TEXT
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/

University of Canberra, Deakin University

Paul Hetherington, Cassandra Atherton, Alyson Miller

Strange Dreams and Unforgiving Landscapes: Australian Gothic and the prose poem

Abstract:

The Australian Gothic is rooted in loss, alienation and angst, concerned with boundaries, transgression and the horror of the "unseen, or the half-seen – the repressed matter that threatens to return" (Doolan, 2019). As a genre which turns on "the perceived hostility of the natural environment, the violence of colonisation … and fears of the racial Other" (Doolan, 2019), it is also embedded in complex ideas about the uncanny, the haunting of borderlines and margins; liminal spaces in which conceptions of belonging, dispossession, and the body interact in uneasy ways; and abjection. While there is significant scholarship on the Australian (colonial) Gothic in relation to cinema and fiction, its connection to poetry is relatively neglected. In this paper we consider the broader implications of prose poems by Samuel Wagan Watson, Thomas Shapcott, Ania Walwicz and Meredith Wattison, as well as prose poems of our own, focusing on how the Australian Gothic may be understood as a form of neo-Gothic, and how the Australian neo-Gothic prose poem possesses an uncanny ability to subvert traditional colonial notions. In doing so, we argue that the Australian neo-Gothic prose poem, partly due to its hybrid form, is well suited to recognising that tragic colonial histories are simultaneously past and present in a postcolonial world – a form of haunting in which violent encounters may not be safely relegated to the past or contained within static visions of time and place.

Biographical note:

Paul Hetherington is a distinguished scholar and poet who has published 18 full-length poetry and prose poetry collections, a verse novel and 14 chapbooks. He has won or been nominated for more than 40 national and international awards and competitions, including winning the 2021 Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize and the inaugural 2024 The Marion Halligan Award. He has also edited ten further volumes. He is Emeritus Professor of Writing at the University of Canberra and joint founding editor of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He founded the International Prose Poetry Group in 2014. With Cassandra Atherton, he co-authored *Prose Poetry:*

An Introduction (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020).
paul.hetherington@canberra.edu.au

Cassandra Atherton is a widely anthologised and award-winning prose poet. She was a Harvard Visiting Scholar in English and a Visiting Fellow at Sophia University, Tokyo. She has published 30 critical and creative books and been invited to edit special editions of leading journals. Her most recent books of prose poetry are *Pre-Raphaelite* (2018) and *Leftovers* (2020). She co-authored *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020) with Paul Hetherington. Cassandra is currently working on a book of prose poetry on the atomic bomb with funding from the Australia Council. She is a commissioning editor at *Westerly* magazine, series editor at Spineless Wonders and associate editor at MadHat Press (USA).
cassandra.atherton@deakin.edu.au

Alyson Miller is a prize-winning prose poet and academic who teaches writing and literature at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her critical and creative work, which focuses on a literature of extremities, has appeared in both national and international publications, and includes three books of prose poetry, *Dream Animals, Pika-Don* and *Strange Creatures* as well as a critical monograph, *Haunted by Words: Scandalous Texts*, and an edited collection, *The Unfinished Atomic Bomb: Shadows and Reflections*.
alyson.miller@deakin.edu.au

Keywords:
Australian Gothic, neo-Gothic, prose poetry, uncanny, haunting, unsettlement

The Australian Gothic

Discussions of the characteristics of the Australian Gothic genre in literature have—somewhat ironically in a postcolonial context – frequently been derailed by a focus of the characteristics of British Gothic literature. The Australian Gothic genre has generally been subjugated to considerations of works such as Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolfo* (1794), Jane Austen's Gothic satire, *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). While the Australian Gothic has attempted to "write back" to, or subvert, the British Gothic tradition, many discussions of the genre still remain yoked to Empire. In this way, despite the proliferation of Australian Gothic texts, these have often been characterised in scholarship primarily as examples of a borrowed genre and mainly considered valuable for their relationship to the British tradition. Indeed, in tracing the history of Australian Literature in the school curriculum, Larissa McLean Davies, Susan Martin and Lucy Buzacott emphasise its "fraught" relationship to British literature. Importantly, they critique and dismantle literature reviewer, Barry Spurr's argument that "Our literature has not developed (and should not be read) in quarantined Australianness … [and] requires familiarity with the British Tradition" (qtd. in McLean Davies, 2017, p. 24).

Davies, Martin and Buzacott argue that the construction of Australian literature as "a part of the imperial motherland" not only ignores the originality and particularity of Australian writing but is dangerous in its tendency to overlook or overwrite Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander literature because it

> seeks to eradicate the distinct and diverse nature of Australian national literatures, and sweeps aside Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander literature, and indeed any literature by or about Australians which does not evidence an Anglo-Saxon connection. This argument, that if Australian literature exists, it is only as part of the literature of the imperial motherland is reminiscent of the comments made about seventy years earlier by Stewart and Cowling, who maintained literature was located and inspired elsewhere. (2017, p. 24)

Critiques of the surprisingly persistent view that British literature and culture has primacy over Australian literature and culture are evident in various works of Australian Gothic literature – and we examine some of these responses in the poems we discuss below. These works make use of such notions as the uncanny and unsettlement (as opposed to the notion that the British "settled" Australia) and frequently inflect the Australian Gothic in postcolonial terms.

These terms have a deep and abiding relevance for Australia's history as a penal colony that also saw the widespread and systematic depredation of Indigenous societies and cultures. They remain important because of Australia's contemporary situation as a country which has never been ceded by its original inhabitants yet is occupied by majority non-Indigenous populations who are, generally speaking, conflicted about their national identity and largely uneducated about the more grotesque aspects of Australia's colonial history, including Australia's frontier wars. Donna Mazza, Narrelle de Boer and David Rhodes observe that

> [t]he terrain of the Gothic in Australia is built on the horrors of colonisation, misunderstandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and the difficult topic of national conscience, which are often veiled in cryptic narratives. Much of this makes Australians uncomfortable, and this unease has percolated into our storytelling, especially in the past twenty years. (2021, p. 25)

The prevalence of these "cryptic narratives" demonstrates a complex and diverse encoding at the heart of the Australian Gothic genre. As an approach to the Gothic, it overwrites the limited binaries that have to some extent continued to endure in scholarship. The Australian Gothic's emphasis on complex ideas and abstractions, including the ineffable, and on subversion, challenges simpler and reductive stereotypes – such as the notion identified by Gerry Turcotte of the colonist as "uprooted, estranged, terrified, on alien territory, and pursued (if sometimes only in the imagination) by a daunting predator: which in Australia was alternatively perceived as the Bush, the convict past, bush rangers or the Aboriginal population" (2009, p. 129). Instead of such convenient narratives, the Australian Gothic has at its heart disrupted identities, haunted landscapes and ghostings (in both its traditional sense and its more recent, colloquial meaning) which engage with what Bill Ashcroft has identified as "the special post-colonial crisis of identity" (1989, n.p.). The fissures, subversions, contradictions and play in Australian Gothic texts are usually moments where writers of Gothic prose and poetry are grappling with ways to express deep and troubling questions pertaining to national identity and culture.

Indeed, the Gothic may now be more urgent and relevant to Australian literature than ever before. Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes argue that it is "one of the prevalent artistic modes of the post-millennial period", and contend that:

> [a]lthough definitions of the Gothic in modern times have continued to be loose and hazy, going as far as characterising the nature of the mode as inherently transgeneric and category-resistant, it is now associated with the dark side of culture. (2019, p. 2)

For the Australian Gothic, this signals that the early understanding of the genre as primarily an expression of British culture and the British Empire has shifted in significant ways. However, despite this, Mazza et al. attest that there is no simple divide between old and new: "The Gothic offers evidence of this diversity in its breaks from the original eighteenth-century template, but it is not a clean break, and Australian works still reference traditional Gothic features" (2021, p. 27). In this paper, we focus on prose poetry and read many of these references as moments of subversive ghosting to demonstrate the burgeoning of an often defiant-of-Empire neo-Gothic Australian literature – and we use the term neo-Gothic because of this literature's new approaches to the disruption of the early tenets of the Gothic genre and the way these new approaches centralise a "complex relationship of the text with the Australian landscape" (Mazza et al., p. 13).

The Aboriginal Gothic

In the Australian context, the Aboriginal Gothic is a crucially important part of any consideration of the Australian neo-Gothic, focusing as it does on "the Gothic's generic instability; its use in imperial, colonial and postcolonial contexts; and its subversive quality"

(Althans, p. 276). In the hands of poets such as Samuel Wagan Watson, Natalie Harkin and Evelyn Araluen, for example, this neo-Gothic is a tool to deconstruct and critique many colonial and postcolonial practices and assumptions, especially those that "other" Aboriginal Australians and, in doing so, are profoundly destructive of Aboriginal culture and society, partly through various processes and consequences of misidentification. In this sense, the Aboriginal (neo-)Gothic may be understood as a distinctive part of the broader corpus of postcolonial poetry, which, as Jahan Ramazani states, "can be seen as resisting empire in its many forms, reclaiming the land from colonization, and restoring damaged precolonial histories and cultures" (2017, p. 8). Ramazani also comments that, in order to do this, postcolonial poets "have hybridized European with indigenous forms, inventing new literary structures for cultural expression in lyric and experimental styles" (p. 1).

Samuel Wagan Watson uses the prose poetry form and modified forms of the haibun to offer such critiques. His terse prose poetry sentences, with their aggregating and emphatic troping, make use of the compression of prose poetry to create a swirl of defiant energy within closely contained poetic structures. An example is his prose poem "Parallel Oz", mentioned in the Australian/New Zealand chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry* (2017). This includes the mordant statement that "The yellow-brick road is pock-marked with massacre sites and the Wizard, the Wizard of Parallel Oz; he holds Dorothy hostage to a mutual obligation agreement" (2020b, p. 175). Hetherington and Atherton have written how the "prose poem form of 'Parallel Oz' … intensifies [its] haunting, not only because its slipperiness and hybridization resist definition but because of the absence of line breaks, which … capture a sense of the pressing, almost claustrophobic nature of the postcolonial condition" (2020, p. 192).

Another poem by Wagan Watson, "Blacktracker … Blackwriter … Blacksubject" (2020a, p. 174), conducts what Sarah Ilott calls a "multi-valent critique of a world irreparably changed by colonial violence and plundering" (2019, p. 23), focusing on the act of writing itself and the way the language of the colonisers invades the experiences of the colonised and is part of the violence enacted against them. A section of the prose poem reads:

> I'm the blackwriter, the blackwriter who can sense the resentment from other blacksubjects who have been denied the Queen's diction. With or without the pen though, I'm always the blacksubject; the blacksubject scouting out upon an endless trail of the Queen's death-notes. Propaganda and poison ink; the medicine the Queen's children now use to edit blacksubjects.

In this prose poem, the neo-Gothic has penetrated into a consideration of language itself, disturbing and disfiguring Wagan Watson's relationship to what he writes and even to those with whom he wishes to communicate – and, in this context, the word "edit" becomes terrifying. At this work's conclusion, there is an assertion by the poet that there are large issues at stake and that writing must be measured according to such issues: "it's with the pen that the lies are used to overwrite the Dreaming, and the written word will never be worth the country it's written on." Here, Wagan Watson's neo-Gothic troping functions to provide a telling and

haunting context to a consideration of what Australian poets might – and might not – successfully encompass in their writing.

A haunted prose poetry

Ideas and themes related to the Aboriginal neo-Gothic also extend into the prose poetry of non-Indigenous Australians who are, as it were, haunted, sometimes unconsciously, by the massacres and other depredations inflicted on Indigenous Australians since Europeans arrived to "settle" Australia in the so-called First Fleet in January 1788. Indeed, even Australian prose poems that do not appear to refer to Aboriginal Australians are often uneasily aware of the uncanny in a landscape marked by the absence of its original inhabitants. An example is a two-part prose poem by Thomas Shapcott from "Turning Full Circle" which, at first glance, does not look to address the neo-Gothic in an explicit way. Yet, as it presents a speaker surveying a quintessentially Australian land- and seascape, a sense of uneasy absence and disjuncture radiates throughout the prose poem. It begins, "I am sitting inside a doorway watching the ocean. A long way off a man and a boy are playing with a dog. There are large biting horse-flies on the beach, they come from among discarded fish heads and entrails." Soon, the unease conveyed by the work becomes an implicit threat of violence. Shapcott's speaker states, "I swat at a large fly. I kill it. I feel good at that" (2020, p. 151).

The second part starts, "This is a dream", indicating that we are in the realm of unconscious thoughts and desires that are being carried into consciousness. However, the prose poem also plays with the idea that the poem is not really a dream at all – a conflict explicitly signalling that the work is dealing with disguise, a troubling ambivalence and misdirection. Indeed, the speaker presents themselves as awake and asleep at once, stating, "This is a dream. I do not remember dreams but wake tossing". The speaker subsequently asserts: "I lie awake in a sort of cooling sweat … I am not dreaming, but am listening for the snatches of a song I have heard somewhere …This is a dream" (2020, pp. 151-52).

Soon the work – rather mysteriously – evokes a French song that conjures European tropes associated with persistent European stories and mythologies: "she is walking in the meadow, the black stallion docile beside her, the bull-calf so frolicsome she laughs. Down by the rivertrees, where the old hog wallows lazily, she has seen the hart, the antlered deer with the strange pale colourings." The appearance of these European symbols is ominous, because one of the hart's most prominent associations is with Herne the Hunter in Act 4, Scene 4 of William Shakespeare's play, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*:

> … Herne the Hunter
> Sometime a keeper here in Windsor Forest,
> Doth all the winter-time, at still midnight
> Walk round about an oak, with great ragged horns;
> And there he blasts the tree, and takes the cattle,
> And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a chain (ll. 29-35)

Additionally, the bull-calf in a meadow appears to be an allusion to the myth of Zeus's abduction of the Phoenician princess, Europa, after he had taken the shape of a bull. Black stallions are most often associated in ancient stories with Alexander the Great's war horse, Bucephalus. It is hardly a surprise when the scene is transformed into one of real menace:

> She is bound to a tree by the riverbank I do not know why, but her song describes the stallion as suddenly ominous, the young bull having blunt hurtful teeth, the boar slowly shambling towards her. The white deer appears from the muffled shadows, his antlers are crimson. She knows he will pierce her through the heart.

Although Shapcott does not refer directly to Indigenous Australians in this poem, the dream he depicts represents the dangerous intrusion of European culture into Australia, and the violence attending on such intrusion. The troping on the idea of what is French reminds the reader that the French La Perouse expedition arrived in Australia in January 1788, only days after the First Fleet, and was part of the eighteenth-century European push to colonise the country. This poem is shadowed by what is does not explicitly say about Australia's colonial past even as it conjures a neo-Gothic sense of uncanniness and horror through its insistent troping on menace and death.

Paul Hetherington's prose poem, "Yilgarn Craton" also addresses the neo-Gothic nature of Australian colonial and postcolonial experience, but with a different emphasis to Shapcott's work:

> 1.
> The Yilgarn craton keeps billions of accreting years, terranes of continental crust, layered as granite-gneiss, granite-greenstone, larded with rare earth, base metals, gold – and mottled duricrust, sixty-million-year-old tree roots fossilised where they searched for moisture. Hypersaline groundwater. If the land were an artwork, the gathering damage could be restored. In fragments a history – glass in soil, shiny as bloodshed, a way of glancing toward what hasn't been told. Black hues; burnt, unacknowledged stories, a flicker of weapons.
>
> 2.
> The surface shows deep one-room bungalows with hipped verandahs and shingled roofs, stone walls, brick and earth, gold-rush built facades – Victorian, Edwardian outlines in parapets, gables of corrugated iron, filigree timberwork, gambrel vents – like hurried sketches on ancient ground; like a passing idea of what might survive. And Gwambygine Park – the Avon's riverine floodplain, permanent pool of swamp sheoak and flooded gum, swamp paperbark and Salmon gum, pink everlastings and braided samphire.
>
> 3.
> The white-faced heron's twitching stare, the kingfisher dipping into the water and the long-necked turtle peering like Methuselah – vanished in the Flood – and the grey teal, edged with buff, waddling white-throated with strong red eye. (n.d., n.p.)

The nearly three-billion-years-old Yilgarn Craton was formed by the accretion of previous fragments of the continental crust, and it makes up a large part of Western Australia's land

mass. Once the prose poem has considered the almost unimaginable expanses of time involved in the formation of the craton – in prose poetical language that replicates the jamming together of the geological processes it evokes – it moves forward, somewhat obliquely, to consider the damage wrought by Europeans, not only on the ancient country but through the attacks on and killing of many of the Indigenous inhabitants of the area, and the attempted destruction of their societies and cultures: "[i]n fragments a history – glass in soil, shiny as bloodshed, a way of glancing toward what hasn't been told. Black hues; burnt, unacknowledged stories, a flicker of weapons." Here, the neo-Gothic is inscribed on the landscape itself as a series of hues and remnants.

The second and third parts of the prose poem continue its critique of the colonial and postcolonial Australian landscape by emphasising the contrast between the transience of the Victorian and Edwardian period buildings and the "timeless" components of the landscape they are built on. The reference to the famously long-lived Methuselah confirms the contract between what is ancient and modern, also introducing an ironic sense of a clashing of cultures as this Old Testament figure is juxtaposed with long-necked turtle and grey teal, both persistent parts of the craton's natural environment.

Subverting Empire

As the example from Shapcott shows, neo-Gothic Australian prose poetry is a form capable of subverting cultural and intertextual references to Empire and its literature. It does this partly through its re-inscription of Australian identity via its chameleon-like structure, something enabled by the appearance of the prose poem's typical rectangular paragraph structure, which looks entirely familiar to readers of conventional prose. Yet, when readers enter a prose poem, any expectation that they will encounter a conventional prose work is soon disrupted by the poetic and fragmentary writing they encounter. Typically, this includes an emphasis on figurative language, an attention to the way prose rhythms may be inflected as poetic speech and an open-endedness that implies or suggests larger, sometimes elusive worlds outside of the work. Because of these characteristics, the prose poetry form is able to defamiliarise its delivery of established Gothic themes and motifs associated with the British Gothic tradition, inflecting them with a shifting uncanniness that is frequently a metaphor for aspects of Australian postcolonialism.

Neo-Gothic Australian prose poems tend to give priority to concepts of displacement in an unsettling appeal to the form's invisible borders. The Australian landscape is a ghosted entity, haunted by the displacement of Indigenous Australians from their country and the erasure of boundaries between different Aboriginal nations. In considering such matters, Mazza et al. suggest in quoting Turcotte that "the Gothic offered one of the most appropriate ways for colonial writers to articulate their experiences in the New World due to its nature as 'a literature that deals with alienation, disjunction, terror and conflict'" (2021, p. 28). In this light, the neo-Gothic Australian prose poem may be understood as a subversive space that, in compressing words and sentences into a tight visual box, is able to create a squeezed breathlessness indicative of unease, along with a concomitant sense of readerly discomfort. The shape of the

prose poem may even act as a metaphor for land or country in the way the text appears as a lot, patch or subdivision – and this, too, encourages readers' imaginative and subversive transgressive leaps beyond the compressed boundaries of the prose poem into the conceptual space and worlds surrounding it. These features, when present in neo-Gothic prose poetry constitute a powerful reminder that Australians live on unceded Aboriginal country that is everywhere invested with meaning and significance extending beyond the ken of the majority of white Australians.

Meredith Wattison's poetry and prose poetry provide examples of such issues and preoccupations because it is highly attuned to issues connected with Australia's conflicted national identity and associated questions of conscience. For example, "Australia", a poem from her long autobiographical verse sequence, *terra bravura*, seethes with the threat of a haunted landscape that creates a powerfully intimate sense of unease and unsettlement. Furthermore, in alluding to the term terra nullius, or "land belonging to no-one" – a "catch-all phrase to explain how Australia was founded; to justify and legitimise the dispossession, dispersal, and inhumane treatment of First Nations peoples" (2024, n.p.) – Wattison critiques Australia's postcolonial situation. *terra bravura* primarily concerns aspects of autobiographical identity, and it also implicitly claims that the "bravura" it refers to requires recognition of Australia's Indigenous culture and history.

In the following excerpt, for example, the narrator encounters a kind of haunting by a fox-like, thylacine-like, dog-like creature in an eerie landscape. Although this is not a work of prose poetry, it illustrates key aspects of how the neo-Gothic in Australian poetry operates; that is, largely by implication and suggestiveness and through the power of metaphor and abstraction. Part of this poem reads:

> It slowly slunk towards me, weaving low,
> eyes at a distance, fixed.
>
> I have seen it before,
> it has stood at a distance,
>
> now it sits at my feet rocking, squinting,
>
> leaning its shoulders into my legs,
> throwing its head into my hands.
>
> *(What to do with such threat?*
> *I am painfully awkward,*
> *what to do?*
>
> *It smells of grassfire and soil.*
> *Its eyes running, closed.*
> *It demands intimacy.)*
>
> […] A dark fleece of sky,

> its edge gold leaf,
> rested upon it
> like an inordinate sphere. (2014a, n.p.)

Wattison explores related themes in "World's End and Gadigal", a long prose poem that begins in Redfern, Sydney and ends "on Regent, just off Cope". Unlike her lineated poem, Wattison's prose poem is condensed and cramped as her references pile up in ways that simultaneously undercut and underscore their seriousness. The Australian neo-Gothic emerges slantwise in this work, as a result of her numerous allusions and associated observations. The poem opens almost casually:

> I share a café table in Redfern with a young man whose bitten nails are lacquered scarlet, or Hunter's Pink, like a London bus, then roughly scraped at by his teeth. Let's call him Dorian. His hands are large, pale and beautifully formed, their squareness implies both invention and practicality, his alabaster thumbs arc like Bacon's. To him it is androgynous transcendence; to me it is purely transport with poetic nomenclatives, Monopoly's real estate; the stuff of desolate, historical novels. It is Dickens sending his sons, cruelly burdened with "potential", to Australia, Austen on A Mystery Tour, the Brontës looking for a rough gypsy or two. It is Blyton's imperious "Parp-Parp" taxonomy, Potter's Puddle-duck's paisley shawl. (The 328 bus to Chelsea, World's End, ran aground here, its deluded shoppers shuffled through The Sales without a purse, or benefactor—but with grasping hands. Some unleashed their European grotesques—the less callous amongst them surprised themselves.) (2014b, n.p.)

The use of the word "Gadigal" not only conveys the poet's respect for the Gadigal people of the Eora nation (the Indigenous Australians whose traditional lands are in what is now called New South Wales) but signals, more generally, that the poem is writing back to the British colonisers' (re-)naming of Australia. Significantly, the work then conjures with the names of various British authors, their canonical texts and their fictional characters, as well as with cultural figures – and there are many of these, including Dorian Gray, Francis Bacon, Charles Dickens, Enid Blyton, the Brontës, Heathcliff, Jane Austen, Beatrix Potter, Sylvia Plath, and the British fashion designers Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren. These names crowd the prose poem, and many become acerbically comical in the way they are parodied. (Perhaps the fashion designers are a metaphor for the need to refashion Australian identity.)

Furthermore, there are criticisms of England in the statement about "Monopoly's real estate; the stuff of desolate historical novels" and in the deployment of words and phrases such as "imperious" and the bus to Chelsea "r[unning] aground." Unlike the lineated poem "Australia", with its wide, open spaces, Wattison's "European grotesques" and the "[d]ispossessed urban seagulls levitat[ing] and resist[ing] above us like metamorphosing plastic bags and our other side's intertwined other" leave little room to breathe and may be read as critiquing Australia's subjugation to its colonial roots. Indeed, in this prose poem, the phrase "World's End", while ostensibly referring to the district in Chelsea, London, also suggests the colonial construction of Australia as a distant penal colony. In these ways, Wattison's work has features which appeal to the urban Australian neo-Gothic, where the desolations of the postcolonial Australian city

are embedded in its continuing connections to its colonising "motherland" – in its nomenclature, literature and hearkening after remote celebrities.

Cassandra Atherton's prose poem is a diptych aiming to subtly re-inflect its British intertexts and nomenclature. Entitled "The Bogey Hole", the poem is set in Newcastle, New South Wales, at the oldest swimming hole in Australia. It was built by convict labour between 1819 and 1822 by order of Major James Morisset, the Commandant of Newcastle. Convicts excavated the rock to make him a private bath, originally known as "Commandant's Baths". This has been overwritten by the name "Bogey Hole", probably originating from a Dharawal word meaning "to bathe". It is likely First Nations people used the bogey hole for bathing before the Europeans arrived and expanded the hole:

> 1. Feet first, we descend into sky blue water, my hair a thick plaited crown. Sitting on barnacles and seaweed, the waves crash over the barrier chains in a canon of salt and light. While I'm pushed up against the rocks, you wash over me with the curling sea foam. For a moment, we are a haunting of contiguous limbs, a mingling of flesh and bone. Over our shoulders, wind-driven waves grow into the grey sky.
>
> 2. Waves are thrown on rocks and I'm Miranda in all her wild blueness. I stand facing the wind as seafoam spots the sky. We're wordless under the slap and patter of water. When you try a new language, saltwater rushes into the warm cove of your mouth. We submerge, grazing our buttocks on rocks and broken shells, and you slip your legs around me like a ringed flotation device. In the press of flesh, you rise against me. (n.d., n.p.)

Wester and Reyes argue that

> [w]hen Gothic texts are set in the present, they tend to stage some type of return of either repressed or forgotten deeds … Certain locations … have come to metonymically stand in for the Gothic: ruins, in particular those of abbeys and monasteries, medieval castles, cemeteries and moonlit cliffs are only some of the most typical. (2019, p. 4)

In "Bogey Hole", the Commandant's bath is a metaphor for a remnant of British colonisation, a kind of ruin. References to the colonisers include the crown and the narrator's projection of herself into the role of Miranda from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a character revealed during the play to belong to European aristocracy.

The prose poem conjures a ghostliness, most overtly in the statement, "we are a haunting of contiguous limbs, a mingling of flesh and bone". Here, Atherton references both the narrator's lover and the history of the Bogey Hole, suggesting that all the people who have ever swum in the ocean bath – or, for that matter, who were part of its construction – haunt the waters. The image of "barrier chains" and the protagonists' wordlessness under a grey sky and among the "slap and patter of water" have disturbing connotations despite the intimacy depicted, and there is also danger in the wind that whips the sea into a fury as waves are "thrown" onto rocks,

catapulting the lovers toward more rocks and broken shells. Additionally, there is a suggestion of drowning in the image of "the saltwater rush[ing] into the warm cove of your mouth", so that the mother tongue (English) is washed out of her lover's mouth and a "new language" becomes possible. The prose poem form allows for such images to feel close to the reader due to their explosive confinement within the taut textual box.

The final image in the prose poem is a sexual one where her lover "slips … legs around … like a ringed flotation device" and "rises against" her. This introduces a postfeminist neo-Gothic element to the prose poem, connected to female agency and sexual desire. It is significant that, in this context that, despite the pull and drag of a potentially silencing history, the narrator "stands facing the wind", reckoning with the place's history and past.

Writing newly

With its "anarchic polymorphism" (Murphy 1992, p. 67), prose poetry is a genre reliant on traditions it seeks to disrupt, a *writing against* that aims to write anew (Murphy, p. 67). Indeed, as Hetherington and Atherton suggest, the prose poem is multi-faceted, "looking forward and backward, understanding transitions, providing passages and doorways. Space opens before and behind it, sometimes like closed rooms, sometimes like expanding fields" (2020, p. 23). In its liminality and "deviant" proclivities, it is a form which offers a space – often anxiously – that powerfully connects with a politics of subversion, frequently through turns in which "the familiar … is made strange" (Hetherington and Atherton 2020, p. 15). In these terms, both the prose poem and the Australian neo-Gothic are concerned with a haunting of borders and margins and, as Lyn McCredden argues, with the possibilities of the liminal through which new subject positions and language forms might emerge (1996, p. 235).

In the poetry of Ania Walwicz, for example, a voice for difference is constructed by navigating around and between dominant discourses surrounding gender, sexuality, and subjectivity, particularly focussed on understanding the self as a migrant and as a series of gendered inscriptions. In "vampire" (1989, pp. 93-95), these subjectivities collide in deeply unsettling ways, resulting in a profound sense of the "other" figured as hostile and alien, as well as a fetishised object of curiosity and desire:

> you're a nice little woman you talk funny hope i'm not interrupting are you having a quarrel you a couple no just friends ha i'd watch out for him if i were you him yes i would and what are you australian he don't look australian to me say yes no oooooooooo you don't look Australian. (p. 93)

In insisting on separation, the interlocutor repeatedly asserts "you got bad eyes bad eyes you got" (p. 93), seeking to establish the nuances of otherness where whiteness is a shared trait. The monologue devolves from racialised guess-gaming to accusations of monstrosity, in which the word "australian" functions as the default centre, and non-Australian as simultaneously marginal – thus without power – and potentially dangerous: "you look yugoslavian to me he looks yugoslavian to me you look yugoslavian not german no you look like one of em vampires" (p. 93).

Certainly, the Gothic figure of the vampire plays not only on notions of the migrant as a parasitical agent of horror and suspicion, but also of abject revulsion, to be rejected via an exclusionary binary in which the "other" is always a presence to be feared: "i'd watch it you would bite you look like a vampire to me" (p. 95). In line with anxieties of consumption and devourment inherent both to the Gothic monster and to the cultural rhetoric around migration, the predator – assumed to be white and male – ironically identifies as a potential victim, who must assert the boundaries of the self in order to protect against dissolution. The repeated declaration "wouldn't want you in my bed" (p. 94), for instance, implies a eugenicist logic of blood purity, as well as the contradictory impulse to possess and control the sexualised "other": "you look wog me to me no offence you look yugoslavian to me you got bad eyes you got look out for this bloke better buy me a drink cos i bought you one" (p. 94).

By ironising the roles of predator and prey through neo-Gothic tropes, Walwicz exposes the conflicting perceptions attached to the migrant-as-other, who is framed as a monster-creature, for example, as well as unknowable and shifting; a threat to be monitored. The denial of voice ensures the male speaker dominates a small and circular space from which the (female) listener cannot escape, trapped in a menacing echo chamber that is intrinsically postcolonial and patriarchal in nature: "you're not going to live long you don't look australian to me" (94). Indeed, the imagery presented in "vampire" reflects Gerry Turcotte's observation of how contemporary migrant writers have used "the Gothic's potential for subversion … to speak their sense of exclusion and dislocation, as well as to comment on the condition of disjunction produced in a country which devalues non-Anglo-Celtic experience" (1998, p. 9).

Importantly, such expression is necessarily complicated in Walwicz's work, as the diatribe of the "self" overwhelms the "other", yet it also operates in parodic terms, as the encounter mimics the racist posturing of the interlocutor, and thus critiques it. As Susan Ballyn notes, migrant writing often utilises "the language of the host to express the individual response to the experience of fragmentation and dispossession and to articulate the search for a stable identity" (1994, p. 141), a repetition with "otherness", as it were. As Walwicz disturbs borderlines in order to trouble the categories of self, liminal spaces are provoked and produced, resulting in a series of uneasy interactions between ideas about belonging, otherness, and the body. Drawing upon the neo-Gothic proclivities of the Australian prose poem, Walwicz blurs the line between the material and the subjective, a form of haunting in which clear distinctions are made impossible.

In Alyson Miller's "Wings", such transgressions are imagined in relation to suburban landscapes, turning on tropes of monstrosity, for instance, to examine the human violence enacted on and within natural environments:

> A woman and a child with lemon yellow hair on a street greasy with the aftermath of rain. The earthiness of petrichor, and slug-heavy flowerheads on the pavement. He points upwards, to a bat hanging from power lines, the patagium biting hard into the threads of hot wire. Its belly is ash coloured and full, moon-like over feet bent into

> arthritic shapes. He wants to stroke the leather membrane of its wings while she is reminded of a jilted Chinese bride who dressed in the ruched silk and tulle of her wedding gown and stepped from a window in mimicry of flight. Caught by the neck, her body hung like a lace-shrouded Lepidoptera from the arm of a stranger. The boy, compelled by the weird flesh displayed above his head like taxidermy, points to the broken teeth and black eyes of the bat, murmuring words about electricity and death, and the curious dreaming of animals. (2019, p. 13)

According to Turcotte, the subversive strategies of Walwicz often occur by "gothicis[ing] a basic experience … to recreate the sheer terror which voicelessness can generate" (1998, p. 9). In "Wings", the mundane sight of "a bat hanging from power lines" gazed upon by a "child with lemon yellow hair" is transformed into an unearthly vision of memory and collision, as the creature trapped within the wires conjures other moments of terror or dread:

> He wants to stroke the leather membrane of its wings while she is reminded of a jilted Chinese bride who dressed in the ruched silk and tulle of her wedding gown and stepped from a window in mimicry of flight.

Both evoking and recontextualising ideas related to the Victorian Gothic, Miller emphasises the animality of the human form, which hangs "like a lace-shrouded Lepidoptera from the arm of a stranger", while the body of the bat suggests a Frankensteinian connection with preservation and resurrection: "the leather membrane of its wings" displayed "like taxidermy". As Emma Doolan notes, the Australian Gothic "increasingly finds new sites to play out its terrors", including the urban and the domestic (2019, n.p.), locations in which tragic histories are conceived as contemporary postcolonial moments, conditioned by the ordinary.

Portraying an unremarkable neighbourhood crisscrossed with electrical wires, paved footpaths, and manicured gardens, the landscape of "Wings" suggests the violence of the unseen, the unspoken and the uncanny, imbued with a sense of the "repressed matter that threatens to return" (Doolan 2019, n.p.). The bat, a suburban pest made docile in death, is rendered both beautiful and nightmarish in its destruction, its strangeness an interruption to the ordinariness of the powerlines: "its belly ash coloured and full, moon-like over feet bent into arthritic shapes". The decomposition becomes a kind of *memento mori*, while the striking nature of the corpse echoes the anxieties of the settler-coloniser, for whom, as Alice Bellette argues, "everything … appears to be 'inside-out'" (2022, p. 258) – viewed as an incumbrance, the animal is, nonetheless, under threat of endangerment.

In such an inversion of the natural and artificial, the poem engages with ideas about belonging and invasion, the creature positioned as a monstrous spectacle not unlike the prey of Walwicz's "vampire", both figured as migratory and out of place, as objects of fascination and horror: "you look like boris karloff you look like a vampire" (1989, p. 95). Miller's prose poem insists on the uneasiness of the urban settlements it invokes, which attempt to function as "pure" or "clean" spaces detached from the realities of their histories and the implications of postcolonial realities. Following Natalie Harkin's understanding of hauntology as "the assertion that social and cultural pasts are always present, persisting and in a constant state of returning" (Bellette,

p. 261), the "weird flesh" of the bat is a reminder of the deeply alien landscapes of suburbia, signifying a tension between postcolonial amnesia and the ongoing violence of the settler-colony.

Conclusion

The Australian neo-Gothic prose poem is no mere mimicry of British Gothic examples, but is rooted in not-yet-resolved, pressing and sometimes claustrophobic postcolonial realties concerning loss, alienation, an examination of the amnesiac approach of so many conventional histories of Australia, and angst. It is concerned with boundaries – those imposed by the coloniser, those the coloniser erased and those of literary works themselves – and transgressive modes that aim to critique and rewrite colonial stereotypes and to bring into focus a sense of the lost and the repressed – and to examine, too, often ineffable issues connected with reimagining Australian country in terms that defy colonial labels and names. This includes conjuring aspects the horror of the "unseen, or the half-seen – the repressed matter that threatens to return" (Doolan 2019). Thus, the Australian neo-Gothic prose poem tends toward the uncanny and the invocation of various kinds of hauntings, as well as the exploration of what exists at the margins and boundaries of conventional ways of speaking and writing. The neo-Gothic prose poem disrupts the continuities claimed by traditional literary modes, including those that are part of the British tradition of Gothic literature, and instead highlights what is fragmentary and has been inadequately acknowledged.

Whether it is Wagan Watson searching his postcolonial inheritance through rewriting and reinflecting colonial intertexts to find ways of speaking authentically of his own experience, or Shapcott addressing postcolonial unease and uncertainty by retailing a dream of European hostility and menace in an Australian landscape, or Wattison exposing our simultaneous sense of connection and disconnection to British literary and cultural tropes, or Walwicz ventriloquising the racist and gendered stereotypes so often encountered by those who are identified as "other" than Anglo-Celtic, the Australian neo-Gothic prose poem is especially eloquent in recalibrating ways in which Australians may imagine themselves independently of their past colonial masters. Although British examples of Gothic literature have no doubt had an influence on Australian writers, the neo-Gothic Australian prose poetry tradition now stands independently and, in its own discrete, uncanny space, aware of postcolonial hauntings and wanting to speak of them from a viewpoint that critiques and largely repudiates the old, if persistent, colonial assumptions about what may be said, who may say it, and what that might mean.

References

Althans, Katrin. (2019). Aboriginal Gothic. In Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Eds.), *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh companion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 276–88.

Ashcroft, Bill. (1989). The empire writes back: Theory and practice in Post-Colonial literatures, n.p. https://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/ashcroft3f.html

Atherton, Cassandra. (n.d.). The bogey hole. Unpublished poem.

Ballyn, Susan. (1994). The fragmented self and strategies of subversive construction: Ania Walwicz and Rosa Cappiello. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 28, 139–49.

Bellette, Alice. (2022). Blood and bone: Unsettling the settler in Aboriginal Gothic. *Griffith Review* 76, 255–64.

Doolan, Emma. (2019). Australian Gothic: From Hanging Rock to Nick Cave and Kylie, this genre explores our dark side. *The Conversation*, 4 July 2019, https://theconversation.com/australian-gothic-from-hanging-rock-to-nick-cave-and-kylie-this-genre-explores-our-dark-side-111742

Hetherington, Paul. (n.d.). Yilgarn Craton. Unpublished Poem.

Hetherington, Paul and Cassandra Atherton. (2020). *Prose Poetry: An introduction*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ilott, Sarah. (2017). Postcolonial Gothic. In Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Eds.), *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh companion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 19–32.

Mazza, Donna, Narrelle de Boer and David Rhodes. (2021). More than something weird: Teaching Australian Gothic in the classroom. *English in Australia* 56 (3) (2021), 25–35. https://www.englishliteracyconference.com.au/documents/item/2678

McCredden, Lyn. (1996). Transgressing language? The poetry of Ania Walwicz. *Australian Literary Studies* 17 (3), 235–44.

McLean Davies, L., Martin, S.K. and Buzacott, L. (2017). Wordly reading: Teaching Australian literature in the twenty-first century. *English in Australia*, 52 (3), 21–31.

Miller, Alyson. (2019). Wings. In *Strange creatures*, Recent Work Press, Canberra, 13.

Murphy, Margueritte. (1992). *A Tradition of Subversion: The prose poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Ramazani, Jahan. (2017). Introduction. In Jahan Ramazani (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Postcolonial Poetry.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–15.

Shakespeare, William. (n.d.). *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Folger Shakespeare Library. https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/the-merry-wives-of-windsor/read/

Shapcott, Thomas. (2020). from “Turning Full Circle”. In Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (Eds.), *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 151–52.

Terra Nullius. (2024). Australian Museum website. https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/unsettled/recognising-invasions/terra-nullius/

Turcotte, Gerry (1998). Australian Gothic. Faculty of Arts Paper – Archive, University of Wollongong, 1–11. https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1060&context=artspapers

Turcotte, Gerry. (2009). The Kangaroo Gargoyles: Footnotes to an Australian Gothic script. In Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal (eds), *Reading Down Under: Australian literary studies reader*. SSS Publications, 352–64.

Van Toorn, P. (1992). The terrors of Terra Nullius: Gothicising and de-Gothicising Aboriginality. *World literature written in English*, 32 (2), 87–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449859208589194

Wagan Watson, Samuel. (2020a). Blacktracker … Blackwriter … Blacksubject. In Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (Eds.), *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 174.

Wagan Watson, Samuel. (2020b). Parallel Oz. In Cassandra Atherton and Paul Hetherington (Eds.), *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry*, Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 175.

Walwicz, Ania (1989). vampire. In *Boat*, North Ryde, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 93–95.

Wattison, Meredith. (2014a). Australia. *Plumwood Mountain Journal*, 1(1) (January 2014), n.p. https://plumwoodmountain.com/poem/australia/

Wattison, Meredith. (2014b). World's End and Gadigal. *Cordite Poetry Review*, 63 (1 August 2014), http://cordite.org.au/poetry/collaboration/worlds-end-and-gadigal/

Wester, Maisha and Xavier Aldana. (2019). Introduction: The Gothic in the twenty-first century. In Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (Eds.), *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh companion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1–16.