

# **Australian Regional Literary History: Rethinking Limits and Boundaries**

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This panel discussion took place at the Texts and Their Limits literary convention in 2021, held at Victoria University in Melbourne. Australia's Triennial Literary Convention, which brings together four of the major Literary Studies associations in the country—ASAL, AAL, AVSA and AULLA—is a prestigious venue for discussion of literary studies. The convention panel featured four settler scholars of Australian regional literary history in conversation about their respective projects and ways of undertaking research. The editors of *JASAL* subsequently invited them to publish a transcription, in order to contribute to ongoing discussions of this sub-field.

The roundtable panel at the conference and the subsequent publication in *JASAL* explore the methods used by scholars working in this evolving field. Brigid Magner, Emily Potter, Jo Jones, and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth reflect on their experiments with writing literary history across three projects, including moments of self-critique, doubt, and failure. The roundtable format offers a site for information sharing and knowledge production that serves to develop this discipline. The research contributes to the field of Australian literary-critical regionalism, which highlights the specific, the singular, the imagined, and historical places of literary texts and the locational perspectives on authors, oeuvres, and reception. This transcribed discussion is framed to be accessible to other researchers and to generate further dialogue about how to *do* regional literary history. It addresses questions such as: Why are some Australian literary regions well known while others are barely acknowledged? What do regions exclude, and what can shadow regions offer? How does a community map against a region? What are the limits of regional literary histories, and is it possible to construct them differently? The panel advanced thinking around the sub-field of Australian regional literary studies as a collaborative space of diverse practices, texts, sites, and communities.

## **Introduction**

The “Australian Regional Literary History: Rethinking Limits and Boundaries” panel, as part of the Texts and Their Limits conference,<sup>1</sup> staged a conversation between four scholars in the field to consider its current concerns, practices and relationship to the frameworks of Australian literary studies. Chaired by Emily Potter in conversation with Brigid Magner, Jo Jones, and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, the panel flagged a renewal of regional literary scholarship in Australia through a

discussion of the panelists' own projects and collaborations in regional and rural Victorian and Western Australian communities. Drawing on the panelists' reflections on the *doing* of regional literary history, the conversation canvassed the distinct qualities of contemporary regional Australian literary scholarship; the role of place, situated practice, and community engagement in this field; and the implications for regional literary studies of the always unsettled boundaries and status of the "region" in Australian life.

Australian writers have long written about non-urban places—a normative definition of the "regional"—yet regional literature in Australia has waxed and waned as a critical focus since the late 1970s (Henningsgaard, "The Decline" 55). Bruce Bennett's *The Literature of Western Australia* (1979) spearheaded his formative work in the field and announced the leading role of scholars from this Australian state in the growth of regional literary studies. This text too, indicated the amorphous descriptor of "regional": here, reflecting a spatial demarcation—potentially including the urban—that correlates to specific environments, communities, and place cultures.

The primary innovation of Bennett's work was to complicate the cultural conflation of "the region" in Australian literary imaginaries with the settler colonial project of expansionism and pastoral nostalgia. An "old regionalism" (Henningsgaard, "Regional Literature" 5) associated with the frontier, and which affirmed white (usually male) hegemony, was countered by an assertion of regional diversity and difference by Bennett and others (see, for instance, Bennett, Hay and Ashford; Gelder and Salzman). As the 1988 bicentenary moved into view, bringing critical attention to First Nations sovereignty, Australian multiculturalism, and the fantasies of white Australia, the concept of the region offered scope to tell situated stories outside the troubled frame of the nation. Importantly this was usually—but not always—framed within a language of regionalism, and included work that creatively explored the long history of First Nations storytelling and the place of First Nations peoples on the continent (see, for example, Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe).

Per Henningsgaard argues that the 1990s brought a reorientation away from the regional as a result of postmodernism's attention to placelessness, and a move towards an emphasis on "internationalisation" and global mobility ("Regional Literature"). Yet, regional literary scholarship didn't disappear and rebounded with the new millennium to encompass the literature of specific Australian geographies (Morgan; Buckridge and McKay; Taylor); the methodologies of regional literary history (Stagg and Mead); reader studies (Lamond; Nolan and Hennaway); bio-regional studies (Blair) and place-oriented biographies (Carter; McCredden).

The work of the four scholars in discussion here is a part of this renewed momentum. Brigid and Emily have been working on a participatory literary history project based in the Mallee region of Victoria that has sought to engage with readers about their understandings of place through a range of activities including book group discussions, shared reading (or reading aloud), literary walks and author events, focusing on Mallee literary works. Jo has been investigating the shared dimensions of the practice of deep mapping and literary history in collating literary responses to the rivers of the Swan Coastal Plain. Her exercises in deep mapping have their roots in detailed and individual studies of space attuned to deep time based on geological measures (Pearson and Shanks; Biggs). Tony is well known for his literary history of the Western Australian Wheatbelt, *Like Nothing on this Earth*, which has become a key text in Australian regional studies.

A commonality across the panellists' work—and in some of the scholarship of the last decade mentioned above—is a heightened environmental attentiveness, and a political impulse, that is inextricable from a focus on place. There is also an attempt to reckon with the entanglement of Australian literature, colonial violence, and dispossession. There is a distinct focus on First

Nations storytelling histories that orient to place in very specific ways, and an ongoing attempt to bring these into an account of regional literary history without denying this specificity and difference.

Much remains unresolved in these efforts and regional literary studies can be critiqued as a kind of “recolonisation,” potentially affirming identities that serve “as euphemism[s] for white belonging” (Hughes-d’Aeth,). Just what a decolonised regional literary studies practice might be is still open for discussion and may well be an illusory concept. However, the impulse of current regional literary scholarship to reckon with and work through the traumatic histories that inform so many regional places—an inevitable result of a colonising project—is a restless one, keeping the work of regional Australian literary studies open and alive.

**Emily:** I should begin by saying that this panel isn’t aiming to be representative of regional literary history in Australia today—by its nature, I think regional literary practice is very situated, so where we’re working actually covers relatively small regions of Victoria and Western Australia. The panel came about because we are all coming to regional literary history from quite located, place-based perspectives. At the same time, I think we’re interested in broader questions such as, What *is* regional literary history? What is it doing? What are its limits? It also seems that there’s a flourishing of regional literary history activity in Australia right now, and that has motivated this panel, too. Of course, it’s not a new field, and there are lots of people working in this space, who have also worked to develop it *as* a space. But I think we can say that it is potentially having a “moment” right now. To start to explore some of this, I’m going to open up to my fellow speakers and invite them to briefly introduce their work in the field and to perhaps reflect on what brought them into the regional literary studies space.

**Jo:** My own interest in regional studies came from earlier work I undertook on my monograph, *Falling Backwards: Australian Historical Fiction and the History Wars*. I did lots of work with Kim Scott’s *Benang* and you cannot engage with that text in any meaningful way without really becoming familiar with the tenets of regionalism, looking at the kind of rich specificities of particular locales and the interconnected movements between story and place. For that reason, I really started being very interested in the way certain stories meant different things when they were written or even read in or from different places. Where you are geographically is deeply influential in terms of the way you make meaning from texts, and during the time I worked on that book, I moved from Perth to Tasmania, then back to Perth. My relationship to place was on the move, and some of my very deeply held assumptions and beliefs about national and local spaces were accordingly unsettled.

I’m always trying to negotiate my response to Perth and the Perth coastal basin, with which I have a vexed relationship. As many Perth-based folk notice, we have an aggressively capitalist expansionist mining culture in that city that I really hate, combined with other colonially derived expressions of place and the values implied by bureaucratic terms such as “environmental management,” and the designation of areas for “recreation.” We still also have European behavior patterns that make the environment unbearable at times—like expecting children to attend a full day of school on a 45-degree day, or Christmas events in full sun. So, I’m always trying to negotiate this love-hate, and for this reason I became interested in exploring histories of the literature of place, collecting different literatures that are either set or written on the Swan and Canning Rivers. A recently completed project of mine is called *Four Rivers, Deep Maps*, and while, obviously, regional studies do not occlude rivers in any way, I’m interested in what happens

when the river is actually the focus of the regional study. I'm interested in the ways we use rivers as a particularly powerful type of metaphor in western culture and how this metaphor is localised. *Four Rivers, Deep Maps* involves what I'm calling a deep mapping curation of collected responses to the Swan and Canning Rivers in Perth and two Scottish rivers—the Don and Dee—through literary expressions of place and lived experiences of place.

**Tony:** My main work on regional literary history is my book on the Wheatbelt of Western Australia. People often ask me, Why the Wheatbelt? What drew you there? So, it's interesting that they are the questions that regional literary history provokes. In other words—why this place? What made you interested?

I have relatives in the Wheatbelt, but I didn't grow up there and I mostly didn't grow up in Western Australia. I grew up all over the place and I think that's one of the things that at a personal level has probably driven me towards regional studies. It's a way of trying to understand where I am and to locate myself. I used to go on holidays to my cousin's farm in the northern Wheatbelt. It was genuinely "other," nothing like the places that I lived in.

So, I had this naive experience of the Wheatbelt in my childhood. Then, I arrived in my teens in Western Australia and ended up at UWA. One of my formative experiences was studying American literature with Bruce Bennett. This was a little ironic, since Bruce was such an important figure in Australian literary studies. But I think, even in relation to American literature, Bruce was modelling the kind of regionalism and interest in place that really spoke to me. I think the next little push came when I was a postgraduate and the reviews editor for *Westerly* at that time (Brenda Walker) asked me to review a book called *The Silo* by John Kinsella. I became more and more fascinated by the qualities of the Wheatbelt—how it was actually created and how it became so important in Western Australia, not just in material terms, but in the imagination.

I've also been lucky to teach regional literature. For a few years we taught a unit about regionalism in Australian literature, which Jo actually taught as well. That got me thinking a bit more comparatively. We looked at Queensland (particularly tropical North Queensland), Tasmania, and the mountains of the Dividing Range—and of course, the Wheatbelt. Teaching regional literature got me thinking about regionalism in more formal terms.

**Brigid:** Oh it's really interesting to hear your autobiographical reflections on your interest in the area. I did a PhD on trans-Tasman literary culture—being from Aotearoa—so I suppose I was thinking about the trans-Tasman space as a region. I can relate to what you're saying, Tony, about wanting to locate yourself in a place through writers and works, and I think that's what I was subconsciously doing: mapping places through literature because I didn't know Australia very well initially. It has been a process of getting to know it, and it's an ongoing one, of course. Emily and I both have an interest in the Mallee—I have some in-laws there—and it's starkly different to the place where I grew up. I think it's always been smouldering away in the back of my mind as an area for investigation, but until fairly recently I didn't know of any writers or literary figures from there. We've had to really dig around a lot to find them, but it's paying off.

I should say where the Victorian Mallee is because I haven't done that—it's north-western Victoria, home to many First Nations groups, including the Latji Latji, Dadi Dadi, Wemba Wemba, and Wadi Wadi. The Mallee's boundaries are contested, though. If you take a bio-regional view, it goes into New South Wales, South Australia, and Western Australia. A recent ARC history project called "Changing Landscapes, Changing People: Australia's Southern Mallee Lands, 1830–2012" took that view and encompassed all those areas. But we're just looking at the Victorian

Mallee, and in doing so, we realise how artificial the state border is, but it's kind of a constraint for the project. We are obviously open to a more expansive view of what the Mallee is, too, and a lot of the texts we've been looking at do actually cross over into South Australia in particular. We're very interested in First Nations storytelling as well and that's something we want to explore further in our extended project.

**Emily:** I am also interested in Tony's reflections on the origins of his personal interest in the field, and then Brigid you added your own—and Jo touched on hers too, of course. I do think that the personal connection is a part of what I perceive to be building interest in regional literature in Australia. One of the reasons I'm so drawn to the Mallee is this kind of connection: I was part of a project team years ago that introduced me to the Mallee, but also it's important to me because it connects into both Adelaide and Melbourne, and they're my two places. I live in Melbourne, but I am from Adelaide originally, and still visit it often, and so the Mallee is like this in-between place for me, and I think that's one reason I've been drawn to it. Something that I'd like to think about today is what role this personal connection plays in regional literary scholarship and whether it can actually be a limitation in some ways. But maybe we'll first turn to the question of what regional literary history is—in fact, what regions *are*—before we move on any further.

**Tony:** In one definition, the Wheatbelt was determined by a rainfall line, or two lines, to be precise. It was created in the zone between the 10- and 20-inch rainfall lines. That more or less demarcates the Wheatbelt in Western Australia, and these lines have moved a little bit with climatic variation. The Wheatbelt was also defined temporally, appearing quite suddenly at the turn of the century. And, of course, it's still there—but it's now emptied of most of its people. Its inception was a bit like a war, or something like that—a grand colonial project—but people inside it weren't thinking of themselves as colonising. They thought of themselves as creating. Yet I think that this grand social narrative or ideology (what I call in my book, the “ideology of wheat”) also conditioned a certain writerly response. I'm not sure how extendable that is to other regions in Australia because there are just certain features that are distinctive to the Western Australian experience in the Wheatbelt.

**Jo:** I think that is a really interesting part of regionalism: what seems like a discrete region from the outside doesn't necessarily hold up to deeper scrutiny from within.

**Emily:** Yes, exactly. In one register, regions are externally determined, and this is shifting and potentially arbitrary. But communities are also another register of the region, and of determining what regional literature is, I think. Brigid and I have been working with what we see as Mallee works of literature and taking them to Mallee communities through reading groups, author events, etc. But these books that we identify as Mallee works are not always accepted as Mallee works by these readers. They might be written by authors who were born in the Mallee, they might be depicting the Mallee, they might be explicitly set in the Mallee, and still the readers will not always agree with our designation. They will sometimes contest the fact that it is the Mallee. I think that speaks to what you're talking about, Jo, that there's this porosity, and it is not just about geographic or atmospheric porosity, it's also about the porosity of the ongoing work of a community imagining itself, and identifying itself, and understanding itself.

There's something I wanted to bring up in relation to the comment that there seems to be a commonality across our work and other work that's been done on regional literary history: that

there's a focus on places or regions that have been subject to colonial violence in a really identifiable way. This might be through primary industries and their extractivist practices, or, Jo, to reference your work, the ways in which rivers become repositories for so much of the damage that's done elsewhere in the environment. I am thinking here, too, of Cheryl Taylor's work on Mount Isa and the mining legacies there, and Philip Mead and Tony Stagg's work on Tasmania with its dark, violent history. Is there something there, do you think, in that space for thinking about what regional literature is?

**Brigid:** There's a terrible irony in the fact that the region we're looking, at the Mallee, was named by the local people after the Mallee tree—*Eucalyptus dumosa*—which was essentially ripped out and burnt and completely destroyed. The trees have essentially been decimated—they're obviously springing back but not in the numbers that they once were.

**Emily:** There are so many resonances with all of the regions of Australia in terms of that kind of ecological devastation, particularly when connected to extractivist practices.

**Jo:** I'm also interested in the way regional foci can cultivate a different, multi-layered relationship with time and stories in place over time. I've been working with a group of Noongar people on the eastern reaches of the Swan River as part of a cross-disciplinary project, involving geographers, landscape designers, historians, and literary scholars. Our focus is a particular creek that was adjacent to a corroboree ground, and it has other literary significance as well; for instance, Katharine Susannah Prichard has written about that area, and there are other literary representations associated with it. We've been working with Noongar people to learn their stories of this place, but in doing so I've been confronted with my own practice: as a western-educated scholar, we just tend to go in and "mine" archives, looking for information we want with a view to sharing it with others. But now I'm working with a First Nations group who refuse this, and who say to me, "Why would we choose to tell you those stories?" And I'm in a continual process of revising my approach, and myself and the way I relate to things.

I wanted people to be able to see the richness of the story of Wagyl—the creator water serpent—in this place, and to make a map of these stories and their resonances over time. But the Noongar people will say, "No, that's not your story to tell," even though it's quite well known, it's in Primary School books for instance. So there are all of these strange spaces that are painful and productive and creative in ways I wouldn't have imagined before. I'm working in a very different kind of ontological frame in terms of where a story belongs and how it belongs to a place and a person, and it just does not fit in with the scholarly approaches that we're used to using. I think that whatever shape my regional study ends up taking, there needs to be an acknowledgment of what I don't know because I can only tell so much as a European-descended person. I don't know what form this will take. Even if I was from a different part of WA and I was a First Nations person, there would still be things that I could not possibly know. In this sense, mine can never be a complete project—it has to remain dynamic and open.

**Emily:** Tony, how did you approach this question of completion with your Wheatbelt project? Did you start out with a need to have this sense of totality and, if you did, was that realised?

**Tony:** I'm a scholar trained in the western tradition of enlightenment humanism. I essentially approach something like this as an object—a research object. I started by asking, "What is the

literary history of the Wheatbelt?” That’s just structural in some ways, in terms of epistemology. But I also saw a contrast between Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*, and the situation in Western Australia, where Perth was the “City” and the Wheatbelt was the “Country.” I sensed that what this dialectic meant in an Old World context and then what it meant in a New World context was radically different. In a settler context, the literature is all about *creating* the farm. In the Old World, people don’t create farms, they just inherit them.

The tragedy of the Wheatbelt is that it’s conterminous with colonisation, and in certain respects there is this overwhelming and irrevocable loss—extinction, annihilation of peoples, of living things and life forms, of languages. But in other respects, there’s extraordinary resilience and a kind of continuance.

We’ve got a couple of things determining our work if we’re committed to understanding these problems, I think. One is the idea of the literary and another is the idea of the historical. In historical terms, regionality is problematic and messy—I think partly I’m inclined towards the idea of a region because it’s a holding position, a space that is sub-national and so more open to contestation. In literary terms, one problem is that “literary” implies writing and literacy, and First Nations cultures are traditionally oral cultures. So how do you deal with these different ways to embrace reality? And, of course, oral tradition in an area like the Wheatbelt is quite badly fragmented.

The challenge then is how do we make history operative again. I think what I did in my Wheatbelt book was I said the Wheatbelt’s an *event*, and literature is a *witness* to this event—and that approach changed the historicity of the Wheatbelt, or at least it changed the terms of its analysis. Using this approach, literature can be understood to function as a counter-archive, in that as well as recording what’s there, it also records what *isn’t there*. Literature is capable in my view of making loss visible, of making absences present.

Offering up literature as the witness to history produces a different sense of a place. But, of course, I’m very conscious, too, picking up on what Jo said, that regionalism can very easily become an exercise in white belonging. What Jo’s doing or describing sounds like the ethical position—you put yourself forward, someone respectfully declines to tell you a story, you write your map, you do this, and you’re the midwife to all this non-knowledge, so you will suffer some blows within that—you’re mired in it.

**Brigid:** I was just thinking of our experience recently running a literary walk in Swan Hill and we asked a local Mutti Mutti/Wemba Wemba elder to do a Welcome for us and talk to us about the river and what she said very graciously at the beginning was that we’d started at the wrong end of the river and that we should have flipped it around and that we should have talked to her first. I think we just worried about bothering her too much and mining her for information so we didn’t ask her which end, and she actually said that she wasn’t that familiar with the river because she felt like it was often colonised by local Swan Hill people—non-First Nations people—and so she didn’t usually walk along there, and when she did go there in preparation for our walk she saw these very special sites, and she felt that we should have begun the walk there. So, that was a chastening moment but a good learning experience for us.

**Emily:** It certainly was, yes, and I was thinking about that too. One of the things we wanted to do with these literary river walks was to have situated readings of texts associated with places along, and histories of, the river. Some of these are colonial texts and they’re often problematic, and in some cases pretty distasteful. In our walks, we were hoping to open up moments to talk about the

river in other ways. These walks were open to the public—people signed up for them, and then there were local readers who we recruited to come along. So there was a mix of people there. And we do think that the walks opened up space for expanding literary—and place—history, but at the same time we are limited by that colonial literary history which is so dominant, and we're also limited by our knowledge of place as outsiders to that place but also as settler colonial people. In the instance of that walk with Aunty Vicki, the area that she would have preferred the walk to begin in was actually pretty much inaccessible. It's not part of the established riverfront walk because the part of Swan Hill that has the riverfront in it is totally colonised; it's where the riverboats came and it's where the museum is—that's the bit that's open for the public. All the bits that are significant to Aunty Vicki, they're behind somebody's house. A huge part of the riverfront at Swan Hill is monopolised by the Pioneer Settlement, which tells you a lot.

I am thinking about Tony's reflection on literature as witness to the event and I think that's very beautiful and there's a resonance there with our project. We too have felt that literary works have fed into the making of colonised places—they are complicit—and these walks really materialised this. For example, we might be reading from Nancy Cato by the side of the Murray where the paddle steamers are still there today. You see how these texts have fed into these imaginaries of place that have just been perpetuated in how that place continues to narrate itself: how it presents itself to a tourist audience, for instance. By drawing attention to this we can highlight the contingent nature of place stories, and the role of many literary narratives in this.

**Emily:** [in response to audience question on the role of regional literary institutions in regional literary culture] This question makes me think about the great disparity between regions, which connects to the difficulty in defining regions and their contested nature. The Mallee is poor and it has so little of what we might call cultural infrastructure or literary infrastructure—in fact it's got almost none. It certainly doesn't have any publishers. It has libraries of course; it has bookshops; it has a literary festival, but the Mildura Festival is so targeted to the cities which is where its audience largely comes from. It's also focused on writers from elsewhere coming to the Mallee and we've had some interesting candid discussions with locals who felt quite excluded from that event and don't feel welcome. They feel that it's not *for* them. This lack of resources perpetuates certain literary histories and certain responses to known historical figures. In the Mallee, John Shaw Nielsen is the recurrently cited literary figure, to the point where we're pretty sick of him, even though he's a wonderful poet, but to me that is an issue of resourcing. Local history societies are really the only places where any kind of broad historical remembering is happening and they're staffed by volunteers. I think it's really interesting to think about that in relation to Western Australia.

**Brigid:** I was just remembering a reading group where I said, "Oh it seems to me that a place like WA is much more organised in terms of the Fellowship of Australian Writers and various bodies working towards building a sense of literary culture," and one of the participants said, "Yes, all those people just run screaming from the Mallee!"

**Emily:** There's a sense that people would leave because it was too hard to try and do something like that, and just going back to the money question or the funding question, it seems that any initiatives like the Mildura Writers Festival are quite beholden to money from Melbourne—they don't have their own pots of money and they haven't found a way of being self-sustaining. One way of thinking about the relationship between what we call literature and regional identity would



be to think of it as a thing that gets encouraged, and even made possible, by local presses that take up the work of local writers and disseminate it, which of course begs the question of what happens to regionalism when we have multinational conglomerate publishers occupying a totally dominant role in literary production. Another way of thinking about this question would be to ask: “Can you still have regional literature in the age of the multinational publisher?”

**Jo:** I’m by no means an expert in this field but I know that it’s becoming cheaper to publish chap books and things like that. I know the poet John Kinsella runs a little operation from his shed that’s called Shed Under the Mountain Press and it makes you wonder how many more like this will pop up in terms of self-publication in the regions.

In Western Australia if you go somewhere like the Fremantle Prison, or a tourist site, you find quite a lot of locally published stuff. There’s a small press here called Hesperian Press that has produced lots of little local histories and there definitely seems to be a connection, somewhat ironically, between small publishing operations and the tourist market. In WA we’ve recently had sort of a hiatus with the publishing of regional stuff, but we are now very lucky to have Tony as a chair of the board for our local university press (UWAP). There were some very tense moments when we wondered where we would be able to publish local material in the future. We’re parochial but it’s not a total myth that we don’t get the same attention as writers and organisations from the eastern seaboard. We are thinking about those things all the time.

**Emily:** To that question of publishing, we’ve got more multinational publishing outlets and this is a mixed silver lining, but perhaps there’s also some optimism in this as you suggest, Jo. You can now self-publish via places like Amazon. Of course, that’s not great for various reasons, but it is a possible place for regional literature to grow. There’s the ebook market—bookshops play an important role there as well. Maybe we’re going back to the moment of the local bookshop. Creative spaces are converging, and people are finding outlets for their work in that way. I think it’s important to point out the issue of access to bookshops. I know there’s internet shopping but again, so few rural communities have bookshops. In the Mallee it’s just Mildura and the Mallee is really big, so you’re not going to be driving to Mildura from the bottom of the Mallee. I’m wondering if there are any in the Wheatbelt, Tony?

**Tony:** York’s probably the only one. I take Emily’s broader point that York’s kind of a day-tripping, tree-change place to go to from Perth, even though it’s the beginning of the Wheatbelt as well. There’s a York Writers Festival. Maybe further out in the Wheatbelt it’s not quite the same. I’ll be interested in some of the class elements that are coming through in the description of the Mallee that sound a little bit different to the West Australian Wheatbelt, just at a glance.

**Brigid:** The Mildura bookshop does stock a lot of self-published titles that wouldn’t be picked up by any major publisher due to quality and the nature of the topic, so often books of local history are funded by the community—for example, Keva Lloyd’s *Then Awake Sea Lake*, which was produced locally. The Sea Lake community works together to fund all of their shops and pubs and so they actually have to pool their resources to make these things happen.

**Emily:** I was reflecting on that question of the bigger publishers producing regional literary works and a response that we had in one of our book groups. Here, an older male participant brought along a selection of the kind of self-published local histories that we are talking about; he threw

these in front of us, and proclaimed loudly, “*These* are Mallee works, *this* is Mallee literature!” I wonder if it was offensive to him that we were outsiders, and possibly that we were women, or that he thought we were telling him what Mallee works were, or that we were implying they were these commercially produced works that came from somewhere else that might be representing that place? We couldn’t be sure as he didn’t say much else.

### Conclusion

The panel discussion highlighted the commonalities between our respective practices as regional literary studies researchers. All of us are interested in the ecological impacts of settlement, and the different but overlapping patterns of colonialism and their textual legacies.

This event also drew attention to the largely arbitrary geographical boundaries of states in delimiting an epistemic project. It raised the question, “What makes state-based limitations necessary for researchers like ourselves?” For practical reasons, the four of us tend to set geographical limits for our regional fieldwork and scholarship, while recognising that regional literary studies can be critiqued as a kind of “recolonisation” if not undertaken thoughtfully.

In response to a question from the audience about how to address “the absence of things that aren’t there now,” and especially “absences in narratives,” Jo remarked that “there is an inherent sense of mourning about trying to recover something that’s unrecoverable, whether it’s a settlement story, or a much more resonant loss of First Nations stories and aspects of culture, even though obviously cultures are still there and alive.” Part of Jo’s mapping process is to make sure that First Nations texts are involved, when culturally appropriate. Emily noted that the First Nations presence in the settler-authored Victorian Mallee works tends “to be there as an absence,” however some texts are surprisingly overt about the genocidal histories of the Mallee.

As Jo observed, the return to a regional focus during the pandemic is becoming a real pivot towards questioning certain forms of nationalism. Lockdowns in particular have reinforced a sense of shared regional identity. She says, “I’m interested to think about what will happen in the years ahead as we reflect upon this event, and how writers will process it through a regional lens or if they will at all.” The turn to the local, and to a heightened place-attentiveness for many Australians in the years of pandemic lockdowns might well contribute to a renewed energy in regional literary production and engagement.

Our discussion allowed each of us to share some awkward moments of negotiation with storytellers, writers and readers when working “in the field,” such as the mismatch between anticipated outcomes and realities, questions of access and permissions, and also what we can’t, or shouldn’t, know. There is much that regional literary studies must reckon with, including necessary absences, irrecoverable losses, and inequitable and uneven literary infrastructures, even as it seeks to engage what stories are there, active and alive, continuing to make our places over time.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Texts and Their Limits (TATL) Conference 2021, hosted by Victoria University Melbourne, “Reading the Archive,” 2.30pm, Day 1, Session 4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpCBOQL46wU>

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