my father in this convention. Most of these women would not dream of moving alone through the country, Aboriginal people being susceptible to and easily frightened by its manifestations. But the black women effortlessly marshal its energies to protect their mysteries, and the laconic hero...is vanquished almost as a side effect. (146)

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79 Even its alternative, the ‘introvert myth’ involving the ‘spiritual quest’ to the ‘mysterious source’, is problematically entwined with ‘Aboriginal attachment to land’ (252).
Mahood indicates that women, especially indigenous women, have the potential to
decentre the mythological white male. Her text foregrounds feminine and Aboriginal
power, which entails an overturning of settler representations of the outback that
privilege the white male. Elsewhere, she comes to insist on the importance of
women’s stories in relation to country, which have in the old order of things been
ignored or marginalised. Their histories also overlay the Tanami: Mahood notes a
‘pattern of women’s tracks across the country…[those of] my mother, my sister, the
girl I was, Daisy and Millie and Margaret and Patricia [indigenous women Mahood
knows], all the women who travelled this way, the ancestral women and the ones
who have come back to their country’ (172). Telling their stories and recognising this
history is, *Craft for a Dry Lake* suggests, a vital aspect of a larger project that must be
undertaken—one in which the more prominent mythologies of the outback and the
nation are interrogated and rearticulated:

> There is a big story here, about women and country, too big for me to tell. Or
maybe it is not a big story but many small stories, spreading in intricate detail across
the country. They are barely visible beneath the more emphatic stories of
exploration and development. Those are the big stories, but they no longer convince
us as they used to. They need to be amended and retold, the possibilities teased out
 toward different endings. (172)

Mahood says little more about these women’s narratives of the Tanami (perhaps this
will be another book), but as we have seen, the text participates in a rewriting of the
‘big stories’ and mythologies of the Australian outback, frontier and desert. This
rewriting is gendered, drawing on a feminine (and feminist) consciousness to
interrogate figures of heroic white masculinity in Australia and masculine
constructions of place and relation to land. Similarly to many white women travel
writers, then, Mahood’s somewhat marginal position *vis-à-vis* the colonialist ‘master
discourses’ of the Australian outback facilitates their subversive treatment in her text.
'My old skin back'

*Craft for a Dry Lake* transcends an exclusively genre-based reading, and one of the reasons for this is its concern with non-indigenous belonging. Traditionally, travel writing has not been preoccupied with deep and meaningful connections to place and although many travel narratives, especially women’s, are personalised, few are as self-conscious and critical as Mahood’s. In this text, the locus of that critique is Mahood’s own sense of the Tanami as ‘home’ and the significance of this in relation to broader issues of white/settler belonging in postcolonial Australia. Mahood foregrounds her ambiguous feelings about this country, to which she wants to belong but does not feel entirely entitled. Questions of identity and belonging are signalled at the start of the book, which begins with a poem that holds striking similarities to Krog’s *Country of My Skull*. Mahood describes returning to ‘her father’s country’ on a ‘pilgrimage’ to ‘lay old ghosts, eschew old myths’. On this journey, she relates, the ‘black women gave me my old skin back’—a reference to her Aboriginal skin name, which offers Mahood the promise of belonging. But in a reflection of her uncertainty (in contrast to Krog) about this, the poem continues, ‘but I could not wear it./The dreaming tracks are not mine’. Mahood goes on to stage an ambivalent and deeply nuanced engagement with unsettled white belonging in Australia that is based on her own experience. Like *The White Earth*, but with a distinctly more personal bent, *Craft for a Dry Lake* critiques the tendency for white settler society to appropriate Aboriginality—or capitalise on Aboriginal connections in some other way—for its own purposes and needs, especially those related to regaining a sense of legitimate belonging.
Mahood’s feelings for the country in which she was raised and to which she returns are strong. This place is of great personal significance to her; on first coming back to it, she finds ‘it is almost too much, this sense of belonging, of coming home’ (35). Her descriptions of this ‘home-coming’ again recall Krog’s, especially in their sensuality, in the physicality of this sense of belonging. In a further connection to white women writers in Africa, Mahood considers that it is, in the words of Doris Lessing, her own ‘myth country’ (94). Yet her relationship with this country is fraught; she is ‘torn with ambiguities’ (195). Just as ‘it is impossible to come back and belong to it fully and unquestioningly’, it is also ‘impossible to go away and leave it behind’ (153). She cannot ‘trust’ her desire to ‘stay...to submit to this deep subtle grip of the country and its people’ because it is ‘contaminated...with all kinds of baggage and sentiment’ (143). The problem, Mahood suggests, is one of knowledge: if she could just hold fast to a ‘narrow and deeply grounded wisdom’, a kind of myopia, she might be able to belong without ambiguity (195). Her ‘unsettledness’ in what she would like to feel is her own country reflects the crisis of settler belonging outlined in the thesis introduction and described by critics such as Ken Gelder, Gooder and Jacobs, and Peter Read. Mahood’s text seems to acknowledge one of Read’s points in Belonging: non-indigenous Australians may also sense a strong, deep feeling of belonging to place, but this is increasingly troubled by a growing awareness of settlement violence and Aboriginal dispossession. In Robert Beardwood’s words, since Mabo and the Native Title Act, ‘non-Aboriginal belonging typically takes the form of a complex and often insoluble problem’ (10). White Australians, Mahood observes in Craft for a Dry Lake, ‘are becoming disenfranchised from any right to a deep sense of connection to country’ (252).
Non-Aboriginal belonging has been described in terms of dissolution, unsettledness and even crisis in contemporary Australian public discourse (Beardwood 10, see also Probyn ‘Settler’ 76-77). Meanwhile, Aboriginal belonging is often presented as ideal: deeply spiritual, ethically secure and uncomplicated by questions of moral legitimacy (Beardwood 10). Indigeneity and belonging are linked in both the popular and critical imaginary. Mahood explores and acknowledges this association in *Craft for a Dry Lake*, relating that in her own personal experience and understanding, Aboriginal people have always held a certain ‘authority’ to belong, whether in place or community. Growing up in the Tanami, where she was often cared for by indigenous women and played with Aboriginal children, Mahood shares that her first memory is of black bodies, which she envies:

[Her white body] did not have the conspicuous *skinness* of these others, who tossed her about in the waterhole... Even the ones her own size were clothed by their skin a way she was not, their grinning faces with gobbets of snot held precariously in place by upper lips. She could not achieve even this successfully, being constantly wiped clean on her mother's orders. So it seemed this most desirable state, to belong, could not be achieved, and she must learn to live with it. (122)

Black skin is connected with belonging, and Mahood reports that as a child she attempted to ‘remedy’ her whiteness with ‘boot polish and paint’—of which she was always ‘painfully scrubbed clean’ (123). Despite being perpetually frustrated in her efforts to be Aboriginal, the child Kim is reportedly received graciously by the indigenous community. She has ‘two mothers, the white one who had borne her and the black one who named her and dreamed for her’; from the latter, her ‘skin mother’, she receives ‘the dreaming of Pintapinta the Butterfly’ (123). Mahood carries this ‘early gift of a dream, a name and country’ through childhood and into adulthood, ‘fending off the spectre of ordinariness with this talismanic knowledge’ (124). Not only does it make her special; she holds tightly to her skin name because
its ‘gives [her] a link, a way of being here [in the Tanami] that circumvents [her] whiteness’ (124). As is evident here, Aboriginal identity is presented as potentially offering the settler legitimate and ‘true’ belonging, and Mahood the narrator is open about her desire to make a claim to country on the basis of Aboriginal connections. Recounting a memory of lovemaking with an Aboriginal horsebreaker in early adulthood, she writes: ‘[He] is bound to this country by blood and knowledge. He belongs here, and only here. Through him she touches the country’ (71). Later, she recollects of her skin name ‘I am Napurrula, which makes me legitimate heir to the country my father turned into a cattle station’ (124). She immediately questions this assumption, as I will examine shortly. But my point now is that in these passages (and others), Mahood references both the prevalent association of indigeneity with belonging, and the efforts of non-indigenous people to lay claim to Aboriginality or Aboriginal culture—often in the interests of a sense of unique national identity and ‘deep’ belonging-in-place.

The thesis introduction and in chapter two on *The White Earth* have discussed the phenomenon of white settler appropriations of indigeneity in the service of non-indigenous needs, including belonging. Like *The White Earth*, *Craft for a Dry Lake* subjects these white appropriations of Aboriginality to examination, and it is an unusual critique in that it comes not from a critical or academic framework but from within Mahood’s own creative practice and narrative. Returning to the passages in which Mahood considers her childhood in the Tanami, her pull to the country and her wish to take hold of Aboriginality, we find that she continually questions her own motives and desires in relation to place, belonging and indigenous people. For

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80 Terry Goldie’s is a foundational study in the area; as I have noted elsewhere, its arguments have since been picked up and extended in Australian contexts in, for example, work by Mitchell Rolls, Fiona Probyn (‘Unsettling’), and, in the domain of national culture, by Anthony Moran.
example, as soon as she has stated a claim to the country on the basis of her Aboriginal name Napurrula, she doubles back on this:

I am aware of the spuriousness of all this. The conferring of a bush or skin name is given to everyone who spends time with the Aborigines, as a formality which places them in a category of relationships and behaviour. I would be deeply resentful of the same attempt to categorise me in white Australian society. So why do I cherish and honour this unearned title, which has been largely meaningless in the context of the life I have led? (124)

Mahood answers her own question unflinchingly:

I know why, of course. It gives me a link, a way of being here that circumvents my whiteness. It has allowed me to claim a kind of belonging that I have never felt. I have used it to claim a certain credibility among urban friends for my knowledge of Aboriginal society. It creates a frisson in the secular comfort of a suburban living room, provides a scrap of evidence that out there something authentic, chthonian, spiritual inhabits the continent. I have invested myself in its glamour. It is as if I have come by a secret password by dishonest means and have hoarded it against the moment when it might open a magic door... (124-5)

And although Mahood might be more justified than many others would (John McIvor in *The White Earth*, for example) in thinking of herself as knowing something of Aboriginality—particularly a contemporary, ‘living’ Aboriginality as opposed to a traditional Aboriginality presented in anthropological books of the colonial period—she questions her own desire to believe she has ‘any real knowledge of, or relationship with, Aborigines and their culture’ (210). She also criticises her exoticization of her childhood and experiences with indigenuity, related in stories to friends, as ‘flimsy posturing’ (210). These are more than trenchant self-criticisms, because they go to the heart of a widespread tendency for white/settler society to romanticise, commodify and appropriate Aboriginality for its own purposes.

In all of her critical reflection on white belonging, Mahood never denounces the desire to belong, nor does she deny her own sense of an ongoing attachment to

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As noted in chapter two, Rolls argues that a ‘traditional’ Aboriginality is more commonly appropriated by settlers than a ‘contemporary, living’ one (122).
the Tanami. She *does* attempt to conceive of a new way of approaching and regarding her own and her father’s connection to this place, which is something her text has in common with Krog’s and Jose’s: the attempt to find new models for identity and for belonging. As Mahood comes to this point she begins to consider various options. Remembering her father’s love of the land and identification with it, which she does not question, Mahood considers that he was ‘sceptical of the notion of ownership’ and ‘saw his relationship to land in terms of custodianship’ (233). Custodianship is the model for shared belonging put forward by Jose in *The Custodians*, as we have seen in chapter two. Like Jose, Mahood highlights the ‘assumption of responsibility to…country, that you will remember and care for it’ (258) that is part of Aboriginal ideas about belonging and which is also entailed in custodianship. But ultimately she does not embrace custodianship as describing her own or her father’s relation to country. Instead she comes to something more provisional:

As I travel through this country I discover that this is not my country, nor is it my father’s country. But my track, my story travels through it and so does his. They make up part of the pattern of the country. By coming back I reinvoke them. At all the points of intersection I feel the other journeys, ancestral, contemporary, historic, imaginary. (258)

Her tracks and her father’s run through it: this is an association with place that is light and temporal, yet not inconsequential and—perhaps paradoxically—enduring. It might be akin to ‘visitation’, a model proffered by *Disgrace* as Coetzee considers white belonging in the post-apartheid countryside. This passage also contains a suggestion that Mahood’s is a postcolonial sense or recognition of place: she is alert to ‘the multiple human histories connected [to the] landscape’ (Casteel 31) and to the various meanings that overlay it.
It must be emphasised that this is not presented as an epiphany, a solution or even a resolution in the text. This is a key distinction between The Custodians and Craft, and also between Country of My Skull and Mahood’s book. Jose and Krog strain toward closure, reconciliation and celebration; Mahood’s conclusion is open-ended as she departs the Tanami for the city again: ‘I have raised old ghosts, rather than laid them’, she writes; she has not resolved the ‘dilemmas and contradictions’ posed by Napurrula (265). The journey back has not been without significance, but it is no ‘victory’; Mahood concedes only that it has ‘begun something which [she does] not yet understand’ (265). As noted, one criticism levelled at Craft for a Dry Lake is that Mahood fails to ‘politicise her theorising of belonging’ (Kurtzer 74). In response to this, Brennan has (rightly, I think) argued that Mahood is only at a place where she can begin to do this at the end of the book (98). Perhaps this is the ‘something’, the process set in motion, of which Mahood speaks on this last page of the book: ‘By coming back I have begun something which I do not yet understand’ (265).

Radical ambivalence

The absence of resolution is a feature not only of Craft for a Dry Lake’s conclusion, but appears recurrently throughout the text. Mahood does not press for a reconciliation of contradiction; she accepts discomfort and allows ambivalence to continue. Any relief from her own uncertainty and unease in relation to her pastoral-settler heritage, sense of belonging, ‘land rights’ issues and ‘the politics of dispossession’ is never more than ‘temporary’ (262). The text is characterised by continual oscillations between positions: between comfort and discomfort, a sense of belonging and non-belonging, between believing in an myth, and acknowledging its falsities. Nothing really comes to rest. As signalled earlier in the chapter, I want to
suggest that the ambivalence of Mahood’s text works toward counter-colonial ends. Throughout this thesis I am mindful of the potential of ambivalence to both facilitate and undercut the postcolonialism of white writing, and *Craft for a Dry Lake* is exceptional in its commitment to hosting it in ways that mobilise its capacity to disrupt colonialist discourse and fixed or inadequately nuanced positions. In the text’s reflexivity and refusal to smooth over discomfort or accept tidy conclusions, we see a ‘radical ambivalence’ at work. The phrase is one I borrow (somewhat out of context) from Stephen Slemon (‘Unsettling’ 40).

Slemon has argued that while critical writing from the ‘second world’ (that is, the former settler colony) ‘has tended to miss out on the rigours of what…comprises a necessarily ambivalent, necessarily contra/dictory or incoherent, anti-colonialist *theory* of resistance’, literary texts can and have shown a greater capacity to represent and thematise the ‘necessary entanglement’ of anti-colonial resistances within the colonialist machineries they seek to displace’ (‘Unsettling’ 39, emphases in original). Slemon suggests that the value of this settler literature lies precisely in its capacity to be ambiguous and double-edged. In *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Mahood’s self-conscious employment of ambivalence as a deconstructive tool renders this work as a piece of *creative* postcolonial critique.

Ambivalence threads through Mahood’s treatment of mapping and settler mythologies of the frontier and her reflections on postcolonial white non/belonging. With regard to mapping, we have seen that she is prompted to question and eventually reject the maps of her masculine colonial forebears (including her father), even as she is compelled to pin down the Tanami landscape in her own mappings. Her transparency and self-reflexivity about these desires allows them to be

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82 Slemon uses the phrase to describe the ‘second world of post-colonial literary resistance…where too much post-colonial criticism in the First World has so far forgotten to look’ (‘Unsettling’ 40, emphasis in original).

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questioned, and by revealing the failures of her own project Mahood undercuts any claims to power made on the basis of mapping (post)colonial space. To the extent that she does re-map the Tanami in her narrative, it is provisional, unauthoritative. *Craft for a Dry Lake* also considers frontier mythology, and here Mahood’s focus is on decentring and re-presenting the archetypal figure of the white outback male. Despite her investment in settler mythologies, she insists that they be interrogated, modified and retold, and suggests that women may play a key role in this task. Finally, the text uses Mahood’s own experience of unhomeliness and feelings of illegitimate belonging in the Tanami to highlight and critique the broader phenomenon of white ‘unsettlement’ in postcolonial Australia. Unlike some other works examined in this thesis, the book does not end with a proposal for, or celebration of, reconciled white belonging. In all of these instances Mahood foregrounds her ‘split’ position. Instead of attempting to resolve this by taking a explicitly oppositional or ‘anti-colonial’ stance, she embraces ambivalence to undertake nuanced representations of place, history, socio-political issues, and indigenous and non-indigenous belonging. The usefulness of this openness to what Bhabha might call the ‘in-between’ is also shown in the text’s resistance to reconciling contradiction. The memories and spaces of the Tanami that Mahood (re)visits are full of these, as are many of its inhabitants. Mahood’s father is a complex, enigmatic figure driven by seemingly disparate motivations and beliefs. Mahood reflects on this near the end of *Craft for a Dry Lake*, pondering how he would be ‘hurt’ to see the country and ‘know he was in part responsible for its domestication’ (185). ‘He loved the country for its remoteness and inaccessibility,’ she writes, ‘yet spent years of his life developing it and bringing it under control’ (185). Regarding her own beliefs about the meaning of the country to her and her difficult relationship with it, Mahood writes ‘I cannot resolve the
contradictions. In fact I don’t believe they should be resolved. This is an age when such contradictions are the reality of the time’ (37). She points to the productivity of ‘ambiguities’ when she says that they may ‘transform themselves into a creative tension with which I can engage’ (37). *Craft for a Dry Lake* has grown out of such ambiguities and ‘tension’. Because the text is not invested in resolution and closure it is able to reflect the mess of ambivalence, contradiction and complexity to be found in the postcolonial spaces of the Tanami.

Some of the text’s ambivalences have led to criticism; I refer in particular to Sonia Kurtzer, who suggests that Mahood is reluctant to admit that her father played a part in colonial dispossession of Indigenous people (the Warlpiri, in this setting) (76). Once again, Kurtzer’s ‘evidence’ on this point is flimsy: on following up the page numbers she uses to support her remarks about Mahood’s ‘explanations’ for the disappearance of the Warlpiri, one finds little basis for her interpretations. But it is true that Mahood withholds harsh judgement or condemnation of Joe Mahood. In the text, he is a figure towards whom the narrator feels a knotty mix of emotions, among them love, frustration, respect and grief. Theirs has been an intense and

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83 Here Kurtzer writes that Mahood provides an explanation for [the Warlpiri’s] disappearance from her father’s station at the time her father occupied a portion of their land. She claims both that the Warlpiri were following natural pre-colonial migration patterns (175) and that they left their country because of difficulty finding water (243). These explanations... seem to provide some protection from any claim that her father may have played a role in dispossessing the Warlpiri or that he has benefited from past acts of violent dispossession. (76)

In both cases, the page numbers (175, 243) refer to passages that comment on scarce water resources and the movement of indigenous people as a result. They describe the indigenous people as ‘gone’ from these areas when Joe Mahood passes by (in the instance of the waterhole on 175) or when the Mahood family arrives (243)—though Kurtzer’s wording could imply that Mahood’s text suggests the indigenous people left not before but *while* (‘at the time’) her family was there. Mahood is also careful to note that Warlpiri have since returned to these areas—they are not permanently ‘gone’. Unable to dispute Mahood’s remarks about these movements on historical grounds (Kurtzer admits she knows little of the area’s Aboriginal history—see 78), Kurtzer instead resorts to insinuation about Mahood’s intentions in noting these movements. This is in spite of Mahood’s underlining, throughout the text, of her father’s, and thus her own, complicity in colonial projects—the violence of which she acknowledges as not only one of guns and strychnine.
intimate relationship that has nurtured Mahood; at the same time, she has been striving to free herself ‘of [her] father’s influence’ and declare ‘the legitimacy of [her] own vision’ (29). When this is achieved in her artistic practice, she feels a sense of ‘betrayal’ (29). She wants to separate herself from Joe in this journey and narrative (49), ‘challenge his story’ (258) and ‘way of [seeing] the world’ (235), but still has some ‘loyalty’ and sense of ‘responsibility’ to him (248). The text recognises many of Joe Mahood’s flaws and his involvement in colonial projects of exploration and domestication, but also insists that its narrator is not in a position to be dispassionate. ‘I cannot see my father clearly’, Mahood writes; ‘My own sense of who I wanted to be was so closely bound up with his approval that it has created a kind of tunnel vision’ (191). Later she repeats, ‘Even from this distance I am too close to see him clearly’ (232). Any critique of Joe Mahood (or what he represents) must be framed with reference to Mahood’s position of compromise as his daughter, which is what *Craft for a Lake* does.

**Conclusion**

All of the texts analysed in the thesis are ambivalent, but none thus far have *mobilised* ambivalence as reflexively and deliberately as *Craft for a Dry Lake*. The text’s critical engagements with a familial legacy of pastoralism in the Tanami, histories of frontier conquest and domestication, colonial-settler mapping projects and mythologies of place, white-Aboriginal relations, and non-indigenous belonging are characterised by self-conscious treatments that feature a continual ‘doubling-back’ on the self. We have seen a similar reflexivity in *Country of My Skull*, particularly when Krog examines her familial ties to white perpetrators at the TRC and her historical complicity in apartheid and colonial violence. As I have shown, however, the power
of these representations is ameliorated somewhat by Krog’s push for renewed, legitimate belonging, closure and redemption. For Mahood, ultimately there is no resolution and no ‘becalm[ing]’ of the ‘wound’ at the end of the journey and book, differently from *Country of My Skull* (see 423 in that text). The trauma of the past, the contradictions of the present and the challenges these pose to her sense of belonging in the Tanami cannot be so easily laid to rest. The text hosts an ethical ‘working through’ that is, crucially, without end. It is a process that is reflected in a South African context in J.M. Coetzee’s powerful post-apartheid novel *Disgrace*, a work that casts doubt on the transformative and reconciliatory power of the TRC and which refuses any easy redemption or return to belonging for the ‘reformed’ white settler subject.
Chapter Six

‘No comfort to be had’: Post-apartheid Anti-pastoral in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

J.M. Coetzee is the South African postcolonial white writer *par excellence*. Despite accusations of political and historical escapism from some quarters during the 1980s (Attwell *J.M. Coetzee* 10-13), the critical consensus now is that his oeuvre constitutes a highly reflexive postcolonial practice. For the most part, Coetzee’s fictions are read as exceptionally, if obliquely, engaged with histories of violence and injustice, unequal power relations, complicity, and the question of the ‘proper response’ to the marginalised and/or suffering other, both within and beyond South African contexts. His frequently non-realist and intertextual novels, like Vladislavic’s *The Folly*, often appear more concerned with interrogating discourse and representations than with the overt address of ‘material realities’. Coetzee’s work undertakes fictional critiques of colonialist tropes and ideologies, and his novels can be seen to reply to and re-work the conventions of South African settler discourse in particular. It was Coetzee, of course, who coined the term ‘white writing’ to describe the literature of a people ‘no longer European, not yet African’, ‘the unsettled settlers… the whites of South Africa’ (*White Writing* 11, 4). An analysis of the ways in

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84 See for example major studies by Attwell *J.M. Coetzee*, Kossew *Pen*, Attridge *J.M. Coetzee*, Head *J.M. Coetzee*, Jolly *Colonization*, and Marais (in a large body of journal articles), as well as Durrant *Postcolonial Narrative*, amongst others.

85 The degree to which ‘material reality’ and cultural representations can be separated is, of course, arguable, and the belief that they *are* entirely extricable is partly to blame for the mistaken labelling of Coetzee’s fictions as ahistorical and disengaged from the material conditions of South Africa.
which his fiction might be seen to ‘write back’ to the texts and trends he analyses in *White Writing* would be a book-length project in itself.

This chapter confines itself to *Disgrace* (1999), a novel that critically revisits the South African farm novel and which clearly responds to the material and historical conditions of post-apartheid, post-TRC South Africa. As its controversial reception attests, *Disgrace* has been a disturbing read for white South Africans. The novel was dismissed as ‘liberal funk’ by one reviewer (see Heyns cited in Marais ‘Very Morbid Phenomena’ 32), while others expressed outrage at what they understood to be its message: the requirement for white abjection as ‘penance’ for the ‘evil...of the past’ (Fugard cited in Marais ‘Very Morbid Phenomena’ 32). Although many of these objections are based on misreadings, even astute critics confess to finding this text almost unbearably bleak (see Jolly ‘Going to the Dogs’ 148; Attridge ‘Age of Bronze’ 100). *Disgrace* is certainly pessimistic about post-apartheid reconciliation and does seem to suggest that the ‘price...for staying on’ is high for even the most sympathetic whites (*Disgrace* 158). Unlike *The Custodians* and *Country of My Skull*, the text offers no celebratory conclusions. There is no resolution to be found at novel’s end: the traumatic past cannot be transcended; and if *Disgrace* offers any models for post-apartheid white placement on the land they are the most uneasy of any examined in the thesis. This chapter reads the novel as an anti-*plaasroman* that utterly refuses historical closure and easy redemptions of the settler, but recognises too that *Disgrace* considers how white South Africans might continue to dwell in the country.

*Disgrace*, along with *Age of Iron*, is Coetzee’s most identifiably South African work. Written in an ostensibly realist mode, it is historically located in a recently post-

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86 It has also troubled black South Africans, as I will discuss shortly.
87 Fugard had not yet read the book at the time he made his oft-quoted remark (see Marais ‘Very Morbid Phenomena 32).
apartheid state. ‘Fifty-two, divorced’ (1), university professor and white South African David Lurie lives quietly in Cape Town. His specialty is modern languages, but he is consigned, in this ‘rational’ age, to teaching classes on communication (5). Uninspired in his work, painfully aware that he is aging, and alone after a lifetime of easy womanising (7), Lurie finds a solution to ‘the problem of sex’ (1) in his Thursday afternoons with a prostitute. When this arrangement breaks down, Lurie finds himself once again afflicted with desire. Before long he seduces one of his students, 20-year-old Melanie. She lodges a complaint, there are hearings before a disciplinary committee, and Lurie’s unrepentant admission of guilt is deemed unsatisfactory. He resigns and retreats to the country town of Salem where his daughter Lucy lives on a smallholding, supporting herself selling flowers and vegetables at Saturday markets and running kennels. There he meets Lucy’s neighbour Petrus, an African she employs to help on the farm, and begins to settle into rural life. But Lucy and Lurie’s relative idyll is shattered by a violent attack. Three black men descend upon the farm while Petrus is away; Lurie is battered and locked in a bathroom while Lucy is raped (and impregnated, as is later revealed). What follows is a drawn-out process of coming to terms with this experience, and, in turn, the broader conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. For Lurie, the event prompts a re-examination of his conduct toward Melanie and a change in his attitudes toward animals. Lucy, meanwhile, renegotiates her increasingly tenuous placement on the land.

Early responses to *Disgrace* were mixed. It was awarded the 1999 Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and given high praise in the Western press (McDonald 321-22). Yet as David Attridge elaborated close to the time...
Mixed in with the huge acclaim that has greeted Coetzee’s far from affirmative new novel there have been expressions of annoyance and anger, especially from South African commentators. The over-riding question for many readers is: does this novel, as one of the most widely disseminated and forceful representations of post-apartheid South Africa, impede the difficult enterprise of rebuilding the country? Does the largely negative picture it paints of relations between communities hinder the steps being made toward reconciliation? Is it a damagingly misleading portrait of a society that has made enormous strides in the direction of justice and peace? ('Age of Bronze' 99)

Perhaps the harshest indictment came from the African National Congress (ANC), which cited Disgrace as presenting a racist depiction of the three black rapists (McDonald 323). The novel’s reception in academic circles was more sympathetic, and from 2000 there was a burgeoning of the critical literature on the text. As even a short review suggests, there are many ways to read Disgrace. This slender novel, with its deceptively simple narrative line, is multi-layered, containing countless allusions and threads for the critic to follow. My reading necessarily eschews several significant aspects of the novel to focus on its historical referentiality, response to South African pastoral, and meditations on complicity and reparations for ‘the crimes of the past’.

Many analyses of Disgrace interpret the character of Lurie as an inheritor of South Africa’s white settler patriarchs, both in his status as a privileged white male professor and in his perspectives and behaviour (see for example Marais ‘Little Enough’, Poyner ‘Truth’, Horrell ‘J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace’, Cornwall ‘Realism’, L. Graham ‘Reading the Unspeakable’, Wicomb ‘Translations’). The degree of allegorism in these readings varies, but most agree that Lurie displays exploitative, patronizing behaviour to non-white (and non-male) others which has a long historical precedent in South Africa. This is most apparent in Lurie’s treatment of

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88 This was done in the context of their submission to the Human Rights Commission’s Inquiry into Racism in the Media in April 2000 (see McDonald 323). As academic critics have shown, this reading is simplistic; see especially Attwell, ‘Race’ and Spivak, ‘Ethics and Politics’.

89 A 2007 search on the MLA database (which is by no means an exhaustive source) turns up 74 entries. I review and use only those most relevant to this chapter’s argument.
Melanie, the student with whom he has an affair. In fact, as Marais writes, Lurie’s ‘attempt to possess his student is emblematic of the relations of power that pervade South African society as a whole’ (‘Little Enough’ 175). In a post-apartheid era, Lurie’s exploits are not permitted to continue unchecked—nor, perhaps, unpunished by history. As Marais notes, the way in which the text sets up Lucy’s rape invites the reader to draw parallels between it and Lurie’s abuse of Melanie (‘Little Enough’ 175), so that Lucy’s rape might be read as a kind of violent return of the past, but with the roles of perpetrator and victim now inverted.

What of this change? The dominant reading of Lurie, communicated by Marais (in multiple publications), Attridge (‘Age of Bronze’), Boehmer (‘Sorry’), Kossew (‘Politics’), Barnard (J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*) and others, is redemptive: in these frameworks, the novel is a kind of *bildungsroman* in which the protagonist gradually comes to a more ethical relation to the other. Derek Attridge argues that Lurie ‘achieves something that can be called grace’, which comes through his ‘other-directed toil’—in particular, his work at the local animal shelter and writing of an opera (‘Age of Iron’ 110, 111). Marais notes that while Lurie ‘claims he is too old to change’, ‘[t]he point...is that he *does* change in the course of the novel and...this change involves learning to love’ (‘Little Enough’ 176). Lurie’s exploitative desire for the other modulates into *agape* and responsibility for the other (Marais ‘Little Enough’ 168; see also Cornwell ‘Realism’ 315). Lurie’s character certainly undergoes a (sympathetic) shift over the course of the novel, yet the novel is ambivalent in its portrayal of his progress. Sue Kossew is careful to note that ‘David’s redemption is a qualified one—“little enough, less than little: nothing”’ (220)’ (‘Politics’ 160). My reading somewhat reluctantly concurs with that of others who see the final scene as signalling an ethical arrival for Lurie, but I emphasise that the text in no way
celebrates this and in fact denies the ‘easier’ redemptions of the settler subject that we have seen in The Custodians and (to a lesser extent) Country of My Skull. Lurie’s redemption, if indeed it is one, offers no comfort to the white South African; if anything, it is more unsettling than resecuring of this subject.

Critics also comment on what the novel has to say about ‘the limits of sympathy’ and the difficulty of (ethically) representing the other (see for example Baker, Durrant ‘J.M. Coetzee’, Spivak ‘Ethics and Politics’, Marais ‘Little Enough’). Like Coetzee’s other fiction, Disgrace seems to suggest that there are bounds to the extent to which one can empathise with and ‘know’ others. In this it departs somewhat from The Custodians and Country of My Skull. Marais argues that the text communicates an understanding of ethics that transcends ‘[a conception] of ethical action…in terms of an eighteenth-century model of philosophical sympathy’ (‘Ethical Action’ 59). Sam Durrant suggests that ‘Coetzee’s sympathetic imagination’ departs from models in which one attempts to ‘mentally inhabit the position of the other’ (‘J.M. Coetzee’ 130). Indeed Disgrace ‘explores the extreme difficulty of what it is to speak on behalf of as well as to represent another’ (Boehmer ‘Sorry’ 138).

Silence is not an ethical option for the white writer, as I have discussed in earlier chapters, and Coetzee’s fiction exhibits an exemplary effort to negotiate the postcolonial dilemma of representation. As Jolly has argued, this is because it ‘attempts to traverse competing ethical imperatives’:

On the one hand, there is the imperative to represent the other, in order to represent the other’s violation; but on the other hand, there is the imperative to represent the other so as to communicate to both the reader and the self—the writer—the unintelligibility of the other in the language of the self. (‘Going to the Dogs’ 153)

Disgrace continues in this vein. Following Gayatri Spivak, I will show how the text ‘makes the subaltern speak’ through the strategic use of focalisation, which prompts
the reader to ‘counterfocalise’ with an attentiveness to Lucy’s, and Petrus’s, difference ('Ethics and Politics' 24). Nowhere else in the thesis do we see such a reflexive and ‘politically fastidious’ representation of the historically marginalised and/or suffering other (Spivak ‘Ethics and Politics’ 24).

Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that Disgrace’s treatment of Lucy (in particular) throws up questions for some reviewers. The most significant of these come from feminist critics regarding ‘the gendering of contrition’ and Lucy’s rape. These are not unwarranted, especially given the socio-historical context in which the novel is set (see Boehmer ‘Sorry’; Horrell J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace). Elleke Boehmer’s is a key voice here, though she finds more fault with other readings of women in Disgrace than with the text’s own representations. But Boehmer does suggest that Lucy’s position in the text as ‘the human body-in-pain’ and her passive acceptance of abjection is ‘worrying’ when considered in light of the historically subject position of women in South Africa (‘Sorry’ 145). Boehmer also queries Marais’s reading of Lucy as showing a way beyond the dialectic of oppressed and oppressor: ‘How...can we speak of atonement if it entails that women as ever assume the generic pose of suffering in silence...?’ (‘Sorry’ 146). These concerns should not be dismissed. Disgrace is deeply disturbing in its depiction of Lucy’s abjection. This chapter can only attempt to resist comfortable readings of Lucy and be attentive to her behaviour and speech as well as the ‘unsaid’ of her character.

At issue for many other South African readers at the time of its publication was Disgrace’s ‘far from affirmative’ stance on the ‘new South Africa’ and, within this,

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90 For example Boehmer criticises Attridge’s consideration of Lurie’s desire as ‘itself...redemptive, along with music and “escorting” dogs, thus setting to one side the predatory and destructive aspects of such desire’ (‘Not Saying Sorry’ 44). Lucy Graham also notes that ‘the majority of reviewers seem to read in sympathy with Lurie when he glosses his sexual encounter with Melanie as “not rape”’ (‘Reading the Unspeakable’ 440).
the achievements of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Attridge ‘Age of Iron’ 99). Sanders, amongst others, point to a possible critique of the TRC in *Disgrace* (‘Disgrace’; see also Boehmer ‘Sorry’ and Saunders). The university committee before which Lurie must appear recalls the Commission, as Sanders notes (‘Disgrace’ 370-71), and the novel engages closely with issues of confession, repentance and absolution. Poyner (‘Truth’) and Boehmer both suggest that *Disgrace* depicts a process of ‘secular atonement’ that links to the TRC, with Boehmer offering that it is figured as an ‘alternative to the public and Christianised ritual of redemption through confession, of reconciliation through a possibly self-serving catharsis, which the TRC...has offered’ (‘Not Saying Sorry’ 30, emphasis in original). Sanders also suggests that *Disgrace* cautions against the closures invited by the TRC’s model, which has tended to suggest that the past can be put to rest once the ‘truth’ is out (‘Disgrace’). Although this chapter does not analyse the novel’s reflections on the TRC in depth, it does argue that the text refuses such closures and the transcendence of violent histories.

Nor does *Disgrace* allow for a refuge from history in rural spaces, as is the case in conservative pastoral. The ‘farm novel’ is a major literary mode in South Africa and in Afrikaner writing especially, as Coetzee has explored in *White Writing*. The tradition he outlines there is one to which *Disgrace* clearly responds, as other critics also recognise. Rita Barnard argues that the novel ‘pressures’ South African pastoral and overturns certain conventions of the form, but suggests that the mode may be tentatively recouped here (‘J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*’ 220). Gilbert Yeoh counters that *Disgrace* ‘wholly negate[s]’ pastoral, and suggests that Barnard’s position entails a failure to ‘detect the novel’s crucial ironic stance’ to it (20, emphasis in original, 15). This chapter’s reading of pastoral in *Disgrace* engages with both Barnard’s and Yeoh’s analyses, each of which makes strong, if divergent, arguments; ultimately my position
is closer to Barnard’s. Where my reading goes beyond theirs is in my analysis of the novel’s depiction of the pastoral site as invaded by history and consideration of Lucy’s pregnancy as a manifestation of the trope of the ‘hybrid child’ through whom reconciliation may be achieved. I conclude that *Disgrace* undertakes a postcolonial critique of South African pastoral, but—differently from *The Custodians*—does not embrace the ‘postcolonial pastoral’.

‘A history of wrong’

Just as *Disgrace* is Coetzee’s most identifiably South African text, its historical referentiality is more apparent than that of many of his other novels. *Disgrace* reflects on a post-apartheid and colonial-apartheid period South Africa, and although the novel makes reference to ‘changed times’, it also suggests that the interracial conflict and inequality of the past continue, even in a more democratic and ‘postcolonial’ nation. *Disgrace* offers up multiple microcosms of the country’s traumatic colonial and apartheid past and its legacies in the present. In doing so, it represents and ‘supplements’ historical narratives and begins to critique white ‘master discourses’ of South Africa, even as it gestures at marginalised stories and subjects.

Lurie epitomizes the privileged liberal white male South African. Highly educated, an urban dweller, aesthete and not identifiably an Afrikaner, he is less obviously a representative patriarchal settler colonialist figure than Nieuwenhuizen in *The Folly*. Yet *Disgrace* indicates Lurie’s status as an inheritor of the country’s white ‘masters’ and one who is deeply implicated in the unequal power relations that have shaped and continue to ‘pervade’ South African society (Marais ‘Little Enough’ 175). This is most evident in his relationships with women. Lurie’s attitudes and behaviour
toward the prostitute Soraya, Melanie and even his own daughter Lucy are selfish and paternalistic. Once Soraya has declined to see him again, he disrespects her wishes, even paying a detective agency to discover her identity and address, and then harassing her on the telephone. Melanie is more vulnerable, and, quoting Shakespeare to her, ‘From fairest creatures we desire increase,’ Lurie betrays the basis of his intent (16). When Melanie withdraws he knows he ‘ought to let her go’ (18), but Lurie instead pursues her, seeing himself as in the grip of ‘desire’ (20). Melanie, after all, ‘does not own herself; ‘[b]eauty,’ he thinks, ‘does not own itself’ (16). He takes advantage of his social elevation over her, as a professor and senior male.

Noticing that he is old enough to be the father of both Soraya and Melanie, Lurie embraces rather than shrinks from this thought (26). Paternity, for him, is suggestive of ownership: of Melanie he thinks, ‘Mine! He would like to say...as if she were his daughter’ (191, emphasis in original). Lurie’s relationship with Lucy is also marked by a peculiar intrusiveness and desire that she remain ‘his’ (86).

There is a ‘further element’ to Lurie’s relationships with Soraya and Melanie (Cornwell ‘Realism’ 315). Both women appeal to Lurie’s preference for youth, ‘exotic’ beauty, and passivity in a sexual partner. That ‘exotic’ may translate to racial difference is suggested by the Discreet Escorts agent: ‘...exotics...—Malaysian, Thai, Chinese, you name it’ (8). Soraya, the ‘honey-brown’ prostitute with ‘long black hair and dark, liquid eyes’, whom Lurie first sees with a flower in her hair, pleases him in this respect, and also in her ‘docile’ (1), ‘complian[t]’ temperament (5). Melanie also has black hair and dark eyes, and ‘wide, almost Chinese cheekbones’ (11). They are identifiable, ‘in the South African nomenclature’, as ‘Coloureds’, and, Cornwell writes

[o]nce the reader grasps that, much in Lurie’s affair with his student becomes clearer and more somber...Lurie’s seigneurial assertiveness and Melanie’s unresistingness can now be seen to be informed not only by the power relations of patriarchy and
The historical familiarity of Lurie’s behaviour is not lost on the committee of inquiry before which he must appear after Melanie’s complaint. The case has ‘overtones’ (50), and one of the members observes with frustration that Lurie ‘makes no mention of the long history of which this is part’ (53). Lurie is unwilling to see his actions as implicated in a broader picture, and refuses to sign the statement on the basis that this is a ‘private’ matter (66). Yet the text itself supports a socio-historical reading of Lurie’s ‘crime’ and subsequent disgrace.

As noted, Lurie’s appearance before the committee of inquiry recalls the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Similarly to the TRC, the committee is chaired by a professor of religious studies (47) and its ‘hearings...held in camera’ (41). The role of the committee is not legal; rather, they will ‘hear both sides of the case and make a recommendation’ (48). Although one of the committee’s members acknowledges that it is impossible for them to know Lurie’s ‘soul’, the group insists that he sign and submit, in a ‘spirit of repentance’ (58), a statement communicating his sincere apology. The TRC, couched as it was in a Christian ethic of confession, repentance and forgiveness, similarly emphasised the value of ‘truth-telling’ and contrition. Commentators have remarked on what seems to be a critical reflection on the TRC and ‘the controversy surrounding’ it in Disgrace (Sanders ‘Disgrace’ 365). I will touch on this later in the chapter; for now, suffice it to say that this scene begins to suggest the text’s scepticism of confession and its larger critique of the

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91 Kossew writes that ‘remorse was not considered part of the TRC process, as it was deemed too difficult to measure its sincerity’ (‘Politics’ 159), but as Sanders notes, there was ‘unlegislated moral pressure to express’ such sentiments (‘Disgrace’ 370).

92 For more on tensions, controversies and criticisms surrounding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission see, for a start, Attwell and Harlow.
TRC. Though willing to enter a ‘plea of guilty’, Lurie draws a line at the committee’s request for a demonstration of sincere remorse (55). Lurie is an unsympathetic protagonist, so the reader may be inclined to take a sceptical view of his antagonistic responses to the committee. Yet had he (falsely) convinced the committee of his ‘contrition’ and accepted their terms (54), the incident might have been resolved, at least from the university’s perspective. Would that have been ‘enough’ (173)? Lurie might be ‘disgrace[d]’ (85), but he is not sorry (56), even though (for all his bravado before the committee) he has retained some sense of his own wrongdoing throughout the affair. Having refused the committee’s offer of conditional clemency, he is required to resign, and escapes the scandal with a visit to his daughter’s smallholding in the Eastern Cape.

The Eastern Cape is the primary setting of the second half of the novel and further suggests the text’s engagement with the colonial past. The Lower Albany area of the province, where Salem is located, was in the nineteenth century the site of some of the fiercest frontier wars in South African history (Cornwell ‘Disgrace’ 43). ‘Although the specific origins and courses of the conflicts varied,’ Cornwell writes, ‘the fundamental casus belli was the question of land’ (‘Disgrace’ 43). This history is referenced by Lurie’s use of the area’s colonial nomenclature ‘old Kaffraria’ (122) and in his consideration of Lucy as

A frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson. (62)

The last lines hint at Lurie’s awareness of a history of excess, in particular, excessive violence, which in this setting was deployed mainly in the appropriation of land. He is correct that history repeats, but as Disgrace will also go on to show, it has not
learned its lesson. The violence of the colonial past returns: in a post-apartheid era, this part of the Eastern Cape is once again a warzone, but now the tables are turned as history is ‘played out, in miniature, on the smallholding’ (Marais ‘Very Morbid Phenomena’ 36). The attack is figured in terms of historical ‘vengeance’ by both Lurie and Lucy (112). Lurie tells his daughter that the rape ‘was history speaking through [the men]....It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors’ (156). Lucy, for her part, refers to her rapists as ‘debt collectors, tax collectors’ (158). Thus, without directly representing it, Disgrace opens up the spectre of a repressed ‘history of wrong’ (156), which has also been allegorized in Lurie’s dealings with Melanie who, moreover, comes from ‘this part of the world’ (68).

### Representing others

Not only does Disgrace represent marginalised, repressed histories, it represents historically marginalised others, as we have also seen in The Folly, The Custodians, and Country of My Skull. There are notable departures amongst the texts, however. Disgrace is more preoccupied with representing the other than is The Folly, though both texts employ a strategy of indirect representation, which marks Coetzee’s novel apart from Jose’s. And differently from Country of My Skull, Disgrace exhibits scepticism of an ethics of empathy. Coetzee’s fiction has always been cautious in its representations of others, as Durrant, Marais and others have shown. It has, for example, refused the direct representations of black South Africans embraced by Coetzee’s contemporary Nadine Gordimer, rejecting the ‘liberal humanist assumption that the novelistic act of empathy can transcend difference’ (Durrant Postcolonial Narrative 27). On the contrary, Coetzee’s work insists on the other’s difference and singularity, and continually points to ‘the unintelligibility of the
other in the language of the self’ (Jolly ‘Going to the Dogs’ 153, emphasis added).

This is also communicated in *Disgrace*, and of all the texts examined in this thesis, this one shows the most exemplary navigation of the postcolonial dilemma of representation. In the words of Jolly, it does not retreat from representing the other and ‘the other’s violation’ (‘Going to the Dogs’ 153), but does so in such a way as to highlight the difficulty of doing so and the impossibility of truly ‘knowing’ the other as other, as irreducible to the self. *Disgrace* refuses direct representation, denying the reader the opportunity to imaginatively inhabit the position of the other. At the same time it works to facilitate in the reader a receptivity to the other’s voice, silence, and difference.

*Disgrace* is full of characters who are ‘others’. Each occupies a different socio-historical position and relation to Lurie, and all are to varying degrees ‘dark’ to him—unknown, unfathomable, whatever his projections. The text thus dramatises the limits of empathy and the self’s capacity to truly understand the other, especially as it comes to reveal that Lurie’s perceptions are almost always wrong. This last thing is a deliberate literary strategy. Gayatri Spivak reminds us that literature can work in special ways to engage the agency of the reader (‘Ethics and Politics’ 22). We have already seen an example of this in *The Folly*, in which irony encourages the ‘canny reader’ to construct meaning for him or herself by working through the text’s incongruities, contradictions and gaps. In *Disgrace*, the irony at work is dramatic: the reader witnesses Lurie’s failures of recognition and is prompted to read beyond Lurie. It is the text’s use of focalisation that triggers this process. The story is told strictly from Lurie’s point of view, and though it would be possible to read *Disgrace* only at his level, for all but the most naïve reader this will not be satisfactory. Quite apart from the fact that Lurie is an unsympathetic character, the text underlines his
unreliability and inability to ‘read’ the other. This is nowhere more apparent than in his efforts to understand Lucy’s experience of the rape and her decisions afterward. When he says that he knows what she went through, she counters with responses like: ‘you don’t understand what happened to me that day...you think you understand, but finally you don’t. Because you can’t’ (157) and ‘You don’t know what happened...you don’t begin to know’ (134, italics in original). His beliefs about her motivations in returning to the farm are similarly rebuffed, as Lucy tells him ‘you miss the point entirely...You keep misreading me’ (112). The word ‘misreading’ points to textuality and is a ‘rhetorical signal’ to the reader, as Lucy’s demand for recognition as a character separate to Lurie:

You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until half-way through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you... (198)

But throughout the text, Lucy is ‘resolutely denied focalization’, and so, Spivak argues,

the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focalizer’s inability to “read” Lucy as patient and agent. No reader is content with acting out the failure of reading. This is the rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counterfocalize. (‘Ethics and Politics’ 22)

To counterfocalise is to read against Lurie’s grain, to attempt to ‘listen’ to Lucy and the text’s other others, as well as to attend their ‘unsaid’—to create, in a sense, an ‘alternative narrative’ to Lurie’s ‘master narrative’. This alternative narrative will, by necessity, still have its gaps, its silences. But the point is that the reader has been alerted to other voices and alternative perspectives. The text has thereby enabled the development of a ‘listening subject’ for the marginalised characters of Lucy, Petrus,
Soraya and Melanie—which is, Spivak argues, essential in order for the subaltern to be able to speak ('Ethics and Politics' 24).

Revisiting pastoral

‘Rhetorical signals’ and an attention to focalisation also help to unlock Disgrace’s critique of pastoral. Barnard and Yeoh both acknowledge that the novel subjects pastoral to a critical treatment, but differ in their assessments of its degree. Barnard, who has previously described the challenge to Afrikaner ‘dream topographies’ in The Life and Times of Michael K and In the Heart of the Country (see ‘Dream Topographies’), argues that Disgrace is a ‘reconfiguration of Coetzee’s abiding interest in the colonial pastoral’ (‘Coetzee’s Country Ways’ 386). The novel revises and exposes South African pastoral, she suggests, but stops short of entirely rejecting it. Yeoh dismisses this as a naïve reading; Disgrace, in his view, ‘wholly negate[s]’ pastoral (15, 20, emphasis in original). Yeoh makes some compelling points that I will explore further, but this chapter does not go so far as to assert that Disgrace subjects pastoral to a ‘total negation’ (Yeoh 22). Barnard’s detection of some positive pastoral strains seems to me not altogether off the mark, even after irony and focalisation are factored in. My own argument is that Disgrace subjects South African pastoral to a postcolonial critique, rather than attempting to recover or rewrite pastoral along the lines of the ‘postcolonial pastoral’, as Jose does in The Custodians.

In order to show how Disgrace critiques conservative South African pastoral, it is first necessary to briefly review the conventions of that tradition, as outlined in Coetzee’s critical volume White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa. Of

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93 Barnard and Yeoh are the most significant commentators on the subject, but see also Cornwell ‘Realism’ and ‘Disgraceland’; and Smit-Marais and Wenzel.
pastoral in South Africa, he writes that it is an ‘essentially conservative’ form that ‘looks back, usually in a spirit of nostalgia, to the calm and stability of the farm’ (White Writing 4). Like the conservative pastoral more generally, South African pastoral tends to depict the farm as ‘[lying] outside history’ (Coetzee White Writing 4).

It is not surprising that the notion of an escape from history might appeal to ‘such unsettled settlers with so uncertain a future as the whites of South Africa’, for whom ‘the retrospective gaze of the pastoral has understandably proved...reassuring’ (Coetzee White Writing 4). White Writing reveals that pastoral is not only reassuring but also securing of the white South African: that is, pastoral discourse constructs a relation between the Afrikaner and the land that naturalises and legitimises his possession of and placement on it.94 A feature of pastoral in this setting, then, is the foregrounding of white labour and (non-economic) payment for the land, for example, the ‘myth of natural right’ in which

the founding fathers pay for the farm in blood, sweat, and tears, not in money: they hack it out of primeval bush, they defend it against the barbarians, they leave their bones behind in its soil. (White Writing 85)95

But if, as Coetzee says, ‘the work of hands on a particular patch of earth...is what inscribes it as the property of its occupiers by right, then the hands of black serfs doing the work had better not be seen’ (White Writing 5, emphasis in original). As noted previously, South African pastoral therefore occludes black labour, even disappearing the colour black altogether (White Writing 5). It has also, though this is less emphasised in White Writing, overlooked the contestedness of the possession of

94 The reader may note some slippage between ‘white South African’ and ‘Afrikaner’ in the course of this discussion. South African pastoral is perhaps most prominent in Afrikaner culture, and certainly White Writing focuses on Afrikaner forms, but ‘pastoral strains’ also feature and function in similar ways in English-language South African novels.

95 I am reminded, here, of the way in which narratives of explorer deaths, with bodies never found, sacralise (and claim) the Australian landscape for the settler imagination—a subject I have discussed in both chapter two, on The White Earth, and more briefly in chapter five, on Craft for a Dry Lake.
land previously occupied by others. *Disgrace* discredits South African pastoral as it is described by Coetzee in *White Writing*. The text is, in a sense, anti-pastoral: it emphasises the labour of the black man (Petrus), depicts the farm as *invaded by* history, and reveals that it is violence that has secured white placement on the land. As I will go on to show, the novel also rejects pastoral-colonialist modes of belonging that are oriented exclusively to the land and which demand an elision of the other.

Retreating to the country, Lurie finds in Lucy’s smallholding a world that seems simpler, and which is initially reassuring. He sees this site and his daughter’s presence on it within the frame of South African pastoral. Much about the smallholding (which he calls a ‘farm’ (200)) seems to him to hark back to an early, rural and distinctly Afrikaner tradition. The house, for example, ‘dates from the time of large families, of guests by the wagonful’ (60). Of his own daughter, Lurie thinks her ‘a solid countrywoman, a boervrou’; he ‘approve[s]’ of her pragmatism in keeping a rifle (60) and muses:

> Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps...history had the larger share. (61)

The tropes of settler rootedness so prominent in South African pastoral also figure into Lurie’s first readings of his daughter’s place on the land: he observes that ‘Lucy’s bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life. Good!’ (62).

But *Disgrace* goes on to expose the falsity of these codes and of Lurie’s reading of Lucy and the smallholding. The ‘realities’ of post-apartheid rural South Africa increasingly pressure his interpretations and, by extension, South African
pastoral ideology itself. Even Lurie comes to realise this, to a degree. He can acknowledge, as the text repeatedly underscores, that Petrus is ascendant in this space, a ‘man of substance’ and ambition who is ‘busy establishing his lands’ (77, 76). Petrus’s ‘honest toil’ (117) cannot be ignored by Lurie, nor is he under the illusion that this man works for or under white authority:

Petrus is the one who swiftly and efficiently lays out their wares, the one who knows the prices, takes the money, makes the change. Petrus is in fact the one who does the work, while he sits and warms his hands. Just like the old days….Except that he does not presume to give Petrus orders. Petrus does what needs to be done, and that is that. (116, emphasis added)

The phrase ‘just like the old days’ suggests that black labour has always been a fact of life in rural South Africa, however much pastoral discourse has sought to cover it up. Disgrace continually depicts Petrus as working (see for example 64, 70, 136, 201), revealing ‘the work of [black] hands on a particular patch of earth’ (Coetzee White Writing 5). The terms of that labour have also shifted: Lucy lectures her father that Petrus is ‘his own master’ (114) and Lurie himself knows that ‘though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help’ (116). To an extent the changed terms of black-white working relationships are a product of the ‘new world they live in’ (117), but Lucy has always refused the power-vested models of the ‘old days’ (116). The first thing she tells Lurie about Petrus is that he is a ‘co-proprietor’ (62). She is not a ‘throwback’, at least not in the sense that Lurie has thought (61), and Lucy herself, as Yeoh points out, contradicts Lurie’s pastoral readings of her and the smallholding (20). At one point she snaps: ‘Stop calling it the farm, David. This is not a farm, it’s just a piece of land where I grow things—we both know that’ (200, emphasis in original).
Lurie does come to recognise that Lucy rejects traditional pastoral and colonialist ways of securing herself on the land. From his perspective this renders her placement vulnerable—in contrast to that of Ettinger, a ‘surly old man’ and settler of the ‘old breed’ who lives down the road (100), and who seems to Lurie to be ‘a man of the earth, tenacious, eingewurzelt [rooted in]’ (117). A racist who declares of South African blacks ‘[n]ot one of them you can trust’ (109), Ettinger ‘never go[es] anywhere without [his] Beretta’ (100) and lives in a ‘fortress’ (113). Lurie believes that Lucy should follow his example: ‘[t]hey ought to install bars, security gates, a perimeter fence, as Ettinger has done’ (113). When she does not, Lurie concludes that ‘Ettinger will be a harder nut to crack [than Lucy]...[who] is merely a transient’ (117). Yeoh points out that these passages reveal the ‘true basis of Ettinger’s deep bond with the land’, ‘the use of material force’ (25). And to the extent that Lurie is shown to be wrong—that Lucy ultimately endures, while Ettinger is increasingly at risk—*Disgrace* again suggests the ‘vacuousness’ of Lurie’s subscription to the ‘arthritic’ and fictitious ideology of South African pastoral (Yeoh 22, *Disgrace* 117).

Disrupting pastoral fantasies of the farm more than anything else, however, is the attack itself, which is figured as an invasion of the past on the present. *Disgrace* thus denies conservative pastoral’s myth of the farm as a site ‘bracketed off’ from history (Coetzee *White Writing* 11). Moreover, in its depiction of this ‘invasion’ the novel again gestures at the violence that secured white settlement and dominance in South Africa. Supporting a reading of the attack in these terms is the parallel between Lucy’s rape and Melanie’s ‘almost rape’ and general mistreatment by Lurie, which, as we have seen, exemplifies unequal colonial and apartheid relations in South Africa, especially white/settler exploitation and violation of non-white others. In addition, and as already noted, the rape is described in historical terms by both Lucy and Lurie.
Yet another clue comes in the name of the youngest rapist, who reappears on the smallholding and turns out to be related to Petrus. Lucy explains the boy’s presence to Lurie:

‘Yes, …[h]e is staying with Petrus, helping him. His name is Pollux.’
‘Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?’
‘P-O-L-L-U-X.’ (200)

It is another rhetorical signal. The character’s name is highlighted, which points in turn to an intertext. In Greek mythology, Pollux is twin brother of Castor, son of Leda by Zeus, and a child of rape (see ‘Leda and the Swan’). Disgrace thus suggests that Pollux is a product of the same historical violence and miscegenation that was referenced in Lurie’s relations with Melanie. Pollux can further be read as a punisher of unpaid dues, reinforcing Lucy’s description of the rapists as ‘debt collectors’ (158).

As Wicomb reminds us, the mythological Pollux also features in Cicero’s story of the Art of Memory (‘Translations’ 219), where he takes vengeance for a ‘full fee’ not paid (‘Translations’ 219). Wicomb suggests that the ‘intertext of Pollux and the story of memory’ points to a critique of the TRC: a process through which, Disgrace may imply, proper reparations were not made (‘Translations’ 220). Perhaps they were not paid at all, and/or not by the right people. I refer in particular to the TRC’s amnesty provision, which Archbishop Desmond Tutu described as a ‘heavy price’ but one that the political negotiators—perhaps especially Afrikaners—insisted was necessary (Yeoh 34). Yeoh detects in Disgrace a scepticism of this ‘deal of the Constitution’, in which the price for reconciliation is borne primarily by apartheid victims (Yeoh 34). He writes that Coetzee’s novel suggests that the true ‘price’ of reconciliation is one that ‘continues to be worked out and [is] one primarily to be borne by whites and not by blacks’ (Yeoh 34). I return to the question of ‘price’ later in the chapter, but to re-
iterate now, Pollux signals both a ‘history of wrong’ and its violent, though reversed, return in the present. His appearance on the smallholding belies the pastoral myth of the farm as outside history.

_Disgrace_ clearly subjects South African pastoral to a devastating treatment. Whether the novel allows any hope for a transformed, even ‘postcolonial’ pastoral is debatable, as Barnard’s and Yeoh’s contrasting positions show. The novel’s penultimate scene is key in both readings; it is one in which Lurie makes an unannounced visit to Lucy’s smallholding. He finds it beautiful, and the sight of Lucy working amongst the flowers inspires him to consider that she is ‘solid in her existence’ and ‘[w]ith luck...will last a long time’ (217). He sees before him ‘ready-made’ pastoral:

> The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, _das ewig Weibliche_, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard.

Lucy soon realises his presence, turns to him and ‘smiles’, looking ‘suddenly, the picture of health’, before inviting him in for tea (218). Lurie notes that she ‘makes the offer as if he were a visitor’ and thinks, ‘Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start’ (218). There is no denying notes of promise here. At the same time, Lurie’s vision of the smallholding is once again conventionally pastoral. The reference to Sargent and Bonnard underlines that his aesthetic perspective is still distinctively European, though it also signals that he is now able to see the smallholding and Lucy’s place on it in a more optimistic way. Indeed Barnard describes this scene as entailing ‘a potentially positive recasting of the tropes of South African pastoral’ (J.M. Coetzee’s _Disgrace_ 220). Her reading is not unwarranted;
Gareth Cornwell agrees that this is a scene of ‘pastoral idealism’ that ‘provide[s] a semblance of hope…for rehabilitation from the disgrace of our past’ (‘Disgraceland’ 54-55). Yet as Yeoh points out, it comes to us filtered through Lurie, an unreliable (and unsympathetic) narrator. For Yeoh, this means that the scene entails a total negation of pastoral (22). While it is true that ‘[a]s a reliable representation of Lucy’s motivations, this passage is wholly vacuous’ (Yeoh 23), I am not convinced that this justifies Yeoh’s deterministic position. These passages are more ambivalent than Yeoh’s argument allows.

The scene is in fact one of ‘perhaps undecidable ambiguity’ (Barnard ‘J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace’ 221). Although Lurie’s ‘gaze and discourse remain masculine, European, traditional’ (Barnard ‘J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace’ 218), we do see him positively contemplating the prospect of self-directed change and re-education: ‘He must have a look again….There may be things to learn’ (Disgrace 218). His relation to Lucy has shifted too: he no longer judges her decisions, and believes she has a future: she is ‘solid in her existence’ and will ‘last a long time’ (218). Of the pregnancy, he hopes that ‘it will be different’ with Petrus and his family ‘after the child is born’ (216).

Lucy’s baby—especially given Lurie’s musings—seems to be a manifestation of the settler pastoral trope of the hybrid child. The hybrid child and/or hybrid union, we have seen in the Australian case, signals the prospect of reconciliation and (sometimes) more legitimate belonging. It is not an unproblematic trope, since it may entail an appropriation of the indigenous for the settler. How does it function in Disgrace? Yeoh dismisses it as simply more of Lurie’s pastoral fantasising, but it is not at all clear that the text itself discredits Lurie’s hopeful conception of the child (as it does many of his other readings). I suggest that its appearance here may signal a ‘potentially positive recasting’ of a pastoral trope (Barnard ‘J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace’
though admittedly, not a trope seen often in South African pastoral. The child does appear to offer hope for a reconciled future, though the violent terms of its conception defy sentimental readings. What Disgrace might finally say about the possibility of a new pastoral mode in South Africa is thus not entirely discernable.

Even if Coetzee does not wholly negate pastoral in Disgrace, he can hardly be said to rewrite it into a more sympathetic form—in the way that Jose does in The Custodians, a text I have described as 'postcolonial pastoral'. The comparison with The Custodians prompts a question: might this contrast be traced to the different lineage of settler pastoral in South Africa as opposed to Australia? As we have seen, Australian pastoral, like its South African cousin, is tied up with white nationalist discourse and naturalising the settler's placement. But it is also more inclined to register discomforting tensions around colonial land possession and feature (rather than occlude) an indigenous presence. It would seem that for Coetzee, South African pastoral might be beyond redemption. Is the form less historically suspect in Australia, and thus more amenable to postcolonial co-option? These thoughts are only speculatory, and it must be said that Coetzee's fiction is, on the whole, more sceptical and reflexive than Jose's. It should probably come as no surprise that it might resist a 'recovery' of South African pastoral, especially in a post-apartheid period in which so much other white writing is attempting to rewrite and 'rehabilitate' the Afrikaner and Afrikaner culture.

Unsettling models for belonging

If colonialist and pastoralist modes of belonging are discredited in a post-apartheid era, what now? Does Disgrace suggest any postcolonial alternatives, as we
have seen *The Custodians*, *Country of My Skull* and *Craft for a Dry Lake* do in their various ways? Barnard is right that ‘Coetzee seems to remain attached in *Disgrace* to some form of settlement, however reduced and vulnerable’ (J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* 220). Lucy and even Lurie remain in the Eastern Cape, albeit each in their own way, with Lucy’s a seemingly more ‘rooted’ placement. I suggest that *Disgrace* does offer models for ongoing white placement in South Africa, but they are deeply discomforting for white South Africans.

Most critics agree that *Disgrace* is ‘bleak’ about post-apartheid South Africa and the position of the white settler within it, but, as noted, some detect strains of optimism in the novel’s penultimate scene. Barnard in particular sees promise in Lurie’s embrace of the notion of ‘[v]isitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start’ (*Disgrace* 218). ‘Visitation’, she writes, is ‘oriented toward the future’, and ‘[w]ith its religious overtones…expresses the hope of some new annunciation or intervention—the arrival, perhaps, of an unexpected grace’ (Barnard ‘J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*’ 219). The suggestion of visitation as a mode of being/belonging in *Disgrace* would connect this novel to *In the Heart of the Country* and *The Life and Times of Michael K* which, Barnard has elsewhere argued, seem to endorse a ‘drifting habitation’ (*Dream Topographies* 39). (We have seen something similar in *Craft for a Dry Lake*.)

Without denying that *Disgrace* offers ‘visitation’ as an option of sorts for some displaced white settlers, I would argue that it is only Lurie’s solution in the novel. ‘Visitation’ or ‘drifting habitation’ is not enough for Lucy: she desires a settled rather than transient belonging. What then is Lucy’s model?

Lucy’s response to the rape—her decision not to report it, and, further, to accept the presence of Pollux next door and Petrus’s ‘humiliating’ proposal of
marriage (205)—was for South African reviewers the most troubling aspect of *Disgrace*. As Marais relates, Lucy's passivity has been widely read as 'exemplifying whites' acceptance of their peripherality' in post-apartheid South Africa ('Very Morbid Phenomena' 32). But to the question, does Coetzee 'suggest a politics of abasement for white South Africans', Marais's answer is no ('Very Morbid Phenomena' 33). He suggests that Lucy's responses to Lurie (who himself seems to interpret her actions in this way) reveal this as a misreading. Certainly Lucy denies that she is acting in terms of 'abstractions', such as 'guilt' and 'salvation' (112), but this is not adequate cause to dismiss that *Disgrace* may on some levels proffer a 'politics of abasement'. Lucy rejects Lurie's suggestion that she is trying to 'expiate the crimes of the past' (112), but one thing is certain: she 'cannot go away' (161). She wants to remain on the smallholding, and her actions and words suggest that she believes abjection is a requirement for doing so. The text appears to support her position.

Lucy’s model of white postcolonial belonging in South Africa entails her own abjection and is based on relations with *people* rather than with *land*, which is a radical overturning of traditional (and pastoral) models.\(^6\) To look first at abjection, Lucy ponders that this may be the 'price for staying on' (158). Discussing the rapists with her father, she asks,

> What if...what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it, perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something...Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? (158, emphasis in original)

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\(^6\) In making this argument I am indebted to Gilbert Yeoh's article 'Negotiating Foundations: Nation, Homeland and Land in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*'. Only discovering this work in the late stages of this thesis, I found in it confirmation of many of my own ideas about the novel's engagement with the issue of contemporary white belonging in South Africa, in particular its emphasis on belonging premised on relations with people rather than land.
Lucy eventually reaches an agreement with Petrus whereby she gives him the farm in return for the assurance of living safely in her own house on it, effectively becoming a ‘tenant on his land’, a ‘bywoner’ (204). She acknowledges that her situation is ‘humiliating,’ but says ‘perhaps it is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing’ (205). This statement, and Lucy’s abjection as ‘price’, should be contextualised within the broader frame of white historical mythologies of belonging in South Africa, as well as Coetzee’s remarks elsewhere about ‘the hereditary masters of South Africa’ (97). As we have seen, the traditional-colonial models of white belonging emphasise a connection with and love for land, and frequently, an occlusion of other people (and their labour) from the landscape. It is a ‘false’ discourse according to White Writing, and Coetzee has suggested that ‘the emphasis on land in white South African literature and art actually masks a failure to engage with South Africa’s indigenous people’ (Yeoh 31). In Lucy’s case, a reversal is evident as she attempts to secure her placement not in terms of land but in terms of relationships with people—especially Africans. She gives up land ownership in order to stay, and it is through her ‘alliance’ with Petrus that she gains the assurance of a continuing presence on the smallholding (203). This relationship does not come for free, however, and in considering this I examine Coetzee’s Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech. Of South Africa’s white forefathers, who have loved the land and not its people, Coetzee remarks that

The veiled unfreedom of the white man in South Africa has always made itself felt most keenly when, stepping down for a moment from his lonely throne, giving in to a wholly human and understandable yearning for fraternity with the people among whom he lives, he has discovered with a shock that fraternity by itself is not to be had, no matter how compellingly felt the impulse on both sides. (Atwell Doubling 97, emphasis added)

The notion of a price is not a comforting one for white South Africans who, Coetzee suggests, want ‘fraternity’ (and reconciliation) ‘without paying for it’—but fraternity,
he insists, comes part and parcel with ‘liberty and equality’, thus requiring a flattening
of historical privilege and power hierarchies (Attwell Doubling 97). Within this
framework, Lucy’s sacrifices become visible not only as a price for living in South
Africa, but as a price for reconciled relations with others (black South Africans in
particular) to whom she owes a debt and through whom she may be able to continue
to belong in the country. The price Lucy pays is much higher than that proposed in
The Custodians and Country of My Skull. In these texts, recognising the wrongs of the
past, acknowledging the other (indigenous or black), and attempting to approach the
other differently seem to be adequate to resecure the settler. (In a notable similarity to
Disgrace, Jose and Krog also ascribe the indigenous with the authority to allow the
settler subject re-entry to the country.) Disgrace appears to call for nothing less than
starting again from ground zero.

To claim that Disgrace makes such a call requires that I establish that the novel
in fact endorses Lucy’s model. In support of this, we see that Lucy’s belonging,
contrary to Lurie’s early belief, is more secure and durable than Ettinger’s. By the end
of the novel, Lurie sees that ‘[i]t is just a matter of time before Ettinger is found with
a bullet in his back’ (204), while Lucy’s placement in the Cape is figured as long-
lasting (217). Similarly, although Lurie thinks she will ‘fall like rotten fruit’ after
hearing of her acceptance of Petrus’s proposal (205), he finds later that she is
flourishing (218). That this is so hardly renders Lucy’s model of belonging any easier
for white South Africans. The reader cannot forget that her resecuring has only come
about through her utter subjugation. Disgrace does not appear to withdraw from its
position that a (legitimate) ongoing settlement in South Africa is only possible for
whites if they are willing to ‘give up’ the privileges, power and ‘passions’ of the past
Lurie too must release all that was most important to him in order to achieve the right to ‘visitation’.

**Troubling redemption**

How does Lurie come to this place of self-relinquishment and, perhaps, ‘grace’ (Barnard ‘J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* 219)? As for Lucy, it is through an experience and acceptance of abjection. Interestingly, this fits very well with Durrant’s argument that

[Coeztee’s novels] suggest that the possibility of reconciliation lies not in our ability to *empathize* with the other but rather in an experience of *abjection*, in which, instead of gaining imaginative access to the experience of another subject, one experiences a radical loss of subjectivity, an ‘experience’…that approximates (brings one closer, more proximate to) the experience of being other. (*Postcolonial Narrative* 27, emphases in original)

‘[A] radical loss of subjectivity’ aptly describes Lurie’s experiences following the rape. The attack renders him powerless and unable to save his child; it wounds him physically and psychically (95). Afterwards, a ‘grey mood’ settles over him, he is ‘shocked to the depths,’ ‘bleeding’; he feels life ebbing from him (107). After years of patronizing Lucy, he finds her speaking to him ‘as if to a child’ (104), and soon he replaces Petrus as ‘dog-man’ (64). As Durrant’s remarks might predict, Lurie’s state of abjection sets him on a new course. He becomes more sympathetic to others and develops greater critical self-awareness, gradually giving himself over to working for the other (the dogs at the animal shelter) and releasing his pride and desire. This process is represented somewhat ambivalently in the novel, but it is figured as a progression, even to a point, ultimately, of redemption. Again in common with Lucy’s resecuring, there is nothing celebratory in the scene depicting Lurie’s ‘arrival’, and more to trouble than reassure the reader.
That Lurie has begun to change is first indicated by his new regard for animals—the ultimate ‘others’ in post-apartheid South Africa. He is surprised to find himself identifying with a pair of sheep that Petrus brings home to slaughter, and realizes that although ‘[s]heep do not own themselves’ (123)—a striking echo of what he thought about Melanie—an inexplicable ‘bond’ has developed between him and them (126). Suddenly, ‘their lot has become important to him’ (126). Considering his own failures to relate to them, he wonders how Bev Shaw, a woman who runs the local animal shelter, manages to ‘commune’ with animals (126). After a series of strident refusals to ‘re-educate’ and ‘reform’ (66), Lurie now asks, ‘Do I have to change…?’ (126). He becomes increasingly caught up in his volunteer work at the shelter, especially in the lot of unwanted dogs (109), finding himself profoundly moved, even to tears, by his participation in their euthanasia (143). He takes it upon himself to dispose of the bodies, doing it in such a way as to preserve their ‘honour’ (146). Although Lurie is, in Brian Deyo’s words, something of a ‘naïve penitent’, this work is not without value or significance. As much as he has resisted it, and as much as he continues to say it is ‘too late’ (216) for him to change, Lurie is being re-educated and making steps to reformation.

Similar changes emerge in Lurie’s relationships with women. First, he begins to listen. In a contrast to his refusal to read Melanie’s statement (see 49), Lurie is attentive when Lucy finally opens up about the rape, and this receptivity facilitates an interrogation of his own attitudes and behaviours around desire. Though he recoils at Lucy’s remark that as a man, he ‘ought to know’ (158) about the potential violence of

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97 Brian Deyo (Vanderbilt University) generously communicated some of his thoughts on Disgrace in an email to me in December 2007. This phrase is his. I had expected to reach a similar conclusion to Deyo’s on the novel’s final scene, but in the end could not agree with his reading of it as ‘sui generis’. Nevertheless, I am most grateful for Deyo’s generosity and willingness to discuss the novel with me.
male desire and sexuality, he does critically consider how rape has been aestheticized and ‘attitudiniz[ed]’ by Western art (159). (Lurie, as we have seen, aestheticized his own violation of Melanie.) He even recognises of his hero Byron that ‘[a]mong the legions of countesses and kitchen maids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape’ (159). It is an indirect self-indictment, and Lurie shortly realises that

he does understand [Lucy’s rape]; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman? (160)

He will try, as becomes evident in his work on an opera about Byron and his lover Teresa.

The opera Lurie is writing about the romantic poet Byron’s ‘last big love affair’ (15) increasingly occupies him in the second half of the novel, and the shifts in his plans and work on it reflect his personal development—indicating, in particular, a new openness to the other and to the unlovely. Lurie has always identified with Byron, and the poet’s scandal and escape to Italy holds personal resonance. Initially Lurie conceives of the opera as a ‘mediation on love between the sexes’ (4), but after his apology to Melanie’s family and discovery of the looting of his Cape Town house, Lurie finds that this conception fails to ‘[engage] the core of him’ (181). Instead he picks up Teresa in middle age, once Byron is dead and she has become dumpy and unattractive—the sort of woman he has always disliked (72). Echoing the earlier question, ‘Does he have it in him to be the woman?’ (160), Lurie asks himself if he can ‘find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman’ (182). His heart has changed (181) and the answer, ultimately, is yes. Moving away from Byron, Lurie
attends to Teresa. He puts the instrument in her hands (184), gives voice to her (183) and before long is even ‘listen[ing] to her’ (209).

Lurie is even prompted to apologise to Melanie’s family. This is a progression from his initial stance (58), but the text’s depiction of his encounter with the Isaacs is once again ambiguous (see 163-174). Lurie begins by attempting to explain himself, offering a ‘self-defence’ (166). When he finally does say ‘sorry’, he identifies his faults as a ‘lack [of] the lyrical’ and ‘I manage love too well’ (171). He fails to recognise, or admit, his exploitation and sublimation of Melanie. More striking and surprising than Lurie’s apology to her father, however, is his subsequent prostration before her mother and sister:

He rises, blunders through the empty dining-room and down the passage. From behind a half-closed door he hears low voices. He pushes the door open. Sitting on the bed are Desiree and her mother... Astonished at the sight of him, they fall silent. With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor. Is that enough? he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? (173)

Lurie’s gesture is both remarkable and troubling. Wicomb, for example, calls it ‘hyperbolic’, ‘aimed at overturning the past’, ‘border[ing] on the bizarre’ (‘Translations’ 221). It would be problematic if the text suggested it were adequate, but Disgrace goes on to imply that Lurie’s apology and symbolic self-humbling is not ‘enough’ (173). Isaacs’ is the voice of authority here:

But I say to myself, we are all sorry when we are found out. The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned? The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry? (172)

Isaacs emphasises the importance of a ‘lived’ follow-through, which for Lurie entails working for the other and ongoing abjection: a ‘state of disgrace’ (172) and process of gradual self-relinquishment that parallels Lucy’s abjection. Lurie has certainly not ‘arrived’ through his apology to the Isaacs. Adding to the ambiguity of his gesture...
before the women, for example, is the ‘current of desire’ he feels when he meets Desiree’s eyes (173). He has not yet relinquished his ‘passions’ (218), though at least he now resists acting on them with impunity (see 164). Nor does he seem to understand the nature of his injury to Melanie. Soon after his visit to the Isaac home, he contemplates whether he might ‘reapply’ to her, and rationalises that the ‘prosecution’ of his advances on her was motivated by condemnation of the disparity in their respective ages (190). To soothe his nerves after her boyfriend tells him that she would ‘spit in his eye if she [saw] him’ (194), Lurie employs a prostitute who is ‘drunk or on drugs’ and ‘younger even than Melanie’ (194). He is hardly reformed, though by this point he is, as Isaacs says, on a ‘path’ (174).

The text denies that Lurie’s apology to the Isaacs represents an ‘ethical arrival’, but for many critics the novel’s final scene signals just that (see for example Marais ‘Little Enough’, Attridge ‘Age of Bronze’, Barnard ‘J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, L. Graham ‘Yes’). These passages relate Lurie’s ‘giving up’ to euthanasia of a halt dog, ‘Driepoot’, for whom he has ‘come to feel a particular fondness’ (220, 215). It is described in terms of sacrifice: Lurie ‘[b]ear[s] him in his arms like a lamb’ (220). It is also called an act of ‘love’ (219). On an affective level, this is hard to take. Cornwell goes so far as to say that ‘[t]here is no way for the reader to understand or interpret this gesture’ (Disgraeeland’ 63). Yet critics have sought to interpret it, and most see Lurie’s act as fundamentally heroic. For example, Marais argues that the scene ‘signifies...the transformation of [Lurie’s] desire for the Other into self-substituting responsibility [for the Other]’ (‘Little Enough’ 178). Lucy Graham, reading Disgrace as engaged with Derrida’s The Gift of Death, suggests ‘this final losung is a sacrificial gesture of care for another body’ (‘Yes, I am Giving Him Up’ 9). Barnard, also drawing on The Gift of Death, suggests that
In refusing to single out the special dog, Lurie is accepting, perhaps helplessly, perhaps resolutely, the claims of an infinite number of other creatures with whom he has no special connection—who are neither his ‘own kind’ (194) nor his historical victims. (J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace 222)

I am inclined to be sceptical of such readings, but my own analysis has led me to conclude that Disgrace’s last scene does signal an arrival of sorts for Lurie. Specifically, there are unmistakable resonances in these passages with the Judeo-Christian myth of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac, and in this Disgrace most likely reflects on Derrida’s discussion of it in The Gift of Death.98 Without going into the intricacies of a Derridean reading, which has already been done by Graham, I examine the Abrahamic intertext more simply. Names are important in Disgrace, as shown in the case of Pollux, and it is at novel’s end that the significance of Melanie’s surname, Isaacs, becomes most apparent.99 (Lurie’s name, too, is a ‘Jewish patronym…linking the character, as a cipher, to an “Abrahamic tradition”’ (Graham ‘Yes’).) The dog is already acknowledged by critics as an ‘other’ to Lurie; I suggest that the dog on some levels fills in for the desired other, Melanie, much as the ram was substituted for Isaac in the Biblical story. Lurie’s willingness to give up Driepoot signals a relinquishment (at last) of Melanie, the other he has longed to possess. That euthanasia is figured as a gift of love to the dog (see 219) fits with the Levinasian and Derridean frameworks suggested by Marais, Barnard and Graham. The final scene can thus be read as suggesting that Lurie has reached a new willingness to self-relinquish and love beyond his own selfish terms.

98 It is no accident that Marais, Barnard and Attridge all make reference to this text in their respective analyses of Disgrace. Lucy Graham further explains that ‘the English translation of... The gift of death came out during 1995, and the text was the basis of workshop presented by Derrida during his visit to South Africa in 1998’ (‘Yes’ 4). Graham speculates that Coetzee may have been aware of the workshop.

99 Although I have not gone into it in this chapter, critics have also remarked on the significance of the names ‘Lucy’ and ‘Petrus’. See for example Barnard, J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace.
Having outlined this reading, I have misgivings. For me, Lurie’s redemption (however qualified, however unfinished) sits uneasily with the fact of the dog’s death.

Perhaps this remark betrays a too-literal perspective, an unwillingness to see the scene within a Derridean or Levinean framework. I confess to being entirely sympathetic with Michiel Heyns, who writes:

[S]omething in me, possibly not the most sophisticated literary-critical part..., wants to step back and say: But does this have to be so?...By what principle, in terms of what vision of life, is it necessary for David Lurie to be instrumental in the killing of a creature who feels ‘a generous affection’ for him? Purely in terms of practicalities, there would seem to be no reason for him not to keep the dog...but perversity as plot principle demands that whatever gives one pleasure must be taken from one, that it is necessary to be reduced to nothingness. (‘Call No Man Happy’ 64)

In addition, as Boehmer points out, there are ‘problematic aspects’ to Lurie’s ‘atonement’ (‘Sorry’ 143). Lurie’s expiation is largely unconscious and it is unclear whether he ever realises the nature of his ‘wrong’ (Boehmer ‘Sorry’ 143). The link between Lurie’s and Lucy’s respective sacrifices is also troubling. ‘[I]s it not outrageous...to align [them]?’ Boehmer asks, before going on to point out that ‘whereas Lurie has been an agent of desire’—a historical perpetrator—Lucy is a victim (‘Sorry’ 144). Ultimately, so much in the text supports the redemptive reading that it cannot be discarded. Yet there is still much in the scene to disconcert, and I would underline that there is no sense of triumph here, only a dogged determination to follow through. Lurie thinks,

It gets harder all the time...Harder, yet easier too. One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet. (219, italics in original)

Perhaps Lurie does achieve a ‘qualified redemption’, just as Lucy may be (tentatively) resecured, but a question hangs: at what price? The price is so high, the lesson so ‘hard’, that Disgrace can hardly be said to offer any comfort to the unsettled white
Conclusion

In *Disgrace*, there is no foreclosure on the postcolonial ‘working through’ of a traumatic and violent history. Its final scene is not cathartic, nor does it herald the arrival of a reconciled future. The indeterminacy of *Disgrace*’s ending and its overall lack of narrative closure is mirrored in the novel’s ‘literary stylistics’ and syntax; even its grammar and use of present-tense narration the novel show a resistance to the ‘perfective’ (Sanders ‘*Disgrace*’ 364, 365). Sanders goes on to argue that *Disgrace* communicates a warning that the summary making past of crimes that the university committee of inquiry, or even the Truth Commission, appears to invite, leaves something out. From this point of view, these bodies employ a ruse of an end, a formal trick of narrative or social closure, when things are far from over. (‘*Disgrace*’ 365)

Such ‘narrative tricks’ are also evident in other works of postcolonial white writing examined in this thesis, as I have been arguing. *Disgrace*’s refusal of ‘a ruse of an end’ sets it apart from *The Custodians* and *Country of My Skull*, two texts which come to celebratory conclusions, but we have seen a similar refusal in *The Folly*, *The White Earth*, and *Craft for a Dry Lake*. Where *Disgrace* arguably goes further than any of these texts, however, is in the model it offers for post-apartheid white belonging. It is ambivalent in its effects: both resecuring of the settler in that it offers an option for a return to belonging on the land and in the nation, but entirely unsettling in its requirement for white abjection and total abdication of historical privilege. Undeniably, it is a model of belonging that is a departure from, and which is placed in opposition to, its colonialist predecessors. Yet it is not only conditional on the decisions and behaviour of the settler, in which case it could be said that this subject might be able to ‘earn’ a return to belonging and reconciliation. It is also
dependent on the acceptance of the other (the black South African, the settler-colonial/apartheid victim) as well as an almost mystical grace, for which historically complicit white settlers can hope for and work toward, but never 'achieve' or be qualified for on the basis of their own merits or actions.
Conclusion

No End in Sight

Change abounds, the times shift. The decade of postcolonial excavation and reconciliation in South Africa and Australia has passed, though as this thesis has noted, its effects continue in the new century. Since *Disgrace* was published in 1999, J.M. Coetzee has left the country of his birth to live in Australia. Gareth Cornwell comments that ‘no reader of *Disgrace* appraised of its content will need to question why’ (*Disgraceland* 54)—a reference to the politics of abasement put forward by that book and outlined in the thesis’s final chapter. Coetzee has elsewhere remarked that the white South African ‘cannot resign from [the master] caste... short of actually shaking the dust of the country off [one’s] feet, there is no way of actually *doing it*’ (*Doubling the Point* 96). Without suggesting that Coetzee would now claim to have ‘escaped’ his own white male privilege, it does appear that he has shaken off the dust of South Africa, both literally and in his writing. His most recent novels feature Australian settings and appear to be less concerned with postcolonial themes. But his South African works will not cease to resonate in that country, where white writers continue to engage with his writing and the situation of a country that even now remains in transition. Antjie Krog, for example, has published another autobiographical work, *A Change of Tongue* (2003), in which she once again ponders how to be and belong in a changed country. The book makes it apparent that these
questions have not after all been resolved for her by the TRC or Country of My Skull. Nor have they been resolved in Australia, where there has been little scope for any kind of national reconciliation in the climate of denial and refusal fostered by former prime minister John Howard’s conservative coalition government. (This is of course registered very strongly in 2004’s The White Earth.)

At the time of this writing, there are further political developments afoot in both South Africa and Australia. In November 2007 in Australia, John Howard’s conservative coalition was defeated by Labor in the federal election. It remains to be seen what the change of government might mean for the country with respect to postcolonial affairs, though there has been a promise of an apology to the Stolen Generation. In South Africa in 1999, Nelson Mandela was succeeded in the country’s leadership by Thabo Mbeki, a more controversial president whose position in the ANC is now challenged by Jacob Zuma, an even more controversial figure charged with corruption and rape. Elected as the ANC president in December 2007, Zuma is in line to become South Africa’s next president. Again, what this may mean for the country is not yet apparent. What is clear is that South Africa is plagued by some of the highest documented rates of violent crime in the world, and socio-economic inequality remains entrenched, even if it is now less marked along racial lines. The legacies of apartheid and a brutal colonial history are still felt across the nation. Doubtless, South African and Australian literary culture—which have of course never been static—will continue to transmodify, partly in reflection of the socio-political shifts going on at ‘home’ and in the world. Yet it seems that a traumatic colonial heritage will be a major preoccupation of each country’s literature for many years to come.
This thesis has sought to investigate these themes and their treatment in a selection of white writing that can be seen to respond to the upheavals of the 1990s. Working in a comparative frame, it has unpacked critical representations of settler post/coloniality in six exemplary South African and Australian texts. I have demonstrated how these texts engage with the settler nation’s traumatic history and its legacies, unearth colonialist crimes, interrogate colonial and settler-nationalist discourse, and propose truly postcolonial models for relating to others and belonging in and imagining the nation. Along the way the thesis has traced common themes and images that emerge across the selection: the importance of the rural in the settler nationalist imaginary; the harsh and unforgiving nature of the land; the settler subject’s desire to belong ‘deeply’ and securely in place; the aboriginal as possessing a true and legitimate belonging and the authority to allow or disavow the settler’s; the buried ‘crimes’ of settler colonialism; the construction of the settler as an embattled and victimised figure. Within colonial discourse as well, South Africa and Australia have frequently been conceived in similar ways; this emerges in the texts, as they set about re-examining, for example, mythologies of feminised landscapes and colonial mappings. Frequently, they make use of genre in their critical practice—satire, gothic, pastoral, travel writing, and others—working within, but also at something of a tangent to, established literary modes of European origin. To the extent that the works examined in this thesis are critical and interrogative of colonialism, and to the degree that they seek to resist and even overturn colonialist perspectives, they are identified as postcolonial. However, as examples of settler postcolonial literature the texts are complicit with that which they critique. The degree to which this is acknowledged in each work is variable, but all are ambivalent. In particular, they register ambivalence around those very issues that are among the most challenging
with regard to the settler subject and post/colony: the crisis of non-indigenous belonging, and the difficulty of ethically representing and relating to the black or indigenous other. It is well-recognised in postcolonial literary studies that white settler writing is ambivalent, but this ambivalence has not often been examined in depth and through detailed analysis of literary texts. In seeking to address this point through close readings of contemporary South African and Australian settier writing, the thesis has revealed some of the complexity and the divergent functions of that ambivalence. It has, for example, shown how this white writing’s efforts to conceive of more postcolonial models for identity and belonging may be held in tension with appropriations of the other’s suffering and/or indigenous belonging. It has underlined that these texts may be read as simultaneously unsettling and resecuring of the settier subject, with the ‘resecuring’ of that figure achieved in various—sometimes problematic, but sometimes radical—ways. Its representations of the other, though almost always sympathetic, frequently fall prey to appropriation or obfuscations, yet they do participate in a dissemination of marginalised stories. The ambivalence of these texts variously undermines or supports their postcolonial projects, and in all cases it functions in complex and slippery ways.

As a comparative study of South African and Australian writing, the thesis is one of a handful. There are relatively few analyses of South Africa and Australia even beyond the field of literary studies. Yet the case for such work is strong, as I have outlined in the introduction. Researchers have only just begun to examine the compelling links and divergences between these two settier sites, and between the two nations at large. This thesis has contributed to the critical literature on postcolonial white writing in South Africa and Australia, especially with regard to its representations of the crisis of belonging, but it is by no means an exhaustive
account. There are many more examples of white writing that could be analysed in this frame. In particular, this thesis has not examined works written in Afrikaans—a significant body of literature in South Africa. This study could also be usefully extended to include white writing from New Zealand and Canada, two other settler post/colonies that have undergone comparable political and historical shifts around issues of colonial settlement and first peoples at the end of the twentieth century.

The added complexity and difference of four separate settler sites, as opposed to two, would enrich the findings. It might also be worthwhile to further explore the subject of co-options of genre; this thesis has begun to suggest the range, productivity, and risks of postcolonial appropriations of long-standing, predominantly Western literary modes, but the analysis could be taken further. And the questions and issues raised and examined in this thesis—the postcolonial dilemma of representation; how might the settler belong now; what is required for reconciliation—are by no means ‘over’ but will continue to circulate in postcolonial settler culture, undoubtedly taking on new forms and nuances that will warrant further research.

The period of national ‘excavation’ and reconciliation may have drawn to a close, but the social concerns and historical revelations these events and discussions brought to a heightened public consciousness are by no means resolved. They are as pressing as ever. At the same time, the trauma of the past and its ongoing effects cannot be transcended. This is not to suggest that there is no value in engaging with it; on the contrary, I hope this thesis has demonstrated the value of such efforts in the texts under review. The most successful texts examined in the thesis self-consciously acknowledge that the colonial past will never be fully revealed or ‘recovered’ in any true sense, much less expiated. They suggest that the impact of
colonialism cannot be quantified or smoothed over. In these works, there is no end
in sight to the postcolonial 'working through' of traumatic and violent histories, and the
promise of reconciliation remains just that: a possibility always on the horizon, rather than
a celebrated point of arrival. Nor is this thesis offered as any kind of final word on
postcolonial white writing. As an exploration—a partial excavation—of the rich
ambivalence of this literature it is only a beginning.
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