A New Understanding Of Abject Communities Through Sewerage Ghost Towns

by

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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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If asked to describe what the word ‘team’ means to me, I would immediately refer to this research, for it embodies the true spirit of team work. To Associate Professor Patrick West, who guided our incredible research team, thank you dearly. To Associate Professor Cameron Bishop and Paul Balassone, as the other members of our team, thank you also. Those simple words of thank you will never express my true gratitude for the chance to work with you, and for the rich work I never imagined could be created. Thank you too, my fellow HDR Writing group, for your support, generosity and friendship. I will cherish our group.

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And my eternal thanks to all the Farm people for without you, we would not have captured a truly significant part of Melbourne’s history: the Farm story. It’s been an honour working with you.
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Abstract

This research provides a new understanding of communities living in the margins of mainstream society through sewerage ghost towns. It focuses on Melbourne’s first sewerage farm community, that of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. It was established in 1892 on the outskirts of Melbourne where those working on the sewerage farm lived on site with their families for around 100 years. The sewerage farm community grew to a peak population of over 500 in the 1950s, and was behind the making of one of Australia’s most important civic works projects in the 1890s and into the 1900s. Little understanding exists on such sewerage towns and their communities, how they flourish as they are segregated from the main population to live in the abject margins of society, and what happens once these communities disband from the town. What is different, discarded or segregated can become the abject; it is that which is separated and placed outside the norm. This is the abjected. In the case of sewerage town communities, they are abjected because of their association with sewerage, and can experience discrimination because of it.

A poetics of creative writing research provides a solid foundation to draw out understandings of abjected communities relative to sewerage towns. Poetics supports a multi-layered approach that includes strong stakeholder engagement. This has helped to capture the social history of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. To effectively engage any marginalised or abjected community, respectful, inclusive and authentic engagement must be established to meet the needs of individual communities. Poetics also supports an exploration of ideas from philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Julia Kristeva, around communities segregated from the main population, the power held within the segregated community and the new community that emerges. Current practice on resilient communities is considered and spiritual concepts such as hauntology are discussed. These are backed up by field work undertaken to observe sewerage town communities in the UK. Findings are presented in an exegesis and creative work as a form of avant-garde literature, for a rebirthing of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community and discussion of sewerage towns. The creative work
includes a collaboration to create a song, for an aesthetic paradox of sewerage and a haunting of ‘truth’.

Sewerage town communities live in marginalised abjection. They grow into communities where the individual finds belonging, for a ‘humanity’ within community. This is a humanity where there is kindness, empathy and acceptance of people and life in its entirety. These communities do not see themselves as living in marginalised abjection, nor of living in the adversity others perceive them to be in. In fact, their experience is the opposite: that of living a utopian or ideal lifestyle, where they are left to prosper as a cohesive community, a community of humanity. Sewerage town communities can be seen as forerunners to Agamben’s ideals on a being together and belonging within the new community. The strong sense of community that forms in sewerage towns remains as a spirit once the town is abandoned, to emanate as a haunting through their ghosts. These ghosts too can be seen to form their own new community, where there is a ‘humanity’ in the spirit of the dead. These findings can be applied to any marginalised or abjected community.

This work is supported by Deakin University’s Research Scholarship program with Melbourne Water as an industry partner.
The faraway land
of the
house and two cows
A new understanding of abject communities through sewerage ghost towns
Introduction

Gasps, the aghast, the awe at the awful. Sniggers blend with glee, tainting muffling squeals that swoon into the dim. Spotlights shine on the metallic, sterile star of the show as it moves through its motions.

The crowd wasn’t here earlier in the day, at the feeding of the star. There was no such fanfare, nothing of the gawk that exists now, as the abjected pale excrement squeezes from a steel tube onto a round glass petri dish. The odour wafts into the dark voyeuristic squirmings and sniggerings.

They stand behind a white line marked on the vinyl floor as if in an art gallery admiring a great van Gogh or Matisse, rubbernecking for a glimpse of Wim Delvoye’s Cloaca Professional, 2010 – the machine that acts as the human digestive system. It is fed kitchen scraps from the eateries within the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA; Hobart, Tasmania) in the morning and, a few hours later, defecates before ghouling eyes and upturned noses of viewers both repulsed and fascinated at the faeces curling in front of them. The contradiction of that being that they too have passed their own motions that day, or will do within the next 24 hours.

It is a fascination that intersects with delight and horror, and can grow in power and appeal because it is not what is considered the norm and, instead, is separated and placed outside the norm. It seems to be part of the human condition to be apprehensive of the different, to be intrigued and intimidated by it. Something that sits ‘on the other side of the fence’ holds a fascination that can be feared and alluring in one, and it is there that a power can grow to the extent that the different is revered. In the case of people, it forms a group of the different: an abject community; however, one that is generally not revered. Both fascination and fear were apparent when I worked to educate the broader community on sewage treatment at the Western Treatment Plant many years ago. Children would arrive at the plant to learn about and witness sewage treatment. They would express intense repulsion at sewage. At the end of a two-hour visit, however, that repulsion would often turn to respect.
What is discarded can be scoffed at, that which is segregated or separated from what is considered the norm. It becomes the different to the norm; the deviation, divergent and estranged. The abjected.

But what is the draw or appeal of the segregated and abjected? Is it the horror, the obscene? When we hear of a bushfire, human nature dictates that we do not want to see the aftermath of the fire as an ash-laden landscape; we want to see the horror of the blazing fire, the glow of orange danger or the dead body on the roadside where, later, flowers may be laid by passing motorists to revere as a place of death. What is different, discarded or segregated can become the abject. We question our moral limits and reject based on defaulting to our individual compass of moral regulation.

The abject is the horror that causes a sense of awe and wonder: awful wonder. That was evident in the crowd watching *Claocca Professional* in 2019, more than 125 years after Melbourne’s first sewerage farm was developed and situated as far away as practically possible from the city, so the abjected waste of humans could not cause offence. What resulted was a new community being established on site, to live beside the abjected and become the abjected, segregated from mainstream society.

Many elements must come together for a better understanding of abject communities relative to sewerage ghost towns. I will explore notions around the segregated and abjected through philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Julia Kristeva, and the power held within the abjected for an emergence of a new community. I draw on my experience as a community and stakeholder relations practitioner and educator, and explore what happens when sewerage town communities abandon a place to create a sewerage ghost town, through concepts of hauntology and spirituality. A poetics of creative writing research is the methodology I use to draw out these understandings to support a rethinking of how such communities survive and thrive in their abjected margins. It is through my creative practice that I explore these notions and concepts.

A poetics of creative writing research allows for the consideration of my experience of working with the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm for 30 years and
living in Werribee for 40 years. During this time I have observed obvious prejudice, with alienation from and discrimination towards people living on and around sewerage plants. This continues today, and reverberates into the wider Werribee community. The discrimination faced by sewerage communities motivates my strong interest in the marginalised and those isolated from broader society.

In this exegesis of approximately 25,000 words and a creative work of approximately 75,000 words, I document findings concerning the story of the community once living on Melbourne’s first sewerage farm: the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works Sewerage Farm (Metropolitan Sewerage Farm). This is the first social history of its kind to record the story of the community behind the making of one of Australia’s most important civic works projects in the 1890s and into the 1900s.

The significance of such research builds on the interest and stewardship of the community, Deakin University and Melbourne Water to preserve the heritage of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. It is recognised through Deakin University’s Postgraduate Industry Research Scholarship program with Melbourne Water supporting the importance of this, as well as other, research by becoming an industry partner. It is vital for research such as this to be undertaken, working with industry to ensure the protection and revitalisation of significant sites, particularly as little understanding and scholarly discussion of sewerage towns and their communities currently exists. It should be noted that when working with industry on any such research, investigations must be independent and uninfluenced to ensure unbiased findings. This can be difficult when conflicting values, opinions and goals can occur in any research.

Chapter 1 of this exegesis defines the research project and the question to be answered. It reviews and defines communities that grow to live alongside sewerage, and the sewerage ghost town that results once the community abandons the town. The second chapter details the poetics of creative writing research methodology. This poetics allows for an interweaving between the exegesis and creative product, where each constantly feeds the other. It
supports a multidisciplinary approach with the application of stakeholder engagement, as part of Stakeholder theory. Stakeholder engagement provides the basis for a robust capture of meaningful historical data relative to abjected sewerage ghost towns. Visiting Cloaca Professional and other sewerage towns is part of this poetics, as are undertaking a literature review, undertaking interviews and archival research, and exploring Gothic and Romanticist notions that inform my writing practice, and have done for many years.

Current literature on theories and concepts is reviewed in Chapter 3, covering segregated and abject communities, the emergent abject community, current practice on resilient communities and what is left behind after a community disbands.

This is further investigated and discussed in Chapter 4, around the notion of a connecting and belonging in abject communities where a community does not depend on an identity or acknowledgement of an identity. It includes looking at what binds communities to become cohesive, particularly when they may not see themselves as abject communities, and what they leave behind once they disband. This not only provides greater understanding of abject communities, but also informs my writing of the ‘truth’ of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community and a cross-art-form collaboration that takes a nostalgic look at this life through song.

Together, these elements provide for a rethinking of abject communities relative to sewerage ghost towns. It allows for proposed supplementation of current theories and concepts, and anticipates further work.
1. Defining the research project and sewerage ghost town communities

It is important to firstly define the research project and question to be answered, and then to provide an understanding of sewerage towns, their communities and sewerage ghost towns.

1.1 The research project

This research project focuses on the question: How can we achieve a new understanding of abject communities through sewerage ghost towns, focusing on Melbourne’s first sewerage farm community?

The question is important as little understanding exists internationally on such sewerage towns and their communities, how they flourish in their abjected margins, and what happens once the community disbands and the town is abandoned. No scholarly literature could be found on communities that have grown on, or neighbour, sewerage farms or treatment plants. Nor has any literature been found on such communities that have disbanded to leave a sewerage ghost town. Scant mention is made in a handful of minor publications of much smaller, similar communities; however, these are nowhere near the size and scope of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, which is the focus for this study and the largest sewerage community found to date. It therefore provides a vital story about sewerage town communities and subsequent sewerage ghost towns, for the benefit of the international community.

The poetics of creative writing research methodology applied to undertake the research allows for a mixed-methods and cross-art-form approach. The poetics has practice-based research at its core to support the writing of the story of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, located 34 kilometres west of the Melbourne CBD in the south of Australia. It allows for the application of stakeholder engagement, as part of Stakeholder theory, to assist in working closely with past and present communities for a robust capture of stories about what it was like to live on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. Also
considered are my experience as a community and stakeholder engagement practitioner and educator, and my views and practice as a writer.

These stories are interpreted through the writing of a book in a style that may be considered different and outside the norms of conventional readability, beauty and taste. This is where ‘truth’ is expressed through language influenced by Romanticist and Gothic notions for evocative expression and, paradoxically, creating a haunting aesthetic of truth and the abjected. It is where activism can be seen as a form of avant-garde literature that employs abject language.

Giorgio Agamben’s notions of community relative to the sacred man, living in a state of exception and the emerging new community, as well as Julia Kristeva’s notions of abjection and the resulting ‘power vacuum’, will be explored.
and applied to sewerage town communities. The differing notions provide the chance for exploring the segregated and abjected, and the resulting impact of their abjection. Exploring current practices around the nature and wellbeing of resilient and self-sustaining communities will also be applied to sewerage town communities. This rethinking will highlight what factors make for successful sewerage town communities living in marginalised abjection.

An exploration, through hauntology and spirituality, into what happens once a community disbands, will follow. This will provide a better understanding of sewerage ghost towns, which will be applied to my creative work where ghosts narrate the story of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community.

Consideration is given to how existing theories and concepts of the abject, stakeholder engagement principles relative to the abject, and writing of the ‘truth’ could be supplemented for greater understanding of sewerage ghost towns and their communities.

1.2 Sewerage ghost town communities

Abandonment, scattered remains in knee-high weeds; a place once thrived, far grander than the relics left behind in this ghost town, where complete homes of yesterday rest buried deep beneath the earth. That’s not visible when sitting on steps of pale blue leading into the old swimming pool, not when glancing at the white square tiles edging it. Not one has fallen away, testament to the workmanship of the 1940s and the care given to it over the years – especially so, given it was built during the meagre times of World War Two when resources were scarce. The change rooms stand derelict to one side of the pool and the community hall from the 1920s guards from behind, as the weathered and wise protector.

The swimming pool is in the top-end township of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm at Werribee. The township grew when the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm was established in 1892, along with a bottom-end township to the south of the sewerage farm, along the Port Phillip Bay foreshore.
Previous to this, British journalists described Melbourne as ‘a city of magnificent intentions’, while also dubbing it Marvellous ‘Smellbourne’ because of its unsanitary waste-disposal methods. Melbourne was considered the smelliest city in the world. Mortality rates from diphtheria and typhoid numbered 86.3 for every 100,000 inhabitants, compared with 16 in London and 66 in Paris. Strolling streets and children playing outdoors necessitated an Irish jig through a cesspool of urine and nightsoil; kitchen, bath and laundry water; drainage from stables and cowsheds; liquids from trades and manufacturers; and water running off roofs and over land. All met in open street channels and earthen ditches to form sluggish glob.

These unsanitary conditions triggered a royal commission in 1888, resulting in English engineer James Mansergh being consulted for his expertise to draw up plans for sewerage for Melbourne. The Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) was founded in 1891 to treat Melbourne’s sewage and to supply water to the city. It was modelled on the Metropolitan Board of Works in London.

The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm measured some 8000 hectares in size – about the size of Phillip Island off the southern coast of Australia or the island of Mykonos in Greece – and Werribee was the nearest town up to 30 kilometres away from the sewerage farm’s most western point. As such, workers of the sewerage farm and their families lived on site.

That was before the automobile came into daily use and where transport was by bicycle, train, horse or foot. The MMBW began building cottages in the top-end and bottom-end townships to lease cheaply to their workers; the cottages came with two cows for milking and making butter, cheese and cream for the family. The cows were so well nourished from feeding on the lush, green sewage-watered paddocks, that families often shared produce with neighbours, particularly if the neighbours’ cows were ageing and producing less milk. They also sold surplus products to grocers in Werribee and to markets in Footscray and Melbourne.
As Melbourne grew, so did the workforce required to manage the sewage, leading to the MMBW progressively building cottages to cluster within four main settlements across the vast and isolated site, as well as others that were situated near remote works. The MMBW could not keep up with the pace of men being employed and so while employees waited for a house to rent for their families, they would share sleeping quarters with single men or camp in tents on site, going home to their families living in Werribee, Little River or Lara on their days off.

Alternatively, they lived with their families in tents on site until a cottage became available for rent, some camping for many years while waiting for a cottage. With this growth came the development of services that any community required — a pier, schools, a church shared by three denominations, a community hall, a post office and general store, a park, a picnic area and sporting and recreation facilities.
By 1943, the swimming pool was in the process of being built as part of a development to triple the size of the top-end township to cater for the postwar boom. Only the top-end township had power; all other cottages across the sewerage farm relied on candles and kerosene lamps for lighting, ice for refrigeration and wood fires for stoves and heating, progressing to generators in later years.

This is the typical nature of sewerage towns: men and, in modern times, women, working on a sewerage farm or treatment plant to treat sewage, living with their families on site and community facilities growing around them. It is how a sewerage town community grows, how the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community grew to support the establishment of sewerage for Melbourne. It was one of the largest and most important public works undertaken in Australia in the 19th century, and provided job security for many farmers during the 1890s economic crash and 1930s depression (Measham 2014).
In earlier years, these workers’ towns were known as construction camps in Australia, where workers and their families developed into communities to live beside large construction projects. Today, we hear more commonly about mining towns and, internationally, of company towns. These are towns where most housing, stores, services and facilities are owned or managed by the one company or organisation that employs residents in the town nearby. The town grows into one that is mostly populated by people working for that company or organisation.

It is worth noting here the difference between sewerage and sewage. By definition, sewerage means the entire system used to collect and treat sewage, that of sewers, channels, pipes, pumping stations and other infrastructure for transporting sewage. Sewage is the wastewater from households — kitchen, laundry, bathroom and toilet — and industry. Sewage passes through sewers, channels, pipes, pumping stations and other sewage infrastructure to be sent to a sewerage farm or treatment plant.
The following table charts key milestones in the development of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Milestone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) founded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>Work begins on establishing the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm; workers begin living on site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Building of cottages begins in the top-end and bottom-end townships; families begin joining workers to live on site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Jetty built in the bottom-end township; proposal to build shops and licensed hotel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Cocoroc North School opens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>The Metropolitan Farm cricket team is established; first sewage flows reach the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>A Mechanics Institute is built to also act as a library and community hall; it will be burnt down in 1924 and rebuilt five years later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>Cocoroc South School and Cocoroc West School open.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The Metropolitan Farm football team is established.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>The Metropolitan Farm croquet and tennis teams are established, as well as a rifle club; the sports pavilion, oval, croquet lawns and tennis courts with a club house, follows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Around 27 cottages stand in the bottom-end township and 20 cottages stand in the top-end township; a post office run by a postmistress offers postal services to residents and workers; a general store follows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Murtcaim School opens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>375 men are employed, cottages stand for 88 families, grocers delivering goods replace the general store.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>The swimming pool is built.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Women play football; the population peaks at more than 500.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>The community begins disbanding; houses are burnt down or relocated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>The Metropolitan Farm football team folds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>The last family leaves the bottom-end township.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>The community hall is moved to sit beside the swimming pool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>The last family leaves the top-end township; all four settlements are now abandoned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>The last of the scattered homes are vacated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>The small cluster of houses leased to employees on the boundary of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm is now vacated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>The MMBW becomes Melbourne Water.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reactivation of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community begins through a public art project, as part of Treatment.

The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community begins reconnecting through this research.

The Friends of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm forms and becomes incorporated.

Table 1: Development of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community.

At the time of writing, in 2019, few physical structures of this past community remain. The swimming pool exists; however, it is earmarked for filling in 2020, to repurpose as a rain garden for stormwater treatment. Its associated change rooms stand, yet will be demolished and rebuilt in the same style and with the same materials as toilet facilities. The community hall exists; however, it was relocated in 1975 from where it originally stood beside the school and church for 70 years, to sit beside the swimming pool and change rooms. It is set to become an education centre. The sports oval and pavilion also remain.

The heritage-listed water tank remains, after being restored some years ago as an exhibition space beneath the iron tank. The water tank was moved to the township in 1893 as a back-up water supply for the workers and residents. It was originally located in East Melbourne, where it stored water from the Yarra River in Melbourne’s early days. It was decommissioned in 1925. The top-end township and all cottages across the sewerage farm site were connected to the main water system and the water tank was never used. It was finally drained in 1929.

Nothing exists in the other settlements or from the other cottages strewn across the site, apart from the wiry tea-tree hedge that fronted the Cocoroc South School in the bottom-end township.

The refurbishing works are part of Melbourne Water’s plan to revitalise the heritage of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm by establishing an education and visitor precinct in the top-end township.
All the cottages, the church, schools and teachers’ residences, post office and general store are gone. Some cottages were sold and moved off site to be relocated in Werribee and Little River. One school was relocated and still stands as the Werribee Scout Hall, another was relocated into Werribee to become the clubhouse for the Young Farmers group. It has since been demolished. Most cottages and their sheds, more than 100 structures, were buried in deep holes beneath where they once stood from the 1960s, either burned into the hole or covered over in their own grave. Nothing is left.

Today exists an abandoned sewerage town. Today sees a sewerage town community resurrecting through this research and other work to preserve its fading heritage.

However, the vast lands of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm still treat sewage. Over half of the sewage generated by Melbourne’s population of 4.8 million continues to be treated on site. It is known today as Melbourne Water’s Western Treatment Plant, renowned internationally for sustainable sewage treatment. Melbourne Water is a statutory authority owned by the Victorian...

Figure 6: Resident in her backyard with the water tank in the background, top-end township, 1960s. Photo courtesy of the O’Connor family.
Government, charged with managing and protecting Melbourne’s water, sewerage, waterways, drainage and flooding.

The Western Treatment Plant is bordered by the Werribee River, Princess Freeway and Point Wilson Road. It sits around halfway between Melbourne and Geelong. The plant produces almost 40 billion litres of recycled water a year and enough energy from the methane, which it captures under large covers, to generate power for its site. Surplus energy is transferred to the electricity grid. The plant provides diverse habitats and vegetation, and a refuge for tens of thousands of birds. It is listed as a wetlands of international importance under the Ramsar Convention 1971. It is Australia’s most important wetlands for waterbirds.
Defining sewerage ghost towns

Sewerage towns are towns where most housing, stores, services and facilities are owned or managed by the one company or organisation that is in the business of sewage treatment. The town is mostly populated by people, with or without families, working for that company or organisation. A sewerage town community is a community that has grown to live in a sewerage town that sits either on or beside a sewerage farm or treatment plant.

Sewerage ghost towns, therefore, are sewerage towns that have been abandoned by their communities and nothing or little of the town’s physical existence remains. The community of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm lived on the land MMBW dedicated to treating Melbourne’s sewage, beside paddocks watered with raw sewage and alongside channels transporting sewage and effluent around the site. When it disbanded, what remained was a sewerage ghost town.

Other sewerage ghost towns and their communities

It was important to uncover other sewerage ghost towns and their communities, particularly communities that continue to exist on or beside sewerage farms or
treatment plants. These communities have a unique set of conditions: those of living around sewage, and the resulting segregation and discrimination because of that. Unearthing them would provide an opportunity for first-hand observations and the chance to speak to people, for further insights into the sewerage town community and the sewerage ghost town at heart of my study. It was hoped, too, that other literature might be uncovered at any time throughout the research, understanding that minimal literature exists.

Small, self-sufficient populations with community and social amenity similar to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community were found in Adelaide and Sydney in Australia, and in London and Esholt in England. A sewerage town community was highlighted as potentially existing in Germany; however, it is yet to be explored.

One community continues to live beside the Esholt Sewage Works in Esholt village. Esholt Sewage Works sits on 300 hectares and is currently managed by Yorkshire Water. The Bradford Council established the sewage works in 1904 and purchased all the cottages in neighbouring Esholt village for employees and their families to live. Esholt village has a community hall, school, church, pub, post office and cricket team. All buildings still stand today, and current and past employees from the sewage works continue to live in the

Figure 9: Esholt village, 2018.
village. These include an engineer now retired, and a woman living in the family home she was born in and that her father rented as a sewage worker.

Other small communities once lived on Crossness, Abbey Mills and Western pumping stations in London, the latter two still operating under Thames Water. Given sewerage engineering and cultural parallels between the MMBW and the UK, it was not surprising to find such communities. The three pumping stations once contained steam engines that would pump sewage up to the surface for discharge into the Thames River, according to the tide.

Crossness Pumping Station began operating in 1865 and housed workers and their families in 35 cottages. A school for the children was situated near the pump house and cricket matches often saw women and men play on the on-site oval. It ceased operation in the 1950s and is now a museum.

Western Pumping Station had three cottages for families, a house for the superintendent and his family, a bowling green and a cooling pond filled with water from the steam engines. It served as a warm swimming pool for on-site families and their visitors. Only the superintendent’s house exists today as refurbished offices.
Abbey Mills Pumping Station was built in the 1800s. Cottages were built for workers and their families on its boundary. Eight still stand, although now privately owned. Again, the superintendent’s house stands on the grounds as refurbished offices.

Figure 11: Past sewerage workers and their families’ homes on the boundary of Abbey Mills Pumping Station, 2018.

The literature on the sewerage communities found in Australia is small and mostly refers to sewage treatment. Light mention is made of employees living on site at the Sunnybrae Farm in Adelaide and on the Botany-Rockdale Sewage Farm in Sydney. At Sunnybrae Farm, a house was provided for the manager. At Botany-Rockdale Sewage Farm, a house was erected for the manager and five cottages were built for the sewage farm’s labourers.

Although much smaller than the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, these sewerage communities provided some insights. These will be discussed in later chapters.
2. The poetics methodology

In academic and creative terms, a poetics of creative writing research that crosses art forms and is multidisciplinary, sits at the base of my methodological design. It provides a strong foundation for bringing many elements together to draw out understandings of segregated and abject communities, for testing on sewerage ghost towns communities.

2.1 Poetics of creative writing research

Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt suggest that ‘knowledge is derived from doing and from the senses’ (2012, p. 1). Studio enquiry methodology can generate new understandings that other research practices may not. They believe in the important relationship between ‘theory and practice and the relevance of the theoretical and philosophical paradigms for the contemporary arts practitioner’ (2012, p. 1). They refer to this as practice-led research (PLR).

Patrick West believes in the ‘social-justice value’ Barrett and Bolt place on PLR. Barrett and Bolt, as cited by West (2019), believe in PLR’s ‘capacity to bring into view, particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalized or not yet recognized in established social practices and discourses’. This resonates with my use of stakeholder engagement principles to engage marginalised communities, and to act as a voice for the abjected and their stories through a form of avant-garde writing employing abject language. Sarah Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel say that ‘Kristeva highlights poetry and avant-garde writing as examples of how “the signifying process joins social revolution”’ (2017, p. 3). Literary activism and poetry communicate viewpoints and cultural and political attitudes for personal and cultural exchanges.

Poetics involves a writer’s way with words – the imaginative arrangement of words, language, rhythm and verbal texture to unlock emotions and establish relationships between writer and reader. Kim Lasky discusses this approach, which goes back to 330 BC when Aristotle explained how ‘basic elements might be assembled to produce a successful composition, the number and nature of
the work’s constituent parts, and “all other relevant matters” (2013, p. 16). Since then, writers have used this poetics to ‘formulate and discuss an attitude to their work that recognises influences, the traditions they write within and develop, the literary, social and political context in which they write, and the processes of composition and revision they undertake’ (2013, p. 17). A poetics of creative writing research provides a means to ‘articulate the relationship between the creative work and the critical context, thinking and outcomes associated with its production’ (2013, p. 17). This principle allows for an infusion of ideas, thinking, application and practice. It is what I have built my methodology around.

West depicts PLR as an action that wavers between hiking and wandering. As a research methodology, it ‘combines the direct approach of hiking with the indirect approach of wandering’ (2019). It is a practice that is expressed in ‘the non-traditional knowledge component (generically, the creative product) and the traditional knowledge component (variously, the exegesis, journal article, scholarly book, or research statement)’ (2019). These notions of wandering and hiking, and an interweaving between knowledge components, align more readily with the principles Lasky discusses. Theorists Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper similarly conceptualise creative writing research as ‘primarily focused on the production of new works, and in the understanding of the processes as well as the ideas and actions that inform a project’. It has ‘practice as its conceptual core’ (2013, p. 2).

Kroll and Harper believe poetics allows writers to focus on techniques that may involve the ‘arrangement of words used to unlock emotions or establish a relationship between the writer and a potential reader’ (2013, p. 3). It permits working with others as well as the imagination, and supports writers to critically engage and ask questions to ‘formulate and discuss a critical attitude to their work. This formulation recognises a range of influences: the tradition they write within and against, relevant literary, social, and political contexts, and the processes of composition and revision undertaken’ (2013, p. 14). Lasky cites writer Seamus Heaney and his consideration of influences on his writing process.
He argues that they include a writer’s “‘definition of his stance towards life, a definition of his own reality.’” It is this “definition of a stance” that lies at the heart of poetics’ (2013, p. 19).

The poetics methodology seems to be a more holistic notion of practice-based research. Rather than practice leading the research as in PLR, the poetics methodology is more circular. It allows for a meander of hiking and wandering through the researching, between the writing practice and critical theories and concepts. Elements interweave, research and practice are fluid, rather than using a methodology that is practice-centric. Kroll and Harper are clear about this. ‘Creative writing research is, therefore, concerned with actions as well as outcomes, with the individual as well as the culture and, furthermore, with concepts and theories that illuminate these complex interrelationships’ (2013, p. 2).

All considerations within poetics connect to make up the research. No consideration is more important than any other. Undertaking the literature review and field work; taking the multidisciplinary approach of stakeholder engagement and cross-art-form collaboration; and understanding key concepts and theories from Agamben, Kristeva, current community practice, hauntology and spirituality – all are part of poetics. There is also the examination of data uncovered through library-based and archival research, the avant-garde, Romanticist and Gothic notions that inform my writing practice, my views, and my experience working with disadvantaged and marginalised communities. This includes working with the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community and the Western Treatment Plant, as well as living in Werribee. Needs may vary: perhaps engagement to draw out data is the focus one month, and the writing is the focus in the next. All combined, however, culminate in a poetics of creative writing research. As Lasky says: ‘The concept of poetics offers a useful means to articulate those processes involved in the making of a work’ (2013, p. 17). It affords the chance for interaction with the research process and its varying elements and methods, thus providing greater awareness of the nature of the
methodology and sensitivity to the fine-grained aspects of findings, including marginal aspects. Findings follow process.

Lasky’s notions resonate with my work as they allow for a flexibility of direction and meander between practice, process and knowledge-enhancing. The creative work and the research findings of the exegesis interweave to create depth when interacting and engaging with sewerage town communities – their experiences are vital information for this research. Lasky suggests that ‘poetics might usefully become the anchoring panel at the centre of research practice that sets out to produce creative work in knowing close connection with critical and theoretical influences’ (2013, p. 15). Anchoring provides a solid foundation for questioning, meandering, hiking and always coming back to the core of the research question.

The cross-art-form collaboration and multidisciplinary approach are rooted in this anchoring. A collaboration with singer-songwriter Elle Murphy enabled a nostalgic look at living on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm through song. It was part of the approach to establish a strong stakeholder engagement framework and method as part of Stakeholder theory, for working with past and present communities to share stories of life in sewerage town communities. This will be discussed in detail in the next section on the stakeholder engagement method. Briefly, however, Robert Phillips defines Stakeholder theory as ‘a theory of organizational management and ethics’ (2011, p. 480). While it is aimed at business, it is relevant to sewerage town communities because any individual or group that can affect or is affected by an organisation is a stakeholder.

The chart below shows the methodological design, where all elements necessary to answer the research question come together. I draw on the theories and philosophies of Kristeva and Agamben to move into a dialogue with hauntology, as well as concepts of community and spirituality, and engage with those through my creative work as an interpretation of the story of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community. My dialogue and interpretation is not as a philosophical reading of Agamben and Kristeva, but rather, theories and
concepts working in concert with my practice and ideas of writing, community and engagement.

Table 2: Methodology design.

When considering stakeholders, I too am a stakeholder in this research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses the notion of inside and outside research and collaboration, and believes that the researcher mostly assumes the role of outsider, ‘to observe without being implicated in the scene’ (2012, p. 138). However, an ‘insider’ researcher has connections and relationships with the stakeholders they work with and may be privileged with information an ‘outsider’ does not have. Insider research, however, must be respectful and ethical. ‘The critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity’ (2012, p. 138).

Smith’s notions resonate and enrich this poetics. I am the outsider conducting the research within the community, as well as the insider through my experience with the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, my past work in community education of sewage treatment and my decades of living in Werribee. Each can work both for and against me.

Being an insider allows for closer connections and trust for a deeper sharing of stories. Yet I may be drawn in too closely and need time for reflection.
Or I may not be ‘insider’ enough, with barriers to being trusted to share in
deep stories.

Being an ‘outsider’ could see some stories being exaggerated due to the
lack of a trusted relationship between the stakeholder and me as the researcher.
Consideration is required around what is ‘truth’ in such tales, and of the ‘truth’ in
the secrets and town gossip.

I have felt myself to be both insider and outsider, sometimes reflecting on
and questioning ‘truths’ revealed to me as being ‘untruths’, such as in the tales
of football grandeur and the deeply personal stories. This was the case when a
woman in her 70s revealed she had been assaulted as a young girl near the
swimming pool. A delicate handling is required to write about such stories.
Omitting them would be an ‘untruth’ and an opportunity lost for a fuller, more
complete story of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community.

Writing of ‘truth’ has always been important to me – human experience is
something that cannot be created without real understanding and expression. I
refer to Matthew Ricketson, who says that writers explore ‘events in their
complexity and people in full humanity’ (2014, p. 1). This resonates with the
poetics methodology as it provides for consideration of events, people and my
views, in order for me to develop my stance. Ricketson explains what he terms
narrative nonfiction as involving a journalist’s curiosity and drive for the truth in
discovering what’s going on in the world. Writing this way provides an
opportunity to tell ‘true’ stories with ‘the complexities of events’ that are
‘imbued with the subtleties, resonances and emotional freight of storytelling’
(2014, p. 6).

While examining library-based and archival material provides some
factual information about living on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, most
information comes from recollected subjective memories shared by past
residents, and families retelling stories told to them. Therefore, much of the
social history was collected through interviews, as part of stakeholder
engagement. Telling these ‘true’ stories is about conveying them accurately, and
interpreting them to evoke the emotion in their ‘truth’. It provides the chance to
think on the ‘truths’ and the quirks of memory haziness and romanticised tale, as what is ‘truth’ to one person may not be ‘truth’ to another. In the same instance, many of these ‘truths’ will be the only remaining ‘truths’ in existence and so it is vital that they are captured.

Because the story of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community is one of abjection, it provides greater scope for creative working of the raw and untold experience of the abjected. I interact with the ‘truths’ to treat the rawness of their abject reality, exposing them through language that moves them from their abject status into an arena for open discussion, while working through an abjection of language in my creative practice. The reader then has the chance for a heightened experience of this newly exposed ‘truth’ of the abjected. My writing, I suggest, has become a form of avant-garde literature.

As has been my practice over many years, I interweave ‘truth’ with Romanticist and Gothic notions of the sublime, emotive and evocative expression, and frank reality. I believe these styles provide the opportunity to convey emotional, honest and evocative interpretations through rich layering of language. Romanticism came into being when artists went on a quest for sublime artistic expression and heightened feelings and emotions. The style filled the void left by upheaval to the Classicist style and political change where, according to Alan Bewell, much interest flooded into Europe from Australia at the end of the 18th century and into the 19th century (2014, p. 15). Romanticists viewed the Australian landscape ‘as if seen for the first time, with a freshness, richness, depth, and intensity that has not been equalled’ (Bewell 2004, p. 5). European visitors and settlers believed that ‘Australia radically called into question the order of nature as it previously had been understood’ (2014, p. 8). The Australian landscape was being seen in frank reality, at least so far as Romanticism defines frank reality, for the first time, instead of in the European tradition. The Gothic style, too, reflected the Australian landscape, but as a wide expanse that can be jarring and dreamy, yet tinged in an occasional fear, horror, death and gloom.

It is these notions that I discuss in the following chapters, which have helped me augment the ‘truth’ of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community
and write about its life within a contrasting dry and lush landscape, among flat basalt plains.

2.2 Working with communities

The basis for working with communities is stakeholder engagement as part of Stakeholder theory, a method I have used for almost 30 years in my community practice. It has worked exceptionally well to draw out stories from past and present communities of what life on and near sewerage farms and treatment plants was, and is, like. These first-hand experiences are important in helping to create real and new understandings of abject communities relative to sewerage towns, particularly around segregation, contemporary attitudes to people living on and near sewage treatment, and the discrimination that can follow.

Robert Phillips et al. discuss Stakeholder theory as having qualities that concern the common good: ethics, rights, morals and being fair. ‘Stakeholder theory is distinct because it addresses morals and values explicitly as a central feature of managing organizations’ (2005, p. 481). This is key because each stakeholder, in the individual as well as in the collective sense, has different morals, ethics and values. Stakeholder engagement must address the uniqueness of the stakeholders. R Edward Freeman believes that stakeholder theory is complex but, ideally, is a way for businesses to work and be managed that creates value for the business. ‘Stakeholder theory is about value creation and trade and how to manage a business effectively’ (2010, p. 9). While I understand the benefit to businesses and other organisations, I have also seen the benefits it presents to stakeholders in my community practice. Freeman goes on to discuss stakeholder relationships, for without those, creating value and managing the business would not be possible: ‘At any point in time a company exists in a network of stakeholder relationships, a subset of which we might designate as “industry” if we are so inclined’ (2010, p. 15).

Stakeholder theory is applicable to any individual or group of people that can affect or is affected by an organisation and its projects, programs, initiatives
or issues. They hold a stake, interest or concern in the individual sense, or a stake in the collective sense – thus, a community. According to James Grunig, stakeholders are ‘linked to an organization because they and the organization have consequences on each other’ (1992, p. 25). These consequences can be both positive and negative. Managing stakeholder relationships, therefore, becomes important in order to manage those consequences and ensure that value to the business is being created. From my perspective as a community practitioner, I also ensure value to the stakeholder, to lessen negative consequences and build on positive impacts that affect them. Engaging a community or stakeholder is part of a process to build and manage relationships and mobilise stakeholders within a community so they can have a voice and become involved.

The range of stakeholder engagement sits along the public participation spectrum model below. The spectrum is used by community practitioners worldwide to ensure optimised levels of stakeholder participation. I have used this model in my own practice, where community collaborations are an essential element of community renewal and building resilient communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</td>
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Table 3: Public Participation Spectrum, IAP2 International Federation, 2014.

Stakeholder engagement is well used as a community participatory tool in community-based arts and to engage disadvantaged or difficult-to-engage communities.

The Street Surfer Bus project I was involved with in 2009, as part of the Heathdale Neighbourhood Renewal project, saw 12 young people painting the...
inside of an old bus using stencil art. It was a way to re-engage them as they had become isolated within the community. Street Surfer buses provide activities for young people aged 12 to 25 years with such things as music, gaming consoles, wi-fi and barbecues, as well as offering support services. The bus is driven to locations where young people visit or loiter and is usually accompanied by a police officer and youth support workers. The program is supported by Victoria Police, councils and agencies offering services to young people (Salvation Army 2019).

Becoming Butterflies was another renewal project. It aimed at re-engaging women who had become isolated after suffering domestic violence or were newly arrived in Australia. Developing a trusted and strong relationship was fundamental in being able to draw the women from their cocoons and encourage them to communicate through their art. It was the beginning of a women’s support group through the Heathdale Neighbourhood Renewal project that was part of the Victorian state government’s Neighbourhood Renewal initiative (2001) used across Australia and internationally, to build resilient communities (DHHS 2007, para. 3). The importance of providing opportunities that encourage people to engage and participate cannot be underestimated, considering the impact of the benefits gained by both individuals and wider communities.

A community-arts-based project in the Netherlands affords another good example of strong stakeholder engagement. In 2010, an arts education institute in the low-socioeconomic city of Delfzijl produced Bizet’s Carmen as a community opera. Jacqueline Clements wrote some years later that, even with all its complexities, the community project achieved ‘artistic results and community outcomes by working with a mix of professionals and amateur performers’ (2016, p. 57). Clements sees the importance of collaboration and engaging people to encourage them to participate: ‘In recent years community arts projects have regained popularity in many parts of the world, including the Netherlands, to stimulate regeneration and community activation’ (2016, p. 58). Governments recognise the importance of creative communities as ‘a
requirement for urban innovation and building economic, social and cultural structures’ (2016, p. 58). Stakeholder theory and, more explicitly, stakeholder engagement are about participatory practices that benefit the individual and communities economically, socially, emotionally and culturally.

Applying stakeholder engagement principles to a well-thought-out methodology builds the framework necessary to develop relationships, and helps stakeholders to participate and contribute their stories about life on and near sewerage farms and treatment plants. This ensures a more robust capture of stories. Little has been written of this life and generations with those stories are dying, making it vital to record their stories before they and their memories disappear. Freeman believes ‘mutually beneficial stakeholder relationships can enhance the wealth-creating capacity of the corporation, while failure to do so limits capacity for future wealth generation’ (2010, p. 20).

Strong engagement and the resulting relationships helped to build trust, inclusiveness and personal buy-in to this research project. That has led to improved sharing of memories and a more authentic understanding of abject communities relative to sewerage ghost towns. A continual flow of mutual benefit persists. ‘Stakeholder relationships are a mutually reinforcing, interactive network’ (Freeman 2010, p. 28).

When engaging abjected, marginalised or disadvantaged stakeholders or communities, it is vital that respectful, inclusive and authentic engagement is established. The process must include a solid foundation of relationship-building that occurs over a long period of time. Engagement must be tailored to the stakeholder and be considerate of the ethics, morals and values that apply to them. One size does not fit all and the method that works with one group may not work for another, and vice-versa.

Two-way communication

A means of two-way communication was established from the research project’s inception. According to Stakeholder theory, two-way communication allows people to participate and, by doing so, provides the chance for them to feel
included and empowered as they are contributing meaningfully and respectfully to the story’s creation. It opens channels for sharing and receiving information and aligns with the Public Participation Spectrum. It benefits the creation of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community story, and gives stakeholders the chance to share their memories and have them recorded, validated and included in the story’s creation. Ultimately, it helps to answer the research question.

Two-way communication sits at the core of my stakeholder engagement methodology. From the moment in August 2016 that the two-way communication was established, information about the project was shared, and the search began for people interested to participate and be interviewed about their experience of living on the sewerage farm. The communication channel provided an opportunity too, for people to ask questions and share information, thus assisting in building trust and the formation of relationships. The establishment of a project Facebook page called The faraway land of the house and two cows provided the focal point for this two-way communication. To garner momentum, I shared information on a weekly basis; soon stories and artefacts began streaming in.

Around 50 interviews were undertaken over two and a half years after ethics approval was granted in November 2016. Interviews were structured to be participatory and with mutual benefit in mind, with me driving interviewees to the site of their home on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm as we spoke. This often evoked strong emotions, and people opened up with personal details that ranged from death, family violence and hardship to sweetheart rendezvous. Interviews would sometimes run for five hours. This was due to the size of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, the fact that people had much to say, and because people thoroughly enjoyed talking about their life. Some people were interviewed two or three times if they had much to say or if I had further questions after our initial meeting. Interviews were recorded and provided the bulk of the information for the creative work. Data also informed this exegesis and paraphrasing was used from interviews rather than direct quotes, for cleaner integration into this text.
I established the communication channel three years ago, thus allowing time for relationships to develop and assisting the project to gain a strong following and reputation over a lengthy period. According to Freeman, ‘good stakeholder relations enable a firm to enjoy superior financial performance over a longer period of time’ (2010, p.22). While he is talking of business, the principle of establishing good stakeholder relations can be applied to any project.

As of December 2019, more than 1200 people follow [The faraway land of the house and two cows page](#) and almost 900 previously unseen images of life on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm are hosted on the page for anyone to see and interact with. Most photos have come from the community, with a handful coming from the Melbourne Water archives and the Public Records Office. Old films, also from Melbourne Water, sit on the page too. Much material has been uncovered, enough to write a second book, at least. Many people have come forward with stories and offers to be interviewed, too many for the timeframe of this PhD. Stories collected reach back to first families arriving at the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm in 1892, most not heard or documented before. In addition, presenting the research project to special-interest groups across western metropolitan Melbourne has helped generate interest in the research and uncover many stories.

The Facebook page is a live and evolving social-media channel. Most weeks I continue to share stories, including stories written about the sewerage farm by other writers. These help to generate interest and act as prompts for people to recollect their own stories. They provide wider variety and interest in the sewerage farm. Upon the death of a past Metropolitan Sewerage Farm resident, I also post a tribute to them with accompanying photos. This, particularly, has helped people reconnect. It is seen through the many comments and sentiments expressed upon a tribute posting. Interestingly, too, after three years of almost weekly communication – where individual posts have been shared up to 20 times each week – when I meet someone in person who has a connection to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm or watches the Facebook page, an instant familiarity is expressed and stories and intimate details are shared.
with me. I equate this to strong engagement where people have come to know me through the Facebook page, even when we have never met in person. The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community reconnecting is an unexpected and wonderful outcome that has seen an almost lost community rebirthing, of a community disbanded from its physical place to exist in an almost etheric plane.

**Flexibility in stakeholder engagement**

A key fundamental in stakeholder engagement is the ability to be flexible, allowing for building on opportunities and addressing issues as they present. An opportunity arose to collaborate with stakeholders to develop a Friends of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm group (Friends group). It was not part of the initial methodology, but the opportunity presented when Melbourne Water was considering demolishing the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community hall. At that point, I realised that working to help preserve and advocate for the heritage of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm was greater than the limits of this research project. The hall was an integral part of social life on the sewerage farm. It acted as a library for residents to borrow books, while also hosting weddings, engagements, parties, dances and balls, school concerts, card nights, meetings and training on constant, weekly rotation. The hall ultimately remains, after it was found to be structurally sound. However, it led to discussions with targeted stakeholders to begin establishing a Friends group, including with Melbourne Water who supported the formation of such a group to help preserve the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm’s heritage.

The establishment of the Friends group began with the recruitment of seven people. Six of these were past residents of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, two of whom descended from initial families stretching back to 1893. It was important to recruit people with strong connections to the sewerage farm as I felt they would ensure the best outcomes for its heritage. The Friends group became incorporated in 2019 and is independent of Melbourne Water; however, Melbourne Water is a member of the group. The group works to advocate and actively preserve, capture and promote the culture and heritage of the
Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. The Friends group received recognition when journalist Carolyn Webb wrote about the Friends group’s formation and the sewerage farm’s heritage: ‘It’s a gem of history, sitting here. And it’s played an important part in everyday lives. Without it, Melbourne would have really suffered. We are all connected to it’ (Webb, 2019).

When establishing any friends group, members engage at the ‘empower’ level of the Public Participation Spectrum, where final decision-making is in the group’s hands. This assists in building resilience and cohesion by empowering the group to make decisions. However, this empower level cannot be reached with the Friends of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm as it is working within the restrictions and parameters that come with an operational sewerage site. This was most noted when the Friends group became aware of Melbourne Water’s plans to repurpose the swimming pool. The group voiced its strong opposition to the repurposing as the swimming pool was an integral part of life on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. However, plans for the swimming pool were part of the top-end township redevelopment and had been drawn up before the Friends group had formed.

I agreed with the Friends group and opposed the treatment of the swimming pool, believing it lacked appropriate preservation. Melbourne Water, however, believed it was preserving the pool according to heritage preservation guidelines. For me and the group, the repurposing was coming at a cost to the memories and human story connected to building the swimming pool during difficult wartime, and to those who swam its waters. Such is the strong attachment and importance of its memory that wider community discontent was growing. I found myself sandwiched between stakeholders – the awakening sewerage community and Melbourne Water. I was also conflicted by my own ethical and moral values. This is a prime example of inside-outside research and the tension that can occur. After reflection, and with the knowledge that the swimming pool’s treatment was being discussed in activist and political circles and that a ‘soft protest’ was being mooted by the wider community, my only solution was to make Melbourne Water aware of the unrest and to step away.
This is where strong stakeholder engagement can become the ‘double-edged sword’. In activating stakeholders, one must be prepared for the dual effect of both positive and negative impact, and the activism that can develop.

When undertaking research in partnership with industry, it is important to understand that these conflicts of interest can occur, and to manoeuvre through them with respect and integrity to all parties, as well as oneself. It becomes a matter of knowing when to agree to disagree respectfully. This is crucial and cannot be stressed enough, when bound by a formal agreement with industry, as was the case with Melbourne Water.

**Treatment: Flightlines**

Further stakeholder engagement was undertaken during *Treatment: Flightlines 2017*, a large-scale public-art project curated by Dr Cameron Bishop of Deakin University (associate supervisor for my thesis). It was held in collaboration with Melbourne Water at the Western Treatment Plant over two days in April 2017 (Bishop, 2017). The project fosters artists to interpret the Western Treatment Plant through their art. It provided me with an opportunity to develop a program
for the community to participate, where they could share thoughts and ideas of community life on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm.

Over the two days, I fitted out the sports pavilion with blown-up old photos and prompts to help people visiting to convey their feelings and memories about this past life. The sports pavilion created the nostalgia to help draw out thinking around the sewerage farm community for discussion in a public arena.

Reflections were collected and written as a nostalgic text as the basis for the cross-art-form collaboration with singer-songwriter Elle Murphy composing lyrics and music. Working across art forms is, according to Conrad and Skinner, ‘central to defining, exploring and investigating current practices’ in helping to create knowledge through art (2015, p. 14). It brings the unique skills of writers, singers, performers and community together to create a wider, more innovative response and experience.

The song created is a haunting interpretation of life on the sewerage farm, imbued with a longing spirit. It is perhaps its own unique form of abjection through the aesthetically pleasing combination of music and lyrics that juxtaposes with the story being conveyed: that of a love of a life on a sewerage farm, with the chance to experience freedom in its isolation. It is to be

Figure 13: Stakeholder engagement at Treatment: Flightlines 2017.
performed at a reunion of past residents and employees of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm being planned for February 2020. A link to the song is provided in the creative written work.
3. Literature review of concepts and theories

The sewerage ghost town provides a distinct and unique set of conditions for investigation compared with other ghost town communities like, say, a mining town. Its distinction comes from an environment where a community lives alongside sewerage, the segregation and discrimination that results, the impact of that on the nature and wellbeing of cohesive and self-sustaining communities, and the effects on the subsequent ghost town once the community disbands. For a better understanding of the nature of sewerage ghost towns, it is necessary to investigate theories and concepts around segregated, abjected and emerging abject communities, current practice and ideals on what makes strong, resilient communities, and notions relevant to what is left behind after a community disbands from a sewerage town. The following literature review looks at key concepts and themes relative to this, for a rethinking of how such communities survive and thrive through marginalised abjection.

Segregation and abjection of community

What is of particular interest to me when thinking about sewerage town communities is their segregation from mainstream society and the resulting discrimination they face. Werribee and western metropolitan Melbourne have a long history of discrimination and disadvantage. Fatima Measham writes that people are reduced ‘to the characteristics of their neighbourhood’. She believes that suburbs can be regarded as ‘bad because the people in it are bad. Prevalent disadvantage and restricted social mobility are thus seen as the outcome of such people congregating, rather than as pre-existing conditions that they must endure’ (2014, p. 3). Measham, however, feels that residents have developed a strong sense of ‘stewardship that is communal and activist’ (2014, p. 4) because of it. This could be seen when Joanne Ryan MP referred to the importance of this research in the Australian federal parliament when addressing a story in the Melbourne newspaper, the Herald Sun, in 2018. The story concerned noxious odours being reported in the city of Melbourne and was promoted on Facebook
by the newspaper with a headline of ‘Worse than Werribee’ (2018). The newspaper story twisted a comment made by a person in the city, who said the odour was akin to that being on the sewerage farm, by attributing the odour to the suburb of Werribee and not the sewerage farm. Ryan is a resident of Werribee, as is Measham.

It is important, therefore, to understand the nature and wellbeing of cohesive and self-sustaining communities as I believe these qualities help communities build resilience to their abjection. Brad Warren and Patrick West maintain that rich ‘connections and relationships made within a place’ (2012, p. 3) result in strong community wellbeing. They hypothesise that an ecology of wellbeing ‘emerges out of the maximisation of (artistically created) relationships of people and place’ (2012, p. 9). While this relates to ecological creativity to improve community wellbeing in south-western Victoria, the idea resonates with other community wellbeing principles, such as those within the Victorian State Government’s Neighbourhood Renewal (2001) initiative used across Australia and internationally. The initiative encompasses a range of essential elements that must come together to build resilient communities, strong in community pride, participation, strength, safety and wellbeing.

When considering the ensuing stigma of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, I look to the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who discusses the human as a sacred person that is part of society, yet with two aspects. One is the biological existence of the animal with the necessity to eat, sleep and drink. The human is given bare life by God, known as zoē, which is sacred. The other is the modern and democratic part of life, known as bios: that of society, the political, social and legitimate aspects of life. It is the human’s legitimised, social life where it is ‘born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life’ (1998, p. 2).

The sacred person can be expelled from society; removed from bios to live as zoē and forcibly reduced to bare life (1998, p. 17). The sacred person, though, according to Agamben, cannot be sacrificed because they are not worthy of sacrifice, and are part of the community. ‘A person is simply set outside
human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law’ (1998, p. 82), condemned to live in this other state. It is interesting to note here that ancient records of capital punishment were not death penalties in the modern sense but more purification rites, where the ‘condemned man, with his head covered in a wolf skin, was put in a sack with serpents, a dog and a rooster, and then thrown into water, or defenestration from the Tarpean rock’ (1998, p. 82). He is not sacrificed, but separated from society.

Each component – bios and zoē – is necessary in society. Things are always cast out to keep society in a balance, as in the polarity of life: ‘pure and filthy, repugnant and fascinating’ (1998, p. 112). This then leads to the included-excluded dichotomy of what is thrown out also being necessary. ‘Together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoē, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction’ (1998, p. 9). Both bios and zoē are necessary together, where zoē lives in a state of exception. Agamben relates this state of exception to civil war because ‘civil war is the opposite of normal conditions’ (2005, p. 2). A state of exception suspends the ordinary rules to some of the population, including taking away people’s rights. Concentration and refugee camps are further examples where prisoners exist within a state of exception, their rights taken away to be left with bare life, zoē. This can then become the norm and a permanent state of exception that ‘tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government’ (2005, p. 2).

I look to philosopher Julia Kristeva for insights into what occurs when living in a state of exception, as Kristeva believes a ‘power vacuum’ emerges within the community living in marginalised abjection. Kristeva associates the abject with rejection: a hopeless, worse kind of behaviour or thing that sits
outside what is considered the norm. ‘It is something rejected from which one does not part’ (1982, p. 4). She talks of our bodies being split in two where bodily fluids are rejected and ejected from us, separated from us to become the abjected from us. The abject is not object or subject; it is me but it is not me. We cannot survive without excreting bodily waste, just as we cannot survive without efficient sewage treatment. Everyone rejects, abjects; often without knowing because we all have aversions. ‘And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject’ (1982, p. 2). What is abjected is now a superego, separated from the ego. Kristeva sees that people can define themselves according to what they are not. They lose sight of what they ought to be or do and associate with that abjection. People have an ego, which is the object, and a superego, which separates from the object to be the subject. It becomes the abject identity, going against cultural rules, etiquette and moral values. ‘What is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses’ (1982, p. 2). She believes the superego becomes the master that drives the ego away. ‘It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game’ (1982, p. 2). Sewerage town communities are abjected for their difference, as the subject of the object and subsequently, the superego of the ego and. It can be argued, the superego of society.

Moral compasses are unique and meaningful to each person, group or culture. The abject is rejecting moral limits according to the compass of moral regulation we turn to by default. This can be applied to my creative practice, wherein the language I use and the song created aims to nudge these moral limits for a rethinking of sewerage town communities. The abject is also the horrors that cause a sense of awful wonder, an experience of the sublime. ‘If the abject is already a wellspring of sign for a non-object, on the edges of primal repression, one can understand its skirting the somatic symptom on the one hand and sublimation on the other’ (Kristeva 1982, p. 11). That was obvious in the crowd watching Cloaca Professional defecate at MONA. Kristeva points out
that the abject is not the absence of something but rather the presence of something of disgust, or a means of arriving at disgust. ‘We are no longer within the sphere of the unconscious but at the limit of primal repression that, nevertheless, has discovered an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection’ (1982, p. 11).

Abjected communities living in a marginalised state

I now consider Kristeva’s notion of a ‘power vacuum’ emerging within this new abjected state, where the ‘power vacuum’ is ‘the absence of plans, disorder, all the things we speak of and that political parties show the effects of, that we citizens show the effect of. Yet in spite of this anarchy (who governs? who is going where?), signs of a new world order’ grow to be ‘both normalizing and falsifiable, normalizing but falsifiable’ (2000, p. 4). Abject communities live in their abjected margins, co-existing in the broader community as zoë to bios. It is in this liminal space that the ‘power vacuum’ emerges to sit alongside the sovereign law and power. Sarah Hansen sees the ‘power vacuum’ existing as a ‘regulatory power elaborated to the extent that it can no longer be located and invested in biological life to the extent that subjects are figured as patrimonial individuals’ (2010, p. 35).

Hansen describes the ‘power vacuum’ according to Kristeva, as a form of revolt that is ‘not a transgression of law but a displacement of authority within the psychic economy of the individual’ (2010, p. 36), and communities. Kristeva questions whether ‘revolt, or what is called “riot” on the Web’ is ‘waking humanity from its dream of hyperconnectedness’ (2014, p.1), and whether revolt is even possible.

Sarah Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel discuss Kristeva’s revolt as an ‘event that regenerates symbolic bonds and empowers individuals to make meaning’ (2017, p. 1). It is a necessary part of life. They believe that if loving support is encouraged in the ‘power vacuum’, then this could ‘encourage the upheavals of revolt’. Without this, people who live within the ‘power vacuum’ and marginalised abjection could ‘lose their sense of belonging to the social order,
their openness to finding and making meaning’ (2017, p. 6). The community now living within a ‘power vacuum’ exists as one that fosters a sense of belonging because all in this new community have been abjected to live within it. It becomes their new norm.

This sense of belonging is vital for strong and resilient communities to flourish. However, I believe that Kristeva’s theories are unable to make the connection to people and community, and fall over in acknowledging the discrimination that abject communities face. Hansen and Tuvel discuss how many commentators believe Kristeva fails to ‘attend to the role of racism and colonialism in the “power vacuum”’ (see Ahmed 2005; Gratton 2007; Miller 2014). These critics worry not only that her work effaces colonialism and racism, but also that, as a result, she misunderstands how the power vacuum operates and its psychic effects’ (2017, p. 8).

Poetics and my creative practice have helped me augment these theories for the ability to think through and formulate understandings of what abject communities look like, and how they survive to flourish in their abject margins. It is through interviews that I hear the passion of a community volunteering to build the swimming pool in the top-end township and swimming in it on hot nights; the growing of food for troops to serve a nation that goes to war; and the collection of money to support a neighbour whose car has just blown its engine and who has insufficient money to buy food as he attempts to fix it. Such is their sense of heartening belonging and ability to rise above adversity. Given this lack in Kristeva’s notions, I turn to Agamben for notions of belonging and acceptance within an emerging community, a ‘coming’ community.

According to Agamben, people come together in a state of exception to create a new community. It is one that is not tied by any identity and as such, allows for an appropriation of belonging. An individual who has no identity can feel belonging in a society that does not see itself as having an identity. This seems to be one where life is what it is, an acceptance of things as they are. ‘The root of all pure joy and sadness is that the world is as it is. Joy or sadness that arises because the world is not what it seems or what we want it to be is impure
or provisional’ (2013, p. 90). There is no ‘politics’ and, instead, is an acceptance: ‘in the so be it said to the world when every legitimate cause of doubt and hope has been removed, sadness and joy refer not to negative or positive qualities, but to a pure being-thus without any attributes’ (2013, p. 90).

People living on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm accepted their isolation and appreciated the freedom it bestowed. Most – 49 of the 50 interviewed – said they did not feel isolated. They developed a strong social network that included weekly dances and card nights, sporting clubs, picnics by the swimming pool, school outings and sports organised by parent committees. While it may be difficult for some to be accepting of life as it is, others grow resilient and accept it as normal.

Ghosted communities

It is important to understand what is left behind after a community living in marginalised abjection disbands, abandoning a place and creating a sewerage ghost town. This is because, as Maria Tumarkin believes, these places become more than just part of their surrounds with sensory and visual triggers. They are ‘capable of eliciting a whole palette of emotions .... the past, whether buried or laid bare for all to see, continues to inhabit and refashion the present’ (2005, p. 12). She calls these places traumascapes: places that are ‘marked by traumatic legacies of violence, suffering and loss, the past is never quite over’. They are ‘more than physical settings of tragedies: they emerge as spaces, where events are experienced and re-experienced across time’ (2005, p. 12). The intrinsic element of this existence in a place of tragedy and suffering can be applied to any place with a past, which is of course all places.

Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln define this existence as hauntology, a term Jacques Derrida playfully introduced in 1993 in Specters of Marx to ‘describe a concern with apparitions, visions, and representations that mediate the sensuous and the non-sensuous, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, reality and not-yet-reality, being and non-being’. It is that place ‘between corporeal existence and some other dimension’ (2015, p. 192). Lincoln
and Lincoln believe ghosts present a haunting of memories as the constant reminder of historical, subjective truths, the political afterlife of lasting reminders. They perceive ghosts as generally associated with tragic death that ‘binds the soul of the dead to the mortal drama of death and captivates it to the place of death, thus engendering a negative condition in the afterlife’ (2015, p. 209). They become troubled and are unable to find peace or reach the afterlife. It can be said that they are excluded from the afterlife, when the afterlife is viewed as bios, to exist as zoiē. What is interesting here is that the afterlife can be considered to exist as the already excluded as zoiē, from the physical life, bios. Thus, we see an exclusion from the already excluded.

It is difficult to understand whether ghosts existing between the physical life and afterlife are troubled. However, I conceptualise them through their voice in my creative work, as capable of traversing an existence over the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm where they become their own abjected community, one that is normalising to them.

Returning to Linda Tuhiwai Smith and her work with Indigenous concepts of spirituality in New Zealand, she discusses an essence where ‘a human person does not stand alone, but shares with other animate and, in the Western sense, inanimate beings, a relationship based on a shared essence of life’ (2012, p. 77). Aboriginal spirituality is also based on ideals that Vicki Grieves describes as the notion that everything is deeply linked to the land, where all objects exist and share the same spirit that Aboriginal people share. This spirituality is one form of Aboriginal philosophy, the basis of Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing. Grieves states that ‘Aboriginal Spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated’ (2009, p. 7). Director and filmmaker Warwick Thornton talks of Aboriginal spirituality and interconnectedness too, through his film The Darkside (2013). The film tells ghost stories from the Aboriginal perspective, about daily Aboriginal living in everyday reality with spirits, dead ancestors and demons from the other side.
The idea of ghosts and all things being connected can be applied to sewerage ghost towns. It is particularly important when considering an abandoned place once populated by an abjected, cohesive and resilient community. My creative work helps me explore these notions of abandonment and the ghosts left behind by abject communities, and the manner in which ghosts helps us to engage with the existence of an abject community.
4. The belonging in abject communities

The fundamental core of this research in exploring abject communities relative to sewerage ghost towns is based on the assumption that these communities are isolated and segregated from broader society because of their association with sewerage. One story highlights this – men finished their day’s work on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, showered and changed from work clothes, and went to a pub in Werribee, only to be told to sit at the other end of the bar because they smelled.

This chapter attempts to examine current practice in building resilient communities, informed by notions of segregation and abjection, the emergence of the abjected community, and the vital aspect of the human and physical life that is left behind once these communities disband. It discusses how, through my creative writing practice, I explore these concepts and act as a voice for the marginalised through abject language and literature. Insights provide greater understanding of how sewerage town communities live in their marginalised abjection as self-sustaining and cohesive communities, and the sewerage ghost town that exists once these communities abandon the town.

4.1 Current community practice

Current practice in building resilient communities and insights gained from working at the grassroots with marginalised communities, with the added challenge of enduring discrimination because of their disadvantage, will help better understand what makes for strong, self-sustaining and cohesive communities. Whether educating about sewage treatment or supporting communities enduring hardship, my aspirations have always been to work to find more equilibrium for those experiencing inequality and who do not have a ‘voice’. I believe we are all different, all vulnerable and fragile, and most importantly, all worthy. Principles inherent within Stakeholder theory and the Neighbourhood Renewal initiative reinforce and consolidate my experience.
Repeatedly, underlying principles supporting marginalised communities to move through adversity centre on validating challenges being faced, collaboration to address challenges, and inclusivity through community participation. The community within Heathdale Neighbourhood Renewal was deemed to be disadvantaged and addressed its resulting discrimination head-on through the Neighbourhood Renewal initiative. It responded to public taunts of living in a birdcage by installing welcome signs at the entrance of the estate, highlighting the birds and wetlands in the area. The community hosted festivals and carols evenings in the wetlands too, and invited the wider community to attend in solidarity and pride.

Neighbourhood Renewal principles are based on ‘bringing communities together with government, businesses, schools, police and service providers to tackle disadvantage’. These principles aim to ‘narrow the gap’ between disadvantaged communities and other Victorian communities, addressing social exclusion that results from poor access to quality services and a lack of opportunity. They involve focusing on community health, wellbeing, pride, participation, connection, safety and trust, and access to employment, education, services and recreation, as priorities for building strong and resilient communities (DHHS 2007, para. 3). Social inclusion sits at the core of the Neighbourhood Renewal initiative. Margaret Shield et al. discuss the risk of social exclusion and the importance of social inclusion to disadvantaged communities in Norlane and Corio in Victoria, Australia. They found that social inclusion had significantly improved within the community after Neighbourhood Renewal had been implemented. They believe in the importance and continuation in the long term of implementing ‘area-specific interventions’ that address disadvantage and focus on social inclusion (2011, p. 10). Although specifically aimed at enriching disadvantaged communities, the principles can be applied to any community.

Anette Lykke Hindhede believes in the importance of community participation to bring about benefits in social and health levels in Western Europe. She sees community participation as fostering empowerment in people,
to build trust in themselves and others, ‘mobilising citizens to take greater responsibility of their own life outcomes’ (2016, p. 235). When considering the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, this could be seen in the parent and social committees that organised recreational events for the whole community to participate in: the annual picnic to the zoo, nights at the movies, weekly dances that rotated across the sewerage farm, and card nights to raise money for the schools or war effort.

Hindhede believes ‘social capital’ to be the ‘widely used concept in community participation’ (2016, p. 536), where social capital places the emphasis on the need for mutual trust to sustain a community. She quotes Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard University on social networks being at the core of social capital, conceptualising social capital as ‘features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (2016, p. 537). This is important when considering sewerage town communities and the strength of ‘social organisation’ that occurs within them. Trust too existed between the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community and the MMBW, enabling the community to live autonomously and grow a strong social network. The community forged a life where children lived freely among the sewerage, spending a night in trees or in old war bunkers after a day of catching ducks or fish and being too far to reach home by nightfall. Parents took comfort in knowing many eyes were watching the children and believed no harm would come to them. It was not uncommon for a workman or stockman on horseback to collect a child who had fallen into the mud or sewage, taking the child home to its parents.

Warren and West’s work holds resonance here too, in ‘relationships of people and place’ leading to community wellbeing (2013, p. 9). Phyllida Shaw believes in the success of the arts in helping people to participate and connect. ‘In communities officially described as deprived, communication is always a challenge’ (2003, p. 2). This results in social inclusion and community cohesion. This is community participation working to build relationships and communities.
It aligns with the importance of building relations for robust engagement as part of Stakeholder theory.

4.2 Segregated and abjected communities

*You’re a shit player from the shit farm.*

*At least I’m not a shit person.*

– Player exchange at an under-18s football match in Werribee, 2016.

More than 125 years after the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm was established in Werribee, the stigma of the community, segregated from broader society because of its association with sewerage, continues. With the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community disbanded, that stigma has seeped into the Werribee community as the perpetual weeping wound reeking of the ominous stench of souring, mustarding waters, having broken their buffer zone. ‘Outsiders’ ignorant of Werribee and the sewerage farm associate Werribee and odour as inseparable, even though the odour motorists drive through on the highway to Geelong often emanates from septic tanks in Little River and Lara, with no link to the sewerage farm.

Little did the Werribee player’s opponent understand the richness of understanding, empathy and acceptance that the Werribee player has developed from living with the stigma of sewerage. As Fatima Measham says, there seems to be ‘an image of the Werribee district as a stagnant hole that lies at the outskirts of civilisation’ (2014, p. 5). She is ‘never sure what people visualise when the sewage farm is mentioned, but we don’t grow poo there’ (2014, p.1).

People can be disgusted by the repugnance of human waste, a bias that can be traced back to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm’s beginnings. The *Yea Chronicle* reported in 1899 on the appointment of a new teacher, Miss Schwieger, to Cocoroc North School in the top-end township. It referred to the sewerage farm in ironic fashion as ‘a small but rapidly rising township between Little River and Werribee … chiefly noted as a health resort, guaranteed to
contain a more varied collection of germs to the square inch than even Footscray .... Miss S. is fortunate’ (1899).

This attitude was evident throughout the 1900s, too, when players of the Metropolitan Farm football team were regularly called ‘sewer rats’ by their opponents. Measham sees these negative perceptions being perpetuated ‘from a combination of observation, hearsay and lore. Perhaps such attitudes are an unremarkable form of tribalism or remnant anxiety over what lies beyond the horizon — a kind of “there be dragons” for our time’ (2014, p. 3).

According to Kristeva’s notions of the different being feared, one can say that prejudice comes from a subjective fear of the different – a horror, even. Cameron Bishop believes subjectivity ‘is refracted through the lenses of the human sciences’ (2009, p. 38). Ultimately, prejudice is born in a subjectivity of social, cultural and moral values, personal to the individual as well as the collective. Bishop talks about being insulted for his olive complexion one night in Darwin and the act being one ‘where the strongest culture (in dominant numbers and technology) reinforces its ascendant position’ (2009, p. 20). Fear can fester in the abject notions of Kristeva, to create disempowerment and disconnection.

Kristeva sees that the abject can become ‘an enigma’, feared because it is different and undesirous. It is more than simply being related to dirt and defilement because society and cultures provide varying definitions of dirt and defilement. ‘It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (1982, p. 4). The abject can become repulsive and, from that repulsion and fear, a fascination can grow. ‘There is fear and fascination’ where abjection is ‘at the crossroads of phobia, obsession, and perversion’ (1998, p. 45). The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community ate tomatoes, mushrooms, zucchini and pumpkins growing wild in sewage-watered paddocks, as well as other crops grown in family gardens watered with effluent. Yet others outside the community, those living as bios, found disgust in that, questioning how people could do such a thing. It added to
the divide between \textit{bios} and \textit{zoē}, and the discrimination towards the sewerage town community.

These notions provide for a circular motion of different-fear-discrimination-different. Yet we are all different. I explored this when writing about the bushfire in my creative written work, using language to confront and provoke in the storytelling of people burning to death. It allowed for an exploration of the horror of bushfires, the devastation they cause and the burning of human bodies with some abjected to ghostly status. I imagine there will be a level of judgement on my Gothic-like imagery as some may be too confronted by it, perhaps nudging this element of my writing to its own abject status.

Within the abjected, an ‘I’ begins to take shape, as the ‘strayed subject is huddled outside the paths of desire’ (1998, p 11). Kristeva refers to this as a singularity of the individual; an otherness and difference. The subject is the singularity and is excluded, with the ‘I’ using ‘the words of the tribe to inscribe my singularity, \textit{Je est un autre} (“I is another”): this will be my difference’ (2000, p. 19). The ‘I’ in the abjected can grow when others have or develop the same abjected status and suddenly the ‘I’ has multiplied into the ‘we’ that sits as a group within the broader population. A community forms. For the sewerage
town community, it began with a few people living on a sewerage site and developed into a thriving community: a population of more than 500 on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm and on Crossness Pumping Station, a community sustained by 35 families. The ghosts hovering within the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm form a community also, one that has been excluded from the afterlife to live in a state of exception: excluded from the already excluded.

Agamben believes that in a state of exception, biopolitics results. A new set of laws develops, as he discusses in an interview (Giorgio Agamben on biopolitics 2019), that may never be rescinded and become normalising: ‘Hitler, as soon as he came into power in 1933, immediately declared a state of exception, which was never revoked’. Agamben goes on to say that it ‘is a normal situation that changes all concepts of politics because once the state of exception becomes the rule, international law and domestic rights change completely’ (2019).

When applying this notion of a new set of laws developing in a state of exception to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, the community grew on the sewerage farm to live in a state of exception, in marginalised abjection as zoē, away from Melbourne and mainstream society (bios), so as not to cause offence. Subsequently, two powers emerged: one within the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community and the other, the sovereign powers of the MMBW and mainstream society. The community was a vital part of society because it was treating Melbourne’s sewage, and yet it was also ‘the other’, the outside but necessary part of society and the ‘sacred’. However, this community played a vital role in treating Melbourne’s sewage and in ensuring the city’s development, yet it was mocked to abject status and feared because it was not desired, repulsive even.

Suddenly, the two new powers, according to Agamben, ‘converge insofar as both concern the bare life of the citizen, the new biopolitical body of humanity’ (1998, p. 9). Biopolitics is ‘the growing inclusion of man’s natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power’ (1998, p. 119). Agamben sees biopower and the law of sovereignty as integrated powers. I explore his
philosophical notion through my creative work, where the MMBW held the ultimate sovereign law and power. It was able to make decisions over its citizens and situate the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm and its community in Werribee, to abject status. Yet, it also worked alongside the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm to ensure successful sewage treatment.

The MMBW committed a second exclusion, however, when it failed to appoint a member from the Werribee municipality to its Board of Commissioners. The Board had the responsibility of sewerage management and its members consisted of one representative from each municipality area whose sewage was to be treated at the sewerage farm in Werribee. I could not find archival data to explain the rationale. An assumption can be made, though, that it was another form of abjection; the Werribee municipality rejected because of its association with sewage treatment at the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. It highlights the integration of biopower and the law of sovereignty, insofar as it was vital that the MMBW work with the Werribee municipality to ensure effective transport of sewage to the sewerage farm for treatment.

Abjection applies to vulnerable, minority and disadvantaged populations, to any instance of difference. Kristeva discusses (A tragedy and a dream: disability revisited 2018) abjection relative to people with disabilities and the rights of people with disabilities to irreducible singularity. The disabled person is considered the abject and is in a ‘sensitive place of the human shame’ (2018). Kristeva believes ‘modern and collectivist humanism failed when it tried to turn its back on singularity’ and trivialised the human spirit. She goes on to add that ‘we are all different, all others, all vulnerable, all fragile. No, we are not all disabled and perhaps even less than we are all gay, or all Jews’ (2018). She challenges the one-size-fits-all concept of disabilities being different.

Bishop discusses the self-sustaining Aboriginal community at Coranderrk that adapted to live alongside ‘European economic culture’ (2010). This adaption, and the fact that white settlers were unable to acknowledge the success of the self-sustaining community, resulted in white settlers instituting the Half Caste Act of 1886. The act banned ‘people of mixed descent under the
age of thirty-five’ from entering the Coranderrk Reserve, believing Aborigines would assimilate and the ‘Aboriginal blood line over generations would fade into white’ (2009, p. 87). Aboriginal populations on reserves plunged, so too at Coranderrk and it was closed in 1924. What is interesting here is the parallel of a community living in marginalised abjection along notions of Agamben’s coming community.

However, Agamben’s notion of inclusion-exclusion can assist us in defining who we are by allowing us to observe what ‘others’ are. On the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, the Balts Camp grew after World War Two. Migrant men, who were already abjected to live in a state of exception in migrant camps dotted across Australia, were employed on the sewerage farm to cater for the postwar boom. They lived in the Balts Camp located on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, so-labelled because many of the men living in the camp had fled from the Baltic Islands after the war. The Balts Camp was separated from the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, abjected from the already abjected to some degree. Yet not at the same time, and the men were not excluded in the traditional sense. More importantly, they were accepted by the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community. They attended weekly card games and dances with the community, worked with the men on site and gradually moved into MMBW cottages with their families to integrate into, and find belonging in, the sewerage farm community. Acceptance is an important notion here, relative to Agamben’s concept of the emerging community, which will be discussed in the next section.

The power vacuum

It is now in this marginalised abjection that Kristeva believes the superego, as the abject, carries out the act of revolt to support the growth of the ‘power vacuum’. Revolt need not be fierce or angry, and is more personal and intimate where the superego emerges from the ego as ‘a political and cultural necessity’ (Hansen & Tuvel 2017, p. 4). Catherine Clement and Kristeva say that any person who would like to create any change must ‘impose a new order, in fact, one must permit a
fierce resistance, an extreme anger, a revolt of pride, to come into oneself’ (2001, p. 29). Kristeva believes that happiness can only exist through revolt.

Figure 15: Women’s football, 1950. Photo courtesy of the Pengelly family.

‘None of us has pleasure without discriminating an obstacle, prohibition, authority, or law that allows us to realize ourselves as autonomous and free’ (2000, p. 7).

To explore this further I will examine a subset of the already abjected: the women of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. The MMBW’s policy did not allow women to work in sewage treatment; consequently, the women became abjected from the already abjected. However, as Sarah Hansen states, in their ‘sacred passage of symbolic development’ (2012, p. 164) and in a bid to earn income for their families, they initiated their own ‘quiet revolt’ to create a new law with their own rights: they developed cottage industries in their homes and, in doing so, created a ‘power vacuum’ within the already existing ‘power vacuum’. These industries included rearing chickens, making milk products for sale and offering cleaning, catering and ironing services. In the 1950s, in a further
act that ruffled some, women played Australian Rules football, which was considered a ‘man’s sport’, wearing shorts to do so. Both actions were disdained for being distasteful. I note here that there is an abjection in every abject, the abject always recurring, exclusion always recurring.

Autonomy develops in a ‘power vacuum’, and encourages independence. Employees of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm worked autonomously, most notably because of the distance between the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm and the MMBW management in Melbourne. The MMBW trusted its employees to undertake their work. Deaths resulting from poor sanitation reduced across Melbourne as proof that sewage treatment was occurring. Jeong-Nam Kim et al. say that without trust, public institutions lose their social licence to operate. A lack of trust can create challenges in responding to any issues that may arise and cause detriment to the organisation (2009, p. 752). This autonomy trickles into the sewerage farm community, as does the growing satisfaction and pride in the work being accomplished, for both employees and the MMBW. Pride was seen in the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community through the careful care of gardens, the community hall, swimming pool and schools, and in the trust and reliance upon one another in times of hardship and difficulty. The MMBW would encourage this by awarding annual scholarships to children in the schools on the sewerage farms and for best-kept garden across the sewerage farm. Again, we can see Agamben’s notions of biopolitics and sovereignty integrating, with employees left with the task of treating sewage, while also supporting the community.

I believe that in the freedom to ‘be’ and with the chance to ‘revolt’ within the ‘power vacuum’, people living in marginalised abjection are left to live freely and independently. In that independence is the chance to question and transform, a chance to regenerate. ‘In abjection, revolt is completely within being’ (Kristeva 1982, p. 45). Many of the interviewed appreciated this freedom, craved it. Children moving to a larger school in Werribee after a sewerage farm school closed found difficulty in adjusting and wanted the space and freedom of their old school. Many did not want to leave their Metropolitan Sewerage Farm
home, even when they had no power and could move to a home in Werribee with power. Measham’s story, too, about the child of a friend who thinks Measham lives ‘at the endpoint of his toilet’ (2014, p. 1) supports this idea. Measham believes negative perceptions of Werribee come from the long-held stigma of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, but that it is also ‘an echo of the terra nullius mindset: no-one (important) lives there, and so it bothers no-one’ (2014, p. 2). This, and Kristeva’s idea of the abject relating to perversion, could be seen to benefit sewerage town communities, as they are left to live independently.

I explore this idea in a scene in my creative written work, where intoxicated visitors to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm create havoc. Once the visitors realise they are in a paddock flooded in sewage, they are repulsed and rush for the steamer docked at the jetty, to go back to Melbourne. The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm residents laugh at the ludicrous behaviour and reaction, and cannot wait for them to leave.

The emergence of the ‘power vacuum’ was seen in the sewerage town communities observed in the UK as well. A strong sense of community came through in conversations had with current sewerage employees at the pumping stations, and with Esholt village residents and the men employed at the Esholt Sewage Works. Descendants from the families of the Western and Abbey Mills pumping stations still work for Thames Water and speak of the socially cohesive lifestyle of their ancestral families, through the regular community dances, cricket and lawn bowls. The fence running along the boundary of the Western Pumping Station created a clear demarcation to the ‘outside world’, and stories of the few living on site swimming in the luxury of their own warm pool evoked a strong sense of living in a ‘power vacuum’. The pumping-station sites still house original pump buildings. The restoration of these majestic buildings has been undertaken with care and pride.
Crossness Pumping Station, too, exuded a ‘respectability’ of its bygone era through its refurbished school, steam house and working pump. Its museum depicts scaled models of buildings and elements within the community, and much interpretive memorabilia, including a timeline of toilets.

Esholt village continues to elicit a strong community connectedness through its social network and activities held weekly at the pub, including games of darts and trivia nights. Sporting teams and community get-togethers continue, akin to bygone celebrations. And yet the community neighbours the Esholt Sewage Works.

Literature on Sunnybrae Farm and the Botany-Rockdale Sewage Farm discusses the quality of the buildings erected on both sites. A railway was extended to convey the children of employees to school at the Botany-Rockdale Sewage Farm, an act that considers the needs of the small community living on site. A civic pride can be seen, too, in the consideration given to on-site buildings. As Colleen Callaghan states, ‘the deliberate matching of the Inlet and Outlet Houses, and the elaborate architectural detailing of their facades, represent a formal expression of civic pride in the establishment’ (1990, p. 46).

While these sewerage town communities do not compare with the Metropolitan Sewage Farm community in size and scope, what is apparent is...
the pride, strength, inclusion and cohesion of community that existed and still exists today. It is in their ‘power vacuum’ that social structures were developed to sustain a community.

4.3 The emerging community

Measham’s quote of the ‘terra nullius’ mindset sits in dichotomising position to the ‘power vacuum’: no-one important lives there yet a community thrives in its abject margins. Both Kristeva and Agamben have created new norms. The abjected live in a state of exception where the ‘power vacuum’ grows, and the ‘I’ of the abjected becomes the ‘we’, the individual of singularity finding an identity in community. The emerging community is establishing new social structures without, according to Agamben, ‘affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging.’ Singularity is only included in some identity, a ‘whatever identity’ (2013, p. 85). I explore Agamben’s notion through my experience as a community and engagement practitioner and as a literary activist, for a humanitarian approach to the identity of each individual being accepted. It provides for a ‘humanity’ within community, humanity here to be in the kindness, empathy and acceptance of people and life in its entirety; to be humane to all life.

The ‘power vacuum’ becomes stagnant in its translation and application to a cohesive and self-sustaining community, as if I am hitting a brick wall when attempting to further the notion into practicality. It is because of this that I look to Agamben’s ideal of a new, coming community, as it adds a wonderful dimension to the ‘power vacuum’. I see it as one where there is no recognition of an identity, and one that is more aimed at acceptance, whether on a conscious or subconscious level. It is in that acceptance that a feeling of belonging develops, and a non-identity within the community develops because all identity is acceptable. While it may be difficult for some to be accepting of life in this way, especially within adversity, others grow to accept it as normalising. I believe this is what the Metropolitan Sewerage farm community and other sewerage
town communities may have achieved, and it is through that acceptance that strong bonds form to support the development of a cohesive and self-sustaining community.

Within the new community, Agamben believes that the State can recognise ‘any claim for identity — even that of a State identity within the State’. What the ‘State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong’ (2013, p. 85). This is about the belonging found by the individual for their individuality, of an acceptance as the individual within the community without needing to affirm an identity. It comes with humility, for a humanity in community where no identity is required.

The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community developed an identity to ‘outsiders’, of a community living in a state of exception because it lived alongside sewerage. Yet it did not associate with this ‘outside’ identity, it did not see itself as an abjected community or a sewerage community. All four schools and the sporting teams of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm happily competed in Werribee-wide competitions, as any other sporting team, even though they were subjected to derogatory comments. Outsiders would call them ‘sewer rats’ that they live on the ‘shit farm’. And yet, they also flocked to the sewerage farm to the weekly dances, to catch rabbits and ducks, and swim in the pool; extended family would visit residents and stay for the weekend to enjoy the serenity. This could be construed as a double standard and an example, again, of Agamben’s notion of the state of exception, bios and zoë both being necessary, and the integration of biopower and sovereign law.

Agamben believes that the emerging community does not depend on an identity or acknowledgement of an identity. ‘Pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of the example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity. They are expropriated of all identity, so as to appropriate belonging itself’ (2013, p. 10). He sees that the coming community does not depend on an identity or acknowledgement of an identity and, because of this, pure singularities ‘cannot form a societas’ (2013, p. 85).
Hansen says that ‘biopolitical resistance is not about “jamming” movements of regulation and law. Instead, it is about transforming social structures and economies of meaning such that power supports and nourishes life instead of abandoning it to depression and violence’ (2010, p. 36). It is here that sewerage town communities can come into their own. They reconstitute their own ‘social structures and economies of meaning’ with a life that supports and nourishes them. They do not rise above the adversity that broader society perceives them to be in because they do not believe they live in adversity. In fact, they see the opposite. According to those interviewed through this research, a feeling of liberation existed where the community was left to live in freedom, even if under the eye of the company or organisation that looked after it. On the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, roads were quiet and paddocks were plenty for women and children to learn to drive, children played across sewage and swam the whole day with little supervision. One man spoke of ‘surfing’ in a sewage channel on a piece of corrugated iron. Committees made up of residents raised money for those in need and developed a social calendar with multiple weekly activities. This is an important principle already stated, where social networks are core to cohesive communities. A social conscience can also be seen to develop here.

It supports what I have seen in my work within marginalised and disadvantaged communities who are supported to be empowered citizens. The paradox is that in their abjection and disadvantage, which often come with discrimination, these communities have the chance to build resilience in the face of their adversity. Over eight years working in Neighbourhood Renewal, I witnessed the Heathdale community grow from one rooted in anger at being in their marginalised abjection and disadvantage, to one activated to be empowered to address their disadvantage through the creation of improved education, employment and community security, and in the many social and community building activities, through such things as festivals and community meeting places. For the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, it came during wars and economic depression. When many ‘others’ struggled with famine,
those on the sewerage farm ‘lived off the land’, as stated in many interviews. They caught rabbits, fish, ducks and eels and picked mushrooms, both for eating and sale, along with surplus cheese and cream made from the milk squeezed from their cows.

Agamben believes in the acceptance of all things being necessary: happy and sad, bad and evil, up and down, bios and zoë. It is this acceptance that makes for tight socially cohesive and resilient communities, ones that tackle the whole spectrum of life, ‘a pure being-thus without any attributes’ (2013, p. 90). It is where a community lives in a way that is normalising for them, and an acceptance of the diversity of life. Perhaps it is in this that a community can appreciate and be grateful, to extend that gratitude by caring for others and accept those that have been abjected. ‘Seeing something simply in its being-thus—irreparable, but not for that reason necessary; thus, but not for that reason contingent—is love’ (2013, p. 105).

The community of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm had its needs met, while also living in a space of freedom. The MMBW painted homes regularly and made repairs instantly upon request. If an outdoor table was required in a home, the workshop would make one; if the school needed a patch of dirt to make a vegetable garden, a rotary hoe would appear to dig it. Donations flowed for anyone who lost a home through fire or was in need. Similar was said in other sewerage towns. Most obvious was in the discussion had by a past Metropolitan Sewerage Farm resident and pupil from the on-site Cocoroc North School, with a past resident of Esholt village and pupil of Esholt School. Both their fathers and grandfathers worked on the sewerage works and their families lived in the sewerage town. Schools, activities, the schoolyard, neighbourly help, teachers, school life, social events and the strong bonds of community were mirrored, and yet they existed on opposite sides of the world. Again, we see Agamben’s integration of biopower and the law of sovereignty, with the MMBW and Yorkshire Water sustaining their communities while also granting space for independence.
Agamben’s ideal is an acceptance of all that is. It is not a false notion of life being pretty and perfect, free from all negativity: ‘At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent’ (2013, p. 105). Jessica Whyte considers this a ‘banality of its account as redemption’, and that it is a disappointing ‘image of redemption, particularly when placed alongside Christian promises of “a new heaven and a new earth”’ (Rev 21:1) (2010, p. 1). I do not believe this to be the case; on the contrary, I believe that perhaps Agamben’s notion of the coming community is the ‘secret’ of the happy and sometimes utopian life claimed by those interviewed. It is where all needs were met within the sewerage town and people were left to live free to experience the whole spectrum of life, in its full humanity. Perhaps this is an exemplar for the community that emerges in marginalised abjection, alongside mainstream society, of Agamben’s coming community? Still connected, yet separated.

In society today, it may not be clear what the figure of a sacred man may represent, and maybe ‘we are all virtually homines sacri’ (Agamben 1998, p. 115). Agamben is right. And so is Kristeva when she says that ‘it is necessary to have men and women with inner experiences that are unique, inquisitive, and
uncompromising. It is on this condition alone that they can be reformers’ (2014, p. 2). To me, reformers mean those finding their place living in their abjected margins.

Could it be that the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community and other sewerage town communities living within an acceptance of their identity, assists in building strong, cohesive and self-sustaining communities? ‘The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization’ (Agamben 2013, p. 84).

4.4 The spirit of sewerage ghost towns

From the once thriving to the now abandoned ... a sewerage town community disbands; people and homes are non-existent in a place of no place and all that remains are sparse, dilapidated ruins. The place lacking physical life is nothing; a barren and empty sewerage town. Or is it?

Hauntology and spiritual concepts provide an opportunity to explore the spirit of sewerage ghost towns, the link between animal, object and land, and all things continuing to be connected beyond the disappearance of the visibly physical. It is the ‘something’ that exists in the absence of the physical. It is important to understand this because I believe an intrinsic element of the strength within the abject community remains in the sewerage town once the community abandons it. It brings the ‘ghost’ into sewerage towns, with no people living on site and little of its tangible, corporeal form of life left in the town. My creative writing of ‘truth’ of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community story allows for an exploration of these notions, for a haunting and avant-garde aesthetic of a ‘truth’ existing in marginalised abjection. It brings the abjected sewerage community into open discussion.

Lincoln and Lincoln define ghost and spirit as an intangible substance ‘that vivifies the body during life, but separates from it at death, at which
moment bodily matter turns into a corpse, while the essential life-force persists as disembodied “spirit” (2015, p. 196). It is what can be ‘sensed and not seen’ in a space where the dead are not quite gone (2015, p. 194). It is a sense I experienced at each of the sites visited in the UK and repeatedly at the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, particularly where much activity and interaction between humans, animals and place has occurred, such as around buildings, in the swimming pool and on the sports oval. It is most noticed in the quiet and still and, as Tumarkin says, it is in the emotions that these places elicit. ‘The nature and intensity of emotions inspired by encounters with death as an idea, while often unnerving, can also prove to be mesmerising and addictive’ (2005, p. 50).

Being inside a classroom where 30 students once sat, and in the community hall where wedding receptions were once held, stirred my senses. Perhaps it is because these places can be so ‘mesmerising and addictive’ that they provoke such strong emotional responses through our senses. These responses can be compounded when we tune into our ‘knowing’, which can come from lifetimes of experience locked in the subconscious.

Lincoln and Lincoln believe that ghosts are the ‘unquiet dead’ that live in ‘texts, memory, and uneasy silences rather than spirit’ (2015, p. 196). They have departed the physical place to exist only inside the ‘consciousness of those they “visit”, rather than on the border of the physical and metaphysical’ (2015, p. 196). They believe that it is not so much the dead haunting us, but more the gaps we are left with because of the secrets of others that haunt our memories. These are the ghosts (2015, p. 196). I explore this notion through both my written work and song. However, there is also much that interconnects between the physical and metaphysical, which I also attempt to draw out in my work.

Lincoln and Lincoln believe these ghosts are beings that move into their own political afterlife, where those ‘Agamben associates with “bare life” have not yet fully departed the land of the living, ghosts, phantoms, specters, et al. are understood as having not yet fully entered the realm of the dead’ (2015, p. 198). It is the place where the dead inhabit a space between life and death, to exist as the abjected from the present physical life as well as the afterlife. Ghosts can be
seen to have been unable to reach the afterlife, \textit{bios}, and instead are excluded to exist as \textit{zoë}. It can be said that they are abjected from the already abjected: the afterlife abjected, as \textit{zoë}, from the physical life, as \textit{bios}, and ghosts abjected, as \textit{zoë}, from the afterlife, as \textit{bios}. It is here that ‘the something’ exists in the metaphysical, outside of what is considered the norm or mainstream of associated laws, to create its own laws and ways.

This notion runs throughout my creative written work, where ghosts exist in their own world over the top of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community. I experiment with the notion of the physical and metaphysical through the ghosts sometimes weaving into the physical, to ruffle hair or stir an itch in the living, or when diving through water or flying into tree-tops. It evokes a mysticism reminiscent of Romanticist and Gothic notions. It could be said that the ghosts linger in the numerous deaths on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm and in the ashes of past residents spread on site upon their death. Life and death can seem to be ambiguous in this instance. Michelle Key calls it the space ‘between body and sign, inside and outside, self and other’ (2004, p. 23). Kristeva suggests it is the ‘in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ where there are no ‘borders, positions, rules’ (1982, p. 4). Agamben talks of concentration and refugee camps as places ‘outside the rules of penal and prison law, which then and subsequently had no bearing on it’ (1998, p. 96).

An ambiguity exists in the storytelling of the ghosts and the stockmen burying the foetus in the foetus graveyard on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. The foetus ghost rises from his grave to join the community of foetus ghosts existing in their abject margins, ghosts abjected in the already abjected landscape, while the stockmen are also present. Gothic notions emanate too, in the dark and, what some may consider a grotesque existence, of foetus ghosts. A blurring exists of the physical and metaphysical. The space, too, can be seen to be a traumascape, as defined by Maria Tumarkin, as a connection between people and place. ‘These dead, finished, forgotten things emerge as a seething presence’ (2005, p. 233). I feel a chill when I visit the foetus graveyard on the sewerage farm, even though no physical feature identifies it as such. I felt chills
too, on the Esholt Sewage Works, where the abandoned Esholt Hall stands. It is a stately manor built on the site of the medieval Esholt Nunnery in 1707. The nunnery was a site of slaughter in 1535, when King Henry VIII ordered the closure of Roman Catholic abbeys, monasteries and convents across England, Wales and Ireland. This ‘Dissolution of the Monasteries’ saw nuns and priests slaughtered as they tried to escape from King Henry’s men through underground tunnels.

Traumascapes are full of emotional triggers and can ‘catalyse and shape remembering and reliving of traumatic events’. They are places of ‘shared human suffering’ (2005, p. 12) that induce meaning. ‘They are a persistent reality check on all our visions of past and present’ (2005, p. 98). Tumarkin gives Port Arthur as an example of a site of collective pain and loss, where thousands of convicts arrived from Great Britain to suffer and die in banishment at the penal settlement. ‘Despite Port Arthur being remodelled into a heritage site, it is still more than capable of triggering powerful emotions in its visitors’ (2005, p. 51). Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs also believe the haunted site is one that ‘may appear empty or uninhabited’ but that it is much ‘more’ than it appears to be (1999, p. 116).

Tumarkin says the sublime is something we experience from objects and sites, rather than the objects and sites being sublime. It is the experience we feel from them (2005, p. 50). When I visited Pompeii in Italy some years ago, a site where a community was smothered in ash from erupting Vesuvius to be killed en masse, it was not death and loss that I felt but more a sublime sense of a community that once lived: the vitality of neighbourly existence, of giving and local trade to sustain a community. It was the spirit and intellect of Pompeii that struck me, the joy and activity in the community through chariot-wheel etchings in the lava-stoned roads and its impressive social and physical structure of connectedness. Some may say this was my ‘projection’ and perhaps what I wanted to feel; however, it is in the subliminal experience that I was moved and my senses were stirred.
The notion of subliminal experience can be applied to any place, as every place has a past existence. The varying intensity of emotions and sensations triggered come as a haunting through the spirit existing in a place. I believe these triggers can be particularly strong when people have banded together to become a close-knit community. Considering sewerage town communities, their unique human experience from living in marginalised abjection could intensify this spirit because their social connection and community cohesion is so strong and unique. The spirit comes from a collective, the community. It can manifest as a strong haunting within the metaphysical plane, in the form of ghosts. In my creative work of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, the haunting manifests through the community of ghosts abjected to live in their own marginalised state. This notion plays out throughout the creative work, with the ghosts growing in numbers while the physical community diminishes. The ghosts have their own non-identity that Agamben talks of, to form an emerging community that is one of acceptance and belonging where no one identity is more important than the other. Ironically, it puts the ‘humanity’ into the ghost community, there being a humanity in the spirit of the dead. When considering these ghosts existing in marginalised abjection, an interesting question would be, at what point can these ghosts, as zoē, become bios again? Perhaps this can be explored in further work.

An interconnectedness exists between the physical and metaphysical. It can be seen as a life of an entirety, of the physical life interacting with the metaphysical life. It results in a lasting interconnectedness of existence and it is this we experience in a place, particularly strong when a life experienced is one of marginalised abjection.

Warwick Thornton explores the notion of a life of an entirety through The Darkside. Aboriginal man Benny tells the story of a firefly-like light that travelled down a hill in Northern Queensland to him and his wife, Amelia, then returned to the top where a house had burnt down and a young family had perished. Outside the burnt house was a beautiful garden blooming in flowers that the young woman once living there had nurtured. When Benny realised that Amelia had cut
the flowers sitting in their home from the young woman’s garden, he took the flowers back up to the house and said, with no-one about, ‘I’m sorry. My wife didn’t know what she was doing.’ He left the flowers at the house and, from that moment, the light disappeared. Benny goes on to say that when we die, he believes ‘our bodies go to the ground, our soul goes to meet with our creator and our spirits remain. Our spirits remain. The woman’s spirit was still around the house and didn’t like us taking her flowers’ (2013). The story, and all stories in Thornton’s film, depict a connectedness to life and death, to the spirit world. At a symposium, Professor Marcia Langton speaks with Thornton and says in opening remarks that Aboriginal people inhabit a world where they ‘hold the other world, the mimi world, to be true and out there and part of the world we live’. Mimis are fairy-like beings in Arnhem Land folklore. She says it is not unusual to find a mimi in the fridge or driving a taxi. (2012)

Australian Aboriginal concepts of spirituality link land, soul, object and spirit to continue beyond the physical of what can be seen, as a holistic interconnectedness. All have a life force and spirit of their own. Vicki Grieves relates a point made by community developer EK Grant in discussing Aboriginal spirituality as a basis for Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing:

Aboriginal spirituality is defined as at the core of Aboriginal being, its very identity. It gives meaning to all aspects of life including relationships with one another and the environment. All objects are living and share the same soul and spirit as Aborigines. There is a kinship with the environment. Aboriginal spirituality can be expressed visually, musically and ceremonially (Grant 2004, pp. 8–9, cited in Grieves 2009, p. 7).

Grieves defines spirituality for Aboriginal people as being rooted in a philosophy of protocols, ethics, behaviour, and social, political and economic values. ‘The basis of this philosophy is the idea of creation, the time when powerful creator spirits or spirit ancestors made sense out of chaos and produced the life forms and landscapes as we know them’ (2012, p. 8). This philosophy ‘exists through Law developed at the time of creation’ (2009, p. 12). The use of the word ‘Law’ indicates the importance of the spirituality and the depth in which it is rooted.
Gelder and Jacobs highlight this depth through the story about the bunyip, an Australian ghost. Non-Aboriginal writers locate the bunyip in swamps or waterholes and represent it as a frightening creature that is never seen and only heard. However, an Aboriginal man tells a different story, of the bunyip being ‘monogamous and attached’ to live all over the landscape, and is familiar rather than being unknown. Gelder and Jacobs refer to the story, as told to Australian anthologist and poet, Roland Robinson, as belonging ‘to a “clever old-man”, an Aboriginal elder’ (1999, p. 117). The Aboriginal man sees the bunyip as empowering rather than unsettling and says he derives his power from the bunyip:

This old fellow had a bunyip. It was his power, his moodjingarli. This bunyip was high in the front and low at the back like a hyena, like a lion. It had a terrible big bull-head and it was milk-white. This bunyip could go down into the ground and take the old man with him. They could travel under the ground. They could come out anywhere. They could come out of that old tree over there. (ibid.: 250) (Gelder and Jacobs 1999, p. 118)

Applying Aboriginal concepts of spirituality that link land, soul, object and spirit as a holistic interconnectedness to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, it is when I walk over land where more than 100 structures sleep buried deep beneath where they once housed families full of life, vitality and vigour that my senses are stirred. I experience a haunting and can almost feel their pain. These homes were either burnt or squashed into a hole and covered over into their own graves. It is a place uninhabited, yet inhabited, where the essence or non-physical part remains. I explore this in the first chapter of the creative written work, where the ghost of one of these homes, buried in its grave, narrates the chapter. It is interesting to note that I feel a haunting in many of the places now lying bare across the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm where much human activity has occurred. However, it is a curious phenomenon that the haunting reduces in intensity around the outside of the community hall. I equate this to the hall being moved in 1975 from its original site where it was used daily. The hall is relatively unused at its present site in comparison to its original location. The phenomena resonate, too, in places where I have sat to write on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. Certain places elicit the sublime more
than others, such as sitting inside the empty swimming pool or in the derelict building at the ranch.

Aboriginal and Maori spiritual beliefs of connectedness are important because they substantiate my experiences on sewerage ghost town sites. I can stand at the wiry tea-tree hedge fronting the Cocoroc South School in the bottom-end of the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm and feel the excited footsteps running through the hedge into school, for learning, a dance or a community meeting. ‘The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the

Figure 18: The stalls inside the Ranch building, 2019.
The haunting I feel comes from the depth of community cohesion that once existed on the sewerage farm, heightened because it lived in marginalised abjection and the resulting discrimination, and because of the strong sense of belonging and acceptance within the sewerage town community. It is this that I believe manifests as their ghosts, their spirits remaining. As Tumarkin says, we inherit ‘the unfinished business of our predecessors’ (2005, p. 235). It is this spirit and haunting in sewerage ghost towns that amplifies the sublime because of the collective essence of this human experience that remains after it separates from the physical life.

My understanding has been drawn out through my creative practice, stakeholder engagement and reflections of sewerage ghost towns captured through Treatment: Flightlines and the resulting song. The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community once living in the sewerage town may have no physical presence in what was but, like the bunyip, appears across the globe and reconnects through this work. A spiritual network still exists because an intrinsic element of the community still exists. Its spirit. Many people interviewed expressed a life in the sewerage town with affection and pride, claiming it as their utopia in a freedom to be themselves without conformity. As Agamben says, ‘even life in its nakedness is, in truth, improper and purely exterior to them, [so] that for them there is no shelter on earth’ (2013, p. 64). In this place of belonging because of acceptance of the non-individual, of the singularity of being, how can a strong spirit not exist in a sewerage ghost town? It is conveyed most strikingly by one Metropolitan Sewerage Farm resident who says, whenever he meets a person who once lived at ‘the Farm’, there is an instant recognition and understanding exchanged that only those that lived on ‘the Farm’ would understand.
4.5 A haunting of truth

My creative interpretation of ‘truth’ is rooted in a practice developed over many years. Ricketson believes the meaning of ‘truth’ is one where the word makes ‘clear that it is actual people, events and issues that are being written about’ (2014, p. 18). There are many meanings of ‘truth’, including my version being that truth can be a subjective remembering. And there are many ways for interpreting the ‘truth’. For me, it comes as an expression fused in poetic and avant-garde language, the darkness and eerie nature of the Gothic, and the lavishness and honesty of Romanticism. It comes in a layering that stems back to my work as a visual and metal artist where, whether painting or creating metal objects, I was always interested in layering to create texture for movement and emotion. I apply that same idea to language, and Romanticism particularly influences me to continue writing in lavish, moving texture.

Hannah Kent’s book Burial Rites is a ‘true’ story about Agnes who is condemned to death for murder in 1829. What is interesting in Kent’s passages is the language she uses, evoking notions of Romanticism and abject language:

When the smell of him, of sulphur and crushed herbs, and horse-sweat and the smoke from his forge, made me dizzy with pleasure. With possibility. I feel drunk with summer and sunlight. I want to seize fistfuls of sky and eat them. As the scythes run sharp fingers through the stalks, the cut grass makes a gasping sound. (2017, p. 103)

It is reminiscent of Romanticists aiming to seduce the senses and transcend the rational. They wanted to create moving experiences of everyday environments with light over darkness, and intuition and instinct over intellect, yet without losing that intellect. Richard Lansdown talks of Romanticism concerning the Australian landscape: ‘Romanticism loved freedom, but it loved truth more’ (2009, p. 120).

Lansdown refers to explorer Bruni D’Entrecasteaux’s writing of Recherche Bay in Tasmania in 1793, as voicing ‘a peculiarly Romantic paradox about nature: that it speaks to and is a part of us, deeply and ineluctably, yet that it is a separate and uncaring system, too’ (2009, p. 120). D’Entrecasteaux writes of the
Australian landscape as being seen for the first time in frank candour, in contrast to a European landscape:

This solitary harbour situated at the extremities of the globe, so perfectly enclosed that one feels separated from the rest of the universe. Everything is influenced by the wilderness of the rugged landscape. With each step, one encounters the beauties of unspoilt nature, with signs of decrepitude; trees reaching a very great height, and of a corresponding diameter, are devoid of branches along the trunk, but crowned with an everlasting green foliage. Some of these trees seem as ancient as the world, and are so tightly interlaced that they are impenetrable. (2009, p. 120)

D’Entrecasteaux writes of diverse, vague and powerful feelings, sometimes in dramatisation. The extremes of the climate and geography of Australia appealed to the Romanticists. Vast lands, especially at night, provided profound and haunting qualities for exploring secrets, mysteries and nature, and of being lost. Lansdown says that ‘from the earliest days, Australia provided Romantic sensations as well as neoclassical ones’, where the landscape and its Indigenous inhabitants are concerned (2009, p. 120).

However, John Scott and Dean Biron speak of Australian texts in Gothic tones, as representing an ‘Arcadian countryside’ with a ‘malevolent rural underbelly’ (2010, p. 310), looming as threatening because the landscape is seen to be wild. The Australian landscape became a hostile wilderness, an image of exaggerated horror and, as such, abjected. Scott and Biron refer to Kristeva: ‘With rural horror what was normatively valued in the idyll becomes a source of the abject. Rural landscapes may become spaces of abjection’ (2010, p. 310). Ghosts, too, as the voices that narrate the story of life on the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm, are found in both Romanticist and Gothic styles.

Even though both styles are largely European importations, and thus freighted with colonial ideologies, they serve my purpose to draw out aspects latent in an abject place and community, through an abject voice. The Metropolitan Sewerage Farm is not fearful or harsh in the European Gothic sense and I am more seduced by its wide, dreamy expanse, tinged in the eeriness of the vast and the contrast of lush green and dry. It inspires me with the ghostly and ethereal, so light it can’t be touched, that it becomes a haunting. This is where I experiment with storytelling through the eyes of ghosts that have their
own ‘true’ story connected to the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm. It comes, for example, in the ghost of an Aboriginal woman who is murdered through arsenic poisoning administered by the white settler farmer. We can see here, the white settler farmer abjected from his European homeland to live in Australia, and the farmer then abjecting the Aborigines by poisoning them. Abjection again, recurring.

George Saunders tackles the ‘historical truth’ of Abraham Lincoln’s 11-year-old son dying, in *Lincoln in the Bardo*. A community of ghosts, caught between the physical world and the afterlife to exist in their own marginalised abjection, narrate the story:

> At one moment, the angels stepping *en masse* back into a ray of moonlight to impress me with their collective radiance, I glanced up and saw, spread out around the white stone home, a remarkable tableau of suffering: dozens of us, frozen in misery: crowd, prone, crawling, wincing before the travails of the particularized onslaught each was undergoing. (2017, p. 95)

What is interesting for me in Saunders’ work is not only the ghosts’ narrating of the story, but also Saunders’ often staccato and abstract use of language that winds and unwinds in a rhythm of verbal texture, including in his grammatical arrangement. For me, it is reminiscent of Romanticism, evoking a sense of mysticism and the surreal. Here below, Lincoln’s dead son is about to step into his father’s living body as he attempts to traverse the two worlds of physical and afterlife, from the liminal space in which he exists:

> How I wished him to say it to me    And to feel his eyes on me    So I thought,    all right, by Jim, I will get him to see me    And in I went    It was no bother at all    Say, it felt all right    Like I somewhat belonged in (2017, p. 61)

I use a similar notion in the rose-gold wedding band in my creative written work, as it traverses time and place to exist in a twisting of the metaphysical. Creating texture in language is important as it generates movement. It comes in a layering through an abstraction of words and poetic interpretation of story, as well as in its activism. These elements of texture in language, layering of abstracted words, poetic interpretation and activism can be considered components of avant-garde writing. I refer back to Hansen and Tuvel, who say Kristeva’s view of language is one where ‘language itself can be revolutionary because it is heterogeneous’
This is reflected in Saunders’ poetic and abstract, provocative language. I employ poetic undertones and abstraction of language to interpret ‘truth’ in the case of the sewerage ghost town, as not one of death and decay as might be associated with a ghost town, but one full of life.

Hansen and Tuvel say that ‘poetry exposes the materiality of language through its music, tones and rhythms: avant-garde writing transgresses and loosens grammatical rules, opening language to bodily conditions’ (2017, p. 3). Avant-garde writing provides for a liberation in language, and a revealing of abject conditions. It allows for ‘psychic revolt’ as a model for reconstituting language, and highlights that abjection does not negate hope because of disgust, difference or marginality. Instead, it provides the reader with a chance to experience expressive and evocative interpretations for greater understanding of life.

Intermingling these styles and notions in my writing of ‘truth’ allows for a haunting in the sewerage farm landscape. It comes in my writing of the foreshore in the bottom-end township and the mystic entwining of sea and land ghosts, and in the violence of the boy being kicked by his father. My creative work is an honest account of a community that many called their utopia, accepting its life in all its fragility. Past residents and their families often described their life in romantic nostalgia, evoking a wonderful and perfect life, even in what some may consider to be a harsh and abjected landscape. Both the creative written work and song aim to evoke this romanticised nostalgia, through a revitalising and refiguring of the social history with sensitivity and respect.

Sensitivity is crucial with regard to the relationships developed and trust gained. Some stories shared in interviews have been deeply personal and at times, it has been necessary to return to the person interviewed to ensure the stories shared with me are for public dissemination. This was the case with the woman exposing her assault as a young girl and with the family violence. If anonymity has been requested, such stories are written as hazy interpretations through a poetic abstraction of language, allowing me further opportunity for experimentation with the ‘truth’. This involved spending many hours on the
Sofie Laguna experiments with language to convey the abstract and evoke feeling in *One Foot Wrong*. It tells the story of reclusive parents imprisoning a child in their home. The story of fiction unravels in Gothic tones that can unnerve:

The dirt moved from one place to another. It was my job to move it. My sponge had changed colour now that it was a house for sink dirt. How would you ever get that dirt to go away for good? It never goes away it just changes houses. (2009, p. 163)
Catriona Menzies-Pike asked Laguna about the physical qualities of language in her work in an interview, and the importance to her characters. Laguna said she speaks all her ‘work out loud’ and that she feels ‘the sound, it’s almost as if I can hear the sound of the music or I can somehow feel it in my body when I write. I don’t write for long periods of time. I write in quite short intense bursts. It is quite cathartic. It’s quite exhausting’ (Laguna 2015). This cathartic quality is one I have experienced in my writing, too, particularly in highly expressive and emotive scenes and in the abstraction of language.

Interweaving these notions for an avant-garde writing of the ‘truth’ as a form of literary activism, while addressing historical and contemporary issues of abject communities, breathes life into what many may consider an abandoned and abjected place of stench and disgust. It creates an aesthetic paradox in writing about sewerage, for a haunting of ‘truth’. This brings these communities living in marginalised abjection into the public arena for a new understanding of a virtually untouched sewerage town community, one that has lived so deeply in marginalised abjection.
5. Conclusion and findings

Through my creative practice, splicing Agamben’s and Kristeva’s theories with concepts of hauntology and Aboriginal and Maori spirituality has gone some way towards better understanding abjected communities relative to sewerage ghost towns. The poetics methodology has supported this well, by allowing all elements to work together.

We have seen that sewerage town communities live in their own ‘power vacuum’. They grow into communities where acceptance of the individual with no identity enables that individual to find a sense of belonging. It is a life of kindness and empathy of people that is normalising, providing for a humanity within community. Importantly, these communities do not see themselves as living in marginalised abjection, nor of living in the adversity others perceive them to be in. In fact, their experience is the opposite: that of living a utopian or ideal lifestyle. It is not a utopia in the traditional sense, but one that is accepting of the individual and life in its entirety and full polarity, to prosper as a self-sustaining and cohesive humanity community: humane to all life. Sewerage town communities could be seen as forebears of Agamben’s ideals on a being-together and belonging existence of the individual with no identity, within the new, emerging community.

It can be said that a spiritual connectedness exists in sewerage ghost towns because of the strong sense of community that has formed in marginalised abjection in the physical life. The spirit of these communities can emanate as a haunting in the abandoned town through their ghosts.

Fusing these notions through avant-garde writing and literary activism provides for an evocative and poetic expression of the ‘truth’ of these sewerage ghost towns and their communities, as a form of avant-garde literature. This is especially important when considering the associated disgust, repulsion and discrimination of sewerage and sewerage towns as it provides for an aesthetic paradox of sewerage and a haunting of ‘truth’.

Sewerage town communities are complex abject communities and further scholarly discussion is required on them. Sewerage town communities
live in marginalised abjection and experience discrimination because of their association with sewerage. Abject communities are not simply vulnerable or disadvantaged communities; they are communities that experience discrimination. As such, abject communities experiencing discrimination could supplement Kristeva’s theory of abjection.

In conducting further work to better understand these marginalised communities, the following should be considered:

- An exploration could be undertaken into the point at which ghosts of sewerage ghost towns, as zoë, become bios again. This could supplement an investigation into the hauntings on Esholt Sewage Works and the neighbouring sewerage town community, for a haunting of ‘truth’.

- What other communities that may have formed within the same timeframe as the Metropolitan Sewerage Farm community, such as the Coranderrk Aboriginal community, as forebears to Agamben’s being-together and belonging existence within the new, emerging community.

- Effective engagement of such communities living in marginalised abjection requires respectful, inclusive and authentic engagement with a strong foundation of relationship-building to occur over a long period of time. Engagement must be tailored and include two-way communication for respectful information exchange.

Lastly, when undertaking research in partnership with industry, it is important that research goals are clear to ensure there is no bias in research findings. In any instance where goals of the industry organisation and research conflict, it is important to return to the research goals and partnership obligations to find a balance in those.

It must be noted, too, that the findings of this research are not only relevant to sewerage communities and their ghost towns. They can be applied to any marginalised or abject community for better understanding of it.
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