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**Re-Imagining the Australian Farm Novel:
Writing Magic Realism into the Georgic**

Elizabeth A. Smyth

Master of Information Studies (Librarianship), Charles Sturt University

Graduate Diploma of Management (Technology), Deakin University

Bachelor of Arts (Literature and Communication), Central Queensland University

Bachelor of Agricultural Science (Land Resources), University of Queensland

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Farm novel, Virgil, georgic, pastoral, ecocriticism, regionalism, realism, magic realism, Australian fiction, creative writing, creative practice research, sugarcane, farmers, gothic, Aboriginal representation, agriculture, Wet Tropics

Abstract

The Australian farm novel typically employs realist depictions of southern wheat cropping and grazing, human farmers in control of the environment, manual labour, and Aboriginal characters at the margins of the narrative and farm life while perpetuating the profit-making motives of the settler-colonial worldview. This creative-practice research breaks this mould with a new conception and method of writing that employs a contemporary setting in northern Australia, magic realism, the farmer as a network of human and nonhuman agents, Aboriginal characters at the centre of the farm and the narrative, and depictions of nonhuman nature and machines with agency and consciousness. *Badila*, the novel written for this research is positioned relative to a long history of georgic literature through the use of Virgil's *Georgics* as an interpretative framework in readings of Jean Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) and Ronald McKie's *The Crushing* (1977). New knowledge for creative writers is presented as a guide for writers of Australian farm novels. This guide includes navigation of a literary cultural interface as a method for constructing narratives in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters co-exist. This research has implications for studies of regionalism, pastoralism, the georgic, ecocriticism, the farm novel, Aboriginal representation, magic realism, the gothic, and creative practice.

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At different times in my doctoral research, I have learned about social science from Distinguished Professor Stewart Lockie, creative practice research from Associate Professor Robyn Glade-Wright, and teaching at university from Dr Florence Boulard.

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Statement of Contribution of Others

My literary scholarship was guided by my primary advisor, Associate Professor Roger Osborne and the reviewers and editors of three published articles and a book chapter:

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Researcher Statement

This statement is provided in response to Jessica White's view that writing always comes from somewhere, which she expressed in answer to a question following her keynote address at the AAWP Conference 2022. White had been speaking about Judith Wright's deafness as an influence on her poetry. Similarly, my writing may be influenced by the conditions of my life.

I was born and raised in Cairns, Queensland, with a heritage of English people who migrated to Australia in the early 1800s. My mother was a microbiologist from Brisbane and highly involved in environmental conservation in Cairns in the 1970s and 1980s lead-up to the Daintree Blockade. My father was a chemical engineer, who grew up on a dairy farm at Mulgildie, west of Bundaberg. At one time Xavier Herbert came to my home to talk to a group of residents about his work, but I was too young at the time to recall much about this event. My family relocated to Brisbane in 1983, where I completed my final two years of schooling at Brisbane Girls Grammar. I was later awarded a Bachelor of Agricultural Science from the University of Queensland, then lived with and married a Gumbaynggirr man who sadly passed away when he was younger than I am now.

After my first degree, I completed an Arts degree majoring in Australian literature and communications while working in the mining sector. I later worked for CANEGROWERS, the peak body representing Australian sugarcane growers, where I edited the fortnightly magazine *Australian Canegrower*. After this I worked in the wool industry in Perth, in agribusiness in Mackay and Yeppoon, and in the visual arts and university sectors in Cairns. Prior to commencing my doctoral research, I completed a Master of Information Studies and began work as a casual librarian in the JCU Library.

What I bring to this project is a commitment to life-long learning, some early influences towards caring for the environment and about literature, knowledge about farming through education and discussions with farmers across many years, and a personal connection with Aboriginal people. I also acknowledge the privilege of having two parents educated at university and the financial security and learning that ensued.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

literary value consists precisely in breaking old molds, doing some kind of violence to received conventions and forms of expression

(Alpers *What Is Pastoral?* 12)

Writers of Australian farm novels typically use realism to depict southern wheat cropping and grazing, human farmers in control of the environment, manual labour, and Aboriginal characters at the margins of the narrative and farm life while perpetuating the profit-making motives of the settler-colonial worldview. This research argues for a radical re-imagination of the Australian farm novel through the use of magic realism to depict a northern environment and form of agriculture, life on the farm rather than the station, and Aboriginal characters at the centre of the narrative and farm life, while challenging the dominant profit-driven ideology. The need for this re-imagination arises from widespread misunderstandings about farming in public discourse and the inability of the farm novel to respond to current farming and environmental issues. Exploring human relationships with nature is not a new concern for creative writers but has become increasingly important, given the widely accepted idea that an anthropocentric worldview is—to use Stephanie Sarver’s words—the ‘root cause of environmental problems’ (*Uneven Land* 8). Challenging anthropocentrism in the Australian farm novel requires a radical shift in the conception and method of writing a farm novel.

Fiction is especially useful for depictions of human relationships with nonhuman nature because it allows readers to consider different scenarios, make judgements on issues, and adopt new perspectives. Over many centuries, European writers have turned their attention to human/nature relationships on plantations or farms. Understanding these texts is an exigency of international research, evidenced by the Routledge book *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre* (2023) edited by Sue Edney and Tess Somervell. A key question these editors ask is: ‘Can the needs and desires of humans and nonhumans remain continuous and compatible in an agricultural context, or must they at some point come into conflict?’ (Edney and Somervell 2). This thesis provides an answer to that question while addressing the primary research question (see 1.1). It examines links between Virgil’s first century BCE Roman poetry, *Georgics*, and three mid-twentieth century Australian farm novels

and presents insights gained from a writing praxis that explores human relationships with nonhuman nature on farms.

Australia's farming imaginary, which is firmly set in the past, is problematic for writers who seek to address contemporary concerns. A pervasive representation of farming in Australian literature is an historical one with portrayals of agriculture involving mostly men in frontier conditions that are either harsh or romanticised as 'wholesome and restorative' (Carter *Dispossession, Dreams & Diversity* 146). This imagery coincides with a history in which farmers have benefited from massacres, dispossession, and marginalisation of Aboriginal people and by exploiting indentured labourers. Recent farm novels, such as Alice Robinson's *Anchor Point* (2015) and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Guide to Scientific Living* (2006), portray farmers as violating the environment by cutting down trees, diverting or damming waterways, and basically doing whatever they want to make money. In both examples, a drought or other environmental hardship forces the farmer and his family off the land. This kind of portrayal of farming fuels the conflict between urban and rural Australians—or city and bush (Carter *Dispossession, Dreams & Diversity*)—that arises from a mismatch in understandings. Tensions due to the disparity between ideals and harsh realities can be acute, especially when urban consumers constantly encounter 'pictures of bucolic paradise' on the packaging of fresh food in supermarkets and in marketing campaigns for rural real estate and holiday retreats (Taylor et al. 96). This binary is also mirrored in the literary concepts of pastoralism and the georgic that hark back to Virgil's *Georgics*.

Pastoralism speaks to ideals and has long been a pre-occupation of Australian critics, while the georgic, which is rooted in harsh realities, has largely been overlooked (Smyth "Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics"). This skewed attention elevates urban perspectives over rural ones. In short, pastoralism encapsulates the pleasure derived from rural places when on a leisurely retreat from the pressures and noise of city life. At leisure, one can appreciate the abundance and artistry of nature. This is the position from which many writers have viewed farming, as either a source of pleasure or a failure to be so. The georgic, in simplistic terms, may be viewed as the perspective of a person who works on rural land in direct contact with nonhuman nature. In this way, the georgic aligns with the farmer's perspective. While not excluding an appreciation of nature, georgic representations are less prone to idealism and more accepting of harsh realities. This perspective may be evident in the work of some scholars, however, most choose to coin new terms relative to the pastoral rather than forge connections with

northern hemisphere criticism on the georgic (see Chapter 3). My research therefore adds significantly to Australian literary studies by contributing readings in which the georgic is employed as a central interpretative framework. My publication in *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre* (2023) (Chapter 4 of this thesis) begins a process of correcting this deficit through active engagement with international scholarship on georgic literature.

However, the distinctions between pastoral and georgic literature are not as simple or clear as so far described, partly due to the nature of genre. John Frow in his seminal text *Genre* (2006) stresses that ‘genres are not fixed and pre-given forms’ (3). They are difficult to define, overlap with other genres and are constantly changing (Frow). Importantly for Frow, any given text does not ‘belong’ to a particular genre but rather participates in that genre while also participating in others. John Naish’s *The Cruel Field* (1962), for example, engages with both the georgic and the farm novel. Along with the georgic, the genre of the farm novel is at the heart of my research. This type of novel is set on a farm, has farming people as the main characters, and addresses farming issues (Freitag *The Farm Novel in North America*; Meyer). It is worth noting that the texts that might be considered farm novels will differ for different readers. One could argue, for example, that Tara June Winch’s *The Yield* (2019) is a farm novel that addresses the issue of farm succession and Indigenous sovereignty. However, for the purposes of this research, I view *The Yield* (2019) as a distant participant in the farm novel genre due to its focus away from the art of farming. This example of a blurred boundary is designed to alert readers of this thesis to the potential for each of the texts discussed to participate to varying degrees in the georgic, the farm novel, and perhaps some other genres such as a rural romance or rural crime. However, this thesis is not about defining genre or assigning texts to one genre or another but rather an attempt to understand how some Australian novels that participate in the genre of the farm novel contribute to understandings of human relationships with nonhuman nature. The thesis also presents new knowledge generated through the process of writing a farm novel that explores current farming and environmental concerns.

Apart from a dominance of historical settings, the Australian farm novel is tied to a Western worldview that remains, at its core, unchanged since the mid-twentieth century. Australia’s dominant perspective of agriculture as a means of financial gain was recognised by Hugh S. Robertson who complained in *Now Blame the Farmer* (1945) that the ‘rural development of Australia was to be a money-making concern – for the

people who couldn't, or wouldn't, do the hard work' (20). Realistic portrayals of farming in historical settings do little to dispel the 'blind orgy of production' that tormented Robertson (65). Indeed, literary realism 'has a tendency to imagine itself in parallel with the action of history, encoding a linear, rational process' (Jones 26), and is often associated with nation-building and the settler-colonial worldview (Mead). This association has in many ways shifted since the mid-twentieth century with the rise of migrant and Indigenous writers (Mead), however, the drive for financial profits from farming has not, as evidenced by the Australian Government's ambition to increase agricultural gross value from \$66 billion in 2020 to \$100 billion in 2030 (Littleproud). In recent decades, a growing body of literature that addresses environmental issues has emerged yet farming literature with a commensurate response tends to be confined to non-fiction, poetry, or life writing. Well-known examples are Charles Massy's non-fiction *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture, A New Earth* (2017), and the poetry of John Kinsella, who is known for revealing the flaws in the pastoral ideal (Bristow; Hughes-d'Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*). Prose fiction set on farms that speaks to contemporary environmental issues is lesser known. Australian farm novels include Benjamin Cozens' *Princess of the Mallee* (1903), Jean Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005). Each of these are realist and set before 1960. The common association of farm novels with a Western worldview derived from a history of nation-building, anthropocentrism, masculine hegemony, and environmental destruction (see Chapter 5) strengthens the contemporary discord between urban consumers and rural producers by reinforcing an outmoded farming imaginary. Recent farm novels with contemporary settings, such as Alice Robinson's *Anchor Point* (2015) and Stephen Orr's *The Hands* (2015), perpetuate these traits with portrayals of unviable farms.

Ironically, the post-1960 era is one of heightened environmental awareness, which many scholars attribute to the influence of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) in drawing attention to the environmental harm caused by the large-scale use of DDT and other pesticides on agricultural lands in the United States. Human population growth has also intensified global environmental impacts and concerns. The United Nations predicts world population to rise to about 8.5 billion in 2030 and to peak at 10.4 billion in the 2080s (United Nations "World Population") while simultaneously pointing to a decline in nature at 'rates unprecedented in human history' ("Nature's Dangerous

Decline" 1). In Australia, over 61 percent of the continent is managed by farmers (Simson), and exports to support global demands for agricultural products comprise about 72 percent of the monetary value of Australian agriculture (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry "Snapshot 2022"). The need for farm fiction to respond to this growing environmental crisis by opening conversations rather than casting the farmer as an ignorant ecological vandal to blame is essential and urgent.

Hence, a radical departure from historical settings and themes is required to shift the Australian farming imaginary away from pre-1960s farming practices and from views of rural life as either harsh or romantic. My research seeks to enact this departure through the process of writing a contemporary farm novel that employs an alternative style to realism and empowers nonhuman nature. My practice of creative writing aligns with Laura Fisher's argument that art projects about farming are 'productive ways for the disparities between urban and rural Australia to be navigated' (98). Fisher notes how the interaction between artists and farmers in an arts project titled *Sugar vs the Reef?* gave those involved 'experiential knowledge of how various trajectories of change: biological, climatic, economic and social, are intersecting at the interface between land and sea, and between the discourses of public concern about the Reef and the family farm' (108). Similarly, my process of creative writing involved an experience at an interface of critical concerns about farming and the environment. Furthermore, Fisher notes that 'Australians certainly don't see agriculture as having the same levels of invention, imagination and creativity as citycentric advances in technology for example' (109). Through my use of magic realism and machines in the farm novel, I seek to elevate literary invention and creativity to match the technical and attitudinal advances in agriculture and cities. Despite past problems with magic realism (see Chapter 5), this style of writing enables a radical departure from realist farm novels and holds potential to stimulate a renewed urban interest in gaining new knowledge and understandings of farming. As Fisher notes, there are 'very few avenues' through which farming can be discussed in a 'non-defensive manner' and an 'artistic project is an entry point for dialogue that doesn't necessarily trigger these foreclosures' (111). My new approach to writing a farm novel therefore offers insights into how fiction can provoke constructive conversations about a contentious topic.

The farm novel presented in this thesis, *Badila*, is a contemporary magic realist novel that challenges capitalism and personal ambition through depictions of human relationships with nonhuman nature and machines. The narrative follows Quentin

George, a young man who returns from over a decade of corporate life in Sydney to his family's sugarcane farm in Far North Queensland after the sudden death of his father. He plans to sell the farm to buy a new apartment in Sydney. But for Quentin everything has changed. His usually meticulous father left a mess of tools in the new house, and his mother Monica has started singing jazz and gifted the farm's best vehicle to a stranger. Farm life becomes even more bewildering when the sugarcane plants rise out of the ground and visit Quentin in his house, and a harvesting machine and a tractor have their own language and secretly communicate with the plants. Quentin is forced to confront a hidden past, when the ghost of a teenager he accidentally killed appears. In time, Quentin abandons his former ambitions and stays on the farm to resist an expulsion of all the humans by the sugarcane and machines. His mother emerges as a woman who has always wanted to manage the farm and does so with the support of, Natalie Cleaner, the sister Quentin never knew he had. This leaves Quentin to reconnect with Speedy, the old man who lives in the barracks. The story ends with the humans and nonhumans co-existing in a negotiated peace, and Quentin finds comfort in the most important creator of life on the farm: the soil. Key features that differentiate this narrative from most Australian depictions of farming are the tropical setting, agency of nonhuman nature, and inclusion of farm machines.

The dominant influence of southern agriculture on the Australian farming imaginary is revealed in most forms of fiction, whether short stories, poetry, or novels. Recent novels set on farms, such as Jessica White's *Entitlement* (2012), Alice Robinson's *Anchor Point* (2015), Stephen Orr's *The Hands* (2015), Stephen Daisley's *Coming Rain* (2015), and Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019) are all set in wheat and grazing regions in the southern half of Australia. As are most of the short stories by renowned writers, such as Steel Rudd (Arthur Hoey Davis), Henry Lawson, Barbara Baynton, Frank Dalby Davison, and Brian James (John Lawrence Tierney). In addition, the works of four major poets depict this type of setting. Charles Harpur (1813-1868) wrote both 'prose and rhyme' against the 'monstrous claims' of southern squatters in his series of 'Squatter Songs' (Harpur 82-83), while the later poets Les Murray (1938-2019), Philip Hodgins (1959-1995) and John Kinsella (1963-present) offer insights into southern *farming*. Although Murray is mostly known for writing nature poetry, his poetry reveals an interest in people 'working the land' (Lehmann and Gray 621). Murray lived on a farm in New South Wales and wrote about relatively small dairy farms (Lehmann and Gray), for example, in his poem "Infant Among Cattle" (1987).

Hodgins too knew about milk production, having grown up on a dairy farm in Victoria (Lehmann and Gray). His poem “The End of the Season” (1993) points to the cyclical nature of farming and the limits of labour for achieving harmony between humans and nature. Kinsella’s poetry may be viewed as an ecocritical audit of rural human activity in the wool- and wheat-growing regions of south-western Australia. Collectively, these poets offer insights into rural life associated with cattle, wool, and wheat. However, none depict farming in northern Australia.

Australian writers whose farming narratives *are* set in northern Australia, such as Jean Devanny, John Naish, and Nancy Cato, offer works set before the mid-twentieth century that convey the nation-building settler-colonial worldview of that era. One must therefore look to alternative forms of literature—for example, the play—to find texts that challenge this worldview. Louis Nowra’s *Radiance* (1993) reveals the injustices faced by three Aboriginal women on traditional land acquired by the non-Indigenous sugarcane grower, Harry Wells. Similarly, Faith Bandler’s *Wacvie* (1977) offers a fictionalised account of her father’s experience as a South Pacific Islander kidnapped and forced to work in the Australian cane fields. The Australian farm novel mostly counters these challenges to the settler-colonial worldview. More recently, writers have told the stories about the experiences of European migrants after World War 2, such as Alli Sinclair’s novel *Burning Fields* (2018) and the family biographies in Maria Bianco’s *Three Trunks and a Cardboard Case* (2014) and Debra Gavranich’s *The Girl Who Left* (2021). Although making important contributions to understandings of the social context of Australian sugarcane cultivation, the historical settings hinder insights into contemporary farming issues and practices. These insights are needed to address concerns about protecting the nonhuman environment.

Typically, georgic literature uses the agency of nonhuman nature to emphasise a specific experience of a human character and thus is largely viewed as anthropocentric. For example, Virgil’s *Georgics* depicts the effects of a plague on human characters (Sayre “Apocolyptic?”), John Naish’s *The Cruel Field* (1962) depicts the hardships for canecutters harvesting plants knocked down by a cyclone (Chapter 4), and Randolph Stow’s *A Haunted Land* (1956) contrasts ‘a redemptive nature’ with farming activities that are ‘strictly at odds with nature’ (Hughes-d’Aeth “Farm Novel or Station Romance” 1). Such depictions limit the extent to which the nonhuman can manifest as independent of the human gaze. My use of magic realism enabled depictions of the nonhuman with greater agency and independence. In the creative component of this thesis, sugarcane

and soil are main characters that actively pursue different aims to those of the human characters. In this way, the agency of nonhuman nature emphasises the experience and interests of the nonhuman to a greater extent than in other realist farm novels.

A risk in this approach is that magic realism can be misunderstood by readers who make ethnographic judgments when constructing meanings. Australian novelists and novels known for magic realist depictions include Patrick White's *Voss* (1957), Peter Carey's *Illywhacker* (1985), and works by Mudrooroo, Tim Winton, Glenda Guest, Beth Yahp, Hoa Pham, and Lau Siew Mei (Giffard-Foret), and Alexis Wright (Takolander "Magical Realism and Indigenous Survivance"; Takolander "Magical Realism and the Transcultural"). Magic realism is known to serve minority agendas (Ravenscroft; Takolander "Magical Realism and Fakery"). Importantly, in my research, rather than assign that agenda on an ethnographic basis, I assigned it to serve nonhuman nature against a dominant capitalist ideology (see Chapter 5). Yet in doing so, the possibility exists that readers could interpret the text through an ethnographic lens and consequently view the magical as representing Indigenous culture and the realist depictions as representing Western culture. This was not my intention. Indeed, ethnographic definitions of magic realism are viewed by Maria Takolander in her reading of Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006), and *The Swan Book* (2013) as 'presumptuous (denying readers of faith the ability to read literarily, for example), misrepresentative (because the fantastical episodes in magical realist texts do not consistently correlate with cultural myths) and, indeed, counterintuitive (given that magical realist literature's distinctiveness as a mode relies on its striking antinomy)' (Takolander "Magical Realism and Indigenous Survivance" 175). In other words, 'reading magical realist texts as mimetic representation of cultural difference risks misreading their complex operations and subversive energies as literary texts' ("Magical Realism and Indigenous Survivance" 189). My novel builds on Takolander's focus on irony and a 'comic spirit' as keys to a transcultural way of engaging with magic realist novels by working with aesthetic and affective properties of the text rather than ethnographic authenticity.

Nevertheless, my decision to position Aboriginal characters at the centre of the narrative and farm life required deep consideration of Indigenous representation. For example, the ways that Aboriginal people engage with nature to obtain food are viewed by anthropologists as very different to those of the European farmer (Sutton and Walshe). However, Indigenous writer Bruce Pascoe redefines farming in *Dark Emu*

Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident? (2014) to encompass Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices and thereby enable comparison with and benchmarking against a European standard (Pascoe). Public debate over the relative merits of these two definitions of farming became known as The *Dark Emu* Debate. Irrespective of which is most useful, Pascoe's positioning of traditional Indigenous beliefs and practices within (rather than uniquely beyond) a European story of farming serves a need felt by some Aboriginal people for public recognition within a Western ideology. This need partly arises from the exclusion or misrepresentation of Aboriginal people in Australian literature (see Behrendt; Leane "Aboriginal Representation"; Leane "Other Peoples' Stories"; Lucashenko "I Pity the Poor Immigrant"; Lucashenko "True Hero Stuff"). Indigenous people have often been characterised by non-Indigenous authors as 'primitive, half-naked, thieving, violent savage, or the tragic drunken relic of a civilisation on the brink of extinction, or the wanton woman – Venus half-caste' (Leane "Other Peoples' Stories" 41) or with a focus on victimhood as people 'distant, damaged, or dead' rather than as 'ordinary living humans' (Lucashenko "I Pity the Poor Immigrant" 8, 2). However, Jeanine Leane notes the 'potential for literary images to be sites of reciprocal understanding' and asks non-Indigenous authors to 'understand that different readings are culturally grounded' and to identify 'limits and boundaries' ("Aboriginal Representation" 37), which are increasingly being dictated by, instead of for, Aboriginal people. In 2010, Leane called for a 'change in attitude' ("Aboriginal Representation" 38) and six years later more specifically for non-Indigenous writers to read 'Indigenous self-representation' and to 'know those they are seeking to represent ... through social and cultural immersion' ("Other Peoples' Stories" 44, 43). The need for careful Aboriginal representations by non-Indigenous authors therefore is an important aspect of this thesis (see chapters 2 and 7) that intersects with literary regionalism.

Regional literature is often dominated by settler-colonial writers, who have harmed Indigenous people in the telling of their stories. Yet, a recent study of the literature of the Gulf of Carpentaria reveals 'a complicated history of shared country' and 'literary scholarship [that] has produced a partial and one-dimensional account' when 'focusing solely on [Alexis] Wright at the expense of other authors' (Martin et al. 342). This upheaval, in which Wright vastly outshines her compatriots, points to an important cultural boundary. Torres Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata also writes of a boundary or interface between Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.

However, Nakata challenges ‘simple binary constructions’ to draw attention to problems arising from a lack of awareness of how the positioning of Indigenous people is ‘effected in the everyday world’ (225). Writing a novel with Indigenous characters also requires close attention to a literary cultural interface and the positioning of Indigenous characters to avoid misrepresentations and inequities (see Chapters 7 and 8).

Another problematic legacy of the Australian farm novel is a lack of depictions of machines and technology. Current technology makes possible the use of sensors, precision application of farming inputs, data collection and analytics, and the use of autonomous equipment that can record activity on the farm, improve efficiencies, and address labour shortages. However, adoption of this technology is limited in some situations by constraints in public policy and unresolved issues around data ownership and control (Relf-Eckstein et al.). Robots are increasingly being trialled in agricultural settings. For example, the use of an autonomous electric vehicle to transport fruit and vegetables from the point of harvesting to a truck at the edge of a field (Loukatos et al.), and the use of lasers to control weeds as an alternative to herbicides or tillage, which can degrade soils (Tran et al.). Artificial intelligence is also expected to increasingly replace human decision-making and become integrated in management of supply chains (Smith). The Australian farm novel’s adherence to representations of manual labour, or at best four-wheel-drive vehicles, prevent contemporary readers from engaging in a literary experience of farming as it is practiced today.

Indeed, representations of machines in any Australian literary fiction is notably scarce. Peter Carey’s 1974 short story “Crabs” offers a rare glimpse into a literary world where a machine is central to the story, when Carey’s human protagonist nicknamed Crabs transforms into a Dodge truck. In the social science theory of *new materialism*, the relationship between humans and machines is entwined with human relationships with nature (Coole and Frost). My interest as a creative writer in human interactions with machines, soil and sugarcane makes new materialism a useful conceptual tool. For new materialists, inorganic materials are ‘active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable’ (Coole and Frost 9). In raising questions about the ‘presumption that humans have the right and ability to master nature’ (10), this theory overlaps with the literary fields of ecocriticism and post-pastoralism. Furthermore, new materialism is considered non-anthropocentric because ‘all bodies, including those of animals (and perhaps certain machines, too), evince certain capacities for agency’ (20). I sought this effect in my creative writing. Timothy James LeCain makes the point that nonhuman

objects that seem ‘beneficent and nurturing’ might actually be hostile to humans. He asks how we can keep them from ‘enslaving and destroying’ humans (5) and raises the idea that ‘[h]umans and their cultures don’t construct a separate material world in their own image – they are rather the inextricable results of a constant process of growth and co-evolution within that material world’ (18). In my novel, I chose to characterise machines as working both with and against the human characters. Working with the humans, for example, when harvesting the crop, and against the humans when the protagonist is injured by a tractor. My aim was for machines to play an active and prominent role in the narrative. Presenting new concepts and perspectives like this is an important component of creative-practice research.

Creative-practice research combines critical and creative practice methodologies and involves multiple transitions from creative to rational modes of activity (Batty and Holbrook; Brien et al.; Gibson; Glade-Wright and Smyth; Krauth; Marshall; Milech and Schilo; Skains; Smith and Dean *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice*; Webb). Barbara Milech and Ann Schilo suggest that an exegesis cannot ‘explain’ a work of art because ‘aesthetic and discursive ways of knowing are different’ (244-45). This relates to a research design in which both the exegesis and creative component simultaneously attempt, in their different ways, to answer the same question. However, Craig Batty and Allyson Holbrook ask that ‘if the researcher does not articulate the research who else can with any hope of doing so completely and consistently?’ (5). This points to a commentary on the research design and process. Outside doctoral programs, writers often comment on their own work to provide unique and useful insights. For example, the American-British novelist Henry James, who was nominated more than once for the Nobel Prize for Literature, has written numerous prefaces to his own works (James *The Art of the Novel*), each of which offer insights into his writing process. Also T.S. Eliot, who was awarded the 1948 Nobel Prize in Literature and is often cited by novel theorists, was open to critically examining anything from written text to ‘our own minds’ (Eliot 1). Both Eliot, who found ‘criticism as inevitable as breathing’ (Eliot 1), and James lead me to view the exegesis as comprising the writer’s explanation of their intentions, process, and discoveries. How the exegesis and creative component work together to address a literary problem requires a clear understanding of the research question, thesis, and arguments.

1.1 Research questions, thesis, and arguments

My primary research question asks: How can the Australian farm novel be re-imagined for the twenty-first century, given the genre has been largely shaped by historical settings and the settler-colonial worldview? To retain links with a long history of georgic literature, I first sought to identify which conventions of the georgic mode are useful when constructing a contemporary setting in the Wet Tropics bioregion of north-eastern Australia, and to identify the limitations of past farm novels for a contemporary readership. My research continued with the premise that exploring human-nonhuman relationships can help when addressing farming and environmental issues. An ecocritical reading of three sugarcane novels revealed the limits of available literature in a contemporary context. I subsequently asked how magic realism is useful when challenging a dominant ideology and responding to gradually emerging farming issues, such as corporatisation of farms, depopulation of rural communities, land use conflict, and loss of soil fertility. Questions arose about how non-Indigenous authors can counter the common omissions and marginalisation of Aboriginal characters in farm novels without encroaching on Indigenous ontology, knowledge, and rights to authorship. This led to an exploration of the limitations of magic realism and the gothic in Australian settings, and a navigation of a literary cultural interface. While crafting a contemporary setting, I experimented with depictions of autonomous machines and machine consciousness.

My thesis is that by employing magic realism in a contemporary setting and giving agency to nonhuman nature and machines, I can break received conventions of georgic literature, unsettle a dominant Western ideology, and stimulate new ways of thinking about farmers and farming. I argue that the Australian farm novel requires a major revision that can be achieved by adopting a magic realist style of writing and by using the gothic differently to colonial Australian and Aboriginal gothic. The creative component aims to challenge widespread understandings of farmers and farming by depicting the farmer as a network of human and nonhuman agents and by alerting readers to farming as an activity that may not require human participation. This part of the research is designed to raise questions about Australia's agricultural future.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

This integrated thesis comprises an introduction, methodology and three published chapters, followed by the creative component, reflections on my creative writing process, and a conclusion and summary of the significance of this research. To limit repetition of the literature reviews in the published chapters, Chapter 1: *Introduction* at times points to those later chapters for further details and context. An abstract precedes each of the published chapters (3-5) along with a statement of how each chapter contributes to the thesis. Chapters 3 and 4 provide evidence to support my argument that the Australian farm novel conveys georgic conventions while reinforcing the dominant nation-building and settler-colonial aspirations prior to the mid-twentieth century. Chapter 5 argues that the Australian farm novel requires a major revision that can be achieved by using magic realism. Chapter 6: *Badila* is the creative component of the project presented as the entire novel, limited to 60,000 words to fit within the total word limit for the thesis. Chapter 7: *Reflections on my creative process* presents the new knowledge arising from my creative writing praxis, which is summarised in Chapter 8: *Conclusion*.

1.3 Rationale and scope

This project was initiated as creative-practice research to fill major gaps in both critical and creative literature, which together limit the capacity for Australian literature to broach contentious farming topics and bridge disparate understandings of farming. The exegetical research builds on the work of literary historian Tony Hughes-d'Aeth on the Australian farm novel. Hughes-d'Aeth identified early examples of the farm novel in NSW and Victoria and those of the Western Australian wheatbelt. However, a need remained to begin identifying farm novels set in the northern half of Australia.

My project was narrowed to include farm novels set on sugarcane farms to ensure the project was achievable within 3.5 years. Three novels were identified as farm novels: Jean Devanny's *Cindie A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), and John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) and *That Men Should Fear* (1963). All are set in the region of the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia, which ensures my research also contributes to literary studies of this bioregion. I critically examined the first two novels. The third was deemed superfluous to my arguments but may be the subject of a future reading.

Unpublished works were not considered. I also acknowledge the possibility that relevant published works may have been, despite my best efforts, undiscoverable.

An expanding universe of literature led me to limit my research geographically, conceptually, and by form. Initially, I considered identifying connections between sugarcane novels in other regions of the world, however, this required more time and resources than available and was therefore excluded. Concepts included pastoralism, the georgic, regionalism, ecocriticism, Aboriginal representation, the gothic, and magic realism. Other areas of research, such as gender and genre theory, are beyond the scope of this project. The form of the novel was selected for two reasons; first, to limit the amount of farming literature to examine, and second, because fiction allows speculation and exploration of complex scenarios (see Chapter 2: *Methodology*).

1.4 Use of terms

In this thesis, I use the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘First Nations’ interchangeably to mean both Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When discussing topics specific to Aboriginal people, I use the adjective ‘Aboriginal’. Where I refer to people who are not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, I use the terms non-Indigenous, non-First Nations, settler-colonial, colonial, immigrant, or migrant. I am aware that some people find the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ offensive (Fuller). I am also aware that some people find the term ‘First Nations’ offensive (Merlan). As a way forward, I lean towards the scholarship of Torres Strait Islander academics Martin Nakata and Vicky Nakata who use the terms ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Aboriginal’ and omit ‘First Nations’ in their book *Supporting Indigenous Students to Succeed at University: A Resource for the Higher Education Sector* (2022).

The term ‘nonhuman’ may be viewed in this thesis as synonymous with the academic usage of ‘more-than-human’. When I write ‘nonhuman’ I mean literally ‘not human’ and do not intend to convey any type of measurement against a benchmark of humanity. For example, I do not intend this to be interpreted as meaning either more or less developed than humans.

Chapter 2. Methodology

This research fits within an interpretivist paradigm, characterised by a qualitative focus, practical approach and inductive reasoning (Williamson and Johanson). However, in my readings of published texts, I lean towards a critical research paradigm by considering the social context of the authors and their works. The epistemology of creative-practice research is constructivist (Webb). This means that ‘reality is socially constructed’ and ‘exists as people experience it and assign meaning to it’ (Williamson and Johanson 137). When reading, I made subjective interpretations, considered many different ideas, and constructed my own understandings. Throughout this research, I worked with text and the imagination in an iterative process dependent on the ‘organic interrelationships between the critical and creative thinking’ (Webb 34). As such, my research process may be viewed in two ways: one, as constructing understandings through my own lived experience and readings; and two, as contributing to other people’s construction of understandings through my publications and reflections on the making a work of art. Constructivism also enhanced my awareness of how my social positions and life experiences have influenced my work. For this reason, I included a ‘Researcher Statement’ in this thesis (see p. vi).

In my writing praxis, I drew on a *new materialist* ontology (Anderson and Perrin; Coole and Frost; LeCain) to question the place of humans in a material world. This ontology shares ground with the literary fields of ecocriticism and post-pastoralism but additionally considers technology and machines. New materialism was an important influence on my thinking about the agency of nonhuman nature and materials, and on the interactions of my human characters with material objects and the nonhuman environment. Another major influence on both my research and creative writing praxis was phenomenology, which focuses on human consciousness and perception (Leitch et al.) and shared human experiences and understandings (Williamson and Johanson). When writing articles, my arguments depended on shared human understandings. When writing fiction, I used my consciousness and perceptions in the crafting of characters and events that might induce a cathartic response in other readers. In this way, the creator, the work, and readers are inextricably linked. My project epistemology also involved collating as much evidence as practicable to enable others to understand how and why I attributed certain meanings to the texts I have examined.

My approach to this research alternated between research-led and practice-led. For Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, the research in research-led creative practice research comes from ‘science, engineering, technology and medical research’ or from ‘basic research work which was not originally intended for [artistic] purposes’ (“Introduction” 7). Whereas practice-led research requires work to gain knowledge about the creative process (Goodall). For my project, the traditional research involved the fields of georgic studies, ecocriticism, realism, the gothic, magic realism, pastoralism, and social science. I engaged in this research to both support my creative practice and to serve alone as literary criticism. This research contributed to my creative-practice research in three important ways. Firstly, it added to my lived experience to form a rich growing media for my novel and provided a store of knowledge that I could turn to when I encountered a problem in my creative practice. Secondly, my research gave me a strong understanding of the literary history into which I was writing, which was crucial to recognising the significance of my re-imagined farm novel. Thirdly, I drew on scientific learnings from prior studies in agricultural science on soils, fallow cropping, and the sugarcane crop cycle to create an authentic imaginary world. Some artists gain this knowledge through conversations with farmers (Fisher), however, I did not engage directly with farmers in this project, except to obtain permission to walk around their farms. I instead drew on memories of past social interactions in farming communities to craft each character’s voice and parlance. Avoiding contemporary voices allowed me to create something other than a thinly fictionalised version of reality; it enabled a measure of creative freedom. This approach followed that of Henry James, who ‘never wanted all the facts, which might stupefy him, but only enough to go on with, hardly enough to seem fact at all’ (Blackmur xv). My intentional departure from collating facts signals a movement towards the boundary of research and creative practice, which is inherent in creative-practice research (Glade-Wright and Smyth; Krauth; Marshall; Webb). Throughout this project, research conducted ahead of my creative writing guided that work on many occasions; and at other times, problems encountered during my praxis demanded a return to research. Examples are given in 1.6 *Reflections on my creative writing process*.

The creative component of this thesis is in the form of a novel, due to the focus of this research on the farm novel, and due to the opportunity offered by the novel to address complex issues, so readers can make their own judgements about speculative situations and events. The novel is one way in which many people make sense of the

world. They read novels, mostly in isolation, and enter scenarios that could exist, or be imagined as existing, beyond their own experience or in their future. These readers construct their own individual understandings and make judgements about the situations they encounter in the text through a cathartic experience of something that *could* happen. It represents a form of personal development and learning, a way for readers to understand other people and the wider world. Indeed, fictional stories could in theory influence an individual's worldview and consequently the way they participate in society. Fiction also offers a useful alternative to a non-fiction, which, in its account of something that has already happened, often presents one side of a social binary or one person's reflection on one or more happenings. Fiction enabled me instead to present the events as they were happening, so the reader must traverse a literary path, before reflecting on the experience. Henry James recognises the importance of readers wrestling with different perspectives in writing that: 'Art lives upon discussion ... and the comparison of standpoints' (James "The Art of Fiction" 44-45). It is the open-ended nature of fiction that enables readers to gain understandings and empathy for viewpoints that differ to their own and enables discussion and comparison. Through an experience that is otherwise unavailable, readers can develop a deeper interest and curiosity about issues that are often simplified or distorted in a fast-paced commercial world. The long form of a novel, and its ability to convey the internal thoughts of one or more characters, facilitates new understandings of complex issues.

Creative-practice research that involves writing a novel is widely recognised as an effective way to explore and respond to complex issues and questions. This methodology has been previously used in doctoral research on rural literature to explore climate change (Alice Robinson "Landfall") and complex histories of place (Guest). The published novels arising from these projects are Alice Robinson's *Anchor Point* (2015), which echoes the traits of a traditional Australian farm novel, and Glenda Guest's *Siddon Rock* (2009), which features magical realism in a rural town setting. Both researchers demonstrated the applicability of creative-practice research to explore complex issues and questions and produce new knowledge and understandings.

However, the most accessible sources of information on how to write a novel at a post-graduate level are not necessarily creative-practice outputs but the works of established novelists and critics. When Henry James wrote, he aimed to give an experience of life by removing 'the waste and muddlement and bewilderment in which it is lived' (Blackmur xv). More recently, Annie Dillard compares the precision and

persistence of the writing process to using a ‘miner’s pick,’ a ‘woodcarver’s gouge’ or a ‘surgeon’s probe’ (Dillard 3), whereas Ron Carlson suggests doggedly staying in the narrator’s mind until ‘something else will happen’ (54). Carlson also prioritises process over detail when developing a story, asserting that it ‘doesn’t matter where she goes; it matters how she goes’ (13). Lisa Cron points to the importance of consistency and plausibility (179) and keeping the reader’s interest the whole way through the story (6). She recommends that writers confront a protagonist with ‘just about everything she’s spent her entire life avoiding’ (169). While some novelists argue for writing concision and use of active rather than passive verbs (King), James Wood explains how in certain situations, passive verbs offer a means of emphasising a lack of control (Wood). Wood also suggests that characterisation should involve only a partial representation (75). This is not so much for the pleasure of the reader, but to determine how characters appear to each other and themselves (Goodheart 557). While immersed in my creative writing, I drew on all this advice about persistence, plot, and characterisation.

Nevertheless, my output followed an unpredictable and often surprising trajectory. This arose because of the need to ‘immerse in my imagination’ and ‘daydream’ in the creative aspects of my research (Glade-Wright and Smyth 9). Debra Adelaide and Sarah Attfield note that ‘creative practitioners are certain about one thing only—the importance of uncertainty’ (170). This feeling of uncertainty is common to the process of both academic and creative writing (Glade-Wright and Smyth). However, the outcome of creative writing is obviously different to academic writing. This is perhaps due to the differing aims of the authors. Academic writers aim to produce a text that makes a clear and logical argument, whereas creative writers aim to deliver what the philosopher Gordon Graham describes as ‘a distinctive way of understanding human experience’ (51). To achieve the latter, it was important that I allowed myself to pursue whichever ideas came to mind. At times, I focused on representing a concept without knowing how the piece would fit into the narrative arc. The writing could later be reviewed in the context of the wider narrative and these sections retained, edited, or deleted. I tended to edit whenever I returned to my creative writing after completing administrative or research work. This editing helped me improve what was already written while I re-engaged with my imagined world. I repeated this process many times.

Success in creative writing is measured by the writer who strives to perfect intended meanings, by public responses, and by the value assigned to the work by critics. In creative-practice research, new insights and understandings arise from the

process of making the creative work (Batty and Holbrook; Webb). It is the critical reflection on a creative practice that produces new knowledge (Webb and Brien). Nevertheless, I considered Paul Alpers' view that 'literary value consists precisely in breaking old molds, doing some kind of violence to received conventions and forms of expression' (*What Is Pastoral?* 12), and Wayne Booth's argument that the value of literature depends on the experience of reading a work in the context of others (Booth). These views inspired me to be bold when re-imagining the Australian farm novel. However, measuring the ability of my creative writing to stimulate new ways of thinking needs reader reception research, which is beyond the scope of this project.

My research into the georgic mode and Australian farm novels (Chapters 3 and 4), gave me a sense of a literary past and my relationship to it, which helped me understand the influence of European georgic literary traditions on Australian texts and develop an awareness of the innovation I was attempting. The necessity of my literary criticism as a component of this thesis is perhaps best explained by the oft-quoted Nobel Prize-winning writer, T.S. Eliot, in his 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (Eliot)

In Australia, traditions broadly come from two different historical branches: European written stories and Indigenous oral stories. My research uncovered a need to explore some shared understandings at the boundaries of Indigenous and non-

Indigenous worldviews (see Martin et al.). I therefore sought, through my research and creative writing, to navigate a literary cultural interface that could shed light on the positioning of Indigenous characters in the farm novel. My research also revealed magic realism as scarce in the farm novel genre, which underlines the originality of my work.

My exegesis includes a substantial reflection on my creative writing praxis (Chapter 7), due to the importance of process to creative-practice research. This reflection aims to reveal insights and understandings gained through the writing process and afterwards. Like a preface by Henry James, it is ‘the story of a story’ or ‘a narrative of the accessory facts and considerations which went with its writing’ (Blackmur ix). However, the reflection developed within creative-practice research differs to a reflection on art for a general audience. It requires an emphasis on the problems encountered and the ways of dealing with those problems to delineate what Jen Webb and Andrew Melrose describe as the ‘artistic innovation and an original contribution to the knowledge of creative practice’ (136). This suite of problems, resolutions, and limits form the new knowledge that may be useful to other creative-practice researchers. As such my reflection demonstrates how a creative work is a ‘form of research [that] generates detectable research outputs’ (Smith and Dean "Introduction" 5). The insights arising from this project provide new knowledge relevant to georgic literature and the Australian farm novel.

On a practical level, I alternated between working on the exegesis and working on the creative component. This provided opportunities for the research and creative writing to inform each other. It also allowed me to ‘rest’ the creative work for relatively long periods of time, so I could return to it with fresh eyes. The timing of switching from research to creative writing was mostly governed by external influences. For example, more than once I was immersed in creative writing when I received an email from a journal editor that required me to abandon the creative writing to meet a deadline for revisions. Other interruptions included doctoral milestones and professional development or family commitments. In October 2020, I visited the CANEGROWERS special library in Brisbane to read past issues of *Australian Canegrower* with the aim of identifying farming events that could possibly be dramatized. I subsequently undertook four one-week residencies in settings like the one I aimed to create in my novel: in Babinda in January, May and September 2021; and at Mission Beach in November 2021. From my accommodation in Babinda, I could walk into the adjacent cane fields and surrounding areas to observe sugarcane at various stages of the crop cycle and

under different seasonal conditions. The Mission Beach residency offered uninterrupted writing time at a stage when I needed to extend the narrative beyond the complex worldbuilding of the first third of the text. I also visited the family farms of Mark Savina and Mick Andrejic in Cairns, and of the brothers Frank and Stephen Gatti in Babinda to observe harvesting, planting, farm layouts, and the contents of a few sheds. These excursions onto farming land enabled me to use my senses to inform my writing, while also offering new ideas from unexpected encounters with nonhuman nature. Finally, the formal milestones of the doctoral program helped me articulate the symbiotic relationship between the exegesis and creative component.

Creative writing decisions about point of view, style, and characterisation point to methodology and method while exposing some limitations of my research. I chose to write my novel in the first person, in which the Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist Norman Mailer writes, ‘you gain immediacy but lose insight, because you can hardly move into other people’s heads without using a few devices, usually dubious’ (84). I wanted both the immediacy and a limitation. Being only in the mind of my non-Indigenous protagonist minimised a potential encroachment on Aboriginal ontology, knowledge, and rights of authorship (see Chapter 5). However, this limitation also meant construction of Aboriginal characters that, in an alternative project design, could have been enriched by collaborating with First Nations people. Because my project design limited representation of Indigenous knowledge and thinking, and I had known Aboriginal people in the way Jeanine Leane specifies (see Researcher Statement; and Leane "Other Peoples' Stories"), a sensitivity reading of my novel was not sought.

My research on the use of magic realism, nonhuman agency, and the gothic (Chapter 6; Smyth "Writing an Australian Farm Novel") informed my decision to employ these devices. Characterisation of the non-human was inevitably crafted through a human lens. The creative component, despite drawing attention to the nonhuman, can therefore only question human perspectives rather than convey nonhuman ones. To assist with representations of the nonhuman, I conceived the farmer as ‘a variety of actors’ both human and nonhuman (Comi 409), and subsequently let ‘the [nonhuman] actors have some room to express themselves’ (Latour 142). This required imagination and ‘creative courage’ (Glade-Wright and Smyth 8). My view of soil was informed by scientific knowledge in terms of the structure, potential for compaction, and the rich biodiversity of soil fauna and micro-organisms in most soils (see Nelson). To characterise sugarcane as an aggressive invader with links to an

invisible corporate force, I followed the Russia-Ukraine war, which began at the time of my writing. News reports in *The Guardian* stimulated my thinking around how the sugarcane could behave: by seeking expansion of territory, exploiting resources for its own interests, and recruiting people to act on its behalf. Reports of the Russia-Ukraine war also gave me insights into the types of resistance that could occur. Characterisation of the machines was guided by current technology, although with a magical consciousness and language, that could perhaps be read as indicative of future possibilities in artificial intelligence. The current trend towards transferring decision-making from humans to machines was employed in a forced expulsion of humans from farms, which counters the dominant conception and fictional representations of humans in control of the farm. Importantly, the central role of the Harvester contrasts with common depictions of manual labour in the Australian farm novel. To assist with my depictions and characterisation, I read a harvester service manual and paid close attention to various machines when visiting sugarcane farms.

While writing, I was mindful of identifying my main characters and not naming others, of concealing some information, and ending chapters in a way that might draw readers deeper into the story. I tried to weave glimpses rather than long stares at the setting through the early chapters, aimed to develop a plot to surprise and challenge the protagonist, attempted to depict personal growth in the protagonist, and allowed this character to experience a range of emotions such as anger, empathetic pain, boredom, confusion, and sadness. As I wrote I imagined myself as each of the human characters and considered my senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste as the narrative unfolded. This approach helped me to focus on the immediate experience of each character, which I hoped would enhance the vibrancy of the first-person view.

Some elements of my human characterisation were supported by specific sources of information. For example, I wanted to enrich the character of Quentin's mother, Monica, through her deep connection with jazz music, so I read *Jazz in Mind: Essays on the History and Meanings of Jazz* (1991), edited by Reginald R. Buckner and Steven Weiland. This work gave me insights into the way famous jazz musicians have spoken and felt about their music that I could apply to this character. Another useful source of information was Simon Milton's *Stop Gambling: The Self-Help Manual* (2001). This text helped me construct plausible behaviours and emotions when revealing that Monica had become a problem gambler.

At irregular intervals, I provided my creative writing to my advisors. On one occasion, my secondary advisor suggested the narrative could be improved by a linear chronology. I subsequently completed a structural edit, which made the text easier to read. Such simplification may please some readers more than others. Finally, some ideas and concepts could not be pursued due to project limits. For example, I wanted to write a scene involving only nonhuman characters, but the time constraint of the doctoral program and the thesis word limit meant this could not be completed. Overall, the creative-practice methodology and limited scope ensured significant research outcomes were achieved within the planned timeframe.

Chapter 3. Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics: Reading the Georgic Mode and Region in John Naish's Farm Novel *The Cruel Field* (1962)

Elizabeth A. Smyth

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My thesis is that by employing magic realism in a contemporary setting and giving agency to nonhuman nature and machines, I can break received conventions of georgic literature, unsettle a dominant Western ideology, and stimulate new ways of thinking about farmers and farming. This chapter identifies which conventions of the georgic mode are useful when constructing a contemporary regional setting. Through this reading, I distinguish conventions of the georgic mode – the harvest, seasons, labour, harsh conditions, heroism, and farming instructions – and explore how the Wet Tropics region is conveyed in John Naish's depictions of sugarcane, seasons, rainforest, Indigenous people, and women. This paper also reveals the limitations of Naish's realist farm novel for a contemporary readership.

3.1 Statement of contribution

While I developed the idea and wrote the article, I acknowledge the support of my advisor Roger Osborne who suggested readings and helped me improve my writing and navigate the publication process. I also acknowledge the feedback of anonymous article reviewers, assistance with final editing by journal editor Ellen Smith and copyediting by Angela Rockel.

3.2 Abstract

Many critics consider the pastoral ideal as key to understanding Australia's rural development and therefore interpret regional literature as either supporting or working

against that ideal. However, this approach is problematic for a farm novel centred on labour and a harsh reality. This essay introduces the georgic mode as a new interpretative framework. In a reading of John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), I identify georgic conventions of the harvest, seasons, labour, harsh conditions, heroism, and farming instructions. These conventions convey insights into the Wet Tropics Bioregion of the mid-twentieth century. Regional insights arise from depictions of sugarcane, seasons, rainforest, Indigenous people, and women. I argue that sugarcane farming and Indigenous fishing align with the georgic mode. My inclusion of Indigenous fishing extends concepts of the georgic and subverts a pastoral tradition. Spatial boundaries situate the farm and sea as georgic, and rainforest as pastoral. This delineation recognises human management of country beyond the farm. This essay has repercussions for how 'the pastoral' is understood and positions the georgic mode as integral to interpretations of the farm novel. Along the way, I correct a lack of critical attention to the Welsh-migrant writer, John Naish, and build on Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins' research on North Queensland literature to revive and reshape understandings of 'the North'.

3.3 Introduction

Many critics regard the pastoral ideal as the key to understanding Australia's rural development and therefore interpret literature as either supporting or working against that ideal. However, this approach is problematic when positioning a 'farm novel' within current understandings of the Australian novel. The pastoral ideal dismisses labour (Low), ignores harsh realities (Indyk "The Pastoral Poets"), and marginalises Indigenous people (Eustace). Yet these three elements are central to the Australian 'farm novel' because farmers gain knowledge through the experience of farm labour (Cohen), farmers face 'conflicting forces of unmediated nature' (Sarver "Agrarian Environmental Models" 156), and Indigenous perspectives change our understandings of Australian history and literature (Hughes-d'Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*). To better address these elements, I propose the georgic mode as a new interpretative framework. My understanding of the georgic mode is taken from the work of Paul Alpers and Anthony Low. As Low writes '[I]ike pastoral, georgic is primarily a mode rather than genre. It is an informing spirit, an attitude toward life, and a set of themes and images' (46). Put simply, the georgic mode attends to labour and the

uncertainty of nature, while the pastoral mode centres on leisure and ease. The pastoral mode is prominent in a significant body of Australian literary criticism (Archer-Lean; Delaney; Eustace; Indyk "The Pastoral Poets"; Kinsella "Is There an Australian Pastoral?"; Lynch; McCredden; Ross), yet a commensurate body of research on the georgic mode is lacking.

In this essay, I examine how the georgic mode conveys insights into a specific region through a reading of the neglected 'farm novel', John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), which is set in the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia. A farm novel is a novel that is set on a farm, uses farm people as main characters, and explores farming issues (Freitag "Naturalism"; Meyer). Australia's small collection of farm novels includes novels by Benjamin Cozens and James Green set in the Victorian Mallee and New England respectively (Hughes-d'Aeth "Settler Colonial" 203), the farm novels of the Western Australian wheatbelt (Hughes-d'Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005) also set in the Mallee (Kirne). My identification of *The Cruel Field* as a farm novel not only adds to this collection but expands the footprint of the farm novel to an area in 'the North' known for its high rainfall, rainforest, hot humid weather, and rich biodiversity. My attention to the Wet Tropics Bioregion aligns with growing understandings of Australian regions as intrinsic to particular ecological systems (Hughes-d'Aeth "Regional Accent"), and builds on Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's literary research focused on wheat cropping (*Like Nothing on This Earth*).

Naish's depiction of sugarcane farming in north-eastern Australia is geographically opposite to the south-western portraits of wheat farming in Hughes-d'Aeth's *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (2017). It also contrasts with a concentration of poetry and prose about cattle, dairy, wool and wheat farming across the southern half of Australia. Given that ninety-five percent of Australia's sugarcane is grown in Queensland, Naish's use of a sugarcane farm as a setting firmly positions *The Cruel Field* in 'the North'. To date, 'The North' has been understood in Queensland-centric terms as the entire state of Queensland (Hadgraft), regions north of Rockhampton (Astley), or regions roughly north of Townsville (Buckridge and McKay). Allison Craven's view of sugarcane as a 'metonym' of the tropics (52) reinforces *The Cruel Field*'s North Queensland setting. Hence, my reading builds on Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins' 2007 research on North Queensland literature.

The Cruel Field is known for its ‘verve and pace’ (Tennant 507), and a ‘masculinist orientation’ that supports ‘the social-realist mode established by [Jean] Devanny’ (Taylor and Perkins 239-40). Published in 1962, *The Cruel Field* addresses Indigenous dispossession and a multi-racial society ahead of the growing understandings of the 1970s. While Ronald McKie’s town novel *The Crushing* (1977) depicts a multi-racial society (Cryle), it ‘elide[s] living Aborigines from Australia’s story’ (Cheryl Taylor "Late Retrospectives" 2). By contrast, *The Cruel Field* offers a realistic yet sensitive portrayal of the social circumstances of Indigenous people by not shying from racist dialogue and giving Indigenous characters agency and subversive power. *The Cruel Field* is one of many texts about the Australian canefields that include writings by Naish, Devanny, McKie, Louis Nowra, Faith Bandler and Nancy Cato. When read alongside Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1957), *The Cruel Field* completes a portmanteau of the canecutter’s life, such that Lawler’s city leisure hinges to Naish’s farm labour. The number of writers connected with the Australian canefields may warrant a new genre, however, developing a genre is beyond the scope of this essay.

This essay begins with a definition of the georgic mode and an examination of a literary culture that nullifies this mode. In particular, I discuss the unstated assumptions that muddy a pre-occupation with ‘the pastoral ideal’. The second part of the essay gives a reading of *The Cruel Field* as an example of the georgic mode in the Wet Tropics Bioregion. Given the lack of Australian literary criticism focused on the georgic mode, I draw instead on the work of art historian, Jeanette Hoorn, who identifies georgic conventions and regional insights in John Glover’s painting *My Harvest Home* (1835). In my reading of *The Cruel Field*, I identify the georgic conventions of the harvest, seasons, labour, harsh conditions, heroism, and farming instructions and discuss how these conventions convey insights into mid-twentieth-century rural society and the Wet Tropics Bioregion. These insights arise from depictions of sugarcane, seasons, rainforest, Indigenous people, and women. Within my discussion, I argue that sugarcane farming and Indigenous fishing align with the georgic mode. I also delineate spatial boundaries that situate the farm and sea as georgic, and the rainforest as pastoral. Classifying rainforest as pastoral arises in part from my recognition, rather than John Naish’s, of humans managing country beyond the farm.

3.4 The georgic mode

The georgic mode is about farming, labour, uncertainty of nature, and harsh realities (Graver; Hoorn; Low). A primary source of the georgic and pastoral modes is Virgil's poetry (Alpers *What Is Pastoral?*; Graver; Halperin; Hoorn; Low), however, depictions of the hardships of farming and the farmer's calendar have been traced to earlier poetry such as Hesiod's *Works and Days* (Hagenstein et al.; Williams; Ziser). Virgil draws analogies between farming and warfare (Attié; Graver; Low). Like a soldier, the farmer faces adversity in a struggle to impose order on a hostile land. Losses may occur but success is declared when the land has been tamed for the good of the nation (Attié). This analogy makes farming heroic (Graver). It also explains why labour can at times be difficult and the conditions harsh. These harsh or violent conditions, inherent in the georgic mode, are elsewhere labelled 'anti-pastoral' (Delaney; Gifford *Pastoral*; Reed) or 'counter pastoral' (Williams). I must emphasize that both sunny skies and violent storms are georgic. The term 'anti-georgic' instead applies to an attitude of contempt towards farming and an inability to farm due to idleness or war (Attié). Importantly, the georgic mode carries the 'realistic' perspectives of farming people (Low 20), rather than the urban views tied to the pastoral (Hoorn), or the perspectives of 'those pretend [farmers] ... who are really courtly shepherds in disguise' (Low 20).

3.5 Examining a pastoral dominance

Introducing the georgic mode requires an understanding of the problems it can resolve, many of which arise from a pre-occupation with the pastoral ideal. To understand these problems, we must first understand what is meant by 'the pastoral ideal'. This ideal is the pinnacle of success in the pastoral mode (Low), where human labour is disregarded because nature does all the work (Marx). In the pastoral ideal, nature provides humans with an abundance of food, which allows them to enjoy leisure and culture in rural landscapes (Alpers *What Is Pastoral?*; Gifford *Pastoral*; Low; Marx). These landscapes are formed by humans in a way that meets European aesthetic tastes (Marx). Low claims that Virgil purposely 'invoked [the pastoral ideal] to provide a contrast to the hard and laborious world of his farmers' (18). This invocation casts the pastoral ideal as a wish or desire for how things could be in the best of circumstances (Poggioli). In Australia, the pastoral ideal is understood as contributing to national

identity (Eustace; Lynch), as a place for enjoying a leisurely retreat from the pressures of city life (Blair "Amanda Lohrey's Vertigo"), an imagined alternative to reality (Archer-Lean), or the origin of distinctive Australian words like 'pastoralists' (Ross). However, the pastoral ideal is also problematic. It is too simplistic (Delaney), and fails to account for the Australian colony as a prison (Hassall; Ross) or the social advancement of former convicts (Kinsella "Is There an Australian Pastoral?"). It also provides a means of legitimising the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Eustace), ignores the reality of negative human impacts on the environment (Reed), disregards the harshness of colonial life in Australia (Indyk "The Pastoral Poets"), and inadequately accommodates the nature writing of early Australian poets (Kinsella "Is There an Australian Pastoral?"; Ross). The pastoral ideal's inability to account for labour and harsh realities invites attention to the georgic mode. However, paying this attention is difficult when the georgic mode is either nullified or elided by a literary culture that prioritizes the pastoral ideal.

The dominance of the pastoral ideal in Australian literary criticism is underpinned by unstated assumptions that perpetuate the misunderstandings and misrepresentations described by Alpers as a 'happy confusion of definitions' (*What Is Pastoral?* 8). Critics of the pastoral in Australia tend to blend the pastoral and georgic modes and apply the label 'pastoral'. I offer two ways of recognising 'the pastoral'. The first combines all the themes and concepts arising from *both* the georgic mode and the pastoral mode. The second uses *only* the themes and concepts arising from the pastoral mode, thus *excluding* the georgic mode. This second method allows critics to vividly distinguish two modes. Low, for example, states that 'pastoral celebrates play and leisure, georgic celebrates work' (4), Bruce E. Graver distinguishes an 'artificial world of idle *otium*' from the 'continual toil and hardship' of a 'life of *labor*' (119), which he later translates as 'pastoral and georgic' (127), and Alpers assures us that '[i]n Virgil's works, pastoral and georgic are distinct' (*What Is Pastoral?* 28).¹ This essay seeks to extract the georgic mode from the dominant blended 'pastoral'.

¹ Pastoral and georgic may also be differentiated as the poetry about herding domesticated grazing animals and the poetry of farming. See Alpers, Paul. *What Is Pastoral?* University of Chicago Press, 1997, Halperin, David M. "Pastoral Violence in the *Georgics*: Commentary on Ross." *Arethusa*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1990, pp. 77-93, *ibid.*, Low, Anthony. *The Georgic Revolution*. Princeton University Press, 1985.

An added complication is that some critics use the term ‘georgic’ as a blend of *both* the georgic mode and the pastoral mode. This makes the term ‘georgic’ synonymous with ‘pastoral’. Tom Bristow provides an example when he writes:

Practical aspects of agriculture within the georgic tradition exhibit expressions of human labour in the world that are not reduced to viewing nature as simply enriching; modes can be read as shifting from peaceful repose to the depiction of the opposition of violence and care, and pleasure and pain. (57)

Here, Bristow describes ‘the georgic tradition’ as including ‘peaceful repose’ which suggests a view of the ‘the georgic’ as comprising both the georgic mode and the pastoral mode. Ultimately, whichever way a critic uses the terms ‘pastoral’ or ‘georgic’ is acceptable, however, stating assumptions would make their intentions easier for readers to understand.

Problems arise when meanings are ambiguous. An example is found in Ruth Blair’s “Introduction” to the 2015 special issue of *Australian Literary Studies* “Afterlives of Pastoral”. Blair writes that, according to Alpers, the endings of pastoral literature exhibit a need for limits that are neither set nor suggested. Readers conditioned by a pre-occupation with the pastoral ideal may interpret this as meaning that pastoral endings have no limits because they are idealistic and do not account for reality. However, Alpers intends the opposite: that these endings represent the mess of real life, which is never neatly resolved (Alpers *What Is Pastoral?*). Although Alpers regards pastoral as mode, he holds a different view of this mode to Virgil and Low. Alpers constructs his pastoral mode, as do numerous Australian critics, as a blend of concepts arising from Virgil’s pastoral and georgic modes. By not providing insight into Alpers’ use of the georgic reality to inform his view on ‘pastoral’ endings, Blair’s writing is unclear. In her Introduction, pastoral endings could easily be understood as idealistic, which misrepresents Alpers. This confusion may help to ‘ring some problematic bells for ecocritics’ (“Introduction: Why Pastoral?” 8), however, the risk of misunderstandings is high. Stating different ways of constructing ‘the pastoral’ is a step towards recognising the georgic mode.

Terminology also plays a role in nullifying or eliding the georgic mode. Rather than referring to the georgic, Australian literary critics refer almost exclusively to pastoral-related terms. Consider the non-idyllic landscapes and violence of the *anti-pastoral* (Delaney) and the *poison pastoral* (Indyk “Kinsella’s Hallmarks”); the non-

anthropocentrism (Blair "Amanda Lohrey's Vertigo"; Delaney; McCredde) and 'uncertainty and incompleteness' of the *post-pastoral* (Delaney 6-9); the nuanced city-country contrast of the *cosmopolitan pastoral* (Beardwood); the changed boundaries between humans and nature of the *radical pastoral* (Garrard; Kinsella "Radical Western Pastoral") *subpastoral*, *displaced pastoral*, and *corrupted pastoral* (Kinsella "Is There an Australian Pastoral?"), and the ecological focus of the *ecopastoral* (Lynch). Many of these terms label concepts already represented by the georgic mode, for example the uncertainty and harshness of nature (Alpers *What Is Pastoral?*), and none specifically address labour. Closer attention to 'the georgic' would not only further understandings of regions and the farm novel, but connect Australian literary discourse with international and interdisciplinary scholarship on the georgic mode.

3.6 Naish's contribution to Australia's farming imaginary

One way to demonstrate the value of the georgic mode is to read a novel that aligns with georgic conventions. To this end, I turn to Naish's *The Cruel Field*. John Naish was a Welsh-migrant canecutter who wrote an autobiography *The Clean Breast* (1961), two novels, *The Cruel Field* (1962) and *That Men Should Fear* (1963), and a number of plays, yet his works are scarcely known. Naish is absent from Peter Pierce (ed.)'s 2009 *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* and the "Australian Dictionary of Biography" (www.adb.anu.edu.au). The AustLit database holds only three reviews of Naish's second novel, *That Men Should Fear*, all written in the year of the novel's publication, which was also the year of the author's death at the age of forty. Both novels are now out of print. Nevertheless, Naish is acknowledged in the Oxford Companion to Australian Literature and by Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins in *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland* (2007) edited by Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay. Additionally, *The Cruel Field* is instrumental to the research on migrant indentured labourers by historian Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui.

The Cruel Field is a fictional account of the 1951 sugarcane harvest on a farm at Cook's End, Nagonda. The farm is owned by two Italian-migrant brothers, Tony and Peter Leonardi. The protagonist is not a farmer, but the English-migrant canecutter, Emery Carol. Emery joins a canecutting 'gang' comprised of four men: brothers Ruf and Jeff Craig, Mark Westcott and Pedro Morgan. These men have cut cane together for years. Due to new industrial rules requiring a minimum of six men in a gang, Emery

and young Danny Hoover are signed on. When Emery announces that he intends to cut cane, he receives the ‘wise weatherbeaten look of the Queensland old-timer’ and is told that ‘Cane killed Abel ... And cane will kill you!’ (Naish 54). Jeff Craig and his wife Betty live with their children in one of the farm barracks, and the single men in the other. The single-men’s barracks consists of a row of individual rooms opening onto the verandah where Emery sleeps. The men share the ‘galley’ where they take turns to cook (131). Naish’s 1951 cane harvest involves the common mid-twentieth-century practice of burning the crop before cutting the stalks by hand. The stalks are loaded onto ‘trucks’ for transport by rail to a central mill (34). The cutters spend their leisure hours drinking and gambling at The Queen’s Hotel. Emery also swims in a rainforest waterhole known as Round Lake, and he and Mark socialise with the Indigenous people living at Turtle Point. Three men die during the harvest: Old Jack Kelly is worked to death, and the farmer Peter Leonardi and canecutter Pedro Morgan die in an uncontrolled canefire. Nonetheless, the harvest is completed. The story ends with Mark Westcott as poor as when he started and headed for a term in Stuart Gaol. And Emery leaves the farm ‘without looking back’ (222).

Of all the novels connected to the Australian canefields, *The Cruel Field* provides the deepest insights into farming practices associated with cultivating sugarcane and the strongest experience of canefield labour. This experience is achieved through the reader’s empathy with the canecutter protagonist. In Jean Devanny’s *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), by comparison, the protagonist directs canefield labour from afar and only actively engages in fieldwork to grow coffee. In Devanny’s *Sugar Heaven* (1936), the narrator makes a brief observation of canefield labour, however, the story centres instead on the political awakening of the housewife protagonist, Dulcie Lee. This awakening occurs predominantly at her house and in town. McKie’s *The Crushing* is firmly a town novel with even less to say about farming. In contrast, Naish depicts a range of farming practices (breakpushing, canefiring, canecutting, loading, and planting) and powerfully evokes the challenges of weather, the rat-borne Weil’s disease, and the limits of human knowledge and capabilities. His rural perspective is conveyed through the values and daily motivations of farmers and farm workers. This focus on a rural perspective and farming practices makes *The Cruel Field* an important novel for demonstrating georgic conventions.

3.7 Georgic mode conventions in *The Cruel Field*

The most easily identified georgic convention in *The Cruel Field* is labour. In the georgic mode, labour involves persistent struggle analogous with the effort of soldiers at war (Attié). Naish's labour also mirrors the 'tragic failure of human effort' shown in Wordsworth's poem "Michael" (Graver 128). The Nagonda canecutters face risks, repetition, fatigue, hot humid conditions, and a devastating slowness that comes with age. Like Wordsworth, Naish portrays a situation where 'the slightest relaxation can lead to ruin' (Graver 119). This is typical of the georgic mode where Virgil's farmer engages in 'endless work' for a harvest to be completed (Low 46). Labour appears to be Naish's main interest, yet from a philosophical rather than political perspective. Instead of joining Devanny's cause of improved conditions for canecutters, Naish leaves his readers wondering whether farming is worthwhile for *anyone*. This philosophical quandary mirrors human reflections on war. In this way, along with depictions of risk and struggle, Naish's labour meets Virgil's analogy between farming and warfare.

The harvest is another convention of the georgic mode, which Naish uses to assemble his main characters, to bookend the narrative, and to justify the action and tension between characters. His main characters include his canecutter protagonist, other members of the gang, and the farmers for whom they work. The narrative begins and ends with the harvest, which dictates progression of the plot. Naish uses the dramatic event of a canefire to emphasise a narrative climax in which lives are lost. One could argue that this loss of life opposes the traditional georgic representation of the harvest as 'success' (Hoorn 258). However, Naish's climax is more like a lost battle in a war that is ultimately won. The canecutters later celebrate completing the harvest 'with a cry of ecstasy and a great exaggerated slash' (Naish 213), and the men receive their final pay. Therefore, despite the harsh conditions and loss of life, the completed harvest means the hostile land is tamed, and the novel abides by both the harvest and warfare conventions of the georgic mode.

Seasons are also integral to the georgic mode, due to their influence on the farmer's calendar, and Naish makes use of them to guide his readers through his narrative and farm life. Naish uses the by-products of labour—blisters, callouses and corns—as metonyms for the turn of the seasons. In this way, a relationship between labour and the crop cycle is demonstrated:

The blisters go deeper and deeper, unobtrusively become callouses, and then one day the cutter finds himself trimming the great corns with a razor-blade to stop them splitting any further. And in the same way the good months come, September, October, November. The wet season gradually loses its grip until the damp Badila burns happily, contemptuously, drying out as the fire advances through it. The showers become lighter and the intervals between them longer until the middle of the season has come. It all happens gradually; but is noticed suddenly, like the corn on the palm of a hand. (69)

Typically, seasons are used in the farm novel to place characters in repeated situations, thereby demonstrating a deterministic aspect of farming (Freitag "Naturalism"). This also applies to the georgic mode, where seasons govern the farmer's calendar. In *The Cruel Field*, the men harvest in one season and plant in another. Naish makes further use of seasonality by structuring his novel in three parts: the start of a season, the good months, and the end of a season. In this way, seasons and the farmer's calendar are interwoven with the narrative.

With seasons come harsh conditions which aid the portrayal of a hostile land being tamed. In *The Cruel Field*, the cane is made difficult to cut due to the impact of a storm. The canecutters face further challenges, such as Weil's disease, uncontrolled fire, and the physical strain of working in the heat and humidity of the Wet Tropics. The motivation of Naish's canecutters and farmers to withstand financial and physical threats is reminiscent of Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife", where 'the best one can hope for is to survive' (Andrew Taylor 42). By the end of *The Cruel Field*'s harvest, lives and money are lost, and another storm begins. The canecutters expect to face harsh conditions again the next year. The land is tamed, but as the georgic mode dictates, this is temporary due to the uncertainty of nature.

Another aspect of the georgic mode in *The Cruel Field* is its representation of heroism and togetherness. Low describes georgic farming as 'a heroic activity, a kind of constructive warfare in which farmer and ox may labor together as fellow-soldiers' (8). In *The Cruel Field*, Emery recognises his capacity for heroism in 'the supreme fitness that had once catapulted him up London escalators when the rugby season had got properly underway' (69-70). The heroic status of canecutters is implied by the 'feeling' that 'made the schoolie and storekeeper and clerk envy the cutters' (70). After Peter Leonardi and Pedro Morgan die in the uncontrolled fire, canecutters from other farms

come to help: Ben Pitt's two cutters and the six-man gang from Regenzani's farm. This mirrors Low's example where 'others come to his aid, labouring toward the same ends, taking up the unfinished work and carrying it forward' (63). So too, Naish's canecutters work heroically together to complete the harvest.

Finally, instructions on how to perform farming tasks are integral to Virgil's georgic mode and appear in *The Cruel Field* as a lesson on how to cut cane. An example from Virgil's poetry is advice on how to maintain soil fertility, as translated by Thomas Fletcher Royds:

Scatter rich dung and unforgetful heap
Much mould upon them, or with them inter
Rough shells or stones of porous sort, for so
The rains will creep between and subtle air
Will penetrate, and fill their hearts with joy. (Georgics II, 415-419)
(Virgil 70-71)

In *The Cruel Field*, ageing canecutter Jeff Craig teaches young Danny Hoover how to cut cane by 'upending the old broom' and showing him to 'grab it chest high' to 'control the sugarcane' then use a 'razor-sharp' knife and load smaller bundles because 'speed' and 'rhythm' are the keys to being fast (63). This scene mirrors farming lessons embedded in the georgic mode. Together, the conventions of labour, the harvest, seasons, harsh conditions, heroism, and farming instructions map a familiar georgic territory. From here, the author leads his readers into the unknown region of his farming imaginary.

3.8 The Wet Tropics Bioregion in 1951

Naish's representation of the Wet Tropics Bioregion alters given understandings of Australian seasons; subverts prior Indigenous characterisations as powerless victims of colonisation; and accepts women's labour as a social norm, albeit barmaids, nurses and housewives. Naish's representation of seasons firmly positions this novel in the Wet Tropics. Naish's seasons are neither contrary to those in Europe as in Henry Kendall's poem "Bell-birds" (Birns), but nor the 'scorching summer' of Geraldton in Western Australia (Hughes-d'Aeth "Farm Novel or Station Romance" 8). In Naish's storyworld, the wet season continues beyond the Australian December-to-February summer 'well into April' (12). Summer and winter are replaced by the wet season and

the dry season. That Naish's canecutters 'slaved the six-month season' indicates the duration of the dry harvest season (11). In this way, the four seasons of other parts of Australia are reduced to two. Each of these seasons represent the 'tortured eschatology' of Randolph Stow's 'scorching summer' and Canadian novelists' 'frozen winter' (Hughes-d'Aeth "Farm Novel or Station Romance" 8). During the dry season, men suffer hard physical labour. Similarly, as the wet season begins, Tony Leonardi and Ruf Craig continue to labour, planting cane on the farm that Tony bought at Windfall Creek. Therefore, the only escape from the physical suffering of labour occurs off the farm.

In *The Cruel Field*, the pastoral mode's leisure and ease predominates in the rainforest. Emery retreats from a complex and oppressive social life to an idyllic engagement with nature. However, this retreat is not a pastoral escape from city life, but rather an escape from farm life. In *The Cruel Field*, farm life is no less busy, organised or hostile than a city. Emery escapes to swim in Round Lake, an idyllic rainforest waterhole, accompanied by the French barmaid, Adèle Bondeau. Adèle is a symbol of culture. Emery had previously described her as 'resembl[ing] a flower in absolute desolation, or culture in a cave' (92). On their way to Round Lake, Emery compares Adèle 'high-handedly with the bleached ungainly country wives' (135). In this way, Naish makes use of his women characters to contrast Adèle, a sophisticated traveller, with the crude and ignorant locals. This contrast corresponds with Robert Beardwood's *cosmopolitan pastoral*. '[N]aturalization ceremony notwithstanding' Emery decides that he too is European (92). This rainforest scene represents the type of pastoral element that Andrew Taylor identifies in David Campbell's poem "Droving" of a 'young swain and his female companion at ease beside a creek' (44). In *The Cruel Field*, Adèle's husband Pierre arrives and takes his wife back to town. For Emery, the rainforest becomes 'suddenly as cold as a vault', and he runs to the farm to 'end the depressing journey as soon as possible' (138). This loss of Adèle's presence represents a separation from cultural life, from Europe, and from love. Naish offers no poem or song to resolve this loss, as is typical of a pastoral love lament (Alpers "Convening and Convention"). Instead, Emery turns to writing a play. Nevertheless, Emery's statement to Adèle at Round Lake that, 'You will not settle here ... If you did ...' to which Adèle replies 'Yes' (Naish 137) may be regarded as a form of pastoral invitation (Alpers "Convening and Convention"). This transfer of the pastoral ideal from a Western human-formed landscape to the rainforest aligns with the way early Australian poets 'pastoralize[d] the bush' (Kinsella "Is There an Australian Pastoral?" 353). Despite rainforest being

represented in the novel as free of human intervention, I use the term *rainforest* rather than *wilderness* to recognise that Indigenous country is ‘not a wilderness, but a humanised world’ (Banning et al. vi). In this way, I counter the ideas of Australian wilderness that John Kinsella notes in Cora Hull’s poem “Rural Victoria” as places unoccupied by humans (Kinsella "Is There an Australian Pastoral?" 366). In *The Cruel Field*, the rainforest represents a spatial zone where the pastoral mode’s leisure, ease and retreat dominate.

Conversely, Naish’s depiction of fishing aligns Indigenous hunting with the georgic mode. Historically, fishing is linked to the pastoral mode through its association with leisure (McIlhaney). Low points to solitary fishing as ‘a preferred activity for gentlemen’ which holds ‘the dignity of religious contemplation’ (24). Yet it is also an activity for women, alone ‘amid the beauty of nature’ (McIlhaney 57). Anne E. McIlhaney traces the ‘British piscatory (fishing) pastoral’ back to *The Treatyse of Fysshynge wyth an Angle* (1496) (56-57). In Australia, Naish presents a different image. Fishing, in *The Cruel Field*, involves the labour of a number of Indigenous people to provide a social benefit. Emery joins a group of Aboriginal characters—Hughie Tray, young Willie Lyons and some boys—to fish from a rowing boat in the sea near Turtle Point. A hierarchy of skill is depicted. Willy ‘load[s Emery’s] bait and lines’ (104), which results in Emery catching a few small cod and a trevally. However, the older Aboriginal man, Hughie Tray, has the greatest skill; he catches a giant wrasse that impresses the boys and ensures everyone is fed. Here, fishing is detached from its pastoral history of an adult in contemplative solitude to become the labour of a group of communicative Indigenous men and boys to produce food. Labour, group effort and social benefit aligns fishing, as a form of Indigenous hunting, with the georgic mode.

Naish’s inclusion of a Torres Strait Islander character strengthens his regional depiction of ‘the North’. In the Wet Tropics, Indigenous people from the Torres Strait Islands and Yarrabah were employed to fill post-war labour shortages in the 1946 and 1947 harvest seasons (Griggs). From the 1948 season, displaced persons and migrants began arriving from Europe in large numbers to complete the two-year term of indentured labour required for migration (Griggs; Vidonja Balanzategui). With this in mind, the Indigenous characters of Naish’s 1951 season may be viewed as not only dispossessed of their lands by colonial occupation, but pushed aside from paid employment as cancutters by European displaced persons and migrants. Regardless, Naish gives his Indigenous characters agency and subversive power. In *The Cruel Field*,

Indigenous men adopt leadership roles. When Caucasian canecutter Mark crashes his truck, Kevin Kelly, of Aboriginal and Irish descent, locates a replacement wheel, and Torres Strait Islander Chick Lyons oversees the project of fitting the wheel. Later, Mark is forcibly removed from an Indigenous home, which subverts the typical mid-twentieth-century social hierarchy: he ‘felt the door battered inwards against his heels and the wind in his hair again. Then ... Hughie’s crinkly hair in his stomach and under his hands. He couldn’t stop himself going backwards ... the door was shut by the time he got to his feet ... the hut ... a solid blank surface now with the window-shutters down’ (185). These depictions of Indigenous agency and subversion of social hierarchy, when combined with racist dialogue and a portrayal of marginalisation, provide a sensitive view for the 1960s of the mid-twentieth-century circumstances of Indigenous people in the Wet Tropics Bioregion.

Although Naish shows no women directly involved in farming, he naturalises women’s labour through characterisations of working women. Readers are introduced to a barmaid, nurse, and housewife/mother: roles that women depicted in rural romances often fight against (O’Mahony). Taylor and Perkins identify Naish’s women characters as ‘foolish, heartless or mercenary’ (240). This is largely true, however, Naish’s narrator exhibits a measure of sensitivity by revealing the ‘penury’ of nurse Judith Harrison’s childhood (56), and the difficulties of Betty Craig’s unpaid labour as a housewife/mother due to ‘the chains of bawling children round her ankles’ (70). Only Betty works on the farm. Through her marriage to a canecutter, she indirectly supports the farming enterprise. The lack of women directly involved in farming limits the level to which *The Cruel Field* draws women into the georgic mode. The absence of women in Naish’s canefields mirrors Glover’s exclusively male workforce in *My Harvest Home*, which Hoorn views as ‘reflecting local circumstances’ and compares with British harvest scenes of the same era that show both men and women in the field (258). Overall, *The Cruel Field*’s imaginary comprises a section of regional society dominated by tough multicultural, non-Indigenous men working hard to harvest a tropical food crop amid excessive heat and rain and the risks of disease and accidents.

3.9 Conclusion

Reading the georgic mode and region in John Naish's *The Cruel Field* draws sugarcane farming and Indigenous fishing into the Australian farming imaginary. This strengthens recognition of labour, harsh realities and Indigenous people as keys to understanding Australia's rural development. In the same way that John Glover's painting *My Harvest Home* employs conventions of the georgic mode to convey insights into early-nineteenth-century regional Tasmania, John Naish employs conventions of the georgic mode to convey insights into the mid-twentieth-century Wet Tropics Bioregion. The harsh conditions and human suffering in Naish's canefield imaginary echo Virgil's analogy between farming and warfare. Other conventions of the georgic mode convey insights into seasons, rainforest, and the lives of Indigenous people and women in the 1950s' area now designated as the Wet Tropics Bioregion. In Naish's imaginary, the traditional city/country contrast becomes a farm/rainforest contrast. This mirrors a shift from the pastoral's urban perspective to the georgic's rural perspective. My examination of unstated assumptions has repercussions for how 'the pastoral' is understood and employed in Australian literary criticism. This essay positions the georgic mode as integral to interpretations of the farm novel. By embracing Indigenous food production, it also widens conceptions of the georgic. Further research is needed to identify other Australian writings where georgic conventions support literary regionalism and where representations of Indigenous hunting, gathering or agriculture may be viewed as georgic.

Chapter 4. The Semi-Georgic Australian Sugarcane Novel

Elizabeth A. Smyth

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My thesis is that by employing magic realism in a contemporary setting and giving agency to nonhuman nature and machines, I can break received conventions of georgic literature, unsettle a dominant Western ideology, and stimulate new ways of thinking about farmers and farming. Given my premise that exploring human-nonhuman relationships can help when addressing farming and environmental issues, this chapter presents an ecocritical reading of three Australian novels. It explores depictions of farming practices and representations of Aboriginal people. Juxtaposing these novels with Virgil's *Georgics* offers insights into how literature can speak to human-nonhuman relationships on farms.

4.1 Statement of contribution

While I developed the idea and wrote the article, I acknowledge the feedback from my advisor Roger Osborne and from participants in a Work-in-Progress session of the ASLEC-ANZ Conference 2021, including Emily Potter. I also acknowledge the detailed and expert feedback of the book editors Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, and the copyediting service of the publisher.

4.2 Abstract

In Australian ecocriticism, farming is understood as a destructive colonial extraction of wealth that has obliterated the pre-colonial Aboriginal relationship with non-human nature. This view is problematic for those seeking to recognise positive changes in farming practices or to develop alternative literary conceptions of farming. This chapter recognises the transmission of Roman culture to Australia by juxtaposing Virgil's

Georgics with three Australian novels and exploring how the georgic mode is registered. A focus on farming practices in Ronald McKie's *The Crushing* (1977), Jean Devanny's *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1946), and John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) enables an ecocritical reading that counters the findings by Shirley McDonald (2015) of British colonists in Canada practising sustainable agriculture. How Aboriginal characters interact with farming and are excluded from or included in the georgic mode is also discussed. Together these novels depict Aboriginal dispossession and marginalisation, large-scale transformation of pre-existing landscapes, and destruction of coral reefs. This chapter makes use of readings of Virgil's *Georgics* as a reflection of Roman imperialism, a scientific text, and a portrayal of chaos and human limits to contribute new understandings of the Australian sugarcane novel and enable the creation of new versions.

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Chapter 5. Writing an Australian Farm Novel: Connecting Regions via Magic Realism

Elizabeth A. Smyth

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My thesis is that by employing magic realism in a contemporary setting and giving agency to nonhuman nature and machines, I can break received conventions of georgic literature, unsettle a dominant Western ideology, and stimulate new ways of thinking about farmers and farming. This chapter presents my argument that a major revision of the Australian farm novel can be achieved by adopting a magic realist style of writing and by using the gothic differently to colonial Australian and Aboriginal gothic. I explore how magic realism may be useful for challenging a dominant ideology and can help an author respond to gradually emerging farming issues. This chapter also considers characterisation of machines.

5.1 Statement of contribution

While I developed the idea and wrote the article, I acknowledge feedback from my advisor Roger Osborne and conversations with advisor Emma Maguire about a sensitivity reading for my creative writing that influenced part of this essay. I also acknowledge the journal editor Ross Watkins for assistance with understanding the journal's formatting requirements, the anonymous article reviewers and copyeditor Julienne van Loon.

5.2 Abstract

Contemporary farming often involves more machines, access to information, and public pressure to protect or regenerate non-human nature than in the past. However, this is

scarcely reflected in the farm novel, which is largely bound to an historical era. Australian farm novels include Benjamin Cozens' *Princess of the Mallee* (1903), John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005). Each feature realism and pre-1960s settings. In this article, I propose a major revision of the farm novel by employing magic realism to challenge Australia's realist representations of farming as a rational, money-making enterprise. Magic realism allows me to position Australia's dominant profit-driven approach to agriculture as fantasy and hopefully to stimulate new notions of farming and the farmer. By casting sugarcane and machines as a colonial farming alliance and humans as their marginalized subjects, I draw attention to a gradual depopulation of rural lands, subvert a persistent anthropocentric element of the settler-colonial ideology, and challenge notions of humans controlling the farm. This article is also a case study in a performance of John Kinsella's international regionalism (He, 2021; Kinsella, 2001), in which Australia's Wet Tropics connects with wider creative writing discourse.

5.3 Introduction

Farming now, in some ways, hardly resembles farming before the 1960s. It involves far more machines, greater access to information, and increased public pressure to protect or regenerate nonhuman nature. Since British colonization of the lands now known as Australia, writers have depicted farmers and farming in poetry and prose. While many literary forms, genres and modes continue to evolve, the farm novel – which is set on a farm, casts farming people as main characters, and addresses farming issues (Freitag *The Farm Novel in North America*; Meyer) – lags behind, largely bound to an historical era. Australian farm novels include Benjamin Cozens' *Princess of the Mallee* (1903), James Green's *The Selector: A Romance of an Immigrant* (1907), J. K. Ewers' *Men Against the Earth* (1946), John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962), Randolph Stow's *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* (1965), and Carrie Tiffany's *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005). Each of these exemplary novels is set before 1960. Roy W. Meyer's definition of the farm novel, in his seminal text *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (1965), includes an "accurate handling of the physical details of farm life" and excludes novels "which concern chiefly village life" (7). These aspects cause many rural romance and rural

crime novels to fall outside Australia's relatively small collection of recognised farm novels. There is also a tendency for Australian writers to "retain the image of the station even when the novel has set out to depict a farm" ("Settler Colonial" 209).

Consequently, readers seeking a literary experience of farming after 1960 encounter relatively few offerings. In this context, I have written a contemporary farm novel to break the mould of past versions and offer a rationale for my approach, supported by extracts from the unpublished manuscript.

The strong association of many Australian farm novels with historical settings sheds light on a distinct period of Australian nation-building, in which women, Indigenous peoples, and the environment were marginalised. Regarding Queensland literature, Cheryl Taylor attributes such nation-building to a dominance of male journalists forging "bush and pioneer mythology" with a "bent on maintaining white male hegemony" ("Shaping a Regional Identity" 42). Melissa Lucashenko similarly notes how some mid-twentieth century critics, like Cecil Hadgraft, failed to challenge, or indeed at times endorsed, harmful settler-colonial worldviews (Lucashenko "True Hero Stuff"). However, in the late twentieth century Australian literature moved "away from an overriding and limiting concept of nation" in favour of "regionally-focused" literature or "critical regionalism" (Mead 550-51). This regional focus, Mead contends, arose from a need to redress the negative aspects of nation-building. In recent years, critics have sought to dismantle Australia's unjust literary legacy by focusing on women's writing (Gildersleeve), diversification of literary histories (Potter and Magner), and ecocritical readings (Hughes-d'Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*; Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). In this article, I augment this dismantling with a focus on magic realism, nonhuman nature, colonial Australian gothic, and Alice Bellette's concept of "Aboriginal gothic" (Bellette 5).

One might reasonably expect the shift towards critical regionalism to increase interest in the farm novel, which it may yet, but the progress is slow. Mead recognised in 2009 that the literary imagination was evolving to become "decentralized, relocalised, Indigenising, transnational" (567). Prior to this, John Kinsella had advocated for a regional focus that would extend beyond geographical boundaries and exalt imagination, respect, and international communications (He; Kinsella "Poets Cornered"). Kinsella employs the expression "international regionalism", which Yanli He traces to post-WW2 political discourse (82). More recently, critics have addressed regionalism in special issues of literary journals, such as "Transnational Approaches to

North American Regionalism” in the *European Journal of American Studies* (2014), and “Writing and Researching (in) the Regions” in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* (2019). One of the many writers putting regionalism into practice is Aboriginal poet Kevin Gilbert. Evelyn Araleun identifies his poem “The New True Anthem” as working against a “shallow literary nationalism [that] stake[s] itself on a fetishised landscape” (7). While this example of a previously marginalized voice being re-centred in literary discourse demonstrates a departure from Australian literature’s nation-building past, the farm novel has not so clearly followed. Recent novels such as Jessica White’s *Entitlement* (2012) and Tara June Winch’s *The Yield* (2019) work differently to foreground pre-colonial sovereignty, and both are set in the relatively well-represented farming regions of south-eastern Australia. I seek instead to foreground issues inherent to many types of contemporary farming, such as plant growth, soil fertility, and farm machines. Throughout this article, I point to how these aspects of farming can anchor a creative text to a particular region and thus shift the dominant farming imaginary from southern regions to the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia. The discussion of my process of writing a farm novel serves as a case study for a performance of John Kinsella’s international regionalism.

Additionally, I argue for using a contemporary setting and magic realism to challenge Australia’s pre-1960s representations of farming as a rational, money-making enterprise. Magic realism, I suggest, allows me to position Australia’s dominant profit-driven approach to agriculture as fantasy and hopefully to stimulate new notions of farming and the farmer. Furthermore, I argue that casting sugarcane and machines as a colonial farming alliance with humans as their marginalized subjects draws attention to a gradual depopulation of rural lands, subverts a persistent anthropocentric element of the settler-colonial ideology, and challenges notions of humans controlling the farm. A machine with magical agency and character is rarely encountered in Australian literary fiction, however, I draw on Peter Carey’s 1974 short story “Crabs” to argue for using this device to challenge a dominant ideology. This article comprises two major parts that contribute to a growing interest in georgic literature and regionalism: a discussion of magic realism, agency, and gothic relative to the Australian farm novel; and insights into my process of writing a contemporary, magic realist, farm novel.

5.4 Realism vs magic realism

Many Australian farm novels are written in a realist style, which may suit the historical novel where the past is no longer accessible, or novels that were published at a time when information about many physical locations was relatively inaccessible, but this style is problematic for contemporary fiction. Realist literature uses “natural speech” and “centralises characters as the touchstone of truth-to-life, thus privileging the ‘intimate story’” (Carter *A Career in Writing* 81-85). In Australian literature, realism is intimately entwined with nationalism and the settler-colonial worldview (Ravenscroft; Takolander "Magical Realism and the Transcultural"). For this reason, regardless of an author’s intentions, realist novels can deliver a conservative literary experience. One example is Jean Devanny’s *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), which is more a realist text than her earlier “propaganda” (Hadgraft 97), and was poorly received by her political comrades for this reason (Ferrier). Although Devanny sought to challenge a masculine hegemony (Ferrier), this novel ultimately reinforces the settler-colonial worldview due to a lack of representation of traditional owner perspectives and its celebratory depictions of securing financial success from farming (Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). Of course, this is not entirely a matter of style, given that Jack McLaren’s earlier realist memoir, *My Crowded Solitude* (1926), conveys the broader view that Aboriginal traditional owners had more important matters to attend to than working on settler-colonial plantations (Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). Nevertheless, an alternative style would logically assist a strong departure from the Australian farm novel’s nationalist settler-colonial entanglement.

Magic realism, I suggest, offers a means of moving away from past realist farm novels by combining the rational with the magical to enable two different ways of understanding a fictional world. Although first mentioned by Franz Roh in a visual arts context (Andrews; Ravenscroft), magic realism most notably emerged in literature through the Latin American texts of the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas Roh presented magic realism as a way of revealing an individual’s ability to perceive both the known and mysterious, most literary critics view this style as a “clash of perceptive codes” between different cultures or worldviews (Lorna Robinson 596). Susan Lever describes magic realism as “a mix of conventional storytelling and elaborate explorations of impossibilities, of realism and fantasy, of a modern sense of time and a pre-modern timelessness” (Lever 512). However, Alison Ravenscroft warns that what is read as magical by one reader may be reality for another, particularly because, as Lois Zamora

and Wendy Faris note, “non-Western cultural systems [often] privilege mystery over empiricism, empathy over technology, tradition over innovation” (qtd. in Ravenscroft 64). In the Australian context, magic realism has frequently provided representations of the colonizer as realist, and those colonised as magical (Ravenscroft). However, Ravenscroft argues that associating “Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality” can lead to Indigenous Law being misunderstood (Ravenscroft 62). Nevertheless, magic realism offers a powerful means of uncovering hidden histories and conveying different worldviews, especially when employed in novels such as Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* (1997) (Takolander "Magical Realism and the Transcultural"), *Carpentaria* (2006) and *Swan Book* (2013) (Holgate "Unsettling Narratives"). An important point, as Lorna Robinson notes, is that “both stories are equally true and valid” (Lorna Robinson 603). It is this ability to convey two different worldviews that makes magic realism useful to my praxis as I endeavour to challenge the dominant, rational, profit-driven approach to farming traditionally represented in the Australian farm novel.

This is not to say that realist literature cannot challenge the notion of farming as primarily a money-making venture. In John Naish’s realist farm novel *The Cruel Field* (1962), a consequence of striving for financial success above all else when growing sugarcane in 1951 is conveyed through a tragic portrayal of farming that ends with the death of the farmer, Peter Leonardi, as he struggles to save his crop from a fire. Leonardi is characterized as a ruthlessly ambitious farmer who refers to his workers as “dogs” and conspires to pay them at a rate his brother Tony describes as “not fair price” (Naish 37). This logic of farmers working hard to prosper, which is often embedded in farm novels, is derived from a nation-building ideology, which Jane Gleeson-White describes as a “capitalistic enterprise [that] abstracts its endeavours from place, reconceiving them in the rhetoric of profit making” (Gleeson-White 11). In realist farm novels, any difficulties on the farm can too easily be attributed to an unlikeable character, such as Naish’s Peter Leonardi. In contrast, non-fiction often lays the blame elsewhere. Hugh S. Robertson’s *Now Blame the Farmer* (1945) takes aim at government policies, which he describes as:

a crime for which there is no pardon. It is the most damning indictment of a system that robs the land to provide metropolitan magnificence, that plunders

the land to sanctify money contracts, and that bleeds the land to pay for a soulless, cheap and tawdry prosperity. (63)

A similar protest in fiction may effectively be achieved, I argue, by embracing magic realism. This style of writing “draw[s] attention to the blindness of the imperial centre to its own machinations” (Conway Herron 96). One example is Peter Carey’s 1974 short story “Crabs”. Carey employs magic realism to depict a young man nicknamed Crabs who transforms into a 1956 Dodge truck to escape his entrapment in a Star Drive-in movie theatre. Crabs follows the one road out only to find himself back where he started. Bruce Woodcock reads this story as speaking to the inability of Australians to escape “American cultural domination” (23), while Rebecca Johnke reads it as speaking to “hegemonic masculinity” (95). Either way, the text is a magic realist story that challenges a dominant ideology. By imagining Crabs as a truck, readers are more likely to consider overarching concepts and issues than simply blame a flawed human character. Thus, magic realism is an important device for questioning dominant ideologies, which in the case of Australian farming are embedded in government policies.

5.5 Nonhuman nature

Magic realism can also address the marginalization of nature by amplifying the literary presence of the nonhuman. Australian farm novels often reveal large-scale transformations of pre-colonial landscapes through the lens of the settler-colonial farmer (Hughes-d'Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*; Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). Such actions have led to widespread degradation of agricultural lands, which Carrie Tiffany encapsulates in a realist portrayal of 1930s wheat farming in *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (Kirne; Tiffany). However, nature itself, while fundamental to growing food, is rarely depicted in the Australian farm novel as mysterious. Instead, it is typically depicted as an input the farmer manages as one might deal with the availability of labour or fuel prices; it may vary, but the human farmer can ultimately control the situation. Magic realism, however, offers a means of taking a different view of nonhuman nature. In a reading of Homer’s poetry, Lorna Robinson demonstrates “how the world of nature and the human world are woven together symbiotically” through Homer’s use of magical words and the physical agency of the divine (595). Robinson views Homer’s poetry as an early “sort of magical realist perspective” that

has since been “eroded by increasingly dominant, rationalist ways of viewing the world” (607). Similarly, in response to Benh Zeitlin’s 2012 film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Ali Brox points to “the ability to use the imagination—the magical—to shed light on what is not seen without its help” and how magic realism’s flexible use of time and space enables representations of issues, such as climate change, that develop over long periods of time (145). Ben Holgate too argues that magic realism allows fiction writers to address “the challenges of imagination posed by the crisis of climate change” (Holgate *Climate and Crises* 9). Accordingly, other gradually emerging environmental challenges of relevance to a contemporary farm novel, such as declining soil fertility or a gradual depopulation of rural lands, could be similarly addressed through magic realism.

Furthermore, the rational settler-colonial perspective of nonhuman nature on farms tends to constrain the imagination, which is problematic for a writer attempting to challenge dominant ways of thinking. Traditionally, the farm novel depicts humans controlling a farm environment, for example, in Naish’s *The Cruel Field* (1962), the farming characters heroically cut sugarcane (Smyth “Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics”). However, in *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (2001), Michael Pollan suggests the opposite may occur. He writes: “We automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species, but it makes just as much sense to think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us, a clever evolutionary strategy for advancing their own interests” (xvi). Environmental sociologist Matt Comi further diverts this thinking to soil as the most powerful agent on a farm. For Comi, agency is “distributed” such that “farmers are more accurately depicted as a variety of actors coalescing as an assemblage” (409). The four major actors in Comi’s complex network are soil, data, the human “debt-owner” and data-collection companies (409). This concept of the distributed farmer dismantles the most common characterization of an individual human as the farmer and replaces it with a diverse network of human and nonhuman actors, a concept that aligns with Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. When considering the relationship between Latour’s theory and literature, Rita Felski writes that “[r]eason cannot be filtered out from the ebb and swirl of moods and dispositions” (737). This claim is directed at critics and their interpretations of literature, but the interaction of reason with moods and dispositions is also pertinent to novelists. Indeed, why should a creative writer view non-human life as lacking sensibility and purpose? As Latour suggests, “let the actors

have some room to express themselves” (142). It follows that, by escaping the constraints of realism and assigning character and agency to non-human nature, depictions can become more imaginative.

5.6 Colonial Australian and Aboriginal gothic

When the nonhuman is given character, a possibility exists for gothic representations on a farm, which may be intensified in magic realism. In Alex Miller’s *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), the non-First Nations narrator considers soil when recalling a lesson delivered by his uncle in England:

‘This is our soil,’ he said—as if he said, this is your soul. ‘We must care for it as we care for our lives.’ Even as a boy, at this first initiation, I knew he spoke of something sacred to him, an indissoluble aspect of his innermost sense of who he was; that source from whence he had his origins. ‘It is the soil of our fathers,’ he said. (96-97)

The narrator’s association of soil with the sacred suggests a mysterious presence with potential to act, which is reinforced elsewhere in this scene as “the fierce god of his soil” (96). However, the soil itself does not exhibit agency. Nevertheless, Miller’s narrator offers a gothic representation when he “woke in fright” to his uncle whose eyes showed “something a little mad” and the soil in the field “glistened before my terrified gaze like freshly butchered meat” (95-96). This scene counters colonial Australian gothic traditions by portraying the farm rather than the bush as gothic. Alice Bellette furthers this idea by arguing for an Aboriginal gothic that more completely inverts the colonial gothic representations, in which Aboriginal people were characterised as monsters haunting the bush. As an antidote to such literature, Bellette points to Tara June Winch’s *The Yield* (2019), a novel about Wiradjuri land rights and reconnection with family and culture, for a portrayal of colonisation as the “monster” and “Country [that] is not passive” when confronted (5). Bellette also notes the characterisation of “ancestors who are not haunting but taking care, helping to make sense of the rupture in time and place” (5). Magic realism and the gothic can therefore work together in representations of farming lands.

Furthermore, combining the gothic and magic realism can reinforce the strangeness of an ideology that prioritises profit-making on farms. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver point to William Astley’s “The Pegging-Out of Overseer Franke” (1892) for its representation of “colonial nation-building” as “a kind of Gothic machine,

driven and unstoppable” (8). Meanwhile, journalist Gabrielle Chan warns of capitalism and government policies driving increasing farm sizes, corporatization of farming, and depopulation of rural communities (Chan). Capitalism and government policies thus form a contemporary nation-building machine with the power to marginalise all humans living on farmlands and calls for a different approach to colonial and Aboriginal gothic. Hence, the farm novel could potentially depict a situation where all humans face gothic disorientation, claustrophobia, ghosts, and death.

5.7 Writing process

When I began writing a contemporary farm novel, I did not have magic realism, agency of nonhuman nature or the gothic in mind, and like most farm novelists started writing a realist narrative. After the first rush of enthusiasm, I realised that no matter how many machinery manuals I had read, how much I had learned through prior studies in agricultural science, and how many times I had visited or worked on a farm, I would never actually be a farmer, and therefore the work of creating a realist, literary experience of farming from the farmer’s perspective would be difficult. I was also aware of the pitfalls for writers like Jean Devanny, who aspired to be factually accurate by writing in the “reportage genre” – that is, writing a report of actual events as a story (Ferrier 126), along the lines of contemporary feature writing in journalism – but nevertheless conveys inaccuracies in the depictions of farming practices in *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949) (Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). Even though most creative writers often do not seek to be factually accurate, at times critics use creative writers as witnesses to historical events, for example Tony Hughes-d’Aeth in his award-winning *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (2017). Whether or not fictional texts should be used in this way, my reflections on factual accuracy and the entanglement of realism with literary histories of nation-building led me to revisit my motives for writing a farm novel, which were to reimagine the farm novel and to draw attention to the Wet Tropics region and the gradual depopulation of rural lands due to a dominant economic rationalist culture. Non-fiction texts such as Charles Massy’s *Call of the Reed Warbler* (2017) and Gabrielle Chan’s *Why You Should give a F*ck about Farming: Because You Eat* (2021) had already addressed environmental and social problems associated with agriculture. However, I felt that a fictional imaginary and access to an alternative worldview was needed to

allow the nonhuman actors to, as Latour suggests, “express themselves” (142). Hence, I turned to a magic realism and added sugarcane, a harvester, and soil to my list of main characters.

5.8 Sugarcane

My use of the magical allows me to characterise sugarcane plants as collectively embodying colonialism and therefore as mobile, expansionist and often cruel. Just as colonialism aims to “improve, control and transform the natural world” (Rees 57), so do these sugarcane plants. They move to the creek to obtain water, exude substances that repel soil pathogens, strangle seedlings of other plant species, and secure their territory by making themselves desirable to the human farmer with a magical syrup, lush foliage, golden stems, and straight posture. As colonisers, the sugarcane plants do nothing to please the humans they perceive as having no capacity to support their success. As such, the main human characters either experience the reward of being fed a magical syrup by the cane plants or the pain of becoming confused in the canefield and encountering ugly, powerful cane, bent and damaged in some way, that scratches and controls them. Additionally, when they are near the sugarcane these human characters physically suffer the pains of their ancestors: for the Aboriginal characters the pains of people killed or hurt during primary colonisation; and for the protagonist, who is a settler-colonial descendent, the guilt of having more recently committed a crime. By alienating all humans on the farm, I hope to avoid the problem of misrepresenting Indigenous Law as noted by Alison Ravenscroft (2012). I strived also to create a narrative arc that delivers bathos and thus emphasises an ideological challenge. Furthermore, the focus on sugarcane contributes to my performance of international regionalism. Sugarcane is only farmed in coastal areas of northern Australia, with about 95 percent grown in Queensland (Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry "Sugar"). It is therefore symbolic of particular regions, which are narrowed to the Wet Tropics through depictions of monsoonal weather and rainforest.

5.9 Narrative

The story begins with the protagonist, Quentin George, working to improve the financial prospects of the farm and complete his first harvest. However, his plan to diversify by planting bananas on part of the farm threatens the sugarcane / machine

alliance and marks a change in fortunes for the humans living on the farm. The narrative in summary is as follows.

Quentin George returns to his family's sugarcane farm in far north Queensland after the death of his father, intent on improving and selling the farm business before re-establishing his life in Sydney. After a decade of city life, working as a corporate consultant for art galleries, Quentin must adapt to changes in the farming sector while organizing people and machines.

To his surprise, his father left a mess of shed tools in the new house, and his mother has taken up singing jazz and given away the new Hilux. Despite this, Quentin makes plans, and the cane grows well. However, after the harvest, life on the farm changes.

A tractor accident causes the loss of Quentin's left hand; sugarcane plants rise out of the ground, behave strangely, and visit Quentin in his house; the massive harvester and a tractor drive themselves; and a ghost appears to frighten Quentin into confronting his hidden past.

In time, Quentin abandons his former plans and decides to stay on the farm, not only to prevent the sugarcane and machines from taking over, but to stop urban developer, Kurtis Steele, from covering the soil with a housing estate. Quentin's mother emerges as a woman who had always wanted to manage the farm and does so in collaboration with her stepdaughter, Natalie Cleaner, the sister Quentin never knew he had.

This leaves Quentin to reconnect with Speedy, the old man living in the barracks. Speedy teaches him how to live with a traumatic past. Together, they study the sugarcane and machines to resist a forced expulsion of all the humans from the farm.

5.10 Soil

Throughout the narrative, I represent soil – Matt Comi's most powerful agent on a farm – in a comparable way to Alex Miller's *Landscape of Farewell* (2007) as the highest power, something akin to a human conception of God. In this way, both the sugarcane and the humans seek to please the soil. Additionally, the soil – like Homer's gods

(Lorna Robinson) – has physical agency. It is physically present when the protagonist experiences hardship, often providing comfort, and interacts in other ways with the sugarcane. In one scene, Quentin drives a tractor to the edge of a field, ready to apply fertilizer, when an unusual mound of soil attracts his attention. He steps down from the tractor to investigate. Momentarily forgetting the loss of his hand, Quentin bends to collect a handful of soil without looking down and overbalances. The stump of his arm contacts the mound, and Quentin discovers an ability to ‘see’ into the soil. He pushes his arm further down, trying to understand this new ‘screen’ of vision when:

something grabs my stump and pulls me in one enormous dive underground, where I’m racing at speed through the soil, presumably parallel to the surface because apart from the discomfort of getting dirt in my eyes and mouth, which I close straight up, the soil isn’t hard and compact, thank Christ. I can’t for the life of me see what got a hold of my stump. It feels like a giant hand that fits easily around my whole elbow. The second screen, which must be connected to the end of my stump shows an incredible galaxy of sparks of different coloured light, which would be amazing to watch if you weren’t convinced you were about to die. And although I’m holding my breath, I don’t feel the slightest need to breathe. Nothing I try to slow me down or escape is working.

Everything changes now. I’m in a forest of plant roots. Presumably under the mature cane of another field. My mouth fills with sweet syrup, and I relax as much as you can when you’re trapped underground without your consent. Whatever’s happening will end well, I decide, under the influence of this life-giving elixir. Maybe the plants want to thank me for bringing fertilizer to the plant cane. They’re passing me around now; I’m travelling in a zigzag, completely disoriented, but thankful for the view of feathered white plant roots being gently pushed and swayed by waves of dark yet sparkling soil. (see p. 164)

This magical representation draws attention to the importance of soil to growing food crops, and in other scenes strengthens my representation of the Wet Tropics with reference to waterlogged soils and high fertility of soils under rainforest. It also enables the unveiling of a relationship of sugarcane with the soil: a relationship that excludes humans and contributes to a departure from a fully anthropocentric worldview. Similarly, machines are not always involved in relationships with humans.

5.11 Machines

The narrative unfolds to reveal a danger to the human farmer arising from his everyday interactions with the harvester and its technology. The harvester is a machine designed specifically for cutting and collecting sugarcane, which again ties the narrative to the regions where sugarcane is grown. Part of the danger on the farm involves an alliance between the machines and the colonising sugarcane. On the one hand, the sugarcane submits to machines to ensure its survival, sacrificing mature stems, ‘knowing’ that new stems will regenerate from the plant material left behind in the soil. Every five years the machines plough out the cane and plant new sugarcane, but only if the past crops have yielded high tonnages of sugar. Given that in Australia, colonialism “introduced concepts of time, the printed word, mapping and surveying, weights and measurements, value/money” (Rees 59), I tie these concepts to a sugarcane harvester that has its own language and seems obsessed with these concepts. Furthermore, the social theory of new materialism points to how routine actions can serve an ideology or social power (Coole and Frost). This idea, along with the importance of the farmer’s daily tasks and routine in georgic literature, led me to reveal a developing interaction between the human protagonist and a sugarcane harvester. Eventually, the human protagonist understands his looming redundancy as the sugarcane and machines become less dependent on human labour and decision-making and on fewer occasions seek to please him. In this way, I show machines and technology as not only serving humanity, but capable of working against the people who live on farming lands.

Quentin’s loss of control of machines is evident when he investigates what appears to be someone driving a tractor on the fields at night:

Running down the steps, I grab my boots and put them on without socks, then leg it to the Main Shed, where I jump onto a quad bike and ride east, purposely keeping the headlights off, so I can sneak up and catch them in the act.

As I get closer, I see a mass of sugarcane plants floating around like they’ve been picked up by a strong wind. Behind them, a massive new tractor drives in one direction, then another, as if rounding up the plants, seriously fucking up the field worse than anything I’ve ever seen. Give us a cyclone; anything but this.

I flick on the headlights now, drive front on towards the tractor. It stops with the engine still running, spider-eye headlights shining in my face. I jump off the bike, feeling gravel in my right boot, and notice the sugarcane forming two

rows, their roots at about the height of my waist. Whoever's in the cabin of the tractor doesn't climb out.

At this point, I regret not grabbing a prosthesis and one of the attachments I've made in the Shed and give the operator one last chance to get out before I climb up there and drag them out. The sound of another vehicle is another reason to pause. To my right, a ute's racing down the track, headlights flashing. When it gets closer, I recognise the vehicle. It's Joe, our partner in the harvesting group. Joe, who helped me understand how to price our cane when I first came back to the farm. Joe who stands by the back of his ute in town, talking to someone, head down, one hand on his hip. Joe, who'd never worn anything other than a blue work shirt and shorts until my father's funeral.

He parks at a distance, leaves his lights on, walks towards me.

"The shed door was left open," he says, face flushed, one side of his shirt hanging over his shorts.

"Do you know who this prick is?" I ask.

"There's no one in the tractor."

I keep my eyes on it. No one has left since I arrived. I climb up the steps, open the cabin door. Lights on, but empty. I kill the engine and by the time I'm back on the ground again next to Joe, the sugarcane has planted itself, and the mess the tractor made of the field has healed over.

"What's going on?" I ask in no mood for this shit anymore.

Joe rubs his eyes, clearly over it too.

"This machine likes to play. With the cane." (see pp. 171-72)

This scene contributes to the gothic mode, in which I exploit contemporary anxieties about monocultures, technology, and environmental impacts by depicting human confusion and suffering in a setting dominated by uncontrollable sugarcane and machines. The denouement centres on a scene where all the humans are forcibly evicted from the farm by the sugarcane. Quentin abandons his prior ambitions of efficiency and profitability to instead focus on observation and devising strategies to co-exist with nature and machines.

As an alternative to the settler-colonial experience of the Australian bush, I show how the farm becomes increasingly strange to all the human characters. My focus on the experience of individuals aligns with colonial gothic traditions of "solitary

characters confronted with singular events” (Gelder and Weaver 5), however, I limit the way these traditions have worked against Aboriginal peoples through a number of measures. These include the creation of a non-First Nations character as the frightening ghost, writing in the first person to limit representations of Indigenous thinking, casting Aboriginal characters as the most intelligent and wise people in the story, and pointing to how these characters have their own language, names, and ways without attempting to represent those cultural aspects myself. I also refrain as far as possible from naming endemic species according to Western terminology. Often, I describe them instead as they are sensed by the non-First Nations protagonist. Collectively, these measures demonstrate my respect for the region’s more than one hundred and twenty Aboriginal clans and eight language groups without erasing a crucial Aboriginal presence. This approach is intended to support a shift away from the settler-colonial worldview without infringing on the work of First Nations writers on Aboriginal narratives and perspectives. With this in mind, the farm is gothic for all people, and the environment beyond – the creek and rainforest – remains relatively calm. In this way, I subvert the colonial division noted by Ellen Rees “between what is owned, developed, improved into civilised space and that which lies beyond as a wild and hellish wasteland” (Rees 61). As a creative writer, the more immediate impact of this gothic representation in a magic realist text is the freedom to attribute mood and disposition, as Latour (2005) suggests, to what would otherwise lack agency in a realist text.

5.12 Conclusion

In this article, I argued that a major revision of the farm novel is necessary to disrupt the haunting legacy of a nation-building mythology. By employing magic realism and casting sugarcane and machines as a colonial farming alliance in a farm novel, I have positioned the dominant rationalist agricultural ideology as fantasy. Furthermore, by depicting all humans under threat, I have drawn attention to a gradual depopulation of rural lands, challenged a persistent anthropocentric element of the settler-colonial worldview, and encouraged new ways of conceiving farming and farmers. Additionally, my use of a contemporary setting and high-tech machines disrupts the traditional association of the Australian farm novel with historical settings and consequent entanglements with a nation-building past. This article also demonstrated a writing process that connects the Wet Tropics of north-eastern Australia

with wider literary discourse in a performance of John Kinsella's international regionalism (He; Kinsella "Poets Cornered"). My creative work aims to enrich the Australian farming imaginary by depicting tropical agriculture. This article has implications for reading and writing rural literature, understandings of farmers and farming, and future studies of georgic literature, the farm novel, and regionalism.

Chapter 6. Creative Component: *Badila*

Badila

Elizabeth Smyth

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Chapter 7. Reflection on my creative writing process

Badila began in Gimuy / Cairns in February 2020, two weeks after COVID-19 was first diagnosed in Australia. The idea of writing a farm novel set in the Wet Tropics was a conceptual beginning. I had only a vague idea of writing a novel that might encourage urban readers to think more deeply about farming and draw attention to the literature of the Wet Tropics bioregion. Over the next three years, the work developed as a way of rethinking the relationships between humans and nonhuman nature and machines. It would ultimately offer an artistic response to many of the concerns raised by Lesley Head, Jennifer Atchison and Alison Gates in *Ingrained: A Human Biogeography of Wheat* (2012), who called for ‘shared responsibility for decision-making about sustainable food production and landscape management’ and recognition of the depopulation of rural lands and associated loss of local knowledge that would result in farms being managed ‘from urban coastal fortresses’ (193-94). English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, recognised for his contribution to georgic literature, conveyed similar concerns in response to industrialisation in rural England in his 1800 poem “Michael” (Mannon). In Gimuy, some of the landscape has in recent years been converted from growing sugarcane to construction of urban residential estates. Knowing that many plants grown for human consumption—for example, bananas, mangoes, lychees, and papaya—rely on the fertile soil and climatic conditions specific to this region made me wonder about the thinking behind a widespread and mostly permanent urban encroachment on some of Australia’s most fertile soils. Indeed, Head et al. suggest that ‘rethinking agriculture – and finding better ways to practice it – will be an important part of reconfiguring the damaging ontologies of modernity’ (197). What concerned me locally was symptomatic of a national and global concern about human degradation of the environment. This was the seed of my creative writing, or as Jen Webb has described it, the ‘flicker of thought or image’ that prompts a writer to respond (Webb 27). My task in this reflection is similar to that undertaken by writers before me, Henry James in particular, in revealing how the seed of an idea ‘took root and grew, invariably developing into something quite different from its immediate promise’ (Blackmur x). This process of transformation has implications for all writers of farming and regional literature.

The first roots of the seed of my novel took the form of an overarching plot. Ahead of my Confirmation of Candidature, I was asked to articulate what my novel was

about. This was far from a simple question, given I had only at that stage completed a literature review and project proposal. Perhaps it was a miscommunication, something that required only a vague answer that I mistakenly interpreted as a request for a synopsis of the completed novel. Either way, it gave me a sense of the kind of dilemma that Australian writer Gretchen Shirm struggled with in a grant application of needing to ‘methodologise [the] writing process in advance of the writing’ (3). Rather cleverly (I thought at the time), I created a back cover blurb that left out more than it revealed. What surprises me now is how much of that blurb—written in a flash for the sole purpose of obtaining permission at a university to move from planning to thinking and making—is evident in the finished novel. I had already conceived the main plot of a young man returning to the family farm after the death of his father, finding the farm different to the one he remembered, and going through some kind of personal transition to become a different kind of farmer, more attuned to nature. In addition to this overarching plot, the Confirmation of Candidature milestone was like a starter’s gun at an athletics event. Ready or not, I would begin writing.

The first major insight gained through the process of writing was that realist writing is unsuited to investigations of human relationships with nonhuman nature in the Australian farm novel. I struck this problem quite a long way into my project, towards the end of the second year, after writing about 35,000 words. I became aware of the impossibility of fully comprehending the experiential knowledge of a sugarcane grower, which raised concerns for me about the authenticity of the narrator and my ability to persuade readers, who could be farmers themselves, to suspend disbelief. Through my research on the farm novel, I knew that fiction writers had been regarded as either witnesses to real-life events (Hughes-d’Aeth *Like Nothing on This Earth*), or as reporting real-life events through a fictionalised narrative (Carter *A Career in Writing*; Ferrier). My thinking about this problem raised questions for me about the role of fiction. How much reality should a novelist depict? And what other styles of writing could be used? The benefit of encountering this problem well into my project was that I had already engaged in research that questioned the human relationship with nonhuman nature and materials, and this gave me the conceptual tools required to overcome the problem. I decided to experiment with a shift away from realism by writing a scene where Quentin stood in the field and felt himself becoming a sugarcane plant. This writing was far more interesting and vibrant than my previous writing. Yet while it spoke to the theories of new materialism and ecocriticism and offered an escape from

the confines of realism, I had then shifted to writing magic realism, a style that I knew little about, and so had to return to research.

My use of magic realism in an Australian farm novel raised new problems due to its history in Australian literature of working against Indigenous people. Alison Ravenscroft's *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (2012) was an instrumental text in my research into these literary injustices (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, this style is widely used to challenge dominant ideologies, which was a primary aim. I decided to navigate this intellectual enigma by making *all* the humans suffer and casting the sugarcane plants rather than a particular group of people as the powerful figures. From this point forward, my creative writing was simultaneously unshackled from anthropocentric narratives, due to an obvious agency of nonhuman characters, and troubled by my concerns about how to craft Aboriginal characters without repeating past misrepresentations. I decided that these characters would be the most intelligent and wise people on the farm to reflect a progressive contemporary society; and that they would possess their own agency, motivations, language, and knowledge that I would make no attempt to reveal, in keeping with my caution against infringing on Indigenous ontology, knowledge, and rights of authorship. I viewed these characters as essential to acknowledging and respecting the stake that Aboriginal people have in Australian farmlands and in affirming that Indigenous people know important things that others are yet to learn or may never have the right to learn.

In some farm stories by non-Indigenous writers, the Aboriginal characters are respectfully and carefully crafted yet remain at the edges of both the farm and narrative (see Alice Robinson *Anchor Point*). In my novel, I wanted Indigenous characters living on the farm and actively participating in the main cast. Their lives and experiences had to be central to the text to counter a literary history of dispossession and marginalisation (see Chapter 4). By representing Aboriginal people involved in contemporary farming, without depicting a connection between this type of farming and traditional ways of obtaining food, I hoped to avoid making a claim on either side of The *Dark Emu* Debate. Writing in first person also limited my narration to the non-Indigenous protagonist's point of view, which I further contained by only including dialogue of an Aboriginal character speaking to a non-Indigenous character, rather than in private conversations involving only Aboriginal characters. From my readings, I was acutely aware of the racist terms in the dialogue of John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) and both racist terms and attitudes used in the historical setting of Maryrose Cuskelly's *The*

Cane (2022). I had no wish to create characters of these kinds, so instead depicted, as far as possible, a world without racism. However, that a farm exists at all may suggest the process of ‘secondary colonisation’ noted by Tony Hughes-d’Aeth in his examination of Randolph Stow’s writing (“Farm Novel or Station Romance” 2). My characterisation of Aboriginal people as leaders was partly influenced by John Naish’s writing (see Chapters 3 and 4) and by Anita Heiss speaking at a conference about a need for positive stories about Aboriginal people. Overall, the positive representation of Aboriginal people that I sought to convey depended on partial representations, positioning Indigenous characters at the centre of the farm and narrative, avoiding racist attitudes and language, and me having sufficient life experience and contact with Aboriginal people to recognise and carefully navigate cultural boundaries.

With these strategies in place to guide my Aboriginal representations, I could shift my focus to questioning a dominant ideology based on capitalism and financial ambition. Two conferences proved especially useful to considering this ideology within a national and international context. Early in my research, I attended the 2021 Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics and Sciences (ABARE) Conference, where the Australian Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management, David Littleproud, promoted the Australian Government’s target of increasing the gross value of agriculture from \$66 billion in 2020 to \$100 billion in 2030 (Littleproud), and the President of the National Farmers Federation, Fiona Simson, stated that farmers manage over 61 per cent of Australian land (Simson). Hearing these statements at a national event made clear the importance of questioning dominant narratives steeped in anthropocentrism, economic rationalism, capitalism, and nation-building. These traits of a dominant ideology are also found in the traditional realist Australian farm novel.

The second influential conference was a 2021 gathering titled ‘New Ways of Being with Plants’, sponsored by The Plant Initiative, an organisation based in the United States of America that aims to ‘encourage respectful treatment of plants’ (The Plant Initiative). This conference prompted me to read plant-centric fiction, such as Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2019). The ideas at this conference, combined with Michael Pollan’s *A Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (2001)—which examines the success of apple trees in North America—strengthened my decision to give sugarcane plants agency in the creative component of this thesis. As Pollan writes: ‘We automatically think of domestication as something we do to other species, but it

makes just as much sense to think of it as something certain plants and animals have done to us, a clever evolutionary strategy for advancing their own interests' (Pollan xvi). These conferences helped me to consider the bigger picture of divergent attitudes and understandings of human interactions with nonhuman nature. Together with my learning about magic realism, I came to understand how the agency of nonhuman nature could be used to question dominant assumptions about farming and about a plant that is often overlooked when considering human relationships with nature due, most likely, to the commodification of sugar. Agency of sugarcane and machines became vital to questioning the dominant profit-driven ideology that shapes contemporary understandings of farming.

Additionally, imagery and symbols were used to reflect my protagonist's early capitalist ambitions and his later change in perspective to a more egalitarian relationship with nonhuman nature. This attention to detail was inspired by Philipp Erchinger's observation that Thomas Hardy, in *The Return of the Native* (1878), compared leaves in a garden to 'half-closed umbrellas' and 'metallic mirrors' with a resultant combination of human art and nature, or more specifically a human culture interacting with nature (149). Early in the narrative, Quentin seeks to make money from growing a heavy crop and sees sugarcane leaves that 'shine like fifty-dollar notes casually passed across a table in a sunny beer garden' (see Chapter 6, p. 76). Later the leaves in the fields are no longer 'shining like fifty-dollar notes in the sun, but a darker green like cooked spinach' (p. 298). This is the moment when Quentin learns that the old man, Speedy, is sowing other plant species in the field, an act that prioritises his traditional path to the creek over the orderly layout of the farm. This act also points to a negotiated existence with the sugarcane that will lose ground in consequence of the humans growing other plants. While the arrival at a renegotiated relationship between humans and nonhuman nature was an early aim of my writing, this raised fresh concerns about how my writing would develop relative to a georgic literary history.

While considering a literary history of many centuries, I began to appreciate some commonalities in the histories of Western and Aboriginal storytelling related to the composition of land, importance of soil, use of human labour to source food, ties to a specific location, and existence of traditional knowledge; and the differences marked by the human-centredness of the Western worldview and a disparate composition of traditional knowledges and divinity. This broad-brush view of complex histories was informed by my research on georgic literature and by Deborah Bird Rose's *Nourishing*

Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness (1996). The importance of recognising these commonalities and differences is that it provides a guide to navigating a literary cultural interface.

Understanding the commonalities of two divergent storytelling and cultural histories enables a writer to explore certain concepts and avoid others such that the resulting text does not exclude readers from one of those cultures. Rose writes that for Aboriginal people 'Country is multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air' (8). The multi-dimensionality of this outlook tallies with that of the Western farmer. Virgil's attention to soils, animals, plants, the human farmer, and the divine catalyses a long literary history of a multi-dimensional Western view of farmlands (Nelson and Grene). I sought to foreground manifold elements of land such as plants, soil, subterranean life, and water. Similarly, For Aboriginal people 'the ultimate origin of life of country is the earth itself' (Rose 9). Soil is also the most important requirement for farming (Comi) and features strongly in Virgil's *Georgics* (see Chapter 4). In my writing, I sought to characterise soil as a manifestation of God by having it appear on Quentin's skin when he is upset or suffering and as a comforting and calming presence.

Another common element of Aboriginal and European histories is the use of human labour to obtain food. I wanted my novel to show both Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters engaged in farming, especially the harvest. This was not meant to suggest that Aboriginal people were traditionally farmers, which is disputed by anthropologists and archaeologists (Sutton and Walshe). Rather it was intended to show the adaptability of Aboriginal people to a contemporary cultural and physical landscape. Associated ties to a specific location or place are conveyed by writing about the protagonist's need to protect his secret of accidentally killing a person on the farm, and the Aboriginal old man's maintenance of a traditional path to the creek. Thus, the multi-dimensionality of land, soil, labour, and ties to a specific geographical location became a guide for writing rural fiction for an inclusive transcultural readership.

However, I suffered considerable anxiety over the nonhuman agency in my writing, due to the possibility for readers to perceive it as an appropriation of an Indigenous ontology. Indeed, for a while I assumed that I had inadvertently appropriated that ontology. I was especially troubled by the ending of the story, where upon death my human protagonist turns into a bandicoot. This felt dangerously close to an Aboriginal philosophy. My intention was to create an image that would signal the

end of a gradual change in my protagonist from wanting to exploit nature for financial gain to achieving a negotiated peace, in which he was a vulnerable yet an active part of nature. My anxiety over this ending may never pass because a writer cannot know how their work will be received or the meanings assigned to it by readers. However, my discomfort suggested to me that this scene was important; that it could potentially provoke conversations about human relationships with nature. I was also heartened by Maria Takolander's reading of Alexis Wright's work (Takolander "Magical Realism and Indigenous Survivance"). If a celebrated Aboriginal author's magic realism ought not to be read as a reliable account of cultural myth, then why should mine? Indeed, my aim was not to write a mythology, but to offer an image of the human protagonist as part of nature to enact a transition from the settler-colonial worldview of the traditional Australian farm novel to a new conception of the farm novel and farming that is less human-centred and thus responds to contemporary environmental concerns.

A further challenge in my navigation of a cultural interface was my decision to make the nonhuman conscious. This was achieved by the sugarcane and machines having their own languages and by raising the possibility of these characters colluding to either work for or against the humans. Like nonhuman agency, nonhuman consciousness has both Western and Indigenous roots. Roman georgic literature is known for 'agrarian magic' and assigning non-human species with 'intelligence or reasoning ... [and] emotional or mental states' that result in 'greed or deviousness' (Borlik 58-68). For Aboriginal people 'country has its own life, its own imperatives' (Rose 10). More than this, Rose explains: 'Animals, trees, rains, sun, moon – all are conscious. They watch us humans, and think about us' (Rose 28). Despite the apparent congruence of nonhuman agency in two disparate cultures of different eras, I was nevertheless again anxious about a potential reader reception. This anxiety should be felt by every non-Indigenous writer in Australia, however my rural setting, where Indigenous Country is freer than in a city, added weight to this responsibility. I recalled Hugh S. Robertson's words about farming and 'the people who couldn't, or wouldn't, do the hard work' (20). Positioning Western literature with nonhuman agency in rural Australia was similarly hard work.

Another commonality in Aboriginal and European histories relates to dispossession of traditional lands and loss of traditional knowledge. The dispossession and losses of traditional knowledge in Aboriginal communities is widely known. Perhaps less well known to Australian readers is the European experience of displaced

farmers. Ethan Mannon discusses how Wordsworth in his poem “Michael” blamed the ‘intensifying commodification of nature’ (126) for ‘eras[ing] an independent, self-sufficient family’ (127). In this poem, not only the land is lost but also the ‘knowledge of the land that Michael inherited and added to across his lifetime’ (127). I wanted my novel to mirror both Aboriginal and European losses of land caused by a capitalist ideology through my depiction of a mass eviction of people from a farming district. This potential loss of traditional knowledges speaks to the ‘complicated history of shared country’ recognised by Richard J. Martin, Philip Mead and David Trigger in the Gulf of Carpentaria (342). While this use of plot may be recognisable as mirroring colonialism, it also reflects the farmer evictions of European georgic literature.

Australian sugarcane cultivation is not only associated with Aboriginal dispossession and losses of traditional knowledges, but also with a history of slave labour, and human deaths through disease and ill-treatment. It proved impossible for me to adequately address these injustices while questioning a dominant capitalist ideology and recentring nonhuman nature in a contemporary setting. Indeed, critics have noted the problem that writers face in deciding which aspects of historical significance to mask or reveal (Goodman; Pellicer). I chose to experiment with the gothic as a device for depicting past suffering in a contemporary setting. In this way, the sugarcane fields could be as cruel as they always were. This decision sent me back to research (see Chapter 5). In accordance with gothic traditions, I cast a ghost in my story. I felt this apparition could serve two purposes: one, it could help me craft a backstory for my protagonist; and two, it could expose the protagonist as an unreliable narrator. Thus, the cruelty of the sugarcane and the ghost of someone who had died in the cane fields were employed as gothic devices that would mesh the text with a tragic past.

However, I became concerned that my attempt to solve one problem had merely generated another by creating a new version of white Indigeneity. David Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre* (1984), for example, has been read as a text in which the ‘meeting point of two different modes of being’ (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) becomes a ‘direct substitution of the white native-born in the place of the indigene’ (Mullaney 112-13). The major problem with Malouf’s writing is his exclusion of Indigenous characters and his suggestion that writers should conflate Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews (Otto). Unlike Malouf, my writing positioned Indigenous characters in central roles. I also ensured that the ghosts in my text were not Indigenous spirits. I instead used them to represent non-Indigenous people: the teenage boy the protagonist

accidentally killed in a troubled past, Quentin's father, and Kurtis Steele. By not depicting Aboriginal ancestors—who I presumed to be present in my fictional setting—I hoped to avoid a problematic representation of colonial Australian gothic (see Chapter 5). I assumed that only the Aboriginal characters in my story would perceive what Deborah Bird Rose describes as the Aboriginal 'range of beings which European cultures define as supernatural [that] conveys a strong sense of vivid presence ~ of country bursting with life' (24). And by limiting my writing to the worldview of the non-Indigenous protagonist, I could not describe what the Aboriginal characters perceived unless they told someone in the protagonist's presence, which they proved unwilling to do. While this limitation lessened the risk of cultural appropriation through a depiction of Aboriginal gothic (see Chapter 5), it potentially led me closer to emulating Malouf's white Indigeneity. I wondered if my writing could be read, as Malouf's writing has been, as a text that 'replicates colonial constructs of Aboriginality or assimilationist policies' (Mullaney 113). However, this was offset by crafting Aboriginal characters to either guide or withhold an Indigenous understanding of Country, rather than attributing this role, as Malouf did, to a non-Indigenous character. I decided that only the Aboriginal characters in my novel would perceive and understand Quentin's transformation after death into an animal but not offer explanations of what they knew. Yet that transformation could still be read as drawing on Aboriginal belief systems. Here lies a tension and a provocation about exchanges of cultural knowledges. Hence, while the gothic may be viewed on one level as a commonality at a cultural interface, it is undoubtedly a complex and difficult domain that must be constantly negotiated.

Throughout my praxis, I endeavoured to meet Nakata's expectations of providing 'the grounds for deeper engagement' rather than 'grounds for departure and separation or superficial contesting of 'truth' claims' (223). The idea of writing a novel without Indigenous characters proved impossible for me, since omission, or as Jeanine Leane calls it the 'literature of erasure', seemed far worse ("Other Peoples' Stories" 42). Although it was extremely difficult to explore a literary interface of Aboriginal and Western worldviews, this emerged as an essential process when crafting Aboriginal representation in a novel addressing contemporary farming issues and environmental concerns. My decisions to write in the first person, to understand the literary and oral histories of nonhuman agency and consciousness, to recognise the existence of traditional knowledges in both European farming and Aboriginal cultures, and in tailoring the gothic to include only non-Indigenous ghosts provides new knowledge for

future writers of Australian farm novels, or indeed any writers using Australian settings. These decisions, and the reasoning leading to them, serve as a guide to navigating a literary Aboriginal/Western cultural interface. Additional knowledge arises from consideration of machines and region.

Depictions of a specialised machine anchor my re-imagined farm novel to a specific region while also reshaping the collective writing from that region. Similar to the way that North American writers used the train to represent an incursion of industrialisation into rural life (Marx), I sought to use the machine harvester as a symbol of a technological reach into rural Australia. While crafting the harvester as a character, I realised that its specific design for harvesting sugarcane would anchor the text to a specific region (see Chapter 5). This adds a new device to the toolkit of writers representing the Wet Tropics bioregion comprising depictions of rainforest, monsoonal weather and seasons revealed through my reading of John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) (see Chapter 3). This research also led me to consider other traits of North Queensland literature, such as a history of a masculine hegemony (Taylor and Perkins). I became increasingly aware of how my novel could potentially shift what is known and expected of regional literature. Apart from offering a contemporary and technologically embedded image of farming, I wanted to depict a progressive society. Three decisions underscored this aim. Firstly, my protagonist should learn to recognise the knowledge and expertise of the women on the farm and ultimately relinquish his assumed leadership. Secondly, Aboriginal characters should be positioned at the centre of the farm and narrative and the conflict arise from relations between human and nonhuman characters rather than racial differences. And thirdly, the resolution of the novel should be crafted to represent a negotiated peace between the human and nonhuman characters. This resolution was intended to reflect the georgic culture identified by Philipp Erchinger in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), in which 'trusting cooperation with nature is ... just as integral to successful husbandry as wary defence against nature' (137). Hence, my aim to craft a progressive contemporary representation of farming could simultaneously anchor the text to a specific region, challenge expectations of North Queensland literature, and build on georgic traditions.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

With over sixty-one percent of the Australian continent managed by farmers and the farming imaginary based on farming prior to the 1960s, stories about contemporary farming are desperately needed. Contemporary narratives can more usefully respond to current concerns about corporatisation of farms, depopulation of rural communities, and environmental degradation. The genre of the farm novel is highly suited to addressing farming and environmental issues while offering insights into the art of farming, yet most feature historical settings, marginalised Indigenous characters, and perpetuate the settler-colonial worldview. This research marks a much-needed intervention in the tradition of these realist farm novels with a contemporary magic realist farm novel that challenges a dominant ideology of farming as primarily a profit-making enterprise and positions Indigenous characters at the centre of the farm life and the narrative. Giving agency and consciousness to the crop and the farm machines created a work of fiction that vividly contrasts with a transnational canon of anthropocentric georgic literature.

My research began with the premise that exploring human-nonhuman relationships can help address farming and environmental issues and asks how a shift away from anthropocentrism could alter the dominant profit-driven ideology of the Australian farm novel. As the research progressed, questions arose about how a non-Indigenous author can give agency and respect to Aboriginal characters in a farm novel, how to navigate a literary cultural interface, and how to anchor a novel to a specific region. My thesis was that by employing magic realism in a contemporary setting and giving agency to nonhuman nature and machines, I could break received conventions of georgic literature, unsettle a dominant Western ideology, and stimulate new ways of thinking about farmers and farming. I argued that traditionally the Australian farm novel maintains nation-building and settler-colonial aspirations of Australian society and required a major revision that could be achieved by using magic realism.

In this thesis, I demonstrated how writers and readers have maintained an interest in human relationships with nonhuman nature over many centuries since the first BCE classical poetry of Virgil's *Georgics*, and how georgic concepts can be identified in Australian literature. I have continued this tradition by writing a new georgic work that breaks the mould of the Australian farm novel through a radical shift from historical realism to contemporary magic realism. My re-imagined farm novel, *Badila*, gives agency to the nonhuman, draws attention to a gradual depopulation of

farmlands, and asks readers to question what they know about farming. Hence, this work makes an innovative contribution to georgic literature by exploring farming and ambition through magical depictions of human relations with nature and technology.

This creative-practice research comprises three essays published during the doctoral program. These essays extend the boundaries of literary criticism by exploring the georgic when Australian critics were instead pre-occupied with pastoralism, by rediscovering the forgotten writer John Naish, by making a new interpretation of Australian sugarcane novels through the first ecocritical reading of these texts, by contributing to The *Dark Emu* Debate through a reading of Aboriginal representation in Jean Devanny's realist farm novel *Cindie: A Chronicle of the Canefields* (1949), by positioning the literature of far north Queensland before an international audience in *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre* (2023) edited by Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, and by examining the application of magic realism to a genre that has not previously featured this style of writing. Offshoots of this research include additional entries in AustLit and academic library acquisitions. *Georgic Literature and the Environment* is currently held in 115 libraries worldwide (see worldcat.org). Furthermore, examples of a thesis-by-publication in creative-practice research are rare but may in future may become more prevalent due to increasing expectations of students in this field to publish articles during their candidature. Recent examples include Martha Sempert's *Essaying Bodies, Bodying Essays: Write in the Middle is a Creative-Critical Research Practice* (2018). This thesis demonstrates that writing essays during this type of research while alternating between research-led and practice-led approaches can help with identifying gaps in the literature, guiding the creative component, and building a reserve of knowledge and solutions that are useful when problems arise in the praxis of creative writing. This type of thesis also offers the doctoral candidate additional opportunities for learning and development through the process of publication. These aspects are transferable to future creative-practice research. However, this approach is highly intensive and may not suit all candidates or all types of creative-practice research.

New knowledge for creative writers gained through my praxis takes the form of a guide for writers of Australian farm novels but may be useful to any writers of fiction in an Australian setting. The eight key points are as follows: 1. Realist writing is unsuited to the Australian farm novel due to an unbroken history and connection with nation-building and the settler-colonial worldview. 2. Magic realism raises problems

due to a history of working against Australian Indigenous people and therefore writers need strategies to avoid misrepresentation and marginalisation of traditional landowners. 3. Magic realism is useful to questioning a dominant ideology, which in the farm novel is the rational profit-driven approach to farming. 4. Research can help with identifying how an approach to writing builds upon or deviates from a literary past, which may be important to understanding and communicating elements of innovation. 5. Exploration of a literary cultural interface enables writers to navigate settings in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters co-exist. 6. Attention to the georgic enables recognition of commonalities of Western and Indigenous worldviews that may help writers navigate contested literary spaces. 7. Use of the gothic to recognise and respond to a traumatic history requires careful consideration of the characterisation of ghosts. 8. A machine can anchor a text to a geographical region. At different stages, these findings influenced my decisions to write in the first person, to understand the literary and oral histories of nonhuman agency and consciousness, to recognise the existence of traditional knowledges in both European and Aboriginal contexts, and to tailor the gothic to include only non-Indigenous ghosts.

This research has implications for future studies of regionalism, pastoralism, the georgic, ecocriticism, the farm novel, magic realism, the gothic, and creative practice. New research is needed to develop a genre of sugarcane novels or mode of sugarcane literature. Should the creative component be published, it may be useful to conduct a reader reception study to measure any changes in perceptions of farmers and farming. Also, a reading of John Naish's *That Men Should Fear* (1963) would further enrich understandings of the Australian farm novel. Finally, additional research on the thesis-by-publication and research-led approaches to creative-practice research may enhance understandings of creative writing doctoral programs.

8.1 Significance and contribution to knowledge

Re-imagines the Australian farm novel

This research re-imagines the Australian farm novel for the 21st century by dismantling a realist nation-building tradition and creating a new magic realist narrative that speaks to contemporary concerns about human relationships with nature.

Redirects a critical focus from pastoral to georgic

The research that informed the creative component of this project makes a significant contribution to literary scholarship in national and international contexts. My readings of sugarcane novels set in the Wet Tropics published alongside renowned critics in *Georgic Literature and the Environment* places the literature of far north Queensland before an international audience. Similarly, readings published in Australian journals enrich national understandings of the farm novel by exploring tropical agriculture within a body of criticism focused predominantly on farming in the southern half of Australia. In the Australian context, my articles break new ground with a focus on the georgic mode, when previously Australian criticism was solely preoccupied with pastoralism. When I presented my first paper at the 2020 ASAL Conference on the georgic, some of the audience had never heard the term. Two years later, at the 2022 ASAL Conference numerous academics mentioned ‘georgic’. The publication of *Georgic Literature and Environment* in 2023 demonstrates the importance of georgic literature to global concerns. My contributed book chapter secures Australia’s place in this increasingly urgent international literary discourse.

Recovers forgotten novelist John Naish

Part of this project involved recovering the forgotten novelist John Naish, who wrote an autobiography *The Clean Breast* (1961), two novels *The Cruel Field* (1962) and *That Men Should Fear* (1963) and four plays. Both novels were published after Cecil Hadgraft’s literary history *Queensland and its Writers: (100 Years-100 Authors)* (1959), and H. M. Green’s comprehensive *A History of Australian Literature, Pure and Applied: A Critical Review of All Forms of Literature Produced in Australia from the First Books Published after the Arrival of the First Fleet until 1950, with Short Accounts of Late Publications up to 1960* (1961). Naish is mentioned in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1994), however, both the author and his works are

absent from *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009) and from the “Australian Dictionary of Biography” (www.adb.anu.edu.au). Prior to commencing this project, AustLit held only three reviews of *That Men Should Fear*, all published in 1963, the year of the novel’s publication. The author is, however, briefly mentioned by Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins in their chapter “Warm Words” in *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland* (2007) edited by Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay. Two of my articles and a book chapter published during this project explore Naish’s writing and have contributed to an update on Naish in AustLit and augments a new archive created in the Special Collections of the JCU Library by librarian Bronwyn McBurnie and historian Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui.

New readings of sugarcane novels

My ‘use of Virgil’s *Georgics* as an interpretative framework represents a new approach to Australian ecocriticism’ (“Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel” 185). Furthermore, Australian farming literature associated with sugarcane had only been read for colonialism, women and politics, romance, and multiculturalism (Chapter 3). I have built on this work with new readings for the georgic, regionalism, Indigenous representation, and ecocriticism.

Offers new insights into Aboriginal representation

This research began at the height of the *Dark Emu* debate, in which Bruce Pascoe claimed that Aboriginal people were misunderstood farmers, and anthropologists responded by pointing to how Pascoe had misrepresented and devalued the complexity of hunter-gathering (Sutton and Walshe). My book chapter “The Semi-Georgic Australian Sugarcane Novel” in *Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre* (2023) edited by Sue Edney and Tess Somervell partly addresses Aboriginal representation in the Australian sugarcane novel. I discuss how the realist writer Jean Devanny, who strived ardently to make her fiction depict real life (Ferrier), represents Aboriginal characters as hunter-gatherers and crafted these characters in a way that denies them agency and depicts them only in pitiable subordinate positions within a dominant settler-colonial worldview. My chapter concludes with a statement that ‘Australian sugarcane novels that instead depict ... the full complexity of Aboriginal involvement in food production are yet to be written’

(Smyth "Semi-Georgic Sugarcane Novel"). My novel partially corrects this paucity by centring Aboriginal characters on the farm and pointing to how Aboriginal people have extensive knowledge of the land used for farming and have been engaged in Western farming since colonisation. Importantly, my research identifies commonalities of the Western farmer and Aboriginal worldviews, which may assist future writers to navigate a mutually beneficial literary co-existence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians on farms.

Creative writing insights

Overall, the implications of the creative component stem from my innovative use of magic realism in the Australian farm novel to give agency to nonhuman nature and machines, while centring Aboriginal people on the farm and in the narrative. This approach provides an opportunity for readers to question the idea of the farmer as one person in control of the farm and aims to stimulate a curiosity about the complex networks of interaction between humans, nature, and machines. My eight-point guide to writing offers a new concise and practical framework for future writers of Australian farm novels. The notion of exploring a literary cultural interface offers a new way of understanding the task of crafting fiction in contested settings.

Models research-led approach and creative-practice thesis-by-publication

This thesis models a combined research-led and practice-led approach to creative-practice research and a thesis-by-publication (see Chapter 2).

Supports library collection development

As part of this research, cultural sensitivity warnings were added to works held in the JCU Library. For example, John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (1962) contains many racist terms in the dialogue, which may offend some readers. The catalogue entry now includes the words 'Culturally sensitive. This material may contain terms that reflect the view of the author/s, or those of the period in which the item was written or recorded but may not be considered appropriate today.' The published outputs add to library collections. *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre*, edited by Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, is currently held in 106 libraries worldwide.

Appendix 1. Permissions to Reproduce Published Texts in this Thesis

Chapter 3 – Sugarcane in the Wet Tropics: Reading the Georgic Mode and Region in John Naish’s Farm Novel *The Cruel Field* (1962)

Elizabeth A. Smyth. Published August 2021 in *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL)*

<https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/14901>

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Chapter 4 – The Semi-Georgic Australian Sugarcane Novel

Elizabeth A. Smyth. Published 18/11/2022 in *Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre*, edited by Susanna Edney and Tess Somervell.

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Chapter 5 – Writing an Australian Farm Novel: Connecting Regions Via Magic Realism

Elizabeth A. Smyth. Published in October 2022 in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*

<https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/40224-writing-an-australian-farm-novel-connecting-regions-via-magic-realism>

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Appendix 2. Acknowledgement of Contribution to Thesis Chapters

Ch	Citation	Contribution acknowledgement
3	Smyth, Elizabeth A. "Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics: Reading the Georgic Mode and Region in John Naish's Farm Novel <i>the Cruel Field</i> (1962)." <i>Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature</i> , vol. 21, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1-12.	While I developed the idea and wrote the article, I acknowledge the support of my advisor Roger Osborne who suggested readings and helped me improve my writing and navigate the publication process. I also acknowledge the feedback of anonymous reviewers, assistance with final editing by the journal editor Ellen Smith and copyediting by Angela Rockel.
4	Smyth, Elizabeth A. "The Semi-Georgic Australian Sugarcane Novel." <i>Georgic Literature and the Environment: Working Land, Reworking Genre</i> , edited by Tess Somervell and Sue Edney, Routledge, 2023.	While I developed the idea and wrote the book chapter, I acknowledge the feedback from my advisor Roger Osborne and from participants in a Work-in-Progress session of the ASLEC-ANZ Conference 2021, including Emily Potter. I also acknowledge advice of the editors, Sue Edney and Tess Somervell, and the Routledge copyediting service.
5	Smyth, Elizabeth A. "Writing an Australian Farm Novel: Connecting Regions Via Magic Realism." <i>TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses</i> , vol. 26, no. 2, 2022, pp. 1-16, doi:10.52086/001c.40224.	While I developed the idea and wrote the article, I acknowledge feedback from my advisor Roger Osborne and conversations with advisor Emma Maguire that influenced part of the essay. I also acknowledge the journal editor Ross Watkins' assistance with the journal formatting requirements, the anonymous article reviewers, and copyediting by Julienne van Loon.

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