

---

**INTIMATE IMMENSITIES:**  
**The Poetics of Space in Contemporary  
Australian Literature**

---

**Stephane Cordier**

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Sydney

Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences

School of Literature, Arts & Media, Department of English

September 2019

### **Statement of Originality**

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Stephane Cordier

23 September 2019

## **Authorship Attribution Statement**

This thesis contains a later version of material previously published as “Tim Winton’s *In the Winter Dark* and the Settler Condition,” *Antipodes* 32, nos.1&2 (2018), 58-72.

In addition to the statements above, in cases where I am not the corresponding author of a published item, permission to include the published material has been granted by the corresponding author.

Stephane Cordier  
23 September 2019

As supervisor for the candidature upon which this thesis is based, I can confirm that the authorship attribution statements above are correct.

Professor Robert Dixon  
23 September 2019

---

## Contents

---

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction: Issues of Spatial Representation in the Settler Colonial Present .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Deconstructing Australian Space: The Poetics of Unsettlement in Ross Gibson and Tim Winton’s Badlands.....</b>	<b>23</b>
Part 1 An Unsettling Spatial History: Empathetic Unsettlement in Ross Gibson’s <i>Seven Versions of an Australian Badland</i> .....	27
Part 2 Communal Neurosis and Settler Anxiety: Epistemological Vertigo in Tim Winton’s <i>In the Winter Dark</i> .....	45
<b>Chapter 2 Place and Self in Crisis: From Unproductive Identities to a Poetics of Unbelonging .....</b>	<b>61</b>
Part 1 Riding the Crisis: Double Aspect, Non-place and Shadow Space in Tim Winton’s <i>The Riders</i> .....	66
Part 2 Real and Imagined Australia: Non-place and Ontological Vertigo in <i>Eyrie</i> and <i>Breath</i> .....	81
<b>Chapter 3 An Imaginative Non-fiction for a Re-imagined Outback: Nicolas Rothwell’s Geopoetics.....</b>	<b>102</b>
Part 1 Self, Place and Nation in Crisis: From Metaphysical Void to Metaphysical Recovery.....	106
Part 2 Ethics of Representation and Self-reflexivity: Nicolas Rothwell’s Narrative Essays.....	134
Part 3 Nicolas Rothwell’s Ethics of Non-belonging: From “relations of co- dependency” to a “soft kind of reverse assimilation” .....	150
<b>Chapter 4 Tim Winton’s Decolonising Poetics of Space: Intimacy with Immensity.....</b>	<b>162</b>
Part 1 Renegotiating Relationships with Space and Time: “Big World” and “Aquifer” .....	166
Part 2 Decolonising Ways of Seeing: <i>That Eye, the Sky</i> .....	179

Part 3 Renegotiating Relationships with the Non-human Realm: Dialogical	
Interspecies Ethics in <i>Dirt Music</i> .....	188
<b>Conclusion and Caveats: Towards a Post-national Literature .....</b>	<b>227</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>241</b>

---

## Abstract

---

Much of Australia's literary landscape reflects a quest to represent its immense space. Empirical modes of investigation and Eurocentric literary models have resulted in alienation. For non-Indigenous Australians, Australia's space remains an unsettling and unsettled space. Colonial erasures, legal fictions and national mythologies have failed to turn space into place. Too much remains unresolved to write from the perspective of a place literature. A lack of intimacy with Australia's immensities has led to much misrelation, with devastating consequences for Indigenous Australians and the non-human environment. The Aboriginal Turn of the 1980s and postcolonial literary theory have been invaluable to progress towards more ethical modes of representation. Yet, we continue to live in the settler colonial present.

My thesis makes connections between authors, modes and genres to offer a compelling case for a complementary poetics of space which embraces intimacy with immensity. Ross Gibson's nonfiction, Tim Winton's fiction and Nicolas Rothwell's narrative essays position readers in front of temporal and spatial hinges that interrogate reified notions of an Australian identity; these hinges include the colonial archive, the age of exploration or the 1988 Bicentenary. Key to their poetics of space is a reorientation towards *Country* so that Indigenous thought and culture may reform settler society. As well as writing back to Empire, Gibson, Rothwell and Winton write from and to the settler colonial present, decolonising modes of perception, representation, time, space and the sacred, as well as relationships with Indigenous people and the non-human realm. Their works double as critical tools that serve to forge a poetics of Reconciliation.

My methodology draws critically from concepts developed in the fields of postcolonial studies, ecocriticism and trauma theory. Because French philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century were instrumental in reforming spatial theory, I use concepts developed by Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to identify principles that inform contemporary spatial representations. From within the colonial present *Intimate Immensities* evokes the possibility of a post-settler dynamic of non-belonging, with placelessness and movement as key markers of a renegotiated identity.

---

## Acknowledgements

---

For this research project, I want to thank my supervisor, Professor Robert Dixon. It has been a privilege to work under his guidance. His erudition and subtle advice have helped me refine my textual analyses and theoretical approaches. The thesis, as it stands, has been much improved from our rich conversations and exchanges.

Thanks to Tim Winton for his kind support of my research project. And above anything else, thanks for writing all these narratives and essays. It has been a pleasure to work in the company of all these characters (OK, maybe not *Eyrie's* Clappy and Stewie) and amidst such settings for the past four years.

This thesis would never have seen the light of day without Daniela Brozek, who dragged me out of France's striated space and immersed me in Australia's immensities, almost two decades ago. Her extensive knowledge of Australia's geography, history, natural environment and literature has helped me develop a more subtle understanding of this continent. This thesis is, in many ways, the culmination of these countless discussions and life-changing perspectives. Thank you!

Stephane Cordier

September 2019

## Introduction: Issues of Spatial Representation in the Settler Colonial Present

Immensity is to space what eternity is to time. Etymologically, immensity is “the unmeasured” – not what cannot be measured, but what has not yet been measured.<sup>1</sup> The difference matters. A person may give up when confronted by the unmeasurable but they will strive to fill in the gap of the unmeasured. That attempt has defined much of Australia’s history, social interactions and of course its literature. Endeavours to map unknown space are instrumental to the act of conquest. The European reading grids that accompanied the colonial gaze operated as levelling machines that determined future relations towards Indigenous populations and the non-human environment: “The space of Empire is universal, Euclidean and Cartesian ... If it were admitted that different cultures produced different spaces, then negotiating these would be difficult, if not impossible”.<sup>2</sup> From the onset of colonisation, seeing also meant not seeing. Colonial presence required Indigenous absence; colonial history required Indigenous erasure. The truth is that the early explorers did not discover anything, for all of Australian space had been intimately experienced, mapped, shaped or cultivated by its traditional custodians, but they certainly brought with them the ideology of their time.<sup>3</sup>

Perception and representation of space are interlinked: they nourish each other and fuel spatial relations and spatial practices.<sup>4</sup> As conceived by French spatial philosopher Henri Lefebvre, space is socially and culturally produced; it is constituted of perceived, conceived and lived space.<sup>5</sup> One should not read artificial division in his conceptualisation. All these spaces are “simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical” according to American geographer Edward Soja, who derives from Lefebvre’s work a coherent “trialectics of space”.<sup>6</sup> Landscapes and literary representations of space are, by definition, products of initial spatial encounters which then affect, or even infect, further

---

<sup>1</sup> *Collins Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Immense,” (1986; London: Collins, 1990), 765.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 4.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (Broome, W.A.: Magabala Books, 2014); Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> George Seddon, *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Stephen Bourassa, *The Aesthetics of Landscape* (London: Belhaven Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 65. See also Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 64.



perceptions of a given place (for space has, at that stage, given way to place, and nature to culture). Colonial exploratory journals were anticlimactic narratives that served as justification for the non-discoveries of explorers defeated by Australia's immense space.<sup>7</sup> Settler journals and early colonial fiction also frequently represent Australian space as the antagonist. Trying to come to terms with Australian spatiality through the conceptual frameworks they introduced (Euclidian geometry, the line, the ratio, rectilinear representations) ensured the object of their quest remained out of reach.<sup>8</sup> Australian writers continued to rely on such modes of perception and representation well into the twentieth century. The thesis examines the spatial renegotiations that are taking place in contemporary Australian literature, and argues that a perceptive shift can be observed in the way space is being perceived, experienced and represented.

Very few people truly inhabit Australia's immensities, but the bush and the outback remain key elements in the construction of personal and national identity.<sup>9</sup> The unacknowledged purpose of much of Australian literature seems to have been an attempt not only to represent Australia's elusive immense space, but to settle it – to substitute landscape for unknown space, in a bid to artificially cement *place*-making: "The quest for a sense of place, of belonging, may indeed comprise an important strategy for psychological survival".<sup>10</sup> Where colonists had failed to effectively settle Australia's immensities, a national literature could perhaps succeed through narrative and myth. In fact, the vast majority of contemporary Australian literature continues to be preoccupied, perhaps even obsessed, with representations of place and space. As Laurie Clancy argued in 1993, "in the last two decades the self-conscious preoccupation with landscape among Australian fiction writers has become ... debilitating and even self-destructive".<sup>11</sup> After close to two hundred and fifty years of settlement, has Australian space not been mapped and glossed-over enough?

---

<sup>7</sup> Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 128.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, less than 2.5% of Australians live in remote or very remote locations. Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Australian Social Trends, 2008: Population Distribution," last modified 23 July 2008. Accessed 5 May 2016. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter3002008>.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Bennett, *An Australian Compass: Essays on Place and Direction in Australian Literature* (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Laurie Clancy, "Imagined Landscapes: Thoughts on Some Recent Australian Fiction," in *Australia's Changing Landscapes – Proceedings of the Second EASA Conference*, eds Susan Ballyn, Doireann MacDermott and Kathleen Firth (Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1993), 49.

Birthered at the time of the Enlightenment, colonial Australia readily embraced modernity and the view of time as progress.<sup>12</sup> Settler colonists hoped to expedite the process of place-making by having time settle space. The legal fiction of *terra nullius* came as a handy tool to extract Aboriginal societies from the colonial narrative. Most settlers were blind to the fact that the depth of knowledge and connection Indigenous Australians had established with *Country* was only possible because it was commensurable with space itself: it was anchored in deep time. Sixty thousand years of patient observation and relationship with *Country* had resulted in the most intimate form of belonging; one in which culture enters the conjoined immensities of both time and space and merges as if in the folds of geology. Not surprisingly, compared to this depth of place-making, politically-motivated forms of belonging only led to superficial claims to place. Australia had been “mapped, but not known”.<sup>13</sup> To bring “a morality to their presence in the country”, settlers used as legitimisation the toil and time it took to shape the land towards purposes of exploitation; but to this day, for many non-Indigenous Australians, it is still a matter of “*becoming* connected” to the land.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that, for non-Indigenous Australians, space is only settled on the surface. Space is not place. It is as though the land itself still refuses to yield up its essence.

For the non-Indigenous protagonists of the works examined in this thesis, Australian space remains unsettled and unsettling, not least because of historical irresolution. Key to the settler colonial project is the “replacement and/or displacement of indigenous Others”: in a typical case of Sartrean bad faith or guilt, settler societies “disavow any foundational violence ... as a defensive mechanism”.<sup>15</sup> Colonial violence led to an ongoing series of misrelations with Indigenous Australians, migrants, refugees and the non-human environment, and this has manifested, in life and literature, as a crisis of (non)belonging. Exploring the possibilities of existential spatiality by conjugating Lefebvre’s spatial trialectics and Existentialism, Soja argues that humans extract themselves from nature and differentiate themselves from their surroundings by establishing a distance between them and the world they emerge from.<sup>16</sup> It is that gap or space that the authors I examine in this thesis – Ross Gibson, Tim Winton and

---

<sup>12</sup> John Gascoigne, *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia* (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Philippa Robin Eaden and Francis Hugh Mares, eds, *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination – Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott* (Netley, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Gill, “Transcending nostalgia: pastoralist memory and staking a claim in the land,” in *Dislocating the Frontier: Essaying the Mystique of the Outback*, eds Deborah Bird Rose and Richard Davis (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005), 73 and 78.

<sup>15</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 132.

Nicolas Rothwell – investigate in their respective works. Their narratives explore attempts to resolve a spatial existential crisis by reconnecting self with space.

If we accept Soja's premise, then settler societies are in a particular predicament. Individuals are subject to a double alienation, from both the motherland and from the Australian environment, because of the need (consciously or unconsciously, individually and collectively) to distance themselves from the world here (Australia) and the world there (the place of origin). This double-distancing is reflected in Australian literature where archetypal protagonists are often dysfunctional characters or exiles trying to resolve not one, but multiple existential crises. The thesis argues that the "double aspect of the inner Australia", diagnosed by Judith Wright in 1965, does not only apply to the emigrant generation.<sup>17</sup> This double exile is an ongoing feature of the settler colonial present. In fact, the contemporary authors studied in my thesis compound the type of crisis found in narratives like Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* – they see "second-hand Europeans"<sup>18</sup> experiencing the land at third hand. Adding to domestic spatial crises linked to Indigenous priority, alienation from the motherland and misrelation to Australian space, Gibson, Winton and Rothwell also subject their characters to exogenous transnational forces (a global economy, the flow of migrants and refugees, multiculturalism) that induce the acceptance of a renegotiated identity after an intense period of destabilisation.

One could argue that the past three decades have been characterised by "spatial instability".<sup>19</sup> Since what Bain Attwood has called the Aboriginal Turn, a confrontation over frontier history in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Mabo and Wik judgements of the 1990s, non-Indigenous Australians' sense of place has become ever-more precarious.<sup>20</sup> Political action has tried, in vain, to settle spatial issues decisively. The celebrations around the 1988 Bicentenary orchestrated a myth of 200 years of settlement. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1991-2001) enlisted intellectuals and authors like David Malouf to precipitate the moment of Reconciliation and bring artificial closure to the politics of unsettlement associated with the Aboriginal Turn. Unsurprisingly, these attempts backfired and thrust wide

---

<sup>17</sup> Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), xi.

<sup>18</sup> A.D. Hope, "Australia," in *Collected Poems 1930-1970* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), 13.

<sup>19</sup> This is how Joanne Tompkins analyses the state of affairs in contemporary Australian theatre. See Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6.

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the Aboriginal Turn, see *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Crowns Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 14.

open the gates of an unsettled place where awaited “the shadow of more than a century of cover though unsuccessful attempts at cultural genocide, and finally the shadows cast by the dark bodies of Aborigines signifying their dignified but implacable protest”.<sup>21</sup>

The Bicentenary and the official policies set by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation marked the opening of the Reconciliation Era, whose forceful objectives became the catalyst for the divergent poetics of space studied in my thesis. Novels like Tim Winton’s *In the Winter Dark* (1988) foreground a precarious settler colonial condition that demands radical renegotiation.<sup>22</sup> *Cloudstreet* (1991) and its focus on dwellings also reflects this obsession with finding one’s place while standing on land that seems to be shifting. Midnight Oil’s hit “Beds Are Burning” (1987) brought a similar message to popular culture: a land slipping away from non-Indigenous Australians’ grasp. Such times also saw the publication of important theoretical works indicating a convergence of postcolonial and Australian literary studies, such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989), and Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra’s *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1991). Australian space is as contentious as ever, but thirty years after the Bicentenary, another flavour permeates debates in the social, political and cultural fields, and this finds an echo in the literary works that have been produced since then. If, in 1988, the nation’s concerns were history and place, after a period of intense economic development, Australia’s geography, its space, is once more at the centre of public concern. We live in the wake of Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations and in the midst of debates around the recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution and the establishment of a permanent Indigenous Voice to parliament. To take into consideration these significant reorientations, contemporary authors have developed particular poetics and politics of space that redirect creative energies and the critical gaze towards a spatial practice and aesthetics that I will call intimacy with immensity.

The authors studied in *Intimate Immensities* seize upon this socio-political moment to propose ways of moving from a logic of settlement and belonging to a logic of unsettlement and unbelonging. For Australian spatial philosopher Jeff Malpas, Indigenous and non-

---

<sup>21</sup> Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), x.

<sup>22</sup> Stephane Christophe Cordier, “Tim Winton’s *In the Winter Dark* and the Settler Condition,” *Antipodes* 32, nos.1&2 (2018): 58-72.

Indigenous Australian identities are consubstantial to place.<sup>23</sup> The influential work of Australian anthropologist Peter Read embraces the same thesis.<sup>24</sup> But other thinkers point to different referents. Roslynn Haynes looks into Australia's immense deserts for the key to Australian identity.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden investigate literatures that steep their narratives into *Intimate Horizons*.<sup>26</sup> I am indebted to these authors, whose work inspired the title of my thesis. Others, like Suvendrini Perera and Elizabeth McMahon, argue for a shift towards the element of water to better account for the vagaries of Australian identity.<sup>27</sup> These are indeed the paradigm shifts effected by the authors studied in *Intimate Immensities*. In many cases their works pre-date these calls. Instead of adding yet another stone to the edifice of "place literature", a tradition that led to "the literature of extinction",<sup>28</sup> "the literature of ruins",<sup>29</sup> nostalgia and melancholy, they immerse their characters in Australia's immensities as a means of offering alternative ways to experience space, and to move away from a logic of ownership towards one of settler non-belonging. Their poetics of space take into account the social and political realities associated with the spatial turn and the Aboriginal Turn, and provide blue prints to navigate change and shape a more responsible future. Where previously a lack of sustained cultural exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians betrayed Australian literature's "massive complicity with an imperialist enterprise",<sup>30</sup> there are now encouraging signs that these dialogues are taking place. It is therefore time to survey contemporary Australian literature and investigate how the tone, form and content of the Australian literary landscape have changed since the Bicentenary.

### Scope, authors and primary texts

To carry out this investigation, *Intimate Immensities* surveys contemporary authors who express their ideas about space and place through different modes and genres. They are writers of fiction and non-fiction, who frequently turn essayists and cultural commentators to

---

<sup>23</sup> Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Elizabeth McMahon, *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Anthem Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Andrew McCann, "The Literature of Extinction," *Meanjin* 65, no.1 (2006): 48-54.

<sup>29</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, x.

theorise or conceptualise the intellectual material that informs their literary projects. They are not part of a literary movement *per se*, but despite their diversity of background, form and expression, all are heavily invested in reforming the way Australians perceive, represent and relate to place and space. They share a similar deconstructive aesthetics that openly signals the need to interrogate the past in order to forge a more ethical future. While my thesis does consider what is taking place in literary works by Indigenous Australians (especially fiction by Alexis Wright and Kim Scott), my focus is on the processes that have transformed the way non-Indigenous Australians experience, represent and conceptualise place and space.

For fiction, Tim Winton was an obvious choice. Space is central to all his works; it is the protagonist *par excellence*. Surprisingly, for an author who was four times the recipient of the Miles Franklin Literary Award, critical writing about his literary production has not been extensive until quite recently.<sup>31</sup> Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly's 2014 collection of critical essays was an attempt to redress "the relative dearth of critical debate about the literature of Tim Winton".<sup>32</sup> McCredden's recent monograph, *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred* (2016) is an important contribution that offers perceptive insights on Winton's novels.<sup>33</sup> Still, literati seem to shun his works, perhaps because he is seen as a popular writer. For similar reasons Thomas Keneally's standing amongst Australian critics, as a literary writer, has waned as his international popularity has increased. But this is precisely why it is of critical importance to study Winton's oeuvre. There is danger in overstating the power of literature to effect change in a given society, but to some degree, because he is so widely read, Winton may contribute to shaping Australians' relations with space.

Winton's narratives deconstruct spatial perceptions and representations of a particular environment before proposing a suitable poetics of space. All the works studied in *Intimate Immensities* put spatial representations at the service of spatial practices that could inflect the way Australian communities relate to the non-human realm and to one another. *In the Winter Dark* (1988) reflects on the forested bush and the mythologies associated with settler belonging. His oceanic novels, *An Open Swimmer* (1982), *Shallows* (1984) and *Breath* (2008) unfold the lives of protagonists who live on the coastal fringes of Australia. Caught between

---

<sup>31</sup> Robert Dixon, "Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* and the Field of Australian Literature," *Westerly* 50 (2005): 240-260.

<sup>32</sup> Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly, eds, *Tim Winton: Critical Essays* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 1.

<sup>33</sup> Lyn McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016).

sea and land, the old world and the new, Winton's swimmers and surfers become metaphors for the individual tentatively negotiating the spatial instabilities of settler colonial space. *Dirt Music* (2001) explores the tropics and operates a renegotiation of the sacred on *Country*.<sup>34</sup> My study focuses mainly on the representation of Australia's immensities, but I make incursions into the way Winton represents urban and suburban spaces in *Cloudstreet* (1991) and *Eyrie* (2013). It would be a mistake to view his novels as conservative imitations of the motherland. In a typical case of abrogation and appropriation,<sup>35</sup> Winton revisits canonical modes and genres to subvert them, and breathes into them a resolutely Australian vernacular that subtly undermines Empire in a bid to assert an antipodean identity founded on a divergent aesthetics.

The spatial renegotiations that one finds in Winton's fiction are also taking place in contemporary non-fiction. For my case studies I look to Ross Gibson and Nicolas Rothwell, who operate a similar deconstruction and decolonisation of spatial perceptions, representations and relations. Gibson is an academic who has published widely on popular culture, mass media and communication. In *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (1984) and *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (1992) he foregrounds the principle of antipodean inversion as a subversive force at the service of decolonisation. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002) and *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* (2012) lean on this principle to interrogate spatio-temporal referents inherited from colonialism and propose an alternative spatiality that is informed, in part, by Indigenous epistemologies. Gibson crafts a spatial history of given locations that is very much in the vein of work like *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (1987) and *The Lie of the Land* (1996) by Paul Carter, another writer and intellectual whose works I frequently draw on as a point of comparison.

Nicolas Rothwell is a professional journalist who led a cosmopolitan existence, spending many years as foreign correspondent in the Middle East and Eastern Europe before becoming northern correspondent for *The Australian*. His erudite works straddle fiction and non-fiction,

---

<sup>34</sup> I use the term "*Country*" to refer to the particular attachment Indigenous Australians have formed with the land (a physical, spiritual, legal, ecological and economic set of relations). The common noun "country" is otherwise used to refer to Australia as a nation state.

<sup>35</sup> See "Abrogation and Appropriation" in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989; London: Routledge, 2010), 37-39.

moving freely from history to geography, natural history, anthropology, philosophy and literature, effectively proposing an alternative Australian literary canon. Apart from book reviews and an important critical essay by Robert Dixon, his body of work has received very little critical attention thus far.<sup>36</sup> *Intimate Immensities* redresses this oversight and argues that Rothwell is, in fact, at work creating a new literary genre. In *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (2003), *The Red Highway* (2009), *Belomor* (2013) and *Quicksilver* (2016) Rothwell develops an aesthetics of the fragment that reads as a political statement about the destructive nature of settler colonialism. In his texts, both settler and Indigenous societies lie in ruins and are in critical need of reinvention. Despite their fragmentary nature, Rothwell's narratives have a striking sense of coherence. Rothwell develops a geopoetics that takes protagonist and reader to *Country*. There, he relies on points of cultural convergence and Indigenous guides to initiate a series of postcolonial transformations through "relations of co-dependency" and "a soft kind of reverse assimilation".<sup>37</sup>

### Thesis summary

Gibson, Winton and Rothwell's poetics of space have not been compared before, but there are strong lines of convergence between their works. They engage in similar reformations of settler colonial identity through a series of decolonisations of modes of perception, representation, time, space and the sacred, as well as relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the non-human realm. *Intimate Immensities* argues that their works form a complementary poetics of space that lies in developing a relationship of intimacy with immensity. They deploy characters who are subject to a deep malaise that I analyse as a multidimensional spatial crisis. A poetics of unsettlement (delivered through a confronting, violent aesthetics) accompanies the premise that Australian space is, fundamentally, an unsettled and unsettling space. A process common to these authors then unfolds: settler colonial space is stripped bare after a deconstructive practice which peels back historical and cultural layers. Gradually place is dwarfed by deep time and reverts to space that can be apprehended anew. The authors resort to a poetics of unbelonging and the recurring motif of the strata to expose settler colonial modes of perception and representation. Confronted with a complex landscape the individual who acknowledges Indigenous priority

---

<sup>36</sup> Robert Dixon, "Ground Zero: Nicolas Rothwell's Natural History of Destruction," *Studies in Travel Writing* 15, no.2 (2011): 177-188.

<sup>37</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Journeys to the Interior* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010), 163 and 212.



as well as the forces inherent in settler colonialism may be able to envision trajectories that move away from settler colonial paradigms. Their works shift the emphasis from measurement, myth making, place making and colonisation of the immense, to an intimate experience of Australian space. There, a geopoetics that stays close to the lie of the land may be imagined.

The specificities of Gibson, Winton and Rothwell's individual representational projects will be outlined in separate chapters, but I will also show how, taken together, their works form a coherent poetics of space which is capable of functioning as a decolonising tool. The spatial practice that consists of establishing a relationship of intimacy with immensity leads to a productive reorientation towards *Country* so that Indigenous thought and culture may reform settler society. Strategies that promote a rapprochement between cultures can prove a perilous literary exercise; characters who enter immensities in search of meaning or a transcendental experience are at risk of appropriating another's space and culture.<sup>38</sup> Do the authors end up rehearsing neo-colonial tropes? Can they escape reterritorialising the Indigenous and non-human realms? Each chapter of the thesis evaluates the authors' literary contributions against issues of white indigenisation, cultural appropriation, and ecocritical debates. Space is not perceived or experienced in the same way by the traveller, the migrant, the Indigenous or non-Indigenous Australian. To conceptualise such a shifting object of study requires a multidisciplinary approach.

### **Methodology and conceptual tools**

Because the space of settler societies is inherently multiple, I rely on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia to apprehend the diversity of subject positions experiencing a given space.<sup>39</sup> To detect and conceptualise the renegotiations that are taking place in the field of spatial representations within Australian literature, I find the kind of studies led by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1957) particularly valuable. Bachelard's phenomenological study of spatial representations across French literature offer means by which to identify crucial drivers of personal and collective identity. Dated, controversial and eminently subjective as it may be, phenomenology still has the potential to identify socio-

---

<sup>38</sup> See Homi K. Bhabha *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) and Edward Said *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Places," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986): 22-27.

cultural trends within literary works preoccupied with issues of place and space. I adapt and transpose Bachelard's theories to suit the antipodean space of Australia's immensities.

Founded on violence, erasure and repression, the particular historical legacy of settler societies also invites the use of trauma theory to reflect on the ethics of representation in cultural productions.<sup>40</sup> I rely on postcolonial *and* settler colonial theory to determine the nature of trauma, and to situate the authors I study in relation to the debate as to whether Australia has entered *post*-colonialism or whether they position themselves in what Lorenzo Veracini calls *The Settler Colonial Present* (2015).<sup>41</sup> To avoid replicating settler colonial paradigms, Gibson, Winton and Rothwell insist on a spatial identity that has much in common with the progressive geography of Doreen Massey (especially her concept of transient identities expressed as trajectories)<sup>42</sup> and the spatial philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, most notably their concepts of de/reterritorialisation, the rhizome and nomadology.<sup>43</sup> In the case studies, the recalibrations which prompt the characters to accept a less fixed sense of self, place and identity almost invariably involve an immersion (literally a baptism) in the non-human human realm, where a renegotiation of the sacred takes place. These transformations are contingent on the acknowledgement of Indigenous presence and a form of engagement with the concept of *Country*. To tease out this complex dynamic, I resort to an array of Indigenous scholarship, critiques of Transcendentalism and ecocriticism.

### Michel Foucault's heterotopic space

Foucault is famed for a prophetic pronouncement he made at the end of a conference in March 1967 that possibly initiated what would subsequently be called the Spatial Turn: "The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space".<sup>44</sup> He was right, but paradoxically his philosophical works only refer to space sporadically. It was during that talk that Foucault presented his concept of heterotopia, a dynamic, plural, real-and-imagined space where several spatial perceptions and experiences contend. Foucault provides examples of what constitute heterotopias: prisons and asylums (heterotopias of deviation), museums and libraries (heterochronies), they are places of exclusion and juxtaposition, counter-sites

---

<sup>40</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>41</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1988; London: Athlone Press, 1992).

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Places," 22.

“capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”.<sup>45</sup> One can immediately sense here the dualistic constraints of French structuralism: as Jeremy W. Crampton observes, “Foucault’s spatial sensibility was ultimately blind to space’s ‘aliveness’ because of his focus on spatial order”.<sup>46</sup> But what seems a by-line in Foucault’s oeuvre proves a rather useful concept to reflect on the nature of settler societies and their spatial representations.

Fragmentary rather than monolithic, Australian space as it appears in the works of the authors I study is represented as heterotopic *spaces* (open, dynamic, plural rather than merely dual). If settler colonial space is inherently heterotopic, it is also heterochronic. Gibson, Winton and Rothwell frequently resort to heterochrony to evoke different time frames synchronously. Strangely enough for philosophers who lived and wrote through the French decolonisation of North Africa, French structuralists and post-structuralists did not seek to extend their theories to settler colonial space (Foucault only mentions “the colonies” in passing).<sup>47</sup> I argue that Gibson, Winton and Rothwell make protagonists and readers experience Australian space as heterochronic heterotopia. They unsettle western space-time paradigms and operate a rapprochement with Indigenous culture where heterochrony is common narrative practice to represent the consequences of historical events in the present.

### Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space

European spatial philosophy continues to influence much of contemporary spatial thought, including for those who advocate a radically postcolonial literature. Lisa Slater advises that “to generate postcolonial cultures it is necessary to transform the representational terrain”.<sup>48</sup> Yet, to deliver her thesis, she still relies on Bachelard’s pronouncement that the individual must look for “The immense in the intimate”.<sup>49</sup> For Bachelard, humans define their sense of place in relation to intimate spaces. He articulates a poetics of space centred on the house,

---

<sup>45</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Places,” 25.

<sup>46</sup> Jeremy W. Crampton, “Space, Territory, Geography,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, eds Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary and Jana Sawicki (Chichester, UK: Blackwell, 2013), 397.

<sup>47</sup> On the failings of the French intelligentsia regarding the conceptualisation of settler colonial space, see Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Lisa Slater, “Intimate Australia: *Body/Landscape Journals* and the Paradox of Belonging,” *Cultural Studies Review* 13, no.1 (2007): 150.

<sup>49</sup> Slater, “Intimate Australia,” 164.

nests or shells – places where the mind is allowed to expand infinitely.<sup>50</sup> How does this transpose to Australia? Densely populated Europe has not encouraged philosophers to reflect on wide spaces or the natural realm very much. In a bid to counter the failings of European poetics in an Australian context, critics like Jennifer Rutherford argue that it is time to do away with Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*. She advocates "Undwelling".<sup>51</sup> The essays she collates in *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space* (2010) provide interesting aesthetic and philosophical propositions for an alternative Australian poetics of space, but they are unlikely to appeal to mainstream non-Indigenous populations.

On the other side of the critical debate, Malpas argues that phenomenology may be the most productive way to investigate Australia's immense space.<sup>52</sup> Because it is poetic, Bachelard's spatial philosophy is malleable. The concept still works, only it needs to be inverted. For Bachelard, all spaces of intimacy operate an attraction.<sup>53</sup> In Gibson, Winton and Rothwell's works, it is Australia's immense space that operates this power of attraction, calling upon individuals to become intimate with the immense. Australians need not *imagine* space, for there is an abundance of it. Before they can reach any degree of resolution to their crisis, their characters need to acquaint themselves with space – not by making space their place, which would rehearse a logic of belonging, but by establishing a non-appropriative relationship of intimacy with immensity with their surroundings.

### Traumascapes and trauma theory

The very nature of settler colonial history impedes spatial conceptual renegotiations. Frontier violence is both inscribed onto the landscape and concealed from view. Widespread practices of archival erasure, denial and colonial silence over the atrocities that were committed against Indigenous populations created the perfect conditions for a post-traumatic society, for all parties concerned. This phenomenon is not restricted to bygone colonial history; it is imbedded in the settler colonial present. Buried under layers of suppressed memories (both personal and collective), and covered by layers of nation-building myths aimed at creating a

---

<sup>50</sup> For contested points of translation, I refer to the original version in French, Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de L'Espace* (1957; Vendome: PUF, 1974); otherwise I use its English translation Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1969; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Jennifer Rutherford, "Undwelling; or Reading Bachelard in Australia," in *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*, eds Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010), 117.

<sup>52</sup> Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 20, footnote 4.

<sup>53</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 12.

semblance of social coherence, Australian space reads as what Maria Tumarkin calls a “traumascape”.<sup>54</sup> This has translated, in life and literature, as spatial loss, nostalgia and melancholia.

To try to recover these “lost places”, Gibson and Rothwell do not hesitate to reintroduce the suppressed violence back into the landscape to confront the enormity of the past.<sup>55</sup> Instead of anchoring historical trauma geographically, other authors resort to metaphorical association. To detect these practices, I adopt the concept of “epistemological vertigo”, which has been used productively by John Docker to elucidate the allegorical treatment of trauma in contemporary Australian cultural productions.<sup>56</sup> In all cases, it is important to identify the nature of trauma in these works. Historical trauma, argues Dominick LaCapra, may be partially resolved, but structural trauma is insoluble.<sup>57</sup> To determine the nature of trauma in my case studies, I am drawn to Bain Attwood’s *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (2005) and LaCapra’s concept of “empathetic unsettlement”, a practice that makes it possible for the historian to have an affective response to the victims of trauma without appropriation or self-seeking redemption.<sup>58</sup> The literary texts I study deploy similar strategies to reflect on the nature of settler colonisation. Settler colonial space, as it appears in Gibson, Rothwell and Winton’s texts, reads as “an immense, historical crime-scene” where there is no possibility of closure.<sup>59</sup> This emphasis on irresolution corresponds to an ethical acknowledgement of the ongoing nature of trauma, and the fact that we live in the settler colonial present, rather than *post*-colonial Australia. For all these authors, “invasion is a structure not an event”.<sup>60</sup>

### Narratives of the settler colonial present

Settler colonial studies were pioneered by scholars like Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini. It is a critical field of enquiry which has brought considerable refinement to postcolonial theory, but I do not find it particularly useful to pitch one against the other. I look to the term

---

<sup>54</sup> Maria Tumarkin, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>56</sup> John Docker, “Epistemological Vertigo and Allegory: Thoughts on Massacres, Actual, Surrogate, and Averted – *Beersheba, Wake in Fright, Australia*,” in *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia*, eds Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), 51-72.

<sup>57</sup> Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 727.

<sup>58</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” 696-727.

<sup>59</sup> Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassel, 1999), 2.

critically and seek to nuance Wolfe and Veracini's conclusions, especially in relation to narrative. Veracini identifies a key difference between colonial and settler colonial narratives.<sup>61</sup> The colonial narrative tends to have a circular form and is based on a return, whereas for settler societies, "no return is envisaged".<sup>62</sup> It follows that in settler societies, a more linear form of narrative tends to supersede space and replace what is there with known forms and presence.<sup>63</sup> Conversely, it is well established that colonial narratives are written in the mode of discovery and write back to the motherland.<sup>64</sup> In settler societies, on the other hand, "settlers do not discover: they carry their sovereignty and lifestyles with them ... they settle another place without really moving".<sup>65</sup> These theoretical observations are indeed invaluable to understand the specificities of settler societies, but I believe they need to be revisited. Colonial narratives do not always return, and at the moment, in the realm of Australian letters, it is settler colonial narratives that return and exit linear narration to explore complexity, polyphony, the fragment or the reduplicative. These contemporary trends, set by authors like Stephen Muecke and Paul Carter in the 1980s, are readily adopted by the authors studied in my thesis. Gibson, Winton and Rothwell do not simply write back to the motherland, they write *to* their fellow Australians from the settler colonial present.<sup>66</sup>

Settler societies sometimes resort to a practice that may look like a decolonisation of settler colonial practices, but on closer inspection this presents another pattern of disavowal: "the colonising settler can disappear behind the subaltern migrant" and settler societies can "then be recoded as postcolonial migrant societies. The migrant blocks out the 'settler', independence (the 'post') occludes the 'colonial', and the 'settler colonial' is thoroughly concealed".<sup>67</sup> I understand Veracini's misgivings in front of the prospect of a migrant paradigm that would result in masking the settler colonial. But if a migrant aesthetic is to be ruled out, one may still conceive ethical representational models based on transience and movement, where the groups composing a given society are understood relationally, as the product of waves of migration and occupation, intersecting trajectories that reflect our

---

<sup>61</sup> Veracini does not limit his reflection to historical narratives but widens it to stories, myths and literature in *Settler Colonialism*, 96.

<sup>62</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 96-97.

<sup>63</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 100.

<sup>64</sup> This thesis is of course explored in depth in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*.

<sup>65</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 98.

<sup>66</sup> This necessary phase, described and theorised by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) is not entirely over, but it is now taking on new forms. Ashcroft identifies these transformations in *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001) and *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture* (London: Continuum, 2001).

<sup>67</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 108.

transience more than our settled-ness. Such renegotiations towards a more fluid, spatial identity would imply a reconceptualisation of place and space, a task that has been the lifework of British geographer Doreen Massey.

### Reconceptualising place and space: Doreen Massey's trajectories

For Massey, traditional conceptualisations of place as known, concrete, and synonymous with presence – and space as unknown, abstract, and synonymous with absence – must be revised because they have been instrumental to colonialism.<sup>68</sup> In Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, for example, these simplistic binaries translate as topophilia (as a site of intimacy the house is a "felicitous space") or topophobia (vast spaces are often feared, as demonstrated in descriptions involving a sublime aesthetics).<sup>69</sup> Massey makes the case "*For Space*", asking: "And what if we refuse that distinction, all too appealing it seems, between place (as meaningful, lived, and everyday) and space (as what? the outside? the abstract? the meaningless)?"<sup>70</sup> The major paradigm shift she suggests would see us conceiving of space as the product of interrelations, "the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist".<sup>71</sup> Massey also insists that place and space be seen as a process, not as a fixed moment in time. These are precisely the kind of reorientations the texts studied in *Intimate Immensities* are invested in. Gibson, Winton and Rothwell consistently deny their characters the familiar, stable referents they so badly need. Instead, they force characters and readers to accept more flexible conceptualisations of time, place and space. The expression of a more fluid form of identity found in their works intersects with Deleuze and Guattari's spatial philosophy.

### Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomic, spatial identities

In an attempt to embrace complexity, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy informs the construction of human identity conceived as process: "We are becoming", "a flux of being".<sup>72</sup> Not only do the authors studied in *Intimate Immensities* represent their characters as "becoming-beings", they extend the principle to place, which is frequently approached in terms of ever-changing "versions" and "views", most notably in Gibson's works: "No idea is

---

<sup>68</sup> Massey stands in sharp contrast with traditional geographers like Yi-Fu Tuan, for whom "Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed". Massey, *For Space*, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxv.

<sup>70</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Russell West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 174.

allowed to become fixed, but must alter itself, recalibrate with what follows. This is the version of place which comes forth – one that is vital and fluid, written in a constant shifting relation to itself – a map with no reference but the capacity to come alive”.<sup>73</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s “nomadology” explores the political expression of an identity founded on movement, flows and flux: it becomes “a war machine” with a potential to resist the structures of centralised systems – “the West”, capitalism, and of course Empire.

Three decades ago Stephen Muecke pioneered the application of these principles in relation to Australian space,<sup>74</sup> but, however progressive, his work remains caught in the strictures of structuralism, unintentionally reviving “a primitivist trope that returns Aborigines to ‘nature’ and a pre-modern state, effectively reiterating the colonialist concept of *terra nullius*”.<sup>75</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s dynamic concept of de/reterritorialisation, however, is particularly useful to reflect on the heterotopic space of settler societies whose migrant populations constantly need to renegotiate space.<sup>76</sup> To deterritorialise is to undo the territory; the territory may be space, the individual, or a particular discipline such as history or literature. This being said, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are two sides of the same coin: “It may be all but impossible to distinguish deterritorialisation from reterritorialisation, since they are mutually enmeshed, or like opposite faces of the same process”.<sup>77</sup> In other words, however well-meaning, he or she who deterritorialises can hardly escape reterritorialising the physical or conceptual ground. What does this mean for Indigenous populations already dispossessed and displaced? Being a product of the settler colonial present, how could Gibson, Winton or Rothwell possibly escape these schemas? And what are they *doing* about this dilemma? The thesis presents the conceptual advances brought by Gibson, Winton and Rothwell on these philosophical and ethical issues. With other contemporary writers, most notably Indigenous Australian writers, I argue that their works become part of a counter rhizome.

Like Massey’s trajectories, the rhizome is a representational feature that constitutes an alternative to binary systems of representation; it is an ode to multiplicity based on a logic of

---

<sup>73</sup> Catherine Noske, “Seeing the Cosmos: Ross Gibson’s ‘Simultaneous Living Map’,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.3 (2015): 1-11.

<sup>74</sup> See Krim Bentrack, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (Fremantle, W.A.: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984); Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992).

<sup>75</sup> Ian McLean *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127.

<sup>76</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

<sup>77</sup> Gilles Deleuze in West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory*, 234.



accumulation and juxtaposition. For Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizomic space *par excellence* is the American West.<sup>78</sup> *Intimate Immensities* explores the proposition that rhizomic writing (literary expressions of the rhizome) suits the rhizomic space of settler societies like Australia. The way Winton, Gibson and Rothwell write is not so different to Deleuze and Guattari's style. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is a philosophical work whose structure mimics the philosophy it unfolds. It is rhizomic in its form. Concepts are sketched rather than thoroughly explained. They are presented in various sections, laid to rest and taken up again as though developing organically. There are no chapters *per se* but "plateaus" which can be accessed in any order. Likewise, most of the literary works studied in *Intimate Immensities* encourage the reader to abandon the chronological order, and their respective poetics of space are quite organic, reflecting the topographic, historical and political terrain, a form of writing Paul Carter calls "a reverent miming".<sup>79</sup>

Still, one needs to be cautious when translating imported models to a different space. Despite showing promise for their decolonising potential, Deleuze and Guattari's concepts have been appropriated by Empire. Considering Indigenous territories as "smooth space", another Deleuzo-Guattarian concept, has served as justification to annex that territory. In many ways, parts of the process Indigenous Australians have to go through to lodge native title claims consists of demonstrating that the space in question is "striated" (inscribed, codified), rather than "smooth space". For such reasons, anthropologist Alan Rumsey insists that outback territories be viewed as "finely differentiated, in relatively fixed and stable ways".<sup>80</sup> In Gibson, Winton and Rothwell's works, it is, therefore, Indigenous thought and the concept of *Country* which form a counter rhizome, a war machine that helps decolonise settler society Australia. They represent Indigenous Australians in place (on *Country*), while their unsettled non-Indigenous protagonists learn to cope with non-belonging. Once transience becomes a *fait accompli*, responsible stewardship of the land must follow.

---

<sup>78</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 19.

<sup>79</sup> See "A Reverent Miming" in Carter's *The Lie of the Land*, 21-114.

<sup>80</sup> Alan Rumsey, "Tracks, Traces, and Links to Land in Aboriginal Australia, New Guinea, and Beyond," in *Emplaced Myth: Space, Narrative, and Knowledge in Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea*, eds Alan Rumsey and James Weiner (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i press, 2001), 40.

### *Country*, Transcendentalism and ecocriticism

In the words of anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, *Country* is “a nourishing terrain” which lives and sustains life. *Country* is “a living entity ... with a consciousness”, a past, a present and a future.<sup>81</sup> In traditional Indigenous societies, *Country* is intrinsically sacred: it carries a set of spiritual and ecological obligations underpinned by totemic associations. It is not the background of human life, but the foreground of all life forms, and the basis for a multiform identity.<sup>82</sup> While one could rejoice at the idea that non-Indigenous Australians have gradually been developing a form of attachment to place that goes beyond mere exploitation of the land, and that some elements of *Country* have slowly been filtering into mainstream and literary cultures, there are marked differences between how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people experience and conceive of *Country*. One would be hard-pressed to claim that a vastly secular non-Indigenous population experiences anything like the intimacy and connectedness that Indigenous people have established with *Country*.

I treat the term *Country* as an “untranslatable” in the sense given by Emily Apter: a concept originating in one culture that cannot be reduced to a simple equivalent in another culture.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, adopting the concept of *Country* without reservation would likely lead to the apotheosis of colonial dispossession: after taking the physical land away from Indigenous populations, the theft of the philosophical and spiritual frameworks of the Aboriginal thought world. While I discuss the way Gibson, Winton and Rothwell represent and engage with the concept of *Country*, it would not be my place, as a non-Indigenous Australian, to offer expert commentary on the infinitely complex concept of *Country*, or on Indigenous people’s thought world. I will limit myself to a literary analysis of some expressions of *Country* I detect in the works of my authors, in relation to anthropological sources and scholarly material from Indigenous academics and writers.

Avoiding unethical cultural appropriation or the trappings of hybridity (when conceived as a utopian version that is blind to its own homogenising tendency) is a concern shared by Gibson, Winton and Rothwell. They rely on the principle of cultural convergence (another

---

<sup>81</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 7.

<sup>82</sup> A relationship of consubstantiality between the individual, the place and the species from which their being comes forth is evoked in Deborah Bird Rose, “Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic,” *Meanjin* 47, no.3 (1988): 378.

<sup>83</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 41-42.

risky practice that will be assessed in the thesis) to drive protagonists and readers towards *Country*, where an intimate relationship with the non-human realm may inform a renegotiation of the sacred. In their study of the sacred in contemporary Australian literature, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden detect an emplaced or “earthed sacred”.<sup>84</sup> I concur with their conclusions and approach the phenomenon as a reorientation from transcendence to immanence. For my analysis I turn to Transcendentalism, as well as the works of ecocritics who provide instruments to rethink relationships between the human and non-human realms, most notably William Cronon and Christopher Hitt, who have reflected on the role of literary models (like the sublime, Romanticism or the Gothic) in further separating “man” from “nature”.<sup>85</sup> The literary texts examined in my research seek to bridge that divide through communicating an intimate experience of the non-human realm, which is informed, in part, by Indigenous cosmology.

Arguably, it has become difficult, if not impossible to write about relationships with nature in the context of the Anthropocene, an era where all of nature, including the climate is under human agency.<sup>86</sup> The thesis takes into account the fraught nature of the term “nature”. I retain the term “nature” when reflecting conceptually on the traditional, critical divides man/nature or nature/culture; otherwise I prefer to use the terms “non-human realm” or “non-human environment”. To determine the relevance of Gibson, Winton and Rothwell’s attempts to forge productive relationships with the non-human realm, I assess their works in light of Ian Baucom and Dipesh Chakrabarti’s theses.<sup>87</sup>

While all these critical and conceptual tools enable me to identify and reflect upon the common elements that constitute Gibson, Winton and Rothwell’s poetics of space, the thesis cannot provide a systematic analysis of their expression in each particular work. My approach consists of focusing on particular elements of this common poetics of space in each chapter, as manifested in a few selected works. The findings and conclusions that are drawn from these case studies are applicable to the other works and authors, and could possibly apply to much of contemporary Australian literature. The conclusion of the thesis weaves all these

---

<sup>84</sup> Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden, *Intimate Horizons*.

<sup>85</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69-90; Christopher Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” *New Literary History* 30, no.3 (1999): 603-623.

<sup>86</sup> See Ian Baucom, “History 4<sup>o</sup>: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no.1 (2014): 123-142.

<sup>87</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarti, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no.2 (2009): 197-222.

threads together to deliver a coherent account of what *Intimate Immensities* and the practice of “intimacy with immensity” have achieved, and what may still evolve from it.

### Outline of the chapters

Chapter 1, “Deconstructing Australian Space: The Poetics of Unsettlement in Ross Gibson and Tim Winton’s *Badlands*”, outlines the necessity of deterritorialising Australian space through a practice of unsettlement. I study how these authors resort to a Gothic aesthetics to destabilise their protagonists and readers in order to expose colonial crimes and national mythotypes that continue to infect the colonial present. Gibson’s *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* and Winton’s *In the Winter Dark* confront traumascapes that need to be carefully investigated before envisaging any possibility of resolution. Both works constitute powerful correctives to the Reconciliation Era which informed their divergent poetics of space. The logical step after this deconstructive process is to articulate a form of identity on non-replicative models, to attain a spatial identity.

Chapter 2, “Place and Self in Crisis: From Unproductive Identities to a Poetics of Unbelonging”, proposes a re-examination of Judith Wright’s “double aspect” in contemporary Australian fiction. I compare Winton’s *The Riders* with Christos Tsiolkas’ *Dead Europe*, in both of which the two authors transport their protagonists to a motherland offering little refuge to the settler in crisis. Instead of providing familiarity, it is European space that proves to be antipodean. Unbelonging is presented as a necessity, but the novels acknowledge that the violent process of ruination affects both spaces.<sup>88</sup> These realisations are not fruitless: through the foil of Europe the novels suggest how to engage with Australian space more productively. In *Breath* and *Eyrie*, Winton complicates the settler crisis by subjecting his protagonists to transnational exogenous currents that further undermine Australian space and identity. The novels explore the need for a more fluid sense of identity based on water, rather than land – a movement from settler belonging towards non-belonging.

Representational models are also in crisis. Chapter 3, “An Imaginative Non-fiction for a Re-imagined Outback”, demonstrates how Rothwell’s narrative essays help decolonise Australian space, time and literary representations, as well as relations between Indigenous

---

<sup>88</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 7.

and non-Indigenous Australians. Rothwell focuses on productive exchanges that are already taking place on a frontier that was never closed. A careful optimist, he leans on points of cultural convergence to support his vision of “relations of co-dependency” and “a soft kind of reverse assimilation”.<sup>89</sup> In order to achieve his aim, Rothwell inverts Bachelard’s spatial philosophy. Instead of seeking the immense in the intimate, he looks for intimacy with immensity. This redirection corresponds to the expression of an earthed sacred based on organic forms rather than perpetuating anthropocentric representations. He formulates a silent, horizontal sublime aesthetics that shares much in common with Bill Ashcroft’s horizontal sublime<sup>90</sup> and Christopher Hitt’s ecological sublime.<sup>91</sup>

Chapter 4, “Winton’s Decolonising Poetics of Space”, looks at spatial practices that could be derived from all these renegotiations. The aptly named collection of stories *The Turning* calls for a significant shift in the way place and time could be experienced when viewed through the prism of deep time and heterochrony. A much earlier work of Winton’s *That Eye, the Sky*, initiated this reflection through a reassessment of modes of perception centred on an intimate experience of the non-human realm. This early iteration of an emplaced sacred is given a much deeper treatment in *Dirt Music*. This key novel in Winton’s oeuvre best illustrates what could be achieved by adopting the spatial practice of intimacy with immensity. I analyse the novel as a decolonising text of Reconciliation that decentres the non-Indigenous subject in an attempt to establish a dialogical interspecies ethics.<sup>92</sup> A form of Transcendentalism is also used as a vehicle to take non-Indigenous Australians towards what Deborah Bird Rose calls “an Aboriginal land ethic”.<sup>93</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Rothwell, *Journeys to the Interior*, 163 and 212.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Ashcroft, “The Horizontal Sublime,” *Antipodes* 19, no.2 (2005): 141-151. See also Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden, *Intimate Horizons*.

<sup>91</sup> Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” 603-623.

<sup>92</sup> See Chapter 8, “Towards a Dialogical Interspecies Ethics,” in Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 167-195.

<sup>93</sup> Bird Rose, “Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic,” 378-387.

## Chapter 1 Deconstructing Australian Space: The Poetics of Unsettlement in Ross Gibson and Tim Winton's Badlands

“Streams and flowers are everywhere ‘nameless’ and ‘nondescript’; ‘silence’ and ‘solitude’ imbue the world and the text”.

– Ross Gibson, *South of the West*.<sup>1</sup>

Colonial descriptions of Australia's immense space often feature a uniform horizon, without much movement or soundscape.<sup>2</sup> But surely an attentive observer would have perceived Indigenous presences, insects and bird calls, eucalyptus capsules popping open in the heat, or the rustle of reptiles. Colonial silence communicates an inability to perceive, which led to the inability to represent. It took artists decades to paint a eucalyptus that did not look like an oak or a willow, and even though John Glover has been hailed as one of the first painters to represent a native tree worthy of the name, his sinuous branches still look somehow wrong.<sup>3</sup> While painters were learning to see anew, back home in Europe, scientists could only think of black swans and monotremes as hoaxes. Australia, from the onset, resisted the best-trained European eyes and minds. Most colonials were blind and deaf to the land because their European cultural inheritance prevented them from articulating productive ways to perceive and relate to the new environment.<sup>4</sup> Of course, W.E.H. Stanner showed how “The Great Australian Silence” was also a politicised tool, which helped promote Indigenous erasure and cultivate the myth of *terra nullius*.<sup>5</sup> Silence is settler society's steward, creating a *tabula rasa* that suppresses native signifiers of any kind:

to remove every vestige of vegetation cannot be explained simply as a mistaken theory of agriculture; it expresses an overwhelming need to clear away doubt – not to make the land speak in accents of its own, but to silence the whispers, the inexplicable earth and sky tremors which always seemed to accompany colonization.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Ross Gibson, “Thomas Watling: This Prison This Language: Thomas Watling's Letters from an Exile at Botany-Bay (1794),” in *Inland in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture*, ed. Paul Floss (Leichhardt, NSW: Pluto Press, 1988), 19.

<sup>3</sup> John McPhee, “The Symbolic Landscape,” in *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque*, ed. David Hansen (Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Art Exhibitions, 2003), 110-121.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Wright conceptualised this stubborn reality as the “double aspect of the inner Australia”. See Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), xii.

<sup>5</sup> W.E.H. Stanner, *The 1968 Boyer Lectures: After the Dreaming* (Sydney: ABC, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 9.

Some will argue that contemporary non-Indigenous Australians have now learned to listen, that the exotic has become the endemic, the Antipodes home. But if contemporary authors have become more adept at conveying Australia's sights and sounds, silence is still widely used – as a gothic signifier of colonial erasure and Indigenous massacres. This is what occurs in Ross Gibson and Tim Winton's literary works. In their hands, silence is a manifestation of settler colonial unease.

For social space to remain the vital ground of social life, death is rejected either in the space above (the heavens) or the space below (hell and infernos), argues Henri Lefebvre.<sup>7</sup> In settler societies like Australia, it seems that death has not successfully been put to rest anywhere. The foundational violence associated with the birth of the nation has made sure contemporary Australians live in the settler colonial present.<sup>8</sup> On many accounts Australia could be said to be a post-traumatic society whose social space is the haunted space of nostalgia,<sup>9</sup> melancholy and "solastalgia".<sup>10</sup> A clear manifestation of the socio-psychological impacts of such a history is the over-representation of the Gothic in Australian cultural productions, from Marcus Clark's *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1870-1872) to contemporary films like Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014). A fabled land of the grotesque since European antiquity, Australia seemed predestined for the Gothic, which took a resolute foothold during the colonial period, when Australia became "the dungeon of the world".<sup>11</sup> The Gothic has been unrivalled in conveying the settler colonial experience: "From its inception the Gothic has dealt with fears and themes which are endemic in the colonial experience: isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit and fear of the unknown".<sup>12</sup>

Without denying the cathartic dimension of the Gothic, it is a literary genre that does not easily escape stasis, trauma and melancholy repetition. Ken Gelder, however, argues that some contemporary expressions of the Gothic have been particularly productive: "Postcolonial nations can reanimate the traumas of their pasts to produce Gothic narratives

---

<sup>7</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, no.4 (2006): 1-11.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity," *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3 (2005): 41-55.

<sup>11</sup> Gerry Turcotte, "Australian Gothic", in *The Handbook of the Gothic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Mary Mulvey-Roberts (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 278.

<sup>12</sup> Turcotte, "Australian Gothic", 278.

[that] bring an otherwise divided nation together”.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the Gothic can be used as a postcolonial tool of unsettlement. Winton and Gibson use the Gothic as a form of shock therapy to take the reader on a journey from myths of settlement to the reality of unsettlement, exposing non-Indigenous Australians as unsettled settlers. To reveal historical erasures and myths of nationhood, they proceed through a meticulous examination of place to re-access space and the non-human realm, through a deconstruction of time/history. Gibson revisits the archive, Winton literary modes of representation that have been complicit in colonial erasure and denial, particularly Romanticism and the Gothic. Neither author considers the colonial chapter closed, their works acknowledging an all-too alive settler colonial present. Winton and Gibson’s poetics of unsettlement are underpinned by narrative irresolution. This puts them at odds with the historical era of Reconciliation during which these texts were produced.

This chapter opens with an analysis of Ross Gibson’s *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002), a work of non-fiction that needs to be examined in the context of the policy objectives set by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR), to which authors and intellectuals like David Malouf readily contributed.<sup>14</sup> Malouf co-drafted “The Australian Declaration towards Reconciliation” with the historian Jackie Huggins,<sup>15</sup> and came under intense criticism after the publication of *Remembering Babylon* (1997), a novel that could be seen as a vehicle for some of the CAR objectives, for its narrative gestures towards hybridity as an instrument of Reconciliation.<sup>16</sup> Gibson keeps his distance from Reconciliation policies that advocated strategies like “sharing history” and “walking together” to settle differences and problematic histories.<sup>17</sup> Published the year after the close of the CAR (which spanned the decade 1991-2001), *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* proposes an unsettling spatial history which subtly undermines the policy objectives of the Reconciliation Era. Far from advocating closure, Gibson re-opens the colonial archive for active investigation, and utilises a technique reminiscent of Dominick LaCapra’s “empathetic unsettlement” to read

---

<sup>13</sup> Ken Gelder, “Postcolonial Gothic,” in *The Handbook of the Gothic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 219.

<sup>14</sup> Isabelle Auguste, “On the significance of saying ‘sorry’: Apology and reconciliation in Australia,” in *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memories and Indigenous Australia*, eds Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker (Canberra: ANU Press, 2010), 314.

<sup>15</sup> Isabelle Auguste, “Rethinking the Nation: Apology, Treaty and Reconciliation in Australia,” *National Identities* 12, no.4 (2010): 432.

<sup>16</sup> On the critical debate that followed the publication of *Remembering Babylon*, see Don Randall, *David Malouf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007): 125-146.

<sup>17</sup> Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Key Issue Paper No.4: Sharing History* (Canberra: AGPS, 1993), 28-29; *Walking Together: The First Steps* (Canberra: AGPS, 1994).



traumascapes anew.<sup>18</sup> He reinscribes colonial fury into a deceptively silent contemporary landscape, and orchestrates a cacophony of voices (human and non-human, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, settler and migrant), which subvert unitary myths of nationhood. Rather than promoting hybridity, Gibson favours modes of representation that explore parallel cultural trajectories in the form of juxtaposition, the reduplicative and heterochrony. He relates the past to the present, the human to the non-human, and Indigenous to non-Indigenous Australians, as well as successive waves of migrants who have formed the heterotopic space of a multicultural Australia.

I then analyse Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark* (1988), whose publication date coincides with the Bicentenary. At a time of national celebrations and resurgent nationalisms desperately trying to stage closure, Winton reopened wounds associated with the settler colonial project. Settler societies tend to resort to myths in order to settle contemporary anxieties. If myths have a settling function, what happens when the seams that hold a contentious past together are unpicked? Winton's novel demonstrates that colonial myths cannot account for a sequence of events that take place in bushland surrounding the protagonist's farm. As the characters fail to resolve this mysterious violence through narrative, the contradictions that demanded the construction of foundational myths re-appear, and the colonial past irrupts into the present in the form of personal and collective trauma. Like Gibson, Winton adopts a poetics of unsettlement that involves the reintroduction of colonial violence, not simply as historical violence, but as an ongoing process which affects contemporary victims and perpetrators (though in different measures). Winton unleashes the colonial past in the form of an elusive beast that forces his protagonists to re-assess ways of thinking, seeing and representing. In this Gothic tale, the object of trauma is displaced and treated metaphorically. I utilise John Docker's concept of epistemological vertigo to propose a postcolonial reading of Winton's novel.<sup>19</sup> Like Gibson's, Winton's poetics of unsettlement is founded on a deconstruction of European cultural imports that are responsible for the characters' demise. The two texts are reluctant to embrace official policies of Reconciliation; they look to a form of negative capability to create a productive state of dynamic unsettlement, opening an ontological space in which non-Indigenous Australians may start to question and renegotiate spatio-temporal referents and their cultural heritage.

---

<sup>18</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no.4 (1999): 696-727.

<sup>19</sup> John Docker, "Epistemological Vertigo and Allegory: Thoughts on Massacres, Actual, Surrogate, and Averted – Beersheba, Wake in Fright, Australia," in *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia*, eds Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), 54.

## Part 1 An Unsettling Spatial History: Empathetic Unsettlement in Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*

In settler societies, “place is displacement”.<sup>20</sup> For Lorenzo Veracini, “There is no way to avoid a traumatic outcome”.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, for Ross Gibson, Australia is a “society with metaphysical turbulence in its foundations” that sits uncomfortably on place, unable to truly belong.<sup>22</sup> To give legitimacy to the nation, settler societies engage in a production of time and space that aims to provide a “settling history for a settler nation”.<sup>23</sup> The discipline of history has been complicit in fabricating myth and promoting erasure.<sup>24</sup> Attempts to renegotiate national identity take place on two levels: historically and spatially. Gibson straddles the two fields and writes an unsettling spatial history of a given location. In *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, he deconstructs the way a particular part of Central Queensland (between Rockhampton and Mackay) has been represented over the past two centuries. For Gibson, this stretch of country could be compared to what Americans call “Badlands”, a geography resistant to agriculture, whose negative representations perpetuated a cycle of violence. This focus on the local, rather than the national, belies mistrust of unitary enterprises which have been complicit in manufacturing myths in order to cement nationhood.

There are objective reasons why Gibson may reject fiction and traditional historical investigations. Historians tend to order events chronologically to weave facts into a neat narrative: imperial history wishes “to see chaos yield to order”.<sup>25</sup> Such histories had their *raison d'être*, but they led to the creation of fixed vignettes to appease the collective mind. Paul Carter deplores the traditional model of history, “which renders time clockwork and miniaturizes space” in order to settle the past.<sup>26</sup> Carter and Gibson, therefore, adopt a diametrically opposed approach: they restore the past in all its messiness, unsettle the reader, and force an acknowledgement of a traumatic past. Like Carter, Gibson resists ordered

---

<sup>20</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 247.

<sup>21</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 134. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 14.

<sup>24</sup> Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, xix.

representations of the past following a fixed timeline; he proposes non-linear versions of the past – seven versions.

It is therefore important to situate Gibson's work within the wider framework of historical studies. Like most settler societies, Australia has been more obsessed with the future than the past. It sometimes seems that the nation has been engaged in a race towards the future in order to avoid dealing with its unsettling history. To be fair, this may be partially because Australia was born out of modernity, which promoted the idea of progress, a "constant movement that continuously breaks with the past".<sup>27</sup> The Aboriginal Turn in Australian history in the 1970s and 1980s (a focus on Indigenous Australians) had far-reaching implications. It provided a necessary pause that challenged the idea of Australian modernity and a relentless march towards the future. With the Aboriginal Turn came the investigation of an unsettling history which saw new narratives of violence associated with guilt emerge, undermining settler belonging. The settler colonist was no longer the victim (convict, economic migrant, Irish or member of a religious minority) but the perpetrator of transportation, dispossession and cultural dislocation. The Aboriginal Turn also coincided with the discovery of Mungo Man in 1974, adding tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal presence and relationship with the land. This addition brought an element of timelessness or deep time which further unsettled traditional settler history, weakening Australia's links with the motherland.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the decades that followed the Aboriginal Turn saw the settler become timeless and placeless.

Gibson's starting point in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* is precisely a settler society in limbo, haunted by its past, uncertain about its future, assaulted by the cataclysmic forces of history and geography. The opening scene of "Version 1" describes the aftermath of a cyclone which could be interpreted metaphorically as the violent conflation of colonialism and its aftermath. This graphic opening underlines an urgent need to rebuild and renegotiate common spatio-temporal referents. The strength of *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* lies in sketching solutions, as opposed to resolutions, for non-Indigenous Australians who thought they were settled (on this key Queensland frontier examined by Henry Reynolds at the height of the Aboriginal Turn) but then found out they were part of a post-traumatic

---

<sup>27</sup> Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Billy Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia* (Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2018).

society.<sup>29</sup> Gibson unsettles the reader in constructive ways to stimulate reflection and change, so that instead of being anathema, Australia's badlands may become productive areas once more.

### The deceptively smooth space of the settler colonial present: a haunted post-traumatic society

Gibson revisits settler colonial historiography to deterritorialise the badlands by providing a systematic investigation of place. The opening page of *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* sets the terms of the reading contract through a direct address: "Let's say you're driving there" (1). "Let's" sounds like a proposition, but the author gives the reader no choice: as soon as the journey starts, an acceleration follows and the car turns into a time machine. The journey that is about to take place is one through time that also affects space. High-speed travelling discourages spatial and temporal investigations. In *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, the highway features as an instrument of modernity that is complicit in creating smooth space.<sup>30</sup> The text associates modernity and settler societies in their endeavours to create the illusion of a horizontal plane that one can cross unhindered.<sup>31</sup> The reader-driver crossing Australia's vast distances at high speed becomes complicit in rehearsing *terra nullius*. The task of decolonising settler colonialism will be arduous, for settler societies are based on foundations that have been "resistant to decolonisation".<sup>32</sup> Gibson, therefore, does not succumb to the temptation to represent the outback as smooth space. As conceived by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "smooth space" is the creative space of the nomad, a space that represents a challenge to the colonist accustomed to well-defined, bounded "striated space".<sup>33</sup> Perversely, settler societies have managed to hijack this concept to further justify dispossession. Alex Trimble Young reminds how Israel has used the philosophical concept of smooth space to justify the destruction of Palestinian houses in the West Bank.<sup>34</sup> Gibson's poetics of space is subtle: he utilises the motifs of the highway and speed to create an impression of smooth space, but he interrupts the traveller's journey on the

---

<sup>29</sup> Historian Henry Reynolds was one of the figureheads of the Aboriginal Turn. See *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Townsville, Qld: James Cook University, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> Edward Dimendberg, "The Will to Motorization: Cinema, Highways, and Modernity," *October* 73 (1995): 90-137.

<sup>31</sup> To conceive space as a continuous surface reduces "other places, peoples [and] cultures simply as phenomena 'on' this surface". See Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 95.

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1988; London: Athlone Press, 1992) 385-387.

<sup>34</sup> Alex Trimble Young, "Settler Sovereignty and the Rhizomatic West; or, the Significance of the Frontier in Postwestern Studies," *Western American Literature* 48, nos.1&2 (2013): 115-140.

horizontal surface of the outback by vertical eruptions of the past. The author gives the past the form of ghosts rising up in “columns of steam” (20). Reader and driver are compelled to mark a pause and investigate the layers of the past.

The smooth space of the settler society is not the smooth space of Deleuze and Guattari. It is space deterritorialized, emptied of the presences that preceded settler arrival. Gibson’s investigations unearth the past and reinscribe presence into space, punctuating Central Queensland with histories, oral tales and alternative myths. He turns a deceptively smooth space back to striated space, deliberately making the journey through space and time more dense, increasingly confronting, forcing the reader-driver to ask questions and remember. Gibson means to make the reader experience the past, so that a non-place becomes once more a space that is alive with voices, presences and the cultural practices that shaped it, before it was declared *terra nullius*. In fact, as Gibson peels back the layers of history, it appears that there is a correlation between the way place is represented and the level of violence that took place there. When Gibson evokes pre-colonial space, the lie of the land is described as smooth space where Indigenous Australians travelled fluidly “across considerable distances” to exchange “commodities, ideas and warnings” (89). What had once been a productive space becomes striated place in his descriptions of the badlands after the settlers deforested and poisoned the land to establish their farms.

In *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, striated space produces violence. This is how Gibson introduces a double murder that took place on “the horror stretch” of the Bruce Highway, a personal tragedy that focused the attention of the mass media in 1975. As they are driving through the apparent monotony of Central Queensland’s canefields, Sophie and Noel Weckert are unaware of the violence latent in the landscape they traverse. Gibson uses cinematic techniques to deconstruct settler colonial space, zooming in on particular features in the landscape that are portents of the violence to come: “Snarls of barbed wire; light bouncing off roofing iron; an old wheel-less tractor stooped down like a horse in need of killing” (26). Gibson leaves the background blurry for his characters and the couple fails to register these vestiges of civilisation that draw ensnaring lines and striate an apparently smooth space. This use of vernacular technologies of representation and memory (cinema, murder mystery, photography, newspaper reporting) becomes a potent tool for communicating the lethal legacy of the colonial past. The wrecked fence line evokes colonial Australia and the production of a striated space that caused innocent people to be killed, but

the Weckert couple does not register these cues because much has been effaced from collective memory. Like a film maker, Gibson uses light and sound to bring important elements back into focus, effectively substituting a vernacular archive for official records which deliberately failed to register frontier violence against native populations.<sup>35</sup>

Alternative investigative methods and associated modes of representation are therefore necessary to re-access suppressed events and rouse the ghosts stirring in the deafening silence of the colonial archive. For Gibson, what took place amounts to a crime against memory: language disguised the facts, “the gun and the pen took the country” (73). He exposes the mass murders of Aborigines committed by historical figures like Frederick Wheeler (from the Native Police Corps). Gibson denounces a culture that encouraged the “illiteracy of evidence” when officers in charge of policing the native population “learned to sweep ... report-books clean in anticipation of a paper chase” (56). Euphemisms were frequently used to conceal the reality of brutal massacres, reports were edited, perpetrators exonerated, and epidemics were invoked to provide evidence for the myth of “the vanishing race”.<sup>36</sup> Keenly aware of how words erased or disguised the facts, Gibson opts for realism and favours visual imagery to impress upon the reader scenes of colonial violence expunged from collective memory. He also reminds the reader that assimilationist policies and the White Australia Policy served the same purpose – to erase the living proof of the colony’s wrong doings and purge national guilt by physically removing evidence: “Now the Islanders were to be removed from national experience. Deportation orders were served on all the black canecutting communities. They had to be gone by the end of 1906” (153). Erasure and silence are forces that shape settler societies: “Remembrance worries away at repression ... murder bleeds through stories via memory. Victims and victors – both can’t help but remember” (81).

For Gibson, there is no doubt that genocidal practices on the frontier constitute the settler colony’s founding trauma. The voices of the past are not at rest.<sup>37</sup> Historical trauma gave rise to traumascapes that hold memories alive: “the country lives like something with a memory, a force of the past prevailing in the landscape still” (63). For the revisionist historian Bain

---

<sup>35</sup> Ross Gibson is also a film maker in his own right. See *Camera Natura* (Sydney: Ronin Films, 1985), a short film on the history of white Australian landscape, and *Dead to the World* (Melbourne: AFI Distribution, 1991).

<sup>36</sup> Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> On the pernicious colonial present, see Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan. Palestine. Iraq* (Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2004).

Attwood, the main issue is not the past, but “*the past in the present*”.<sup>38</sup> Likewise in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, the ghosts are very much part of the settler colonial present: “In Queensland, colonial times and contemporary times are coeval ... Life in Central Queensland today is a *direct continuation* of the systems that formed a new society during the frontier era” (53-54). Throughout the book, unresolved violence is evoked in the present tense, for it continues to shape our relationships with time, place and space: “you are haunted by fear and tragedy”; “the country conspires with your moods” and “spooks in around when you cross the Tropic of Capricorn” (1). The very structure of the book evokes a post-traumatic settler society where the past creeps into the present in unhealthy ways. It is composed of three parts entitled “recently”, “historically” and “presently”; they are framed by two short passages entitled “A beginning” and “Exit” which, at first glance, may be thought to perform the tasks traditionally assigned to the introduction and conclusion. Gibson, however, deliberately confuses tenses and refuses to lead a chronological investigation of the badlands; he evokes historical events in the present tense, and contemporary landscapes are presented in light of past spatial practices. The structure is, in fact, circular and reflects the impossibility of escaping the past. While the book strives to reach for an “Exit”, the place is presented as diseased, plagued by time.

Gibson represents the past as a pervasive force shaping the present in its likeness. Victims of trauma tend to confound past and present because the traumatic event keeps being relived. This creates “a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion” and the victim “remains possessed or haunted by the past”.<sup>39</sup> Gibson demonstrates how the ghosts of the past ground the settler in time. He recalls a road-trip with his parents through Central Queensland: while the adults are “in the front seat, peering into the immediate future”, a young Gibson observes ghosts through the rear window. They are “in pursuit of the car. Five or six of them stalking us” (20). The ghosts intrude into the present, denying settler society the possibility of a future. For Gibson, it was a haunting “about where we had come from”, the colonial times (20). These ghosts remain in the landscape as a tangible presence: “ever after I’ve maintained a sense of them always being present in the tropical air” (21). The text suggests that, as a result of settler colonial practices of repression and suppression, spatial loss occurred. Detective work is therefore necessary to uncover the past and put the ghosts to rest.

---

<sup>38</sup> Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, 191.

<sup>39</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” 699.

Yet the task seems over-ambitious. Like victims of trauma, settler societies tend to have an incomplete, fragmented memory of historical events: “In the landscape of Central Queensland, old passions and violent secrets are lying around in a million clues and traces” (1-2). *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* aims to recover and make meaning out of these fragments. Its structure is mimetic of its content and reflects the symptoms of trauma victims. Each “Version” is composed of many short sub-sections whose titles are often enigmatic or incomplete. Gibson investigates the impact of historical and spatial trauma on the communities living in the badlands. The epigraph, from John Berryman’s poem “Homage to Mistress Bradstreet”, starts his reflections with an alarm bell: “I sniff a fire burning without outlet, / consuming acrid its own smoke” (v). It suggests a society in crisis, asphyxiating on its own past. It is as though the author wished for that energy to be released, for the badlands to be purged of the toxicity of a repressed past.<sup>40</sup> But, however well concealed, the suppressed past keeps working its way into the present: “settler collectives are traumatised societies *par excellence*”.<sup>41</sup> But whose trauma is being represented – the victims (Indigenous Australians), the beneficiaries of the violence committed on the frontier (perpetrator trauma), or trauma sustained by other displaced populations such as Melanesian canecutters or Chinese workers (migrant trauma)? Is it historical trauma or structural trauma? Gibson does not pretend that literature holds answers to what has led to “a pathology of spirit in Australian being”,<sup>42</sup> but there is value in his representational project which seeks to relate these seemingly irreconcilable traumatic experiences, without conflating them.

### **From communal neurosis to empathetic unsettlement**

Gibson diagnoses a collective trauma that manifests itself as “communal neurosis” (92). Looking at frontier photographic portraits, he divines in these faces a “Disturbance in the soul, [for] many white inheritors and most black survivors of the frontier were unable to forget the violence” (92). Settler collectives are at risk of slipping into social melancholy. In a bold parallel, Gibson invites direct comparison between the post-traumatic populations of Germany after World War Two and contemporary Australians. He uses the thesis, developed by Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich in *Society without the Father: A Contribution to*

---

<sup>40</sup> Andrew McCann, “The Literature of Extinction,” *Meanjin* 65, no.1 (2006): 54.

<sup>41</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 76.

<sup>42</sup> Linn Miller, “Belonging to Country – A Philosophical Anthropology,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no.76, (2003): 221. Accessed 5 May 2017, doi: 10.1080/14443050309387839.



*Social Psychology* (1969) and *The Inability to Mourn* (1975), to reflect on historical trauma.<sup>43</sup> Alex Miller's novel *Landscape of Farewell* (2007), invites similar comparison.<sup>44</sup> What Gibson retains from the Mitscherlichs' thesis is that it is the denial of guilt and the lost opportunities to mourn losses, rather than guilt and losses, that plagued post-war Germany. According to the Mitscherlichs, such trauma and melancholy prevented Germany from progressing towards maturity. For Gibson, settler Australia shares these traits and is dangerously close to falling into "infantile narcissism" (160). Past injustice will plague the nation until there is an acknowledgement of the past and a retreat from settler colonial logic.

Not content with simply diagnosing trauma and melancholy, Gibson sketches solutions to detect, represent and exit trauma. These are in the vein of work by Dominick LaCapra who suggests the tool of "empathetic unsettlement", which allows the historian to be moved by their object of study and establish an "empathic basis for working the past through".<sup>45</sup> LaCapra validates the virtual experience of empathetic unsettlement because it represents a "desirable affective dimension of inquiry that complements and supplements empirical research and analysis".<sup>46</sup> Gibson's work adopts similar investigative techniques and transposes LaCapra's historical practice to the field of spatial history. Feeling the victims' losses, he projects their experiences onto physical space. He pictures past presences and reads the historical events in the lie of the land. Gibson resorts to such a technique because "There is little written evidence" of Aboriginal massacres (64). Imagination is therefore needed to represent history. To balance this subjective mode of investigation he also relies on oral transmission of history, as well as what could pass as myth. Peter Read writes extensively about the value of such a practice when much of the evidence has disappeared.<sup>47</sup> Gibson is aware of the limits of this practice which amounts to *feeling* history in the landscape, but "'unreliable' as it is as conventional history, the Goulbolba tale [an oral narrative of a massacre of Aborigines] is significant because it is so generic. All over the Australian frontier, stories like it have been placed in the landscape" (67-68). Gibson justifies taking orality and myth into account when seeking to shed light on history: "A forceful story will *evoke* as well as record what happened, offering a version of colonial experience including

---

<sup>43</sup> To encourage the reader to undertake their own spatial and historical investigations of badlands that affect their regions, Gibson readily shares his primary and secondary sources in a section entitled "Further Reading" (191-198).

<sup>44</sup> For a comprehensive review of the critical debates around such comparisons, see Robert Dixon, *Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2014), 138-142.

<sup>45</sup> Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, 182.

<sup>46</sup> LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," 722-723.

<sup>47</sup> Read, *Returning to Nothing*.

the *structures of feeling* that settled into the social environment” (69). Another danger inherent in such practices lies in appropriating the trauma sustained by the historical victims of colonial violence (and their descendants).

If Gibson uses empathetic unsettlement in productive ways, there are moments when he also seems to integrate the trauma of the victims (Indigenous Australians), the perpetrators (Native Police Corps), the beneficiaries of frontier violence (the settlers) and the trauma sustained by various communities of migrants (Chinese gold diggers and Melanesian canecutters). Gibson seems a chameleon in his ability to wear these successive traumas. He does so at great risk. LaCapra highlights the necessity of stopping short of identifying oneself with the subjects of history (in other words, avoiding a transfer): “It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject-position”.<sup>48</sup> The scope and manifestations of the trauma sustained by each group are distinct, yet Gibson sometimes treats them simultaneously: “many white inheritors and most black survivors of the frontier were unable to forget the violence that produced the riches of the burgeoning nation ... these people were looking into the future, their expressions dark with an inarticulate malaise” (92). Evoking perpetrator trauma and the trauma sustained by Indigenous Australians in such quick succession may be perceived as a misguided narrative choice which replicates neo-colonial tropes.

Exploring trauma in settler societies must also avoid presenting the whole population as traumatised victims. The argument that “everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim” is fallacious and dangerous.<sup>49</sup> It contributes to cementing a society based on structural trauma. One must interrogate whether Gibson’s text presents a settler society founded on structural trauma or historical trauma. If some form of resolution may be reached in the case of historical trauma (when events can be precisely located and dated), it is not the case for structural trauma, where the event is more diffuse and can be lived obsessively as an absence.<sup>50</sup> Throughout *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* Gibson carefully seeks to associate a particular date with a particular location. It is as though his investigations seek to identify the specifics of each event in order to avoid the nation slipping towards more myth and structural trauma. Furthermore, he does not fall prey to the practice of converting loss

---

<sup>48</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” 722.

<sup>49</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” 712.

<sup>50</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” 727.

into absence; this would result in “endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia”.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, Gibson seeks out the zones of silence in order to let the reader hear, in place, the voices that were silenced. Ultimately, the author seems optimistic that it is possible to redress historical and spatial trauma: “‘post-traumatic’ societies can develop techniques of mourning so that the denials might cease, so that guilt and threat might be ‘lived out’” (159). While this passage rings with optimism, it remains a general, theoretical statement on what can be achieved by settler societies. The text does not suggest that Australia has reached settlement or that it has entered a post-colonial phase.

Trauma feeds on the melancholy repetition of the past. An important step to approach trauma is, therefore, to abandon the foundational myths that were substituted for facts or erasures. But societies being what they are, new myths or archetypes will need to emerge. What could constitute a productive basis for these renegotiations? All the authors studied in my thesis create progressive fictions and imaginative non-fictions that look towards commonalities. What unites Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees, the human and the non-human is the centrepiece of their respective representational projects. They acknowledge difference, but refuse binary thinking or dualism that result in othering, for only complexity can account for the heterotopic nature of settler societies like Australia. To connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences and world views, Gibson calls upon the non-Indigenous historical figure of James Morrill, who spent seventeen years living among Indigenous Australians before stumbling upon the colonial outpost of Port Denison in 1863. Gibson prefaces his remarks on Morrill by referencing David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, a novel which raised a critical storm over issues of indigenisation, hybridity and “white aboriginality”.<sup>52</sup> In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf drew on the same historical material and fictionalised Morrill to create the hybrid Gemmy Fairley, the “white black man” at the source of critical controversy.<sup>53</sup> Gibson is fully aware he is stepping into dangerous terrain. Like Malouf, he is interested in the potential of hybridity as a means towards cultural rapprochement – after all, Kim Scott also investigates that possibility in his novel *That Deadman Dance* (2010) – but he is also subtly at odds with the concept.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” 698.

<sup>52</sup> See Randall, *David Malouf*, 125-146.

<sup>53</sup> David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (1993; Sydney: Random House, 2009), 9.

<sup>54</sup> Chapter 4 and my overall conclusion discuss Kim Scott’s novel and the critical issues around the concept of hybridity.

In his account of Morrill's intercultural potential, Gibson focusses on particular qualities he demonstrated. He presents Morrill as a multicultural Australian long before the term became policy. Morrill was intrinsically fluid, able to navigate Indigenous and settler worlds; he was therefore conferred the status of translator and ambassador. Gibson is prompt to comment that this is also the status of traitor, and he does not encourage white indigenisation. Gibson utilises Morrill not as a foundational myth, but as a foundation for ethical questioning to establish a more equitable future: "Was he some kind of prototype, a model of an unpredictable future Australian?" (107). Unlike Malouf, who used Gemmy Fairley as a possible archetype, Gibson's text is in the mode of questioning. All the author does is highlight certain qualities in this possible future non-Indigenous Australian who would have to be adaptable, fluid, multicultural and, most importantly, accepting of unsettlement as part and parcel of the settler condition.

Like Malouf's, Gibson's use of Morrill has come under scrutiny. Adam Gall deplors Morrill's representation as "a missed opportunity for the settler to find a way to belong", and concludes that "Gibson's text can thus be linked historically to themes of indigenisation".<sup>55</sup> Don Randall, who surveyed the critical debates around *Remembering Babylon*, comes to a conciliatory conclusion: "The contestatory criticism, from Greer to Perera, unites in its will to defend cultural and racial borders" but Malouf's work "insistently involves the testing and questioning of borders, boundaries, and boundedness".<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Gibson suggests ways to renegotiate belonging in the problematic space of post-traumatic societies. He uses the figure of Morrill as a poetic symbol imbued with transformative potential – not to encourage settlement or appeasement of settler society, but to anchor unsettlement at the heart of an unsettled society. In *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* (2012), Gibson makes use of another hybrid character who fulfils the same function as James Morrill. He writes a speculative non-fiction based on Lieutenant William Dawes, the First Fleet officer in charge of setting up the observatory. His scientific curiosity saw him develop a fascination for the Indigenous population of Sydney Cove. Gibson presents Dawes immersed in the Eora language, gradually retreating from the company of his British counterparts as he catches glimpses of another thought world. Both Dawes and Morrill were unsettled historical figures caught between two worlds; they did not belong to either society.

---

<sup>55</sup> Adam Gall, "Re-imagining Australian Modernity: Performative and Non-Performative Indigenisation in Three White Australian Cultural Texts," in *Frontier Skirmishes: Literary and Cultural Debates in Australia after 1992*, eds Russell West-Pavlov and Jennifer Wawrzinek (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2010), 222.

<sup>56</sup> Randall, *David Malouf*, 128.

For Gibson, this is the crux of the settler condition. Contemporary Australians must accept the fact that they do not belong either: the driver who crosses the badlands feels “like an alien ... Whatever colonialism was and is, it has made this place unsettled and unsettling” (1-2). Far from opting for peaceful settlement, hybridity or prompt Reconciliation, Gibson’s work advocates further unsettlement to force a crisis that will see non-Indigenous Australians acknowledge and take responsibility for historical and spatial trauma inflicted on Indigenous Australians, particular migrant communities, as well as the non-human environment. To this effect, Gibson resorts to violent means and opens a Pandora’s box. It is not enough that “present-day Australians should be responsible for present-day infidelities. Our collective consciousness should include all the past”.<sup>57</sup>

### **An unsettling prose to unsettle settler societies: Gothic aesthetics, heterochrony and irresolution**

Because of the unresolved violence inscribed in place, the landscape is like a ticking bomb waiting to explode. Gibson calls for an engagement with space that may allow the violence to be let out. But in order to work trauma through one must find ways to represent the repressed object of trauma. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon asks, “what kinds of aesthetic activism can reinsert the violence into the view?”<sup>58</sup> Gibson deploys such an aesthetic. He reintroduces colonial and contemporary violence to shock the reader into the realisation that past atrocities must be confronted. He depicts many scenes of violence in a style sometimes akin to true crime, but the graphic details Gibson provides are rarely gratuitous. They invite reflection on the representation of violence itself. The narrative of the Weckert murders, for example, sounds voyeuristic in the way it portrays the gory atrocities that were committed. This is intentional. His prose acts as a commentary on the sensationalist tropes used by the media, who relished the perpetuation of nefarious images of the badlands. For Gibson, there was a coordinated effort to produce a Gothic myth. The toponyms selected by the journalists (the Styx River, Charon Point, Grave Gully, the Berserkers Range) assisted them in fabricating myth; the badlands were even given a criminal intent: “the country itself was cast as a serial killer” (30).

---

<sup>57</sup> Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>58</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 249.

Gibson exposes Gothic propensities and concludes that the murders of Noel and Sophie Weckert can partly be explained by “larger forces such as chance, nature and narrative” (50). Once a place has been deemed a badland, past representations will be used to justify further violence. To break the cycle of self-perpetuating mythologies, Gibson features as an archaeologist or geologist exposing the layers of the past to substitute histories for myths: “Myths help us live with contradictions, whereas histories help us analyse persistent contradictions so that we might avoid being lulled and ruled by the myths that we use to console and enable ourselves. Which is why we desire our myths and need our histories” (170). Despite Gibson’s emphasis on the need to exit the mode of myth, there will not be any quick-fix to settle the nation. Gibson favours questions over resolutions to keep propelling the reader into various spatio-temporal dimensions, prodding an exploration of contested areas of Australian history, from Aboriginal massacres, to the exploitation of the Kanak, or Chinese migrant communities. Questions are a strategy for unsettling and direct involvement. As he exposes the layers of myth and history, Gibson asks the reader to rethink the representational process.

A decolonisation of spatial perceptions therefore accompanies Gibson’s violent aesthetics. He makes the reader experience different times simultaneously to make visible the influence of the past into the present. In a fragment entitled “superimposed scenes” Gibson revisits a crime scene:

In this place ... you stand exposed, running the superimposed scenes in your head. A short history of trouble plays at once ... Bremmer’s nights of migraine and rifle practice during the week after he’d bought his gun ... Wilson driving the lights-out Holden into the car park while the Weckerts doze in the Celica just down the road ... The camping car was in a sinister state the last time I was there. All around the bullet-pocketed petrol bowsers, car bodies were eviscerated in gulches. Middens of 1970s artefacts. (47-48)

Many confluences take place in this passage: it is Gibson standing there, but also the reader. The scene is first described in the present tense but after a fragmentary reconstitution of the events where verbs cease to be conjugated, the narration resumes – in the past tense this time. The border between past and present is permeable. To emphasise the idea of layering, Gibson uses the metaphor of the midden. More imagery associated with archaeology follows: “As we dig deeper into the landscape ... we will uncover many more murder-scenes from the bloody

past of Australia's colonial frontier" (50). More than resurrecting time layers, Gibson juxtaposes different time sequences and presents them synchronously: "Central Queensland became suffused with the fears as well as the desires of a huge array of people recently jumbled together there, at odds with one another ... And now, added to the heritage of the land wars, there was this labour trade" (133-134). Gibson's practice of heterochrony is particularly judicious since the conflation of time periods indicates trauma. In "Version 1: Land Gone Wrong", spatial trauma and the recent ecological disasters that befell the badlands are evoked in an episode where many dates reel: "March 1986", "the 1860s", "the 1940s and 50s", "the 1970s", then "January 1918". Gibson does not create links between events; the events collide and seem to merge, giving the reader the impression that it is the (repressed) past which poisoned the land and the settlers' present.

Heterochrony unsettles Gibson's readers in productive ways; they are made to move quite fluidly between history's strata. The reader walks in the settler colonial present and senses all the layers of time below. Gibson nurtures an attitude of hyper-awareness; his frequent tense changes are constant reminders that the present is the product of all the past. Readers are also made aware that they, too, produce space as they assign meaning to it. This realisation must trigger a new ethics of space. Gibson's next major book of non-fiction, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* uses heterochrony to decolonise settler colonialism more directly.<sup>59</sup> In that work he adopts a productive deterritorialisation–reterritorialisation of Sydney Cove, which unlocks new ways of seeing and being in the world. This is achieved by representing how the historical protagonist, William Dawes, managed to renegotiate his European preconceptions of place, space and time at the contact of Indigenous Australians. As suggested by its title, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* makes the reader experience spatio-temporal unsettlement by presenting the place from a dizzying number of perspectives.

Representing various historical events simultaneously is a strategy shared by Indigenous Australians. It enables the recipient of the story to immediately connect a historical event and its present consequences. Despite initial resistance due to Cartesian logic, heterochrony is an effective mode of transmission which may enable non-Indigenous Australians to experience time and space in a new way. A potent example of heterochronic representation is given by

---

<sup>59</sup> Ross Gibson, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2012).

Bain Attwood in *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (2005) where he presents a “Captain Cook story”.<sup>60</sup> Such practices, Attwood argues, do not amount to simply writing history, but serve to develop a dialogical relationship with the past,<sup>61</sup> which also has the potential to decolonise spatial relations. Such is Gibson’s design; heterochrony becomes a tool to encourage the settler society to break away from rectilinear representation, an aesthetics he associates with the colonial apparatus.<sup>62</sup>

Gibson’s decolonising poetics of unsettlement is marked by a lack of closure, “a sense of unfinished business”.<sup>63</sup> Like Ghassan Hage, who is critical of the concept of postcolonialism, Gibson wonders whether a settler society can truly be *post*-colonial. The colonial chapter of Australia’s settler history is not closed, partly because there has not been any treaty signed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Gibson cannot allow narrative resolution when so much of history remains unresolved due to the colonial erasures he exposes in his literary works. A didactic dimension to Gibson’s spatial history assists in recovering the past. He enlists the reader to become an amateur historian and seek out the evidence *in situ*. The last section of *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* is entitled “bend down to listen”. The verb is in the imperative form; Gibson involves the reader in meaning making. The individual must become intimate with space, not to turn it into place, but to develop “an *historical* understanding of the landscape”, “overcome the habits of repression and denial”, mourn the “losses in our past”, take instruction from previous custodians, welcome difference and discard immature myths of a singular nation (174-175). What started as an individual investigation becomes a collective, participative project. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* provides a cornerstone for a collective history of the nation that could eventually connect individuals. What was seen, perhaps, as the prerogative of the historian becomes an act of citizenship, leading communities to renegotiate their relationships with space and place. Communal remembering associated with communal mourning is an effective way to engage with trauma. According to Lacapra:

---

<sup>60</sup> Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Attwood, *Telling the Truth*, 169.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Carter’s oeuvre is likely to have been an inspiration for Gibson. From the seminal *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), to *Dark Writing* (2009), Carter’s spatial histories aim to decolonise settler societies like Australia by adopting alternative aesthetics and modes of representations.

<sup>63</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2003), 49.



Through memory-work, especially the socially engaged memory-work involved in working-through, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then that is related to, but not identical with, here and now.<sup>64</sup>

Gibson reaches similar conclusions: "The historian strives to amplify and translate these voices [the dead's], in the hope that the dead will settle and allow present communities to live peaceably once the past has been acknowledged and made palpable in the public domain" (82-83). The sentence indicates a belief that it is possible to heal and move beyond trauma. There is optimism there; yet the words "in the hope that the dead will settle" linger.

It might be more accurate to say that instead of advocating settlement Gibson advocates a movement towards settling. This would avoid Australian society becoming complacent. There is no formal conclusion to *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, only an "Exit". Exit is also the imperative of the verb. In fact, three of the four last book chapters use verbs in the imperative form: "worry away", "Exit" and "bend down to listen". These verbs imply reader participation, actions to undertake in order to move towards a resolution. Gibson exploits this lack of closure to develop a poetics of space based on returns. Returns are necessary to keep exploring the complexity of settler colonial space. There are many perspectives to relay: those of traditional custodians, settlers and their descendants, as well as migrants and refugees. The non-human environment must also be taken into account, hence Gibson's representations of the ecosystems that govern the badlands. Gibson, therefore, abandons linear narratives and opts for the reduplicative, an aesthetics associated with a regenerative quality. Irresolution might appear as a paradoxical choice (because it may result in a state of limbo), but irresolution and complexity invite individuals to avoid stasis and constantly renegotiate their sense of place in relation to other complex communities. Gibson's poetics of unsettlement leads to the kind of "poetics of relation" developed by French Caribbean poet Édouard Glissant, where the writer "can tap the unconscious of a people and apprehend its multiform culture in order to provide forms of memory and intent capable of transcending 'nonhistory'".<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 713.

<sup>65</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1990; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), back-blurb.

Gibson's resolute irresolution is a fitting answer to the socio-political context that informed *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. Published in the midst of Australia's History Wars, Gibson's work constitutes a powerful counterpoint to the official agenda of the era of Reconciliation sought resolution and closure through well-meaning catchy slogans like "sharing history" or "walking together", Gibson promotes a confronting, violent aesthetics, a vernacular archive and irresolution as necessary companions to unsettlement.<sup>66</sup> Gibson certainly has grounds for being suspicious of national approaches that sought to divide, annihilate and assimilate. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* and *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* are still ambitious works that promote a rapprochement between the various communities and cultures that form Australian society, but they mistrust top-down institutional policies which were the source of the human and environmental devastation he presents. For Gibson, the answers will come from local investigations which may eventually cohere, and subvert national narratives.

### **Conclusion: From topophobia to topophilia**

Gibson's formally innovative literary object straddles many modes and genres, borrowing features one might find in news reports, true crime or cinema. It is non-fiction, but highly imaginative. The work is partly autobiographical but it is also the biography of a particular place. For that reason it is also geography. It is philosophical and engages with ethics. It is revisionist history, in the best sense of the term, but it could also be called a non-history because it investigates the silence, the historical fabric that disappeared. As Chapter 3 will establish, Nicolas Rothwell's works are informed by similar principles, and it could be argued that both Gibson and Rothwell's oeuvres owe much to the innovative non-fiction of W.G. Sebald, especially *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). Gibson's poetics of unsettlement is a potent tool that helps represent such dynamic complexity. Knowledge and comprehension dispel topophobia and make possible the passage to topophilia. If *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* first evokes a place that Australians fear, "a place you're warned not to go", Gibson revisits the badlands in order to find what made them "bad", shedding light on the processes which gradually severed Australians from that particular locality (1). After stripping the myths from place and encouraging a remembering of the past, Gibson invites the reader to reconnect with the badlands. His use of the shell motif in the concluding pages

---

<sup>66</sup> Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Key Issue Paper No.4*, 28-29.

of the book is reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's who associates the shell with topophilia.<sup>67</sup> Bachelard develops a "phenomenology of the inhabited shell", where the shell represents the threshold between fear and knowledge.<sup>68</sup> It is particularly judicious of Gibson to end his *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* on this symbol. Indeed, the settler society is poised between fear and knowledge, standing at an important juncture. The past has been made more available than ever, but what is the nation going to do with that knowledge? In Gibson's hands, the shell becomes an enabler that links past, present and future, and assists in transcending fixed boundaries between space, time and cultures.

Gibson encourages his reader to pick up the shells that adorn Central Queensland's littoral zone. It may be difficult to regain innocence after the knowledge the book has imparted to the reader, but the author offers a rewarding variant: to listen to the voices of the individual communities which contributed to forming Queensland and other settler societies; "if you listen carefully ... you might fancy you can hear the shells whispering a thousand words for 'home' every time a wave washes out" (183). *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* strives to impart a transnational, or even, post-national sense of identity. One of the last sections, entitled "mock the boundaries" (167-170), reaches across islands and continents to acknowledge a resolutely multicultural Australia that predated Federation. At the end of the book, the past and the present thus merge into a dialogue which has an activating power. If, in the opening pages the dead stalk the living, at the end, the dead *talk* to the living. This recognition of the past may allow the settler society to establish an ethical engagement with the present and the future, the passage from "infantile narcissism" to maturity (160), a program that is also central to Tim Winton's fiction.

---

<sup>67</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 105-135.

<sup>68</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 107 and 110.

## Part 2 Communal Neurosis and Settler Anxiety: Epistemological Vertigo in Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark*

“Men must have legends, else they will die of strangeness”.

– Les A. Murray, “Noonday Axeman”.<sup>69</sup>

The social function of myths in settler societies is investigated in depth in Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. The book is very much an autopsy of the badlands; it deconstructs the foundational myths that preclude productive relationships with these regions. For Gibson, myths are meant to settle contemporary anxieties: “a myth is a popular story that highlights contradictions which a community feels compelled to resolve *narratively* rather than rationally, so that the citizens can get on with living” (170-171). As demonstrated in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, this does not work; it is just a bandaid on trauma. In Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark* (1988) men and women die of legends more than “of strangeness”. The settling myths that hold the nation together are not enough to hold back the violence associated with the colonial past, which keeps coming to the surface of the present in the form of personal and collective trauma. *In the Winter Dark* presents an unsettled protagonist. Maurice does not feel quite at home in an environment he thought he had mastered, a nature he believed he had subjugated. For Maurice, the forested bush – this most iconic Australian environment – remains a formidable badland. Mental projections inherited from colonial times have led to a failure to relate intimately to his surroundings and summon an elusive beast that consumes the protagonist. By showing how easily the most inflexible farmer gives way to fear and irrational behaviour, the narrative reveals the fragility of the settler society.

For the past three decades, Winton's fiction has been probing the contested issue of settler legitimacy. *The Riders* (1994), *Dirt Music* (2001), *Breath* (2008) and *Eyrie* (2013) explore how non-Indigenous Australians attempt to renegotiate spatial relationships in this contemporary context of social, cultural and political instability. *In the Winter Dark* exploits the socio-political context of the 1988 Bicentenary (a time when the nation was seeking to settle its citizens through history and myth) to subvert notions of settlement. In the novel, the characters' spatial malaise can be traced to the legacy of settler colonial ways of thinking,

---

<sup>69</sup> Les A. Murray, “Noonday Axeman,” in Les A. Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann, *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1965), 33.

seeing and representing. Like Gibson, Winton resorts to a poetics of unsettlement and the violent aesthetics associated with the Gothic to confront historical erasures and release the violence dormant in the ground for two hundred years, before embarking on a necessary renegotiation of spatio-temporal referents, relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and the non-human environment. This early novel of Winton's reads as a foundational statement upon which the rest of his fiction is built: the necessity of exposing myths of nationhood and fundamental questioning of the modes of representation that supported their ideologies. Winton deconstructs the myth of the settled settler, the Romantic view of the bush as a sanctuary, and the converse image of the bush perceived as an intrinsically evil or Gothic place. The novel suggests that Australians move away from models of identity-building based on personal or national history and adopt a temporality and spatiality inspired by Indigenous ways of seeing. Winton's Gothic tale also engages with the idea of settler colonial trauma, but the object of trauma is not as apparent as in Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*; it is displaced and treated metaphorically. I will use John Docker's concept of epistemological vertigo to elucidate how Winton achieves this important reflection.<sup>70</sup>

### **Maurice the unsettled settler: Trauma, displacement and epistemological vertigo**

Settlers must disavow Indigenous presence to ensure the "seamless process of settler territorialisation", but early colonists sat uneasily on a land they knew was not theirs.<sup>71</sup> While the nation sought to enshrine non-Indigenous Australians' legitimacy to own land in narratives of belonging and legal mythologies, people knew such claims were tenuous. In fact, colonial officials found themselves at a loss to justify *terra nullius* because of evident Aboriginal presence.<sup>72</sup> It could therefore be said that spatial instability has always been part of the settler colonial present and that unsettlement has always been part of the settler condition. More recently, the High Court rulings of 1988 and 1992, which recognised native title, the 1997 "Bringing Them Home" report, which led to Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, and the discussions around the recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution, have contributed to an increasingly tenuous sense of place in

---

<sup>70</sup> Docker, "Epistemological Vertigo," 54.

<sup>71</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 80.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1987), 7-54.

the non-Indigenous population. Winton seems to have anticipated these developments. Far from validating the conservative views nourished by his protagonist, Winton turns Maurice's known world upside down.

Maurice is the settler *par excellence*; he takes pride in being part of a long lineage of settler farmers. For him, people are either farmers or outsiders. This is how he defines his two neighbours Ronnie and Jacob: "She didn't look like any farmgirl to me", and "Jacob was no farmer. I noticed how late he got up. He had a policy of doing nothing. He was rigorous about it".<sup>73</sup> The justification of land ownership through hard work is a long-standing tradition in Australian pastoral circles. Nature is to be conquered and tamed, made into man's image. Descriptions of the settlers' struggle with the landscape abound in colonial literature and constituted a "legitimation enterprise".<sup>74</sup> They were also a ploy to avoid mentioning the bloody conflicts which arose between settlers and first peoples. Because settlement coincided with the Enlightenment, settlers and colonial authorities could not be seen to be subduing Indigenous populations; they needed another enemy – Australian space itself.<sup>75</sup>

The literatures of settler societies are, therefore, obsessed with questions of law and land; they reflect the vexed question of land acquisition via dispossession.<sup>76</sup> Central to issues of legitimacy is the concept of property, defined in the Australian legal system as the right to exclude: "private property is created by the guarantee that an individual can exclude others from the use or benefit of something".<sup>77</sup> Maurice and his wife Ida are wary of strangers on their land. When a neighbour suspects wild dogs may be responsible for the carnage at Ronnie's place, Jacob suggests that the Shire Council should be baiting and poisoning the culprits. Ida is defiant: "You're not a farmer, are you, Mr Jacob ... it's a Sink matter. We'll sort it out ourselves like neighbours should ... I don't want busybodies poking around my home" (53). Maurice's obsession with the beast can be interpreted as an endeavour to protect his land at all costs.<sup>78</sup> After their dog is killed, Maurice and Ida patrol their land. They do so unconsciously, as though a settler instinct had kicked in: "We rode the boundaries, as they

---

<sup>73</sup> Tim Winton, *In the Winter Dark* (1988; Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1996), 58 and 6. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>74</sup> Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991), 26.

<sup>75</sup> Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, 23-24.

<sup>76</sup> Tony Hughes-D'Aeth, "Cooper, Cather, Prichard, 'Pioneer': The Chronotope of Settler Colonialism," *Australian Literary Studies* 31, no.3 (2016): 14-15.

<sup>77</sup> C.B. Macpherson, ed., *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 5.

<sup>78</sup> The idea of a beast preying on property also evokes the archetypal Old English poem "Beowulf".

say, and we didn't know quite what else to do" (25). When his fences get damaged, Maurice repairs them straight away, as if to re-assert his land rights. A more careful analysis of the situation might have been for Maurice not to pen his domesticated herd, but to leave the fences open so that that the sheep stood better chances of escape. Fences also suggest, metaphorically, the rejection of other ways of thinking. Maurice never considers the alternative of leaving his property, albeit temporarily. He prefers to defend his land to the death rather than hire the services of a professional hunter, as Jacob suggests: "We belong here. We are strong" (124).

The events that unfold will prove the contrary: that the characters do not belong and that their heritage made them weak. Maurice, who thinks he has complete ownership of his land, is in fact at risk of dispossession. In an ironic twist, the author introduces the figure of American mining prospectors and a real estate agent at the very end of the novel: "The Americans have found bauxite in the forest. They'll be digging before long. That estate agent was across the valley the other day" (132). The protagonist is caught in the wheels of a global economy, but that is not all. Winton's novel was published in 1988, a date that coincides with the bicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet. No Australian could ignore the debates around the celebration of two hundred years of settlement. While the establishment used the celebrations to validate settler legitimacy, other voices pointed at the necessity of reflecting on the dispossession associated with the settler colonial project.<sup>79</sup> One can only speculate about the level of authorial control Winton might have had over the date of publication of his novel, but Maurice's fierce defence of his land certainly reflects the fragility of the settler over issues of legitimacy concerning their rights to own land acquired through dispossession.

The historical context surrounding the publication of *In the Winter Dark* presented a valuable opportunity for Winton to engage in a re-exploration of the fears and traumas that are constitutive of the nation. It is customary for Winton to afflict his characters with personal trauma. Most of his protagonists are prey to traumatic memories which cripple their ability to function in society. But *In the Winter Dark* stands as an exception: it is a novel that explores the processes that destroy the characters, rather than the coping mechanisms they develop to regain a position in society. All the characters are victims of personal trauma: Maurice is haunted by his guilt over the death of the old woman next door; Ronnie feels responsible for

---

<sup>79</sup> Hodge and Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream*, x.

being a passive witness to the torture of a cat; Jacob cannot overcome memories of his daughter's death and subsequent divorce. They are prisoners of time despite their efforts to break free from traumatic memories which breed physical monsters – always in the form of a cat. Victims of trauma tend to experience a recurrent intrusion of past events in the present: “the survivor tells their story to reconstruct traumatic events and transform them, to integrate them into their life story”.<sup>80</sup> The circular structure of *In the Winter Dark* suggests the prevalence of trauma.<sup>81</sup> It opens with Maurice confessing his sins to “the dark” and finishes with a similar address: “It’s dark already and I’m out there again, talking, telling the story to the quiet night. Maurice Stubbs listening to his own voice, like every other night this past year” (1); and again, at the very close of the novel: “Ah, but you, Darkness, you know all this. I tell you night after night” (129).

The narrative voice also evokes trauma: Maurice starts his tale in the first person but before long he uses the third person, viewing himself from the outside. This distancing mechanism functions as a coping strategy to avoid re-living the events personally. In fact, Maurice resorts to the third person each time he narrates a particularly traumatic event: “Blood comes hot out of a boy’s face. Two brothers carry him across sloping pasture in the twilight, the crash of the shotgun still in their ears” (40). Maurice is one of the brothers in this passage, but he describes the events from a distance, as if to exonerate himself. The man who used to read history books to settle himself, now wishes he were free from time. The irruption of the past into the present foregrounds trauma, but what sort of trauma really affects Maurice? Is it simply personal trauma after he killed his neighbour, his wife and Ronnie’s child to be? Sissy Helff believes that Winton’s oeuvre deals with “the inherited Australian memory and the country’s disputed history”.<sup>82</sup> Settler societies resort to hiding and repressing the violence that was constitutional of the State, at an individual and institutional level. It is therefore not surprising that “The Gothic is endemic to the Australian condition”.<sup>83</sup> Like Gibson in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, Maurice struggles with personal ghosts, but the repressed collective past is what really haunts him.

---

<sup>80</sup> Hannah Schürholz, “‘Over the cliff and into the water’: love, death and confession in Tim Winton’s fiction,” in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 104.

<sup>81</sup> On the motif of the loop in trauma literary narratives, see Roger Luckhurst, “Trauma in Narrative Fiction”, in *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 87-146.

<sup>82</sup> Sissy Helff, “Transcultural Winton: Mnemonic Landscapes of Australia,” in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 225.

<sup>83</sup> Baines, “The Haunting of History,” 71.



Maurice is described as the recipient of the Sink's collective memories and dreams: "I'm alone here on the farm, the carrier of everyone's memories" (2). He *is* the sink where the legacies of white settler culture drain. There is much to atone for. In the midst of collective panic over the nature of the beast that disrupts the characters' routine, Ida asks: "You think we've done something? ... Like 'the sins of the fathers' and everything?" and Maurice replies: "Ida, I've tried to tell you. The answer is yes" (112). One way to cope with the guilt associated with the massacre of Aborigines was to pretend that the murder of Aborigines was not murder at all but more like clearing land or killing animals for sport. In his 1980 Boyer Lectures, Bernard Smith reports how an anonymous commentator put it, in 1847: "Regret concerning the disappearance [of the Aborigine] is hardly more reasonable than it would be to complain of drainage of marshes or the disappearance of wild animals".<sup>84</sup> But denial only serves to cement trauma. In Maurice's case, the past resurfaces in the form of paranoid fears that feed belief in an external beast which is merely an expression of his repressed inner demons. Winton chooses iconic Australian bushland as the site where important renegotiations must take place.

Much of Australian literature presents the forested bush as an eerie place. Les A. Murray writes: "Only strangers, the very poor and the dead walk in the bush. Of the living, no one who belongs to the bush walks any further in it than they can help. It is an old, subtle taboo, compound of pride and unease".<sup>85</sup> Maurice inherited a very similar conceptualisation of the bush from his father: "He was frightened of trees, my old man. Never sleep in the forest, he would say; everything is above you ... The old man had his practical side, but there was more to his feelings about the forest than that" (27). Maurice himself senses a particular malevolence in the forest that he dares not put down in words: "it struck me of a sudden that maybe we should never have stayed on here, maybe I should have taken Ida out of this valley thirty years ago and never come back" (18). What are these pragmatic grown men possibly afraid of? Fear of the bush has been interpreted as the response of the outsider "who remains at a distance, emotionally involved in the landscape, yet not at one with it".<sup>86</sup> In other words, fear of the bush is fear of the other. *In the Winter Dark* conflates the idea of "the bush as other" and "the Aborigine as other".

---

<sup>84</sup> In Bernard Smith, *The 1980 Boyer Lectures: The Spectre of Truganini* (Sydney: ABC, 1980), 17, no source given.

<sup>85</sup> Les A. Murray, "In a Working Forest," in *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), 57.

<sup>86</sup> Read, *Returning to Nothing*, 139.

In colonial times, forests were perceived as a threat at least in part because this was where the vengeful native could lurk, waiting for the cover of night to carry out an attack. In Winton's novel, trees, beast and Aborigine (alive or in spirit) are conflated: for the protagonist, the forest is where the beast hides and retreats after attacking the settler on his land, destroying his livelihood. The beast is always associated with the forest; even when it ventures out of the bush, it has the ability to merge with trees: Jacob "set off, but something stopped him still as a stump. Between the trees he saw something. A movement. A silhouette ... The shadow seemed to stop, slip sideways between apple rows. And then there was nothing" (7-8). The beast is described as "other", "something that didn't belong, and I wanted to kill it and nail its pelt to a tree so all the hidden eyes could see it" (75). One is reminded of the public executions of Indigenous Australians who had attacked cattle or white settlers' property in the early days of the colony. For Maurice, the beast and the bush are incarnations of the vengeful past which saw his forebears kill Indigenous people in their efforts to secure land. The elliptical nature of this narrative circumvents Maurice's nameless fear of the forest, but the trees, it seems, are the crux of the matter. In front of this intangible sense of impending retaliation, his main coping mechanism is going into the bush to cut down more trees.

Land clearing is used as a potent metaphor for the murder of Aborigines in Winton's novel. Because settler societies tend to repress memories linked to massacres of indigenous populations, the return of the repressed often manifests itself psychologically and culturally in the form of haunting, confusion and vertigo. John Docker investigates these symptoms in terms of "epistemological vertigo", an expression coined by Ella Shohat in relation to Jewish settlers who had to come to terms with the dual status of victim and victimiser. In settler societies, the object of violence is often displaced. In North America, destroying the wolf or the bison, and taming the wilderness were ways to effect and represent the destruction of autochthons.<sup>87</sup> Likewise in Australia, the mass shooting of kangaroos by educated Australians in the film *Wake in Fright* (1971) can be read as "a surrogate for the actual historical massacres of Australia's Indigenous peoples".<sup>88</sup> *In the Winter Dark* lends itself to a similar reading where the destruction of the forest evokes the destruction of Indigenous Australians. For colonists, cutting trees was an act of civilisation: not only did deforestation provide precious construction material, it also allowed a clear line of sight to keep the savages at bay. And as forests gave way to pastures, the resources Indigenous Australians relied on dwindled.

---

<sup>87</sup> Docker, "Epistemological Vertigo," 54.

<sup>88</sup> Docker, "Epistemological Vertigo," 64.

The more forests cut down, the less Aborigines. Maurice's father was "a tearer and burner, cleared damn-near everything he could find ... He was frightened of trees, my old man ... Whatever it was, the old man did what he could to bash and burn it into submission" (27-28).

Cutting the bush into submission can be read as a metaphor for massacres of Aborigines, but the forest remains the place where the spirits of the dead linger. When Maurice is asked by his neighbours to explain why he does not want the authorities to come to their help, Ronnie jokes "He's growing dope in the forests" (114). But Ida flinches and realises that Maurice must be hiding a dark secret there after Maurice's confession about "the sins of the fathers" (112). She formulates questions and envisions supernatural manifestations to explain the events: "None of this is natural. Something is going on here. The whole land, the night, the valley is poisoned. What have these people been doing? What have they meddled with?" (115). The term "natural" is ironic: they do not understand the non-human environment at all. Their comprehension is tainted by their cultural baggage. These lines also imply some form of curse and one senses that the forest could be a repository for the remains of Aborigines killed by Maurice's forebears when they established the farm. The original art work for the cover of the novel's first edition features a dense forest whose heart pulses light that leaks out of the darkness and extends towards cleared land. One can only speculate as to the nature of the ghostly light that advances, but it is represented as a powerful spiritual force. Winton's engagement with collective anxiety regarding the nation's colonial past has a significant political dimension: his Gothic novel portrays a paranoid nation.

### **The politics of unsettlement: The paranoid settler**

In the context of 1988, the political resonance of *In the Winter Dark* cannot be understated. Maurice's obsession with the beast is close to paranoia, "a pathological form of fear based on a conception of the self as excessively fragile, and constantly threatened".<sup>89</sup> The protagonist literally jumps at shadows. Winton's novel conveys that after two hundred years of settlement there remains "a sense of unfinished business ... whatever traces of colonial confidence existed in Australia are built on genocidal practices, and so remain haunted by these constitutive deeds".<sup>90</sup> Australia is gripped, it seems, by a structural fear. The fact that many Australians still believe that Indigenous Australians, migrants or refugees pose a threat to

---

<sup>89</sup> Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, 49.

<sup>90</sup> Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, 49.

their lifestyle, when politically, economically and physically they do not constitute a powerful movement likely to upset the established order, is proof that Australia's legitimacy and self-confidence as a nation were established on fragile bases and need to be revisited urgently. Winton does not shy away from this task.

Most nations will resort to fear as a strategy to assert their legitimacy, control their populations and strengthen national claims. What is peculiar in Australia is that fear is foundational to the establishment of the colony and does not only flare up sporadically. As soon as the "Black Wars" were won and Indigenous Australians no longer represented a threat, the nation worried about external threats. Upon his dismissal as Secretary of Department of Foreign Affairs under Malcom Fraser, Alan Renouf wrote *The Frightened Country* (1979) to expose the misguided principles he believed underpinned Australia's foreign policy. According to Renouf, Australia has "always been afraid of someone" and behaved like an immature nation replicating known schemas instead of seeking a distinctive voice and identity.<sup>91</sup> Renouf writes about the country's irrational fear of Asia and surveys Australia's more recent history (from the 1850s till today), but one could push his reasoning further back in time and argue that an "unreasoning fearfulness" has been at the heart of Australia from the moment the First Fleet landed in Botany Bay.<sup>92</sup>

Australian literature naturally relays these anxieties. Nathanael O'Reilly and Jean-François Vernay have reflected on the "centrality of fear in Australian culture" and provide a useful catalogue of the fears expressed in Australian literature and film.<sup>93</sup> Winton's fiction and non-fiction continually probe the roots of settler anxieties and spatial instabilities. *Cloudstreet* (1991) has been read as a ghost story whose protagonists are haunted by a prior indigenous occupation and colonial dispossession.<sup>94</sup> *Eyrie* (2013) examines irrational fears associated with recent waves of immigration and an increasingly multicultural Australia. Winton also questions the indifference shown by a significant number of Australians concerning the plight of asylum seekers detained offshore in the name of national security. In "Palm Sunday Plea", published simultaneously in *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* in March 2015, and

---

<sup>91</sup> Alan Renouf, quoted in Peter Hartcher, "Bipolar Nation: How to Win the 2007 Election," *Quarterly Essay* 25 (2007), 42.

<sup>92</sup> Alan Renouf, quoted in Hartcher, "Bipolar Nation," 41. See also David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1999).

<sup>93</sup> Nathanael O'Reilly and Jean-François Vernay, "Terror Australis Incognita?: An Introduction to Fear in Australian Literature and Film," *Antipodes* 23 (2009): 6.

<sup>94</sup> Michael R. Griffiths, "Winton's spectralities or What haunts *Cloudstreet*?" in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 79.

later included in *The Boy Behind the Curtain* as “Stones for Bread”, Winton identifies fear as the reason for this callous indifference: “You see, we’re afraid of strangers. We’re even scared of their traumatized children. Yes, this big brash rich nation trembles. When people arrive with nothing but the sweat on their backs and a crying need for safe refuge, we’re terrified ... This fear has deranged us”.<sup>95</sup>

*In the Winter Dark* presents Maurice caught in the grip of an irrational fear sparked by a mere footprint. His first instinct to reconcile himself with this intrusion is to invoke European myths. He believes the beast to be the descendant of a cat introduced at the time of colonisation; but the cat “acts as a reminder of colonization” and re-activates a misplaced European mythology.<sup>96</sup> Wolves, witches and terrifying beasts, people the forest world of many European tales. In Winton’s novel, the cat stands for imported European settler culture and ways of thinking. What Maurice fights, unbeknown to him, is the legacy of the colonial past which has bred into a monster. By extension, one could argue that Maurice shares in the animality of the beast: it is the settler farmer who is pictured as an animal in this tale. Functioning by instinct rather than by reason, Maurice is often described as muddled, crawling on the ground, sniffing for fresh tracks: “On hands and knees I went over the wet grass” (24). The 1998 film adaptation of the book by James Bogle exploits such a reading of *In the Winter Dark*. There, Maurice’s grunts and growls accentuate his animality. His downfall comes from the fact that the only tool he uses to fight the beast is settler logic. He is unable to grasp other world views – a humanist approach suggested by his wife Ida, Ronnie’s hippy interpretation of the events, or Jacob’s city-dweller perspective. Patriarchy and the gun are the only ways Maurice can conceive of to resolve his predicament. *In the Winter Dark* advocates the need to exit the modes of myth and nostalgia. The only dangerous animals in the bush are humans and the European imagination gone feral.

Because space defeats the protagonists, Maurice’s first response is to try and literally settle himself by immersing himself in time. Winton’s philosophy is contrary to these principles, and he defeats Maurice’s absorption into armchair history. The thesis of *In the Winter Dark* is that, unlike in a European context, in Australia, space has conquered time. The characters’ efforts to let time rule the Sink come to a dead-end, and European temporality disintegrates in

---

<sup>95</sup> Tim Winton, *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2016), 254.

<sup>96</sup> Pilar Baines, “The Haunting of History and Feral Self in Tim Winton’s *In the Winter Dark*,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 17 (2011): 71.

the depth of the bush. The location is not called the Sink by accident. When Ronnie experiences a drug-induced hallucination in the forest, time vanishes: “there was Ronnie and there was jarrah forest, and yet it was no time at all. There were places here the moon could not follow. No time at all but fast-time, quick-time, hurry-time that she dawdled in” (13). In a striking antipodean inversion, space claims place and engulfs the graves of the burnt old woman, Ida, and Ronnie’s still-born child, three generations of women who represent different expressions of time (the past through the old woman, the present through the wife and the future through the baby). While Jacob seeks oblivion in the bottle, Maurice consults the annals of history, a *Pictorial History of Australia At War*. The foundation myths of Australia as a loyal partner in the British Commonwealth provide Maurice with a settling version of history; he is certainly not reading a revisionist history (like Henry Reynolds’ *The Law of the Land* or Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay*, two works published the year before *In the Winter Dark*) that would throw light on the unsettling accounts of the colonial period. His obsession with time is not productive because it prevents him from engaging with the present and the reality of the space that surrounds him. Ross Gibson’s first major publication, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (1984), encouraged a close investigation of spatial representations in foundational literary texts.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, this early novel by Winton is heavily invested in a renegotiation of spatial perceptions and representations, with a view to inflect spatial practices.

### **The neutrality of the bush: The bush as a mirror**

Like Gibson, Winton rehabilitates Australian space. He encourages his characters and his readers to tame fears imported from Europe and adopt a different attitude towards the Australian bush or any kind of badland. While the bush stirs our imagination, it is a fatal error to people Australian forests with imported myths. Western literary genres and motifs only contribute to alienating the characters from the non-human environment. For Maurice, trees remain threatening. Australian forests “make visible to the traveller [and the settler] his own mythical origins, the jumble of Gothic images that constitute his history”.<sup>98</sup> In the moonlight; they stir and feed the imagination: a bleached tree here will appear as a ghostly figure, a charred stump as a crouching native. This is exactly what takes place in Winton’s novel:

---

<sup>97</sup> Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984).

<sup>98</sup> Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*, 266.

“when the dusk comes, in that gloaming time of confusion ... you can’t tell a tree-stump from a kangaroo, an owl-hoot from a question in the night” (2). Until it is cut down and lies horizontal as a resource to tap into, the tree is the enemy: “The axe rang out sweet and clear ... The timber was good and dead, the colour of honey” (28). Henry Lawson’s image of a bush that would be entirely humanised is close at hand.<sup>99</sup> Australian geography proved resistant to conquest, and these failures provided justification for pillage and plunder. The land had been unkind and cast as a killer, settler colonists could therefore mete out retribution on it by tapping unchecked into its resources, without regard for ecological consequences. *In the Winter Dark* foregrounds that the failure of the characters to relate to the non-human environment is a sign of the failure of the European imagination. My analysis has so far established that the novel re-assesses two important strategies adopted by non-Indigenous Australians in their attempts to settle personal and communal trauma: one based on time/history, the other on myth. Both fail, and result in the destruction of all the characters involved. Winton then seizes the opportunity to present a different kind of temporality and spatiality. In this novel, how the characters perceive and relate to the bush is literally a matter of life and death.

Two conflicting theses about nature compete in this narrative: an idealised, romanticised vision of the bush and a darker version associated with the Gothic. In turn, the characters project their imagination and emotions onto the bush and soon these projections breed into monsters, transforming the bush into what Ross Gibson terms “a mythological badland, a paradoxically real and fantastic location where malevolence is *simply there* partly because it has long been *imagined there*” (178). Winton deconstructs simplistic representations of nature and exposes their trappings. He adopts a complex structure whose focalisation alternates between characters to dramatise their struggle to exit the anthropocentric models of representation they inherited. This constant dance of voices comes to a standstill at the close of the narrative, where the protagonist comes to the realisation that the bush is neither benevolent nor malignant. It is neutral and just holds a mirror to the characters’ troubled selves.

---

<sup>99</sup> Henry Lawson published the poem “Up the Country” in *The Bulletin* (1892) as a response to Banjo Paterson’s romantic perception of the bush: “I believe the Southern poets’ dream will not be realised / Till the plains are irrigated and the land is humanised”, lines 52-53.

The novel exposes as dangerous naïve views of the bush nurtured by city folk. Maurice derides Jacob as a good-for-nothing urbanite who comes to the bush with dreams and little practical sense. For Jacob the bush is a sanctuary where he can seek solitude: “He knew this place was good. Even if he died here alone, it would be good” (22). Jacob sees goodness in the bush, Maurice evil. Both men are guilty of anthropocentric representations of nature which lead to disastrous consequences. It is when humans fantasise about space that things go horribly wrong for them. Henry David Thoreau might have been a better guide for them.<sup>100</sup> Winton points to the danger inherent in romantic conceptualisations of nature. Like Gibson in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, he resorts to the use of mass-mediated settler memory to expose other flaws in his characters. Winton portrays Jacob’s settler inclinations through the transnational TV program he watches: his favourite show is *The High Chaparral*, an American series that ran from 1967 to 1971. The plot revolves around a settler protagonist trying to establish a ranch on Apache land in the 1870s, defending “his” land against hostile tribes. Jacob may seem a peaceful retiree but he is just as keen as Maurice to guard his property against the mysterious beast.

As for Ronnie and her partner, they are “kind of modern types from the city” (7). Ronnie came to the bush because it was a place to come clean from drugs and raise a child, a form of sanctuary. She does not see the Sink as a real place and can only interpret it through popular culture. As the darkness falls onto the valley, Ronnie pictures a romantic scene which rapidly takes a Gothic turn: “Mist formed on the valley slopes below it. Looks like a movie set, she thought” (10). But the bohemian musician in search of a retreat to raise Muscovy ducks, a goat, a cow and a child is ill-prepared to deal with the realities of living close to the bush. Unable to relate to her surroundings, she resorts to taking drugs again in order to cope with the place. After ingesting acid, “It looked nicer out there” (12). But the forest does not change, of course, and she falls victim to a terrifying hallucination: “an army of ghosts marching upon her” (12).

There is a sense of irony in the way Winton challenges the romantic stereotype of “the bush as sanctuary”, as initially conceived by his characters. Ronnie dives into a drug delirium and ends up losing her baby. Jacob sinks into alcoholism. As for Maurice’s Gothic misgivings of the bush, they lead him to kill his innocent wife. Moments before her death, Ida has an

---

<sup>100</sup> Chapter 4 analyses the influences of Transcendentalism on Winton’s fiction.



epiphany which allows her to conclude that the characters are not justified in their irrational behaviours: “It was only bush, only soil, only sky. There was nothing to be afraid of” (123). She understands that the bush is neutral and acts as a mirror: the residents of the Sink have been projecting their own fears onto the bush; the beast is of their own making. She embraces this new way of thinking and seeks to merge with the bush physically: “Get in there. See and not be frightened, right into the thickets” (123). Ironically, it is because she has managed to understand the true nature of the place that she is shot.

None of the characters’ imported views of the bush, be they positive or negative, serve any fruitful purpose. They cannot perceive the bush for what it is: a natural tract of land or previously occupied place that needs to be understood on its own terms, not through preconceived notions, be they romantic, Gothic or pastoral. It is the characters’ failure to relate to the bush in a truly original way that causes their demise. Winton does not fictionalise the real, but de-fictionalises it; in the same movement he initiates a decolonisation of spatial perceptions, representations and relations.

### **Conclusion: The settler transformed**

*In the Winter Dark* suggests that non-Indigenous Australians adopt a different logic. Had the characters not built their identity on history (personal or national) but on space, or a temporality inspired by Indigenous ways of seeing, the outcome might have been very different. Indigenous Australians’ non-linear temporality might have been a helpful construct for Maurice to create conscious links between the traumatic events of the past and the present situation. The novel highlights the need to redefine western conceptualisations of time. Current views of time as progress, orientated towards a future, cause us to dissociate the past from the present. Winton’s re-assessment shares much with Deborah Bird Rose, who suggests we engage with complex “alternatives to linear time” such as “ecological time, synchronicities, intervals, patterns, and rhythms”.<sup>101</sup> As established in my study of Gibson’s *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, heterochrony may enable non-Indigenous Australians to experience time and space in productive ways.

---

<sup>101</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 25.

In the final scene Maurice comes close to experiencing time and space differently. He is simultaneously immersed in the landscape, able to appreciate its every detail but at the same time ready to be uprooted from his environment by the authorities. Maurice is a defeated but transformed man: he has come to the realisation that it is his inherited preconceptions of space that were responsible for the tragic events that occurred. The circular nature of the narrative denotes hindsight. But more than a reflection on time, Maurice seems to have developed a concrete ability to relate to space. The way he describes the forest and waterway in the opening and concluding pages of the novel conveys a keen sense of observation based on the five senses. Maurice has also developed the ability to live in the present: “I row myself around the bend a little where the sun comes through the paperbarks to light up the water so bright you can barely see. I’ll just drift along from here ... I should have known earlier to always live like that” (130). It is important to note that he reaches this awareness through a form of cultural convergence, rather than an appropriation of Indigenous culture. The last image of Maurice, alone, waiting to be uprooted from his land, suggests quite a radical politics of space. It prefigures fictional characters created much more recently. The final pages of Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2005) offer a similar image which can be read as a metaphor for the settler condition: as Sue Kossew observes, Thornhill “remains an ‘unsettled settler’ whose sense of security is always fragile and under threat ... still painfully aware that his hold on the land is tenuous as it waits patiently for its Indigenous owners to return”.<sup>102</sup> One can easily substitute for Thornhill, Maurice, the *contemporary* settler, waiting anxiously for the moment of restitution. Winton resists an easy resolution of the settler’s mounting crisis; he opts for complexity and leaves his protagonist in a state of dynamic unsettlement.

Winton represents deeply-seated anxieties around issues of settler legitimacy and seizes the opportunity offered by the Bicentenary to suggest how Australians might relate to place and space ethically by accepting a form of negative capability based on unsettlement. As in Gibson’s non-fiction, irresolution is a prominent feature of Winton’s fiction.<sup>103</sup> It is the narrative form that best suits the concept of unsettlement. I wish to stress that a poetics of unsettlement does not necessarily advocate division. Winton and Gibson’s works still encourage respectful cultural exchanges. It is judicious that *In the Winter Dark* and *Seven*

---

<sup>102</sup> Sue Kossew, “Voicing the ‘Great Australian Silence’: Kate Grenville’s Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42, no.2 (2007): 17. Accessed 7 March 2017, doi: 10.1177/0021989407078574.

<sup>103</sup> Brigid Rooney, “From the Sublime to the Uncanny in Tim Winton’s *Breath*,” in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 258-259.

*Versions of an Australian Badland* adopt the Gothic mode. Ghost stories typically explore the characters' renegotiation of their relationship with place (the haunted house or the haunted land): "Ghost stories are traditionally about possession; one takes possession of a haunted house and is possessed in return".<sup>104</sup> The characters' journey towards resolution must hinge upon sharing the place with other presences – a shared dispossession.

Unsettling is a necessary step towards acknowledging the traumatic legacy of the colonial past as the cornerstone of the settler colonial present. Winton and Gibson not only unsettle their characters, they also unsettle their readers. The constant dance of voices that succeed one another in *In the Winter Dark*, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (and *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91*) creates a dizzying sense of vertigo that stimulates questions. Winton and Gibson demand in-depth reflection on time, place and space. The Gothic is a genre which provides productive, albeit unsettling narratives for settler colonists to reflect on. It invites them to question their heritage and move towards a new relationship with space. Winton and Gibson contribute to this process, not by advocating a colonising attitude, but by encouraging the reader (through the trials and tribulations of their characters) to learn their place in Australia by achieving an intimate relationship with space based on experience rather than projected fantasies. At a time dominated by dubious efforts to make the nation cohere, literary works like *In the Winter Dark* and *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* contributed to cultivate "a productively unstable dynamic" that favoured a deconstruction of, and re-investment with, the non-human realm, non-Indigenous spatiality and temporality, with a view to operate a fundamental paradigmatic shift: from settler belonging to unbelonging.<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998), 32.

<sup>105</sup> Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 23.

## Chapter 2 Place and Self in Crisis: From Unproductive Identities to a Poetics of Unbelonging

“It will be centuries / Before many men are truly at home in this country”.

– Les A. Murray, “Noonday Axeman”.<sup>1</sup>

In settler societies, place is inseparable from identity: “all constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question ‘Where do I belong?’”<sup>2</sup> But no sooner has the individual formulated an answer, than another question arises which threatens any possibility to ground the self in place: “do I have the right to belong?”<sup>3</sup> While scholars like Peter Read have been trying to articulate ethical forms of belonging, others are convinced that Australians face a “crisis of belonging” that may never be resolved.<sup>4</sup> As I argue in Chapter 1, the nation’s contentious past continues to trouble Australians’ relationships with their surroundings. To know one’s self is to know one’s place, intimately and historically; but due to institutional erasures much of the past remains inaccessible. Linn Miller argues that not knowing the past has resulted in “a pathology of spirit in Australian being”, which I link to an entrenched spatial crisis.<sup>5</sup> If place is not a settled issue, the construction of identity stands on fragile foundations.

There has been a long tradition, as far back as the journals of early explorers and settlers, for Australian writers to represent the self as being at odds with Australian space. Society relied on *terra nullius* to turn space into place, the antipodes, home. But Judith Wright, in 1965, still argued that Australian space remained an enigma to non-Indigenous Australians: the landscape either “forces its way into the foreground”, taking up “an immense amount of room”, or “it is so firmly pushed away that its obvious absence haunts us as much as its presence could do”.<sup>6</sup> It seems impossible for non-Indigenous Australians to find the right distance to experience or represent Australian space. Wright conceptualised this stubborn

---

<sup>1</sup> Les A. Murray, “Noonday Axeman,” in Les A. Murray and Geoffrey Lehmann, *The Ilex Tree* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1965), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 125.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Martina Horakova, “The Unbearable (Im)Possibility of Belonging: Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* as a Postcolonial Novel,” in *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*, ed. Nathanael O’Reilly (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010): 109-128.

<sup>5</sup> Linn Miller, “Belonging to Country – A Philosophical Anthropology,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no.76, (2003): 221. Accessed 5 May 2017, doi: 10.1080/14443050309387839.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Wright, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), xi.

reality as the “double aspect of the inner Australia”.<sup>7</sup> Much more recently, Joanne Tompkins undertook a comprehensive analysis of contemporary Australian theatre, concluding that the colonial past has led to “an underlying instability in spatiality”, which denotes “a general spatial anxiety ... beneath the surface of Australian culture”.<sup>8</sup> This diagnosis can easily be extended to the realms of fiction and non-fiction. But where previous generations of writers tended to present characters suffering from a double identity crisis (along the lines of Wright’s double aspect), contemporary authors inflict much more complex spatial crises upon their protagonists.

Building on theories from existential philosophy, Edward Soja argues that humans differentiate themselves from their surroundings by establishing a distance between themselves and the world they emerge from.<sup>9</sup> Much of the journey towards belonging lies in a person’s attempt to bridge that distance. To this avail, Soja calls for the need to move “Towards a Spatialized Ontology”.<sup>10</sup> Taking the concept of existential spatiality into the realm of postcolonial studies, the crisis deepens. The reading grids, the memories of home and the fantasies developed there do not adhere to the new place. Home is not home; the familiar remains “uncanny”.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the distance that separates the individual from their environment does not diminish: it increases. Caught between nostalgia and a future forever out of reach, the settler is trapped into the “double aspect of the inner Australia”.<sup>12</sup> The crisis is further complicated by a challenge to settler sovereignty that comes from two opposite directions. From within Australia, land rights movements and Indigenous native title claims have compelled Australians to come to terms with the fact that “what is ‘ours’ may also be ‘theirs’”.<sup>13</sup> In the other direction, the transnational forces of capitalism and a global economy destabilise national and regional identities through a levelling form of cosmopolitanism that produces displacement on a massive scale. Neo-colonial in essence, these forces have produced a constant flow of migrants, tourists and refugees with their own claims to place.

---

<sup>7</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 132.

<sup>10</sup> See “Towards a Spatialized Ontology,” in Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 118-137.

<sup>11</sup> Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Preoccupations*, xii.

<sup>13</sup> Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia*, 138.

While representing these evermore complex challenges to place, contemporary Australian writers find themselves compelled to redefine the fundamental principles upon which Australians are articulating their identity. In Australia, narrative forms are “profoundly tied up with national myths of land, landscape, and identity”; what we have is a “land producing its literature”.<sup>14</sup> Attempts at forging a land-based identity are consistent with the settler colonial project, but these have not been very successful in helping non-Indigenous Australians articulate ethical relationships with their environment or the populations they encounter, be they Indigenous, migrant or refugees. Suvendrini Perera argues that what defines Australian identity is not the land, but the sea. Borrowing Irit Rogoff’s concept of *terra infirma*, she proposes that Australia’s unattainable desire for a grounded insularity is constantly challenged by complex shifting currents such as immigration, foreign cultural influences and more recently fears over asylum seekers or terrorism.<sup>15</sup> Australia’s contemporary literature certainly reflects these perceptions. Richard Flanagan’s *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006) and Michelle De Kretser’s *Questions of Travel* (2012) are examples of this reorientation. But it is the works of Tim Winton I choose for my case studies, an author who has been perceived by many critics as a poet of place and belonging. What is taking place in the fictions of a widely-read contemporary author might be a good indicator of the way these paradigm shifts are being negotiated.

In his first autobiographical work, *Land’s Edge: A Coastal Memoir* (1993), Winton declares: “I am a ‘littoralist’”.<sup>16</sup> A more recent book of memoirs entitled *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (2015) also straddles land and ocean. Winton’s oeuvre ponders Australians’ engagement with both forces of attraction. Perera actually starts her reflection on the role played by water in the Australian imagination with an analysis of a protagonist of Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (1992), the aptly named Fish Lamb. For Perera, Fish’s endeavours to leave the land and return to the watery element symbolise a “struggle between warring elements ... writ large not only in Australian geoinimaginaries but in the elemental ideologies of land and sea embedded in western consciousness”.<sup>17</sup> I read Winton’s literary production both as a product of this ambivalence, and as a platform used by the author to offer commentary and

---

<sup>14</sup> Graeme Turner quoted in Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton, *Imagined Landscapes: Geovisualizing Australian Spatial Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 4 and 5.

<sup>15</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Tim Winton, *Land’s Edge: A Coastal Memoir* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1993), 107.

<sup>17</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 33.

direction on ethical questions faced by non-Indigenous Australians in an island that is all but home. His narratives press the reader to ask, whose land or island is this? Are Australians insular at heart? If so, what groups do they seek to exclude?

This chapter opens with an analysis of *The Riders* (1994), a novel that provides a textbook example of ongoing alienation resulting from settler colonialism. There, Winton inverts Wright's double aspect. Scully is transported to a Europe where he expects familiarity with the culture of his origins. Yet instead of finding his roots, he discovers the source of his rootlessness. Behind the varnish of high culture and civility, most of the people he encounters are dysfunctional rapacious cynics, who are themselves both agents and victims of colonial and neo-colonial impulses. As in Christos Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe* (2005), which I use as a point of comparison, the protagonist wanders the physical and ideological rubble of a ruined Europe. In Winton's novel, these ruins are all but inert; the ghostly figures of the riders are a lethal force. I interpret the potency of these ruins along the lines of Ann Laura Stoler's "Imperial Debris" and the ability for structures bequeathed by Empire to continue to affect metropolitan and settler societies alike.<sup>18</sup> Winton represents an aboriginal Europe (for Scully the Australian, Europe is the land of origins) whose colonial and neo-colonial forces continue to alienate and displace. To find coping mechanisms when confronted with the settler colonial present, Winton compels his characters to abandon common spatial conceptualisations. Scully's journey is one from belonging to unbelonging, from stasis to movement, from the past towards the future.

Leaving Winton's antipodean Europe, I then turn my attention to *Breath* (2008) and *Eyrie* (2013). Land is also a shifting object in Australia for the protagonists who feel the ground literally being swept away from under their feet. Dizziness, confusion, loss of balance and consciousness are very common in these narratives. I interpret these symptoms in terms of ontological vertigo in the context of a spatial crisis that compels the characters to make ethical decisions. Destabilised by the need to renegotiate their sense of place and identity after an acknowledgement of Indigenous precedence, they also face exogenous currents that are reshaping Australian culture and society. As a result of globalisation, the flow of capital, migrants and refugees with their own claims to place, Winton's protagonists physically experience the land they stand on as *terra infirma*. Pervasive cosmopolitanism, tourism and

---

<sup>18</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 7.

popular culture are other vectors of neo-colonialism that further undermine any fixed sense of place by producing evermore non-place. *Breath* and *Eyrie* explore the need for a renegotiated spatiality that has much in common with Michelle De Kretser's *Questions of Travel*. The two authors turn to water to develop the kind of spatialized ontology Soja called for, by moving towards a logic of settler unbelonging. I interpret Winton's surfers as agents who attempt to reposition national identity on more fluid constructs and ways of being in the world that will deterritorialise and decolonise settler spatiality.



## Part 1 Riding the Crisis: Double Aspect, Non-place and Shadow Space in Tim Winton's *The Riders*

Literary critics concur that *The Riders* presents an individual in crisis, but there has been much speculation as to the nature of this crisis. Barbara Arizti diagnoses a “crisis of masculinity” in *The Riders*.<sup>19</sup> Robert Dixon and Philippa Kelly argue that Scully performs a “crisis of narcissism”.<sup>20</sup> For Jennifer Rutherford the novel stages a crisis of national identity: she argues that the plot is a ruse seeking “to reaffirm the legitimacy of white Australian narratives of nation and to revalorise nationalist narcissism”.<sup>21</sup> Much closer to the mark is Lyn McCredde who, in an illuminating study of Winton’s fiction, establishes that his novels question the “supposed stabilities of place”, and that Winton is “the poet of *non-belonging*”.<sup>22</sup> While she points to “colonial unease”, McCredde concedes that it is not an easy task to identify the nature of the characters’ crises.<sup>23</sup>

*The Riders* explores the settler’s foundational fear of placelessness. What would happen to settler Australians if Indigenous land claims were widely successful? What if, by an ironic twist of history they, in turn, became unhoused and dispossessed? The novel lays bare these deep-seated national insecurities. Key to interpreting *The Riders*, a novel where time threatens to annihilate space, is the novel’s timeline. Scully arrives in Ireland shortly after the Enniskillen bombing by the IRA, a historic event which took place on 8 November 1987, and the novel ends on New Year’s Day of the following year. The plot therefore unfolds at this pivotal moment when Australians were reassessing settler legitimacy and national identity in the lead-up to the Bicentenary. Scully represents the settler Australian trying to find home outside of home. He believes his education has prepared him for a sort of homecoming but he soon realises that the motherland has little to offer and that he is not wanted there. His only true home is Australia, but Winton denies him the possibility of return.

The opening pages present the protagonist re-enacting the settler-colonial process in yet another colonial outpost: Scully the Australian renovating his Irish cottage, reterritorialising

---

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Arizti, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s *The Riders*,” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 24, no.2 (2002): 29-45.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Dixon and Philippa Kelly, “Brave Myth-takes: Re-writing Romance in Tim Winton’s *The Riders* and Amanda Lohrey’s *Camille’s Bread*,” *Westerly* 42, no.2 (1997): 53.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Rutherford, “The Colonising Victim: Tim Winton’s Irish Conceit,” in *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, eds Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001), 153.

<sup>22</sup> Lyn McCredde, *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016), 11 and 109.

<sup>23</sup> McCredde, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 110, 113, 114.

an independent Republic of Ireland, which, of course, was one of England's earliest colonies. The treeless landscape around him evokes swathes of land for the grabbing: "There in the blaze he saw the huge burns of memory, the windrows of uprooted karris whose sparks went up like flares for days on end over the new cleared land".<sup>24</sup> He views his recent acquisition in Europe as a prized possession: "It really was his. Theirs" (4). The two possessive adjectives leave little doubt that Scully functions according to a colonial mindset, though the rapid shift from singular to plural already denotes an immediate instability in the settler subject. The first line of the "only Irish song he knew" is "*There was a wild colonial boy*" (5). But the author will make Scully's odyssey across Europe his long purgatory, until he embraces less appropriative modes of existence. A haunting image defining the central issue explored in this novel arrests Scully as he is about to start his renovations. The old newspapers that litter the cottage floor tell of the discovery of a man long dead and preserved in the peat bogs. Has Scully's European heritage been preserved after two centuries of settler presence in Australia? Is the settler now on a different trajectory from the motherland's, or does he remain an agent of Empire? It would be presumptuous to believe that Winton, or literature, could resolve the settler crisis of non-belonging, but through a series of motions that deconstruct the elements of this crisis, *The Riders* points towards a possible poetics of unbelonging.

### **Distancing one's self from European identity and spatiality**

Two driving forces for identity building contend in the novel: the pull of Europe and the pull of Australia. Scully journeys across Europe expecting to find his "cultural home", but the modes of thinking he has inherited do not work.<sup>25</sup> He soon realises that he remains antipodean despite an extended stay in Europe. To add to his estrangement, Europeans expect him to perform the colonist's part, but when he fails to deliver they revile him. A prolonged stay outside the motherland seems to have irremediably altered the cultural DNA, which gives rise to a defensive sense of insecurity on his hosts' behalf. They resort to stereotyping Scully as the naïve, friendly Aussie battler, the good mate; but Scully still represents a threat to the motherland: "He frightened the French and caused the English to perspire ... No one could place him" (9-10). The author keeps challenging the protagonist's sense of home, making his

---

<sup>24</sup> Tim Winton, *The Riders* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1994), 3-4. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>25</sup> Anthony J. Hassall, "Over There: The Dream / Nightmare of Europe in Tim Winton's *The Riders* and George Johnston's *Clean Straw for Nothing*," *Overland* 161 (2000): 26.

claims to place more and more tenuous. Scully experiences the double spatiality of the settler Australian as formulated by Judith Wright. He is caught between “‘the reality of newness and freedom’ and the ‘reality of exile’”.<sup>26</sup> The “second-hand European” who struggles in Australia due to inherited reading grids that preclude authentic forms of engagement with the Australian continent, comes back to the motherland, only to realise that he carries a distinctive cultural baggage that causes him not to fit there either.<sup>27</sup> Scully, like Richard Mahony, the archetype used by Wright to formulate “the double aspect of the inner Australia”, is caught in an existential impasse. By making Scully flounder in Europe, Winton insists that Australians are no longer European, but on a different trajectory.

Winton’s most European novel offers an extended reflection on a divergent Australian identity and spatiality. The sense of freedom Scully experiences in the old continent is short lived. As soon as his wife Jennifer disappears, it is Europe that is perceived as a land of forced exile and Australia’s “other”. Europe is presented as Australia’s foil. Wherever they are, Scully and his daughter Billie perceive European space as hopeless, striated space: “Every field had a name, every path a stile. Everything imaginable had been done or tried out there ... In Australia you looked out and saw the possible, the spaces, the maybes” (51). More than striated space, it would be appropriate to write that Europe is just *time*: “architecture was what you had instead of landscape ... Europe had it in spades because the land was long gone, the wilderness was no longer even a memory” (49). On the other hand, Scully’s Australia denotes vitality, an orientation towards the future and smooth space with its “seamless blue sky” (44). The pull of Australian space is a potent force:

There were moments in Scully’s day when he simply could not use a brush or plane or hammer for the thought of the summer he was about to miss at home: the colourless grass prostrate before the wind, the flat sea whitehot at its edge and the boats paralysed at their moorings with the heat and the smell of the desert descending upon them in the marinas. (44)

There in Australia, it is man-made objects that are rendered ineffective (“colourless”, “paralysed”) by the agency of Australia’s immense space (“wind”, “heat” and “desert”). The topophobic spatial representations found in the novel are European ones; it is Europe whose

---

<sup>26</sup> Graeme Turner, summarising Wright’s “double aspect” in *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 25.

<sup>27</sup> A.D. Hope, “Australia,” in *Collected Poems 1930-1970* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), 13.

environment is antipodean and hostile. In this passage Scully still calls Australia home, but in the next sentences he reflects on his placelessness and regrets selling the family home.

Scully is a boomerang: he comes back to Europe loaded with his Australian cultural referents, and at the same time he is taking back to Europe the product of its culture. His failure to be functional in Europe is Winton's case in point that Australians do not share much with "the motherland" anymore, which does not mean they are not tainted or pursued by its heritage, as the novel clearly demonstrates. But it is unproductive for Australians to try to be European (either in Europe or in Australia). Winton's position is complex. For the most part, as Ian McLean puts it, "in their stubborn antipodality, Australians preserve their origins as European. To be Antipodean in Australia is to be a European".<sup>28</sup> It would be tempting to argue that for Winton, to be Australian is *not* to be European. But his position is more subtle than this. For Winton, to be Australian is to acknowledge that heritage and face up to the spectres of an inherited dislocation that makes the individual both an agent and a victim of Empire. It will take Scully the length of the narrative to reach the conclusion that he must pull himself away from the riders. Winton's narrative is one of *un*belonging.

Scully knows he needs to distance himself from Europeans who are locked in time and place. Callously, they routinely deny him access to their doors, intuitively perceiving a threat in Scully, the Australian who is no longer quite one of them, with his different sense of place. They seem permanent fixtures whose role is to be guardians of the place and its ideologies. The Europeans depicted by Winton seem like degenerate royalty: they succumb to alcoholism, sexual promiscuity and depression. One could expect the only artist in the novel, Alex, the British expat', to propose a creative alternative to this culture of death, but he commits suicide to escape a dying culture centred on place and time: "I don't know how to live in the world anymore" (158). He leaves Scully his last testament, a pen-and-ink drawing of Paris admired by Francis Bacon. He commands Scully to roll it up like a scroll so he can take the artwork with him wherever he goes, a symbolic act which amounts to the passing down of an important philosophy: take European culture with you, disseminate it, be mobile. Scully takes stock of the implied message and of its poisonous implications: he does travel with the symbolic scroll, taking to task the important element of mobility, but in an ironic

---

<sup>28</sup> Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

twist he ends up leaving the masterpiece in a hotel room. Scully will not rehearse European colonialism, artistic or otherwise.

Winton urges Australians to acknowledge that there is no need clinging to unproductive cultural representations. The fact that children and teenagers dominate Winton's oeuvre is significant. Bill Ashcroft argues that postcolonial literatures tend to appropriate the image of the child to articulate "a particular form of counter-discursive strategy [where] the trope of the child provides a focus of resistance by intimating a different kind of cultural trajectory".<sup>29</sup> This is precisely what takes place in Winton's fiction: the figure of the child provides "a site of difference and anti-colonial possibility".<sup>30</sup> Most of Winton's novels are *bildungsromane* of sorts, a genre which essentially reflects the growth of the nation. Winton, however, does not rely on the trope of the child lost in the bush, a prevalent motif in Australian literature that "symbolizes so well the drama of colonial displacement, a sign of the vulnerability of a society dominated imaginatively, if not in reality, with the struggle for survival against the land it is trying to reinscribe with its own post-colonial reality".<sup>31</sup> In Winton's fiction, children are not lost in a hostile Australian environment. They are immersed in the non-human realm, and learn to read and decode its rhythms; they emerge as functional individuals, more-than-human even, since they gain access to an earthed sacred from their intimate relationship with their surroundings.<sup>32</sup> The only child who gets lost in his oeuvre is Billie – lost on several occasions in the European "wilderness" of Paris and Amsterdam.

Winton empowers his children (and grown-up protagonists with child-like qualities like Luther Fox and Scully) so that non-Indigenous Australians need not turn to the motherland and Empire for answers to their crises. European thought and literary models, as well as modes of perception and representation, are the cause of their demise. The answers are to be found in an abandonment of these models, not their replication. Winton's children are invariably guides to the previous generation of Australians. Ort Flax becomes the agent of his father's resurrection in *That Eye, the Sky*, and Kai imparts a renewed sense of purpose to Keely in *Eyrie*. In *The Riders*, while Scully is bogged in the past, mired in coloniality, and it is Billie the child who rescues him from the silty depths of time and belonging, and the

---

<sup>29</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture* (London: Continuum, 2001), 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures*, 49. See also Elspeth Tilley's *Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012); and Peter Pierce, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> See my analysis of *That Eye, the Sky* in Chapter 4.

paralysing influence of the riders: “as he felt Billie tugging on him, curling her fingers in his and pulling him easily away, [he knew] that he would not be among them and must never be, in life or death” (377). In Winton’s fiction, the child “becomes the site of an unstable and unpredictable potentiality ... a transformed and transforming subject”.<sup>33</sup> His novels reflect the view that the settler colony is now on an independent cultural trajectory from the motherland’s.

There is therefore no reason to be nostalgic about that heritage, for it is a culture Winton associates with death. On an ominous wintry late afternoon foregrounding the mode of tragedy, in the opening pages of *The Riders*, Scully enters the cottage and detects “the sealed-up scent of the dead and forgotten” (3). Scully is supposed to start a new life but what he faces is old Europe in ruins: it stinks of the dead, and the remains of history are potent instruments of imprisonment, with “Walls twenty feet thick” (50). The omnipresence and omnipotence of history is symbolised by the ruined castle at the bottom of Scully’s hill. The edifice threatens to collapse on passers-by. If, in Australia, live trees are feared as widow-makers, in Europe, you can literally be killed by the weight of the past.

### Leaving place: Ruins and ruination in a deceptively dead Europe

The lethal potency of these ruins evokes the concept of “Imperial Debris” developed by the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler, who led a reflection on the way structures bequeathed by Empire continue to affect settler societies over the *longue durée*. Building on Patrick Wolfe’s diagnosis that “invasion is a structure not an event”, she argues that the process continues to cause the nation’s “ruination” (moral, as well as physical).<sup>34</sup> For Stoler, “ruins” are all but inert; they are routinely revisited by the State to agitate nationalisms: “Our focus is less on the noun *ruin* than on ‘ruination’ as an active, ongoing process [...] and *ruin* as a violent verb that unites apparently disparate moments, places, and objects”.<sup>35</sup> The imagery and thematics of *The Riders* anticipate Stoler’s thesis by two decades; the ruins of the castle and their trans-historic guardians suggest this propensity to conquer and colonise. A product of imperial debris, the riders actively seek to infect, or rather reinfect the settler who left the motherland and returned. Winton phrases the settler expectation and fever for evermore land very clearly:

---

<sup>33</sup> Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 7.

Scully “saw that they would be here every night seen and unseen, patient, dogged faithful in all weathers and all worlds, waiting for something promised, something that was plainly their due” (377). Winton’s phrasing, “in all weathers and all worlds”, emphasises that, wherever the settlers go, they carry the seed of Empire and will pass it on to future generations. The riders are not only the agents of Empire; they are also its victims. Those who haunt are also haunted. They are locked in the repetition of the past, in “the dead heart of the castle keep ... whose light did not show and whose answer did not come” (377). Winton clearly signposts that the promise of settlement will never be fulfilled.

The old continent is haunted by the spectres of its own past, which European settlers and migrants have taken to Australia. The end of the novel leaves no ambiguity as to the ongoing nature of settler colonialism and its enduring ability to affect its descendants. With the landscape smoothly coated in a fresh layer of snow, Winton offers (and perverts) the typical image of renewal. He resists the temptation to end on a *tabula rasa*. So, while the expectation is one of change in this wintery scene, far from providing an idealistic clean slate for the protagonist, Winton has the castle resurrect itself and expand its reach: “Its ruined walls were rebuilt with snow, and snow joined it to hedges that looked solid as stone, a new settlement overnight” (377). In this passage, ruins are much more than a noun; Winton’s imagery evokes the active process of ruination, that indeed “unites apparently disparate moments, places, and objects”.<sup>36</sup> Published two years after the High Court Mabo judgement, *The Riders* warns against complacency; settler societies are notoriously resistant to decolonisation.<sup>37</sup>

Through the process of ruination, Scully has been reinfected by Empire and emerges as its hapless agent. He walks into this “new settlement” and mingles with the riders in the castle keep. The text presents the riders as unambiguously real. There is no magical realism in the description we get from Billie’s focalisation. The five senses are mobilised: “Their little fires crackled on the end of their sticks, and steam jetted from the horses’ nostrils and you could see their streaming sides and tarry maps of blood”. The text insists on the urgency to distance one’s self from such a destructive heritage. The author does not suggest it is possible to escape the colonial present, for Scully is “almost one of them”, but being aware of one’s heritage and its trappings is a step in the right direction (377).

---

<sup>36</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 95.

With its central theme of an infectious Europe represented in the Gothic mode, *The Riders* anticipates Christos Tsiolkas' novel *Dead Europe*. Its Australian protagonist, Isaac, looks for his roots in the same cities traversed by Billie and Scully. Tsiolkas, like Winton, suggests that the European heritage is not one of high culture, but that of a dead Europe. Lynda Ng reads the perverted Europeans peopling *Dead Europe* as "ghostlike spectres who are physically and spiritually adrift in a world with no future".<sup>38</sup> Isaac, who left Australia full of idealism, finds that capitalism and the worst forms of cosmopolitanism have filled the vacuum left by the collapse of the political ideologies that dominated the twentieth century. The protagonist wanders the physical and ideological rubble of a ruined Europe. As in *The Riders*, it is the process of ruination that is the focus of *Dead Europe*, the self-perpetuating vicious cycle of Empire and European migrations (both settler and economic migrations). The European migrant emerges from a diseased society as a victim of war, famine, and economic or political persecution. Once the migrant or refugee reaches the new destination, the inherent qualities of Empire cause the settler to repeat the cycle and infect their descendants as well as local populations. The settler who returns to Europe as a visitor comes face to face with the origin of the disease that caused their ancestors to migrate. Immersed in "a corrupt and corrupting landscape", Isaac rapidly turns into an immoral vampiric hedonist.<sup>39</sup>

While Tsiolkas' emphasis is on the neo-colonial forces of capitalism, a market economy that commodifies and objectifies bodies and minds, Winton's is on settler colonial imperatives that force themselves onto the individual. This being said, what Scully finds in Europe is no different to Isaac: ruins, physical and moral corruption which infect his life and his imagination – a toxic legacy with no end in sight. Tsiolkas and Winton's protagonists rediscover the political, legal and economic frameworks that engineered displacement on a massive scale. Western ideologies operate according to the same principles as Empire; their tragic product is an endless trail of chaos and refugees. One scene at the beginning of *The Riders* evokes this sobering reality through a series of connotations where the neo-colonial (the capitalism of Wall Street) collides with the colonial, the local with the global. Upon his arrival in Europe, Scully is met by a macrocosmic series of events that prefigure the personal crises he is about to face:

---

<sup>38</sup> Lynda Ng, "Dead Europe and the Coming of Age in Australian Literature: Globalisation, Cosmopolitanism and Perversity," *Australian Humanities Review* 54 (2013): 122.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew McCann, Jeff Sparrow and Christen Cornell, "The Spectres Haunting Dead Europe," *Overland* 181 (2005), 28.



England was still choked with debris and torn trees from the storms and the place seemed mad with cops and soldiers. He had no radio and hadn't seen a paper. Enniskillen, people said, eleven dead and sixty injured in an IRA cock-up ... The world was reeling ... People talked of Enniskillen, of Wall Street, of weather sent from hell. (7)

Far from finding a refuge in the motherland, the unsettled settler wades through this debris and witnesses the catastrophic collapse of Europe itself, where the expansionist nationalisms of the mid twentieth century led to two world wars, the Shoah and the Gulag, and a similar sense of placelessness there. Despite appearances, the people met by Scully in the bosom of Europe are not at home either. Described as restless, soul-less opportunists, like the characters of Tsiolkas' *Dead Europe*, they are not animated by any clear sense of purpose, and have adopted a parasitic lifestyle that feeds on greed and envy – they are riders in the making. What the settler finds in Europe, by travelling to the land of his origins, is the root of his restlessness, a disturbing aboriginality.

An important difference between the two novels, however, is that Tsiolkas hardly acknowledges the Australian dimension of the Australian identity. For Tsiolkas, Australians are European before they are Australian; culturally, Australia offers “Fucking nothing”.<sup>40</sup> Yet, at the end of the novel, Isaac expresses the wish to be reunited with his long-term partner and “be home, in pure, vast Australia where the air is clean, young”.<sup>41</sup> This ending does not sit well with me. Why suddenly present Australia as a redemptive foil to Europe? Hasn't Isaac been irremediably tainted? More worrying still is the image of Australian space as “pure”, “clean” and “young”. Is the damage inflicted upon the world's oldest continuing civilisation to be ignored after all? Are we not in the settler colonial present? Winton's novel leaves no ambiguity: the non-Indigenous Australian is denied any kind of romantic resolution. Scully does not go home. In Winton's fiction, conceiving Australian space as “pure”, “clean” or “young” is close to a death sentence for the characters who entertain such notions, as I establish in my final chapter. Therefore, rather than resting on the premise of a dead Europe, which denotes a non-threatening corpse, I believe the riders to be a much more effective rendition of the active process of ruination, and of the ongoing nature of colonialism: a relentless, lethal force “seen and unseen, patient, dogged faithful in all weathers and all worlds” (377).

---

<sup>40</sup> Christos Tsiolkas, *Dead Europe* (Milton Point, NSW: Random House, 2005), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Tsiolkas, *Dead Europe*, 375.

*The Riders* therefore reads as a cautionary tale. It demonstrates how destructive European politics, histories and mythologies can be. Fairies, phantoms, quests, sirens and bohemians – the lure of culture and Empire – lead nowhere. They are dead-ends which bring Scully dangerously close to limbo and thwart any chance of resolution. Ultimately, the borders between fiction and reality blur. This is the shadow space where the riders dwell. Because it has relied so heavily on European models of representation, Australia itself is continuously in danger of becoming another Europe, a real-and-imagined Europe, a non-place. In *The Riders* Winton conflates the two geographies and geo-imaginaries to invite a decoupling of the two continents.

### **Distancing one's self from time and the shadow spaces of Europe and Australia**

Scully's attempts to relate to the real are frustrated by a European space that has become over-represented. It is as though European space can no longer be productive. In a focalisation that alternates between Scully and Billie's points of view, Europe appears as a Walt Disney village, a postcard devoid of life, movement and character: Amsterdam was "Beautiful but subdued to the point of spookiness. There was almost no one on the streets" (326). For Billie, the French capital was "pretty on top and hollow underneath" (322). Reminiscing about the places they travelled through, "She remembered Hydra and Paris and Alan's house, but other places were just like television, like they weren't for real" (232). Europe seems a place of mere transit (the vehicle Scully buys to move about Europe is a Ford Transit). Scully and Billie perceive and experience Europe as a non-place, as defined by French anthropologist Marc Augé, who studied spaces of transit such as airports, motorways, hotel rooms and shopping malls.<sup>42</sup>

When spatial or cultural referents have become so over-coded, it is necessary to "empty the too-full world" and operate a "re-enchantment of space".<sup>43</sup> But, try as he might, without firm spatial referents to hold on to, all Scully achieves is entry into a form of shadow space where he can no longer discern the past from the present, the real from the imaginary. The riders represent the past and its propensity to devour space, old Europe chasing the colonial subject to make him come back into the fold. The ghostly figures have reterritorialised all of space

---

<sup>42</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (1995; London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. Robert T. Tally Jr. (2007; Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 83.

and only time remains. Anthony J. Hassall argues that Jennifer and the riders are the ghosts of the “European past, frozen in defeat and waiting”.<sup>44</sup> The statement is illuminating, but it fails to convey the agency of the European past in *The Riders*.

With the appearance of the riders, the past claims the present, and physical space literally disappears: “Out in the valley there were no more lights, no floods burning in the yards of local farms, no handy sign of life” (79-80). The present is porous and a form of shadow space opens up that threatens to engulf Scully and Billie. It is through a hole that Scully “tumbled and crashed” the first time he meets the riders (80). This irruption of the past into the present is reminiscent of how Ross Gibson evokes the past rearing up in vertical columns in pursuit of the car in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*.<sup>45</sup> Precursor signs announce the riders’ arrival, which the characters learn to read with varying degrees of success. In Paris, when Jennifer is supposed to meet her family, Billie suddenly feels dizzy as the past is about to crash into their present: “Whirling all around were statues and birds ... the floor was sagging everywhere” (268-269). Scully experiences the same sense of vertigo when he realises he has lost all possibility of returning to Australia. This is not just another version of Sartre’s nausea. Contemporary, dead Europe confirms the individual’s placelessness at home as well as in Europe, an acute sense of non-belonging resulting from time/history destroying place wherever the settler is. *The Riders* represents the struggle to articulate an ontological spatiality, in Europe and Australia, for both settler societies and Empire.

With the repeated assaults of the riders (Empire, time and the European cultural legacy), the characters lose their memories and sense of Australian space, which becomes shadow space. After thirty-one chapters of European place, a stand-alone chapter punctuates Scully and Billie’s European ordeal: “Out of the rumours of places, of the red desert spaces where heat is born, a wind comes hard across the capstone country of juts and bluffs, pressing heathland flat in withering bursts ... Land is peeled back to bedrock, to ancient, stubborn remains that hold fast in the continental gusts” (241). The passage presents Australia’s immense and timeless space in direct opposition to European time-bound, striated place. But it is an antipodean spatiality that the settler cannot aspire to. Winton lets the passage float like a distant mirage, seemingly disconnected from the rest of the novel, and resolutely inaccessible to the characters. Winton’s poetic passage is reminiscent of Les Murray’s poem “A

---

<sup>44</sup> Hassall, “Over There,” 28.

<sup>45</sup> Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 20.

Levitation of Land”.<sup>46</sup> Both texts evoke how the desert winds in the Australian outback may assemble vast clouds of red sand particles, as well as insects, small birds and reptiles, which will later on rain down into the ocean. Winton uses the metaphor to evoke a land that remains elusive to non-Indigenous Australians, making firm claims to place all but impossible. This lyrical evocation of Australian space travelling overhead with its “billion spinning, tiny displaced things which twitch and flay and sink a thousand miles from home”, accentuates Scully and Billie’s estrangement (241). With its indistinct focalisation, this passage makes Australian space a fantastical and distant memory that gradually disappears from the characters’ consciousness. It is the shadow space of an Australia that is no longer accessible, a lost place that was itself a fantasy, if we accept that the settler “at home” was subject to the “double aspect of the inner Australia”. The protagonists are dangerously close to limbo: two particles stuck in mid-air between the past and the present, Europe and Australia, placeless and timeless.

The shadow space where Jennifer and the riders dwell, and into which Scully almost falls, is also the heterotopic space experienced by the settler. According to Michel Foucault, heterotopias are places where space is experienced simultaneously in different ways by different groups of people. Heterotopias are also heterochronies where different times may co-exist. For Foucault, the boat is the best possible symbol to represent heterotopias.<sup>47</sup> The heterotopic space of the boat is also that of the settler colony. Winton achieves a doubling of time and space in *The Riders*, a rich layering that reproduces the settler condition where the individual needs constantly to renegotiate their spatio-temporal referents. In yet another antipodean inversion, Winton presents Europe as a heterotopic counter-site where Scully learns to redefine his Eurostralian identity. In one of the concluding chapters, it is precisely on a houseboat that Scully ultimately forms the resolution to stop chasing the past and Australian space, and embraces the present. There, the houseboat that once harboured Jennifer almost becomes his grave. Until then movement has been Scully and Billie’s salvation, but the houseboat, moored to the quay, is sinking, signalling the dead-end of both European and settler colonial modes of thinking. Scully’s obsession with Jennifer is an anchor that drags him towards the abyss of the past. It is difficult for the settler not to heed the call of the past, but nostalgia only leads to stasis, if not paralysis, and Winton warns that to enter that space is to enter limbo.

---

<sup>46</sup> Les Murray, “A Levitation of Land,” in *The Best 100 Poems of Les Murray* (Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2012), 82-83.

<sup>47</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Places,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986): 22-27.

Shadow space is the residual space resulting from the ongoing process of ruination. I am reflecting on Europe and Australia because this is Scully's cultural heritage, but one could extend the argument to most settler societies, and possibly to migrant spatiality. The settler (Scully, in *The Riders*) needs to travel to the motherland to take the full measure of his placelessness, and come to the understanding that colonial ruination has engulfed the two continents. What may appear at first glance as quaint ruins is the space whence the fearsome riders depart in their all-out spatial conquest. It is no surprise that Scully and Billie's Australia becomes a disconnected, floating image, the memory of a fantasy. Will contemporary non-Indigenous Australians ever experience Australian space as something other than the projection of inherited fantasies? To enact this paradigm shift, Winton, along with the other contemporary writers examined in my thesis, suggests that individuals exit the logic of belonging and adopt unbelonging to face settler anxiety. In an essay reflecting on the genesis of *The Riders*, Winton declares: "Place is as serious a proposition as religion. In fact the two are bound together".<sup>48</sup> The only ethical space for Winton's settler Australians is in "the shadow of their house" (377).

### **Conclusion: Unhousing and unbelonging, an ethics of irresolution**

*The Riders* opens with Scully renovating his Irish cottage and his dreams of settler-belonging but Winton has other plans for him. Scully ritually places three candles on the window sill of his cottage. He does not pack much into his bag when he leaves for continental Europe, but the candles will travel with him. They are a Bachelard-like symbol for the intimacy of place, of home-outside-of-home, for the flame of the candle is "an inhabited verticality".<sup>49</sup> They are also likely to be a nostalgic relic of a holy past – the trinity of Jennifer, Billie and Scully. The candles accompany him all the way to Greece and on most of the journey back to Ireland. But there is a marked turn at the end of the narrative, a sign that Scully has accepted another model to construct his identity: away from time, belonging and fixity, towards space, unbelonging and movement. It takes the duration of the novel for him to achieve this necessary transition, but in the end, he abandons his candles in a Paris hotel room, leaving the past behind on Christmas Eve, a symbol for a new start.

---

<sup>48</sup> Tim Winton, "Letter from a Strong Place" in *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2016), 185

<sup>49</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Flame of a Candle*, transl. Joni Caldwell (1961; Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 40.

The last paragraph of *The Riders* indicates that Scully has now accepted unbelonging as an ethical response to the settler condition: “It was only when they were high on the hill, two figures black against the snow, in the shadow of their house, that Scully’s feet began to hurt” (377). The characters are able to relate to the here-and-now (the corner stone for any kind of futurity) once they step “in the shadow of their house”. Winton does not let his characters settle in the comfort of their home. This tangible shadow could be the shadow of their house in Australia or the shadow of their house in Europe. The ambiguity points towards the same conclusion: that the non-Indigenous Australian needs to be unhoused and ready to step into a logic of unbelonging in order to survive the shadow space of the settler colonial present. Only once they can enter the reality of the shadow of their house, will non-Indigenous Australians be able to leave the shadow space that plagued their relationships with Australian space and Indigenous Australians.

The novel demands that individuals find the resources to question their heritage and build an ethical legacy. Winton could have repatriated his protagonists to Australia, like Henry Handel Richardson does.<sup>50</sup> Instead, he leaves them in Ireland to figure out an ethical poetics of unbelonging. The novel points to the qualities that are necessary for the settler to survive. Scully is ingenious; he can make do. It is Australians’ ability to adapt, to be fluid, that Winton celebrates. The settler must learn to be unhoused, not at home. *The Riders* is a journey from non-belonging to unbelonging. This is the plight of Winton’s settlers, be they in Australia or abroad. Reflecting on the status of the settler from a postcolonial perspective, the Canadian poet Dennis Lee comes to the conclusion that, for the settler, placelessness and a sense of displacement are, perhaps, home.<sup>51</sup> For Lee, the task of the writer is not to articulate place but placelessness. I believe that Winton’s novel shares similar conclusions. The fact that *The Riders* is “intentionally inconclusive” emphasises the protagonists’ placelessness.<sup>52</sup> Scully and Billie live placelessness as an imposition on their lifestyle, but Scully eventually accepts a less settled form of existence. Non-belonging is a symptom, a consequence of the settler condition. Unbelonging is the active response of stepping back from belonging, learning to relinquish place and rely on other landmarks on which to found self and identity.

---

<sup>50</sup> Henry Handel Richardson, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930; Penrith: The Discovery Press, 1968).

<sup>51</sup> Dennis Lee, “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” *Boundary* 23, no.1 (1974): 151-168.

<sup>52</sup> Michael McGirr, “A Lot to Say,” in *Tim Winton: A Celebration*, ed. Hilary McPhee (Canberra: Pan Macmillan Australia, 1999), 34.

Irresolution is the narrative strategy that serves to deliver Winton's poetics of unbelonging. All his novels remain inconclusive: the fairy tale in *Blueback*, the *bildungsroman* in *An Open Swimmer*, the environmental novel in *Shallows*, the spiritual narrative in *That Eye, the Sky*, the Gothic in *In the Winter Dark*, the intergenerational saga in *Cloudstreet*, the Robinsonade in *Dirt Music*, the surfing novel in *Breath*, the suburban novel in *Eyrie*. How could Winton use these canonical genres to offer resolution to his non-Indigenous fictional characters when Indigenous Australians continue to be affected by intergenerational trauma? The way forward is for the individual to acknowledge the past and admit that the settler colonial present continues to territorialise place and people on the two continents. Scully is almost consumed by ruination and the embodied presence of myth and culture; but after a dizzying chase across Europe he starts to find his feet again. In the final scene, he walks barefoot among the ruins of the castle keep, as though to feel the terrain better. His footsteps are important signifiers. At each step, he ponders his choices, until he finally resolves to forsake the temptation of the past represented by the riders: "he would not be among them and must never be, in life or death" (377). The narrative ends on a hopeful irresolution, which is an invitation for meaning-making. Winton asks his readers to contribute writing the next chapter of Australians' ethical belonging, or rather unbelonging to Australian space.

## Part 2 Real and Imagined Australia: Non-place and Ontological Vertigo in *Eyrie* and *Breath*

“The expression ‘identity crisis’ is ... a crisis of space”.

– Marc Augé, *A Sense for the Other*.<sup>53</sup>

The complex spatial crisis that affects characters like Scully and Billie in Europe is a transnational crisis of non-belonging that Winton’s characters must also face at home. Almost all of his fictional Australians are prey to a conflicted spatiality that gives rise to an acute form of vertigo and confusion. Luther Fox is faint with fatigue, hunger and guilt in *Dirt Music*; Bruce Pike in *Breath* and Lockie Leonard are floating in between sets of waves; and Tom Keely is fainting and falling through most of *Eyrie*. All these characters struggle to find ethical balance, caught as they are in the conflation of intersecting spaces and epistemologies, unable to anchor themselves in their communities or the non-human environment. Vertigo, fainting, floating and falling are related symptoms of an apparent disorder. Globalisation, cosmopolitanism and tourism have the same currency in Australia as they do in the rest of the western world; they produce an economy of relativity that affects Pike and Keely in the same way as Scully and Billie in Europe. While the protagonists learn to deal with non-places produced by these forceful currents, they are also destabilised by the recognition of Indigenous priority (in *Breath*), and the movement of migrants and refugees (in *Eyrie*). The land does not retain that grounding place of primacy in building the settler Australian imaginary. Critics like Philip Mead and Michael Farrell even discern “an ongoing writing of unsettlement” throughout the body of Australian literature.<sup>54</sup> Winton’s protagonists are destabilised by these powerful currents that are lived as assaults upon their known culture and localities. To renegotiate their sense of place, they gradually abandon the firm referent of land or earth, and accept a less fixed form of identity based on water.

The liquid element constitutes a metaphor of choice to debate the shifting object of national identity because “Flows and diversions of people undermine as well as reinforce existing

---

<sup>53</sup> Marc Augé, *A Sense for the Other: The Timeless and Relevance of Anthropology*, trans. Amy Jacobs (1994; Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 109.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796-1945* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4; Philip Mead, *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry* (2008; Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2010).



territorial divides”.<sup>55</sup> Due to its western, postmodern, postcolonial status, much of Australian space has become what Edward Soja calls a “real-and-imagined space”.<sup>56</sup> As the real becomes detached from its referent, the individual is no longer able to get a tangible grip on reality, and non-places seem to float indeed: “the distinction between the real and fiction has blurred”.<sup>57</sup> Bertrand Westphal argues that we are currently witnessing the “derealisation of the real”.<sup>58</sup> This is how Keely in *Eyrie* perceives the world around him. The Fremantle he once knew has become unrecognisable. The vision Winton offers of Fremantle is not far from Marc Augé’s *L’Impossible Voyage* (1997), where the anthropologist roams the non-place of Disneyland Paris, and is caught in a world where “the real copies the fiction”.<sup>59</sup> Keely is a victim of capitalism, and the Americanisation of Australian society. Tourism, popular culture, cosmopolitanism, and the flow of migrants and refugees complete his alienation. For Keely, Western Australia has lost its essence. It feels like a theme park where people behave like the fictional characters portrayed in television programs and popular culture.

### The non-place of Fremantle

*Eyrie* explores two complementary processes that underlie spatiality: how the place defines the individual and how the person shapes the place. The opening chapter offers a double portrait of Keely and the city of Fremantle, where the individual is portrayed as place and the city as a person. Both are in crisis: “Above the wildman beard he was all gullies and flaky shale. Badlands. His wine-blackened teeth the ruins of a scorched-earth retreat”.<sup>60</sup> Fremantle fares little better: “Good old Freo. Lying dazed and forsaken at the rivermouth, the addled wharfside slapper whose good bones showed through despite the ravages of age and bad living” (5). Keely has every reason to be distressed: he has lost his job as an environmental spokesperson, as well as his wife, friends, father, house and yacht. But spatial loss is what affects him most: he feels placeless in an apartment he owns in a city he has always resided in but no longer understands. From the top floor of the apartment block, he frequently scans his

---

<sup>55</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 56.

<sup>56</sup> Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>57</sup> Marc Augé, *L’Impossible Voyage: Le Tourisme et ses Images* (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 1997), 169. The translation is mine.

<sup>58</sup> See Chapter 3, “Referentiality” in Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*.

<sup>59</sup> Augé, *L’Impossible Voyage*, 69. The translation is mine. Augé advances the spatial conceptualisations Jean Baudrillard pioneered in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1984).

<sup>60</sup> Tim Winton, *Eyrie* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2013), 4. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

surroundings, but for much of the narrative his eyrie fails to give him the sense of perspective he seeks.

The crisis is first introduced as an indefinite “it”: “Here it came” (6). Keely ingests all sorts of pills throughout the narrative but they do not provide the expected relief; the cause is not a medical condition – it is a spatial malaise. Places and spaces collide at great speed in this novel, creating confusion, vertigo and crisis. The mining boom has upset physical geography, the spiritual sacred sites of Indigenous Australians, and the social fabric and identity of Western Australia. Where there used to be clear boundaries between classes, religious denominations and nationalities, all is now subject to renegotiation. Keely struggles to find firm landmarks and slowly drifts into limbo, unable to relate to place and space in an environment that has changed too fast: from a fishing port and easy-going backwater into “The greatest ore deposit in the world. The nation’s quarry, China’s swaggering enabler. A philistine giant eager to pass off its good fortune as virtue ... Leviathan with an irritable bowel” (5). The new Western Australia is encapsulated in a passage that describes an emerging part of Fremantle, which Keely refers to as the “Cappuccino Strip”:

In the seventies the Strip had been a beacon of homely cosmopolitanism, a refuge from the desolate franchise dispensation stretching from sea to hazy hills ... Somewhere along the way the good folks of the port settled in the wisdom that coffee was all the culture and industry a town required. Butcher shops, hardware stores, chandlers and bakeries had steadily been squeezed out and supplanted [sic] by yet more cafés ... The city had become a boho theme park perched on a real estate bubble, and behind every neglected goldrush façade and vacant shopfront was a slum landlord counting pennies, lording it over family and bitching about refugees. (19)

Winton presents Fremantle as a non-place that is largely responsible for Keely’s acute spatial crisis. Where there was once a real community supported by local shops providing the staple foods (meat, bread and milk) and the building blocks of Western Australia’s economy (hardware shops and chandlers), an international café scene now reigns. Historical landmarks like the goldrush façades are “neglected”. The words “homely” and “refuge” betray Keely’s sense of placelessness and nostalgia in front of the radical changes that transformed his city. And although Keely is critical of conservative attitudes towards refugees, he is struggling

with the arrival of these newcomers. He has literally lost his grip on this version 2.0 Australia.

*Eyrie* is an overtly political novel which investigates the spatial, social and cultural impacts of seemingly invisible forces on Australia. Winton represents these powerful disruptors as elusive currents that make the characters' attempts to function according to traditional paradigms based on land or earth seem all the more pointless. Like Suvendrini Perera, Winton redirects unproductive Australian identities towards the element of water.<sup>61</sup> Novels like *Eyrie* and *Breath* offer representational models that enunciate a preparedness to embrace the crucial paradigmatic shift from *terra firma* to *terra infirma*.<sup>62</sup> Like waves generated by distant storms, cultural and spatial changes brought about by political and economic influences are only felt by the characters closest to the shore. Michelle De Kretser's use of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami to represent the massive disruptions generated by these unseen currents in *Questions of Travel* (2012) is an unforgettable, daring narrative choice. For the protagonists of both novels it is hard to navigate flows whose source cannot be precisely identified.<sup>63</sup> Only their consequences are manifest; this is what baffles Keely most in *Eyrie*, and young Pikelet in *Breath*. American academic Nicholas Birns convincingly argues that *Breath* investigates the social impacts of neoliberalism on the Australian society of the 1970s.<sup>64</sup> *Eyrie* picks up the pieces where *Breath* concludes and ponders the changes brought about by the mining boom of the 2000s. The pressures exerted by international mining companies caused Keely to lose his job as an environmentalist; and the same forces have significantly reshaped the socio-economics of Fremantle, bringing an influx of FIFO workers, migrants and refugees.

The liquid nature of globalisation, the digital revolution, the gig economy, tourism, the free flows of capital and labour associated with capitalism and neo-liberalism, are nowhere encapsulated as well as in De Kretser's *Questions of Travel*, a text published the year before Winton's *Eyrie*.<sup>65</sup> Her novel illuminates the dislocations associated with these disruptive flows. The two main characters work for Ramsay, a company dealing in the most fluid of

---

<sup>61</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 62-63.

<sup>62</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> Arjun Appadurai theorised globalisation in terms of flows in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Birns, "A Not Completely Pointless Beauty: *Breath*, Exceptionality and Neoliberalism," in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014).

<sup>65</sup> Michelle De Kretser, *Questions of Travel* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012).

environments: tourism. Travelling the world to produce tourist guides, Laura Fraser literally consumes the places she visits: she eats baguettes with lashings of red wine in Paris, grilled sardines in Lisbon, olives in Madrid. *Tourism* is anything but benign in De Kretser's novel: like any -ism, it is a totalising enterprise that levels out the local as it preys on the quaint localities it seeks out to embrace. Its parasitic nature is evoked through the other protagonist, Ravi the refugee, who is enraged by westerners searching for authenticity in war-ravaged Sri Lanka: "He had a vision of a horde. It ate, frolicked, trampled unthinkingly; at its head strode Laura Fraser".<sup>66</sup> Keely experiences the Cappuccino Strip in similar terms in the presence of backpackers whose confident nomadism further undermines and fragments his sense of place. He perceives the city as a "boho theme park"; he has become a non-being in a non-place, where franchises disenfranchise (19). Fremantle is experienced as veneer rather than a real place, a signifier of "fictional invasion", as described in Augé's uniform cityscapes.<sup>67</sup> The Blackboy Crescent of his youth has changed dramatically. Renamed Grasstree Crescent, this politically correct version of his neighbourhood has smoothed out the Australian vernacular:

The crescent curved down towards the swamp, so strange and familiar. But few of the old places were there anymore ... The quarter-acre blocks had been subdivided, the small brick-veneer bungalows replaced by two-storey triplexes pressed together without eaves or verandahs ... No families out on porches watching TV ... Number 14 was gone. He idled out the front of a shrunken Tuscan villa behind whose wrought-iron gates stood a Chinese 4x4. (222)

This passage paints globalisation and cosmopolitanism as cultural impoverishment: a Tuscan villa instead of "brick-veneer bungalows", wrought-iron gates and brick walls instead of verandas, whose open spaces encouraged a sense of community while people could look in and look out for each other. Suburban space is no longer the working man's paradise but a prison. Keely is a stranger in his neighbourhood, and experiences the place as uncanny, simultaneously "so strange and familiar".<sup>68</sup> In De Kretser's novel, the flow of economic migrants and political refugees that results from more liquid economies is depicted more radically through the use of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami – a levelling force of an altogether different nature, killing tourists and locals indiscriminately. Winton and De Kretser refuse to

---

<sup>66</sup> De Kretser, *Questions of Travel*, 490.

<sup>67</sup> See "The town: between imagination and fiction", in Augé, *L'Impossible Voyage*, 167.

<sup>68</sup> On the figure of the stranger in the global consciousness, especially in the context of suburban space, see Chris Rumford, *The Globalization of Strangeness* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

represent tourism, cosmopolitanism or capitalism as benign forces that enrich local economies. Their novels expose violent dislocations associated with transnational forces that wipe out local idiosyncrasies (social, linguistic and architectural). The effects of globalisation on the individual are painfully real. For Doreen Massey, globalisation has led to a time-space compression which “has produced a feeling of disorientation, a sense of the fragmentation of local cultures and a loss, in its deepest meaning, of a sense of place”.<sup>69</sup> To regain a precious sense of agency, the characters need to redefine a sense of identity which considers “the global as part of what constitutes the local”.<sup>70</sup>

### **When the global is conflated with the local: From free fall to agency**

It is the conflation of the local and the global that is responsible for Keely’s dizziness, vertigo and frequent fainting fits. When he scans the horizon and sees the economic forces at play in the harbour, with its boats loaded with minerals, he is literally unable to change focus and his vision becomes blurry: the individual is not made to adjust to such rapid scalar changes. As he senses the ability for these forces to change his local community, Keely teeters and is affected by yet another symptom of vertigo: breathlessness. He is gasping for air, hyperventilating, “a mouth-breathing moron” (8). Keely’s crisis of scales is delivered through an effective cinematic technique, a constant zooming in and out that communicates his sense of vertigo to the reader. De Kretser uses similar tropes to reflect on the consequences of transnational movements on local communities in *Questions of Travel*. The dizzying non-space of the internet facilitates the denunciation of oppressive political regimes, but what do persecuted populations gain from these interventions? Ravi’s wife gets involved with human rights activists who come to the region with good intentions but disrupt local society. The direct consequence for Ravi is the mutilation and death of his family and his subsequent exile. De Kretser’s novel ponders whether these transnational movements are, ultimately, neo-colonial: after proposing an economic model (capitalism and consumerism), a political model (democracy) and its technology, now the rest of the world is supposed to adopt western ethics. Constantly zooming in and out of Australia / Sri Lanka, through alternate focalisations (Laura / Ravi), De Kretser creates a sense of ontological vertigo that probes much more than “Questions of Travel”.

---

<sup>69</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 162.

<sup>70</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 5.

Ontological vertigo is central to Winton's *Eyrie*. Pulled between the local and the global, caught between real places, non-places and the non-human environment, Keeley is almost paralysed when ontological positions or actions are required. The difficulty for individuals to adapt to these constant changes of scale has led to a profound sense of dislocation, argues Marc Augé:

We are experiencing a period in which great economic spaces are being created, large political spaces outlined, where multinational companies and capital "trespass" borders ... and, at a smaller scale, local museums are multiplying, together with references to minuscule local identities and demands to be able to work in one's own bit of country. The expression "identity crisis" is sometimes used in this connection, but what we are really looking at is a crisis of space – how is it possible to think simultaneously of the planet as a canton and my canton as a world? – and a crisis of otherness.<sup>71</sup>

Winton makes Keely go through all these motions and questions, but refuses despair. From his vantage point, he scans the horizon all the way to the sea, gauging the currents that are reshaping his known world.<sup>72</sup> But Winton does not sanction ivory towers; he forces the anti-hero to reconsider his misanthropic stance. *Eyrie* is an unusual novel in Winton's oeuvre, for it is characterised by inaction. Keely is pathologically detached from events, people and places. Part II of the novel starts by heralding a change – "the time for action was now" – but Keely quickly loses his resolve (188). The final scene, which sees the villain maimed or killed, is provoked by Keely's agency, but only indirectly: it is a car that runs over Clappy when the protagonist gives chase. Keely is a Hamlet of sorts, prone to procrastination as he weighs the ontological choices he must negotiate.

Stewie and Clappy feature as the representatives of one last insidious transnational current that has been reshaping Australian communities, and which Keely must get a grip on before he can regain any sense of agency. The novel depicts an Australia which has been seduced by dubious cultural imports that are presented as a threat to Australian society. Keely's endeavours to defeat Stewie and Clappy can be interpreted as a desire to purge Australia of a drug and gang culture inspired by elements of American popular culture. These dangerous thugs have modelled themselves on gangsta rap or underbelly TV icons which glamourize

---

<sup>71</sup> Augé, *A Sense for the Other*, 109.

<sup>72</sup> On elevated prospects over global distances in the context of Modernism, see Jon Heggland, *World Views: Metageographies of Modernist Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

criminal activities. Clappy is covered in tattoos, dons a gold tooth and speaks in rapper lingo. Keely is almost amused by this spectacle when he comes across Stewie's Facebook page: "Mista Gangsta. A wall of crim poses and tattoo displays. Arms across the shoulders of vamping molls in titty tops. Likes to PARTAAAAY" (358). But popular culture in this novel has an all-too-real potential for destruction, especially for Kai and Gemma. These questionable cultural imports cause Keely to experience a severe form of vertigo. After his visit to Stewie's, unable to get a grip on anything, he loses consciousness on his mother's carpet. When he regains his senses, Doris orders her son to take "a considered position. An act" (288).

There are disturbing elements that point to the possibility of *Eyrie* promoting a retreat into nostalgia, and a return to an Australia free from the corrupting influence of other cultures. In its early stages, the novel does not provide much opening onto outside influences. Exogenous economic and cultural elements are depicted and experienced as violent disruptors; more troubling still, Indigenous Australians are invariably represented as a quarrelsome drunken lot. An overview of Winton's oeuvre sheds a reassuring light on this critical issue: his other novels and his two recent memoirs do portray the inestimable value of Indigenous cultures and the wisdom Indigenous Australians have imparted to non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>73</sup> In fact, my final chapter will argue that Winton's body of work represents a subtle decolonising poetics of Reconciliation. The racist, essentialising views expressed in *Eyrie* are to be interpreted as the characters' opinions.

*Eyrie* portrays and critiques the resurgence of white nationalism in the context of the economic development of mining states like Western Australia and Queensland in the 2000s. Gemma is cast as the archetype of the Australian redneck. Brash and racist, her views on Australian society are reminiscent of Pauline Hanson's. The rise of One Nation Party (established in 1997) is a complex phenomenon, but it could be attributed, in part, to the mining boom and the influx of foreign workers it relied on. While the reader and critic recoil at Gemma's expletive language in phrases like "they changed the name [of Blackboy Crescent] so more boongs could move in", what Winton's text does is represent what she thinks, in the vernacular that carries those ideas (223). We have recently witnessed the consequences of not representing the views and voices of disempowered, impoverished

---

<sup>73</sup> See the essay "Paying Respect" in *Island Home*, 219-235; and of course, *Dirt Music*.

westerners. The resurgence of populism, and the rise of its political representatives across most continents, has been attributed to the failure of the establishment to listen to disillusioned voters who felt excluded from social, cultural and political forums.<sup>74</sup> I believe that Winton demonstrated foresight in his decision to cast an unlikeable character like Gemma in his novel. Her “bogan” language and political views may shock, but Keely’s frequent correctives and the creation of an anti-Gemma character, Doris, who displays tolerance and compassion towards strangers, ultimately portray the possibility of a heterogeneous Australia. As often with Winton, the novel has a didactic function; it does not advocate a conservative or moralistic message, but provides glimmers of openings to other cultures.

It may take the whole length of the narrative, but Keely eventually manages to conceptualise and embrace what Massey calls a “global sense of the local, a global sense of place”, where “All the different layers of peoples and cultures are explored”.<sup>75</sup> In the final scene, Keely suddenly registers and welcomes cultural diversity. People of colour, migrants in hijabs, are his salvation: it is “dark heads in hoods”, “Dark-skinned noses, black eyes, pieces of faces through the letterbox slits of cloths” and “lovely brown thumbs pressing numbers” who come to enquire about Keely’s well-being and call for an ambulance when they find him unconscious and bleeding on the pavement (423-424). In one of my conversations with Tim Winton over the ending of *Eyrie*, the author confirms that multiculturalism is one of Australia’s hopes:

I did enjoy the image of the veiled ladies doing what they could to help him out. I imagined them as Muslim migrants, yes. Also agents of grace, I see in retrospect. I have to confess those two lines of dialogue are special for me. Such a loaded question, “Are you well?” Sometimes I wonder if certain hospitable and charitable phrases have faded from our lexicon. This is the culture we have forfeited, it seems to me, not the “way of life” our right wing nativist demagogues are so anxious about. This is something a veiled newcomer from some “undeveloped” country still understands.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016).

<sup>75</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 156.

<sup>76</sup> Tim Winton to Stephane Cordier, 28 September 2016.



*Eyrie*, therefore, does not promote nostalgia; it treads a careful middle ground. Winton may be nostalgic for particular memories, values, aesthetics or social interactions, but he is also forward looking and critical of the past. Keely embraces multicultural Australia and starts considering “home” as “something else, as something less familiar and less settled”.<sup>77</sup> He effectively becomes a vector through which a variety of trajectories pass (settler, migrant, refugee and other-than-human): “Keely understood. He’d fallen. He saw the tower beyond and the tiny figure of the boy safe on the balcony. He smelt salt and concrete and urine. Saw lovely brown thumbs pressing numbers, cheeping digits, reaching down. The edit was choppy. The boy’s face a flash – or was that a seagull?” (423-424). Once he learns to read the transnational currents that are reshaping his environment, Keely is able to find creative responses to curb them. For example, he paints a toy gun and uses perfunctory religious messages to destabilise Clappy, neutralise gang culture, as well as prime-time “prosperity theology”, for churches have gone global too in *Eyrie* (Billy Graham is mentioned). The protagonist mobilises the imagination to set out directions that are not replicative of western, neoliberal or colonial models. For Winton “Imagination is the fundamental virtue of civilisation. If people can’t imagine then they can’t live an ethical life”.<sup>78</sup>

A novel cannot possibly answer the complex issue of settler non-belonging or the multidimensional spatial crisis non-Indigenous Australians face. Works like *Eyrie*, or *The Riders*, leave the protagonists in a position of fragility, which forces them to question their cultural heritage and social prejudices before articulating creative ways out of their crises. Each non-Indigenous Australian will need to define their own response to their spatial crisis, but Winton gives a few pointers: the answers will be non-appropriative, will not replicate previous modes of representation, and will seek to connect the individual to a community. Getting involved in his neighbours’ lives and recognising the dignified benevolence of strangers are part of the ontological shift he needs to operate. He can only say “I am well” after journeying with his fellow humans (424). At the end of *Eyrie* Keely is “puzzled, happy, still reaching” (423), a sign that he has reached a productive sense of negative capability:

---

<sup>77</sup> Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998), xiv.

<sup>78</sup> Tim Winton quoted in Stephanie Convery, “Tim Winton on Class and Neoliberalism: ‘We’re not Citizens but Economic Players’,” review of Tim Winton, *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, *The Guardian* (UK), 14 October 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/14/tim-winton-class-neoliberalism-essays-tony-abbott>.

I'm perfectly happy with the idea of a novel that "can't conclude". I think we've drunk the Kool Aid on false closure, many of us. Closure is a therapeutic notion, quite useful as a construct to throw over a trauma in order to domesticate it. But I don't think art is bound by therapeutic rules ... I like the idea of a character "still reaching" at the end of a book, and I think this is a pretty consistent pattern in one form or another in my work.<sup>79</sup>

Loss of balance, fainting, falling or floating are the symptoms of an ontological vertigo that constitutes a foundational step of unsettlement before the characters regain a sense of agency and a different sense of place in the world that is not articulated on belonging, earth or land, but on more flexible identities that embrace movement, flows and an acknowledgement that the individual is a nexus through which many trajectories pass. The surfer seems a particularly apt metaphor for Winton's epistemological purposes.

### Winton's transnational surfers: From *terra firma* to *terra infirma*

From his young-adult fiction (the *Lockie Leonard* series) to his latest memoir, *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (2016), the figure of the surfer looms large in Winton's oeuvre. In interviews, the author has often commented on how formative surfing has been in his personal life.<sup>80</sup> The surfer is rich symbolic material that has received scant critical attention apart from two notable exceptions. Lyn McCredden interprets the activity of surfing in *Breath* in the context of unbelonging, as an expression of the process of becoming-being in a "space of freedom" that unites the human and non-human realms.<sup>81</sup> And Brigid Rooney analyses the symbolism of the surfer in *Breath* as "a potential avenue for the configuration of a non-imperial masculinity" where two versions of surfing coexist, the beautiful and the sublime.<sup>82</sup> Like McCredden, Rooney detects "the rootlessness of settler-colonial modernity" in *Breath*, but the chapter format does not allow her fully to explore that key feature in Winton's fiction.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup> Tim Winton to Stephane Cordier, 28 September 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Jessica Douglas-Henry, "Modern Prophets," episode 1 - Tim Winton, screened April 15, 2017 (Sydney: ABC TV, 2017). Television Broadcast. <http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s4641893.htm>. See also Amruta Slee, *Late Night Live*, aired 12 October 2015 (Sydney: ABC Radio National, 2015), radio Broadcast; and Salhia Ben-Messahel, "An Interview with Tim Winton," *Antipodes* 26, no.1 (2012): 9-12.

<sup>81</sup> McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 120.

<sup>82</sup> Brigid Rooney, "From the Sublime to the Uncanny in Tim Winton's *Breath*," in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 244 and 246.

<sup>83</sup> Rooney, "From the Sublime to the Uncanny," 244.

I read the surfer as a symbol of the non-Indigenous Australian caught in the rips of a contentious postcolonial, postmodern space, trying to find precious ethical balance. On one side, there is a cumbersome settler heritage modelled after a motherland that seeks to ground identity in place, earth, *terra firma*. As demonstrated by my study of *The Riders*, Winton refutes this proposition which has been responsible for seizing Indigenous Australians' ancestral lands, and which also resulted in non-Indigenous Australians developing a conflicted antipodean identity built on unproductive dialectical models. On the other side, as my study of *Eyrie* established, Winton is well aware that the individual has to face the reality of *terra infirma* and acknowledge powerful exogenous, transnational currents that require a renegotiation of identity on more fluid principles.

Like *Eyrie*, *Breath* represents Australian society in a state of flux. Pike and Loonie's world is reeling. The local sawmill town of Sawyer is awash with the tidal wave of neoliberalism (Sando and Eva stand as its representatives), new recreational practices, new ways of making money, of making love, which all demand ontological repositioning.<sup>84</sup> This will require a shift from a land-based to a water-based identity, a proposal thoroughly explored by Suvendrini Perera the year after the publication of *Breath*.<sup>85</sup> Eva and Sando are the products of a transpacific society that brings to Australia a culture of risk fuelled with drugs, extreme sports and sex. The novel represents the attraction these imports had on young Australians in the 1970s. For a moment Sando seems to offer a creative alternative lifestyle for two teenagers in need of an outlet, but his interest in the boys just feeds his ego. The end of the novel reveals that the charismatic figure was a guru of finance. Sando, alias Bill Sanderson proves to be a false prophet whose main currency is the dollar bill. In *Breath*, surfing embodies the ethical choices his characters must make, all the subtle re-arrangements that need to take place in front of a rapidly changing, "liquid modernity" and associated socio-cultural transformations.<sup>86</sup> Winton's surfers are metaphors for the possibility of navigating these changes without being engulfed by the forces that govern them. But before Pike takes to the ocean, he must come to terms with an unsettling land.

---

<sup>84</sup> For a perceptive analysis of neoliberalism and *Breath*, see Nicholas Birns, "A Not Completely Pointless Beauty: *Breath*, Exceptionality and Neoliberalism," in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014): 263-282.

<sup>85</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>86</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

Winton makes it a rite of passage for his protagonists to face settler anxiety over the dispossession of Australia's first peoples, a central feature of his fiction that is regrettably absent from Simon Baker's recent cinematic rendition of *Breath*.<sup>87</sup> However young Pikelet may be, in the novel, he must face a form of internal displacement linked to the conscious recognition of Indigenous precedence. Winton steeps the teenager in the settler colonial present through a scene of historical haunting that leaves the boy in a delirious fever. He adopts a subtle form of presencing which resists appropriating Indigenous voices or experiences. Among the graves of early settlers, Pikelet is spooked when he suddenly registers Aboriginal presence:

The settlement itself was little more than a cluster of Victorian barracks and cottages on a patch of level ground beyond the highwater mark. The decommissioned buildings seemed hunkered down, besieged by sky and sea and landscape. The steep isthmus behind them was choked with thickets of coastal heath from which granite tors stood up at mad angles. Every human element, from the slumping rooftops to the sad little graveyard, seemed older and more forlorn than the ancient country beyond. The scrub might have been low and wizened and the stones badly weathered, but after every shower of rain they all shone; they stood up new and fresh, as though they'd only moments ago heaved themselves from the skin of the earth ...

It was like seeing the familiar world at a twofold remove, from another time as much as another direction, for it felt that I was in an outpost of a different era. It wasn't only the colonial buildings that gave me such a sense, but also the land they were built on. Each headstone and every gnarled grasstree spoke of a past forever present, ever-pressing, and for the first time in my life I began to feel, plain as gravity, not only was life short, but there had been so much of it.<sup>88</sup>

More than the simple realisation that the human is divorced from the natural world, more than the double aspect and the disconnect between European and Australian spatiality, Pikelet is beset by guilt over the genocide of Indigenous Australians. He is also troubled by the idea that the settlers' lands, buildings and culture may be reclaimed by Indigenous Australians and the non-human realm. The above passage highlights the impermanence of the settler

---

<sup>87</sup> Simon Baker, dir. *Breath* (Gran Via, Windalong Films & See Pictures, 2017).

<sup>88</sup> Tim Winton, *Breath* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2008), 117. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

descendant visiting “a cluster of Victorian barracks and cottages”. The permanence of *Country* (“the ancient country beyond”), on the other hand, reminds the settler that his buildings may look old but that his culture is transient. The headstones in “the sad little graveyard” compare poorly with the granite tors polished afresh by each rainfall. The acknowledgement of Aboriginal presence triggers “the spatial anxiety that is a result of the dispossession of Indigenous people ... [the] appropriation of their land cannot be reconciled, no matter what logic or ideology justifies the acquisition of the land”.<sup>89</sup> Pikelet may be young but he senses that reality; the landscape itself seems an accusation: “Each headstone and every gnarled grasstree spoke of a past forever present, ever-pressing”. Indigenous Australians are evoked through metaphoric association. Early explorers and settlers called grasstrees “blackboys” because from a distance their silhouette, with their distinctive flower spike, reminded them of Aborigines holding a spear.<sup>90</sup> There is no silencing of the past: the grasstrees “spoke” and the past is “forever present, ever-pressing”. Pikelet’s reflections on a conflicted history, deep time and space send him reeling into spatial and temporal instability. He develops a delirious fever in which he repeatedly dreams of drowning.

Spatial and temporal instability is the settler’s plague. The text represents settler anxiety through effective use of epistemological vertigo, a feature discussed in my study of *In the Winter Dark*, where the massacre of Aborigines is evoked through deforestation.<sup>91</sup> In *Breath*, the plaintive call of humpback whales sounds like a mourning song that conflates the slaughter of their species and historical massacres of Indigenous people. A younger version of Queenie probes Pikelet:

You think there’s ghosts? I asked offhandedly.

Probably.

You believe all that stuff? I asked, surprised.

Yes, actually. Out on the farm, she said. Down on our beach, you hear things at night.

Yeah? I sniggered. What things?

Well, people’s voices. And whales. You know, singing.

Well, *that’s* not ghosts, obviously.

---

<sup>89</sup> Horakova, “The Unbearable (Im)Possibility of Belonging,” 117.

<sup>90</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first recorded instance of the term is in Joseph Cross’ *Journals of Several Expeditions Made in Western Australia During the Years 1829, 1830, 1831 and 1832* (1833).

<sup>91</sup> John Docker, “Epistemological Vertigo and Allegory: Thoughts on Massacres, Actual, Surrogate, and Averted – *Beersheba, Wake in Fright, Australia*,” in *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia*, eds Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), 51-72.

I don't know about that, she said. Whales are more or less extinct on this coast. (118)

Associating ecological and historical trauma in this way is not without danger. One could certainly object that Indigenous Australians are evoked in the form of spirits or ghosts, as “more or less extinct”, a strategy that has been used to propagate the damaging myth of the “vanishing race”.<sup>92</sup> Yet in Winton's fiction, epistemological vertigo leads to important acknowledgements (“I began to feel, plain as gravity, not only was life short, but there had been so much of it”) and ethical agency: once Pikelet registers Indigenous presence, he withdraws from the site (117).

An “underlying instability in spatiality”,<sup>93</sup> a “postcolonial uncertainty”,<sup>94</sup> a “crisis of belonging”<sup>95</sup> – what can non-Indigenous Australians do when both space and time constantly shift under their feet? Or, as Perera puts it, “What if the ground beneath our feet turns out to be the sea?”<sup>96</sup> Earth, a symbol for the individual's anchoring to place in many western cultures, is an unreliable medium on which to build one's identity in Australia. In *That Eye, the Sky*, Ort's father tells his son: “the easterly brings little pieces of the deserts and the goldfields and the wheat-belt: red dust and gold dust and yellow dust. The country is a nomad, he says, always going walkabout”.<sup>97</sup> Winton also uses this metaphor in *The Riders*. In much of his fiction, earth is movable like water; therefore, in a striking antipodean inversion, it is the sea which becomes the anchoring element. It is in the ocean that Winton's characters (swimmers and surfers) renegotiate their relationships with place and space. Jerra is looking to the ocean for the answers to his existential questions; it is among the whales that Queenie and Cleve rediscover their places in the world; it is in the ocean that Abel Jackson is truly at home; and Luther Fox regains a sense of purpose after an extended stay in the watery Kimberley.<sup>98</sup> Likewise in *Breath*, once Pikelet realises he lacks the moral right to base belonging on place (through traditional land attachment), once *terra firma* is acknowledged as *terra infirma*, he takes to the sea:

---

<sup>92</sup> Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

<sup>93</sup> Tompkins, *Unsettling Space*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Horakova, “The Unbearable (Im)Possibility of Belonging,” 109-128.

<sup>95</sup> Horakova, “The Unbearable (Im)Possibility of Belonging,” 109.

<sup>96</sup> Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1.

<sup>97</sup> Tim Winton, *That Eye, the Sky* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1986), 70.

<sup>98</sup> On the symbolism of water in Winton's fiction, see Bill Ashcroft, “Water,” in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 16-48.

Those summer holidays I went out to Sando's nearly every day. Eva had gone to the States for a few weeks and with Loonie in the workforce I had Sando to myself. I did more than seize the opportunity; I drank it up. On flat-calm days we dived, and if there was the slightest swell we fooled about at the Point with boards. (123)

Two ideological ways of surfing contend in *Breath*: one courts the beautiful, the other the sublime.<sup>99</sup> Sando and Loonie's daredevil surfing seeks to repeat the sublime moment, but the sublime is, after all, a relic of conquest. Surfing gigantic waves may be a way to prove oneself but it also contributes to a desire to prevail over nature by literally riding over its back. An activity that starts as a wish to become one with the environment can paradoxically end up separating the individual from nature, and from their community due to the formation of a clique and competitive spirit. *Breath* also hints at the relationship between the sublime, colonialism and neoliberalism, a wave of another kind which corresponds to a form of conquest based on individualism, risk-taking and contest. If surfing initially represented freedom, it was quickly reterritorialised by capitalism when surfing franchises took a foothold (Sando is making money through advertising in glossy magazines). Pike tastes the sublime. Exhilarated for a time, he then becomes aware of its destructive potential. In the end, he opts for the beautiful.

Surfing, however, may be much more than "something completely pointless and beautiful" (216). Some may argue that the characters in *Breath* revisit the same surfing spots in order to surf the same waves, therefore nourishing a sense of nostalgia, but revisiting the place does not necessarily mean revisiting the past. For Winton, the ocean is a site for reinvention – starting again with a sense of acknowledged difference. Pikelet manages to reinvent the codes he inherited from Sando and purposefully turns the sublime into the beautiful as a more ethical choice. Surfing is a creative act which "looks repetitive but no ride is ever the same".<sup>100</sup> Winton's surfers learn to read currents, which helps them identify and navigate the transnational waves that threaten their known worlds. The provincial world of Pikelet is beset by the arrival of Sando, who represents the Americanisation of Australian society in the 1970s. Mobility and fluidity are equally important in *Eyrie* for Keely to negotiate a whole set of other transnational currents. It could be argued that surfing allows the individual to transcend place (the past) through movement in an attempt to merge with space and time:

---

<sup>99</sup> Rooney, "From the Sublime to the Uncanny." 241-262.

<sup>100</sup> Winton, "The Wait and the Flow" in *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, 131.

“The wider culture expects you to hurl yourself at the future. Surfing offers a chance to inhabit the present”.<sup>101</sup> The surfer, by extension, becomes the centre of these renegotiations. There are important philosophical implications associated with that proposal.

If we agree that *Breath* aims to unsettle the non-Indigenous Australian in order to ask for a re-examination of time, space and movement, we must try to determine the kind of philosophy and aesthetic it proposes. A work that explores the possibility of meaning, movement, flows and trajectories invites a reading informed from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. From *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) they designed a theory of meaning that is a theory of space. For Deleuze and Guattari, meaning is produced locally and crystallises at nodes where trajectories intersect. Another fundamental idea is that we are a process, a flow, “a flux of being”.<sup>102</sup> Rather than representing the human at the centre of any network they would rather position the human on the continuous surface of blurry borders which connect with other fields. Russell West-Pavlov summarises a key concept of their philosophy through the metaphor of the wave: “territorialities are gathered up and then subside again, like the crest of waves on the surface of the sea. The moment where the wave subsides back into the fluid medium from where it came furnishes an instance of de-territorialization in service of nothing except being-becoming itself”.<sup>103</sup> Similarly in Winton’s fiction, the protagonists are insecure victims of deterritorialisations / reterritorialisations brought about by globalisation, capitalism, cosmopolitanism or even historical revisionism. Their intimate world is being redefined dramatically and they are at the junction of multiple trajectories that “provoke the insecurity and confusion generic to contemporary victims of globalization”.<sup>104</sup> The sea carries these national and transnational influences, which meet local communities and ecologies on the beach front. The surfer and the swimmer are the node where all these trajectories intersect.

The water in the wave does not move forward. Just up and down. The surfer or swimmer on that wave is simply traversed by a wave of energy which disrupts the water. The ocean is the medium where Winton’s surfers ponder the ethical questions associated with the currents that affect their surroundings: “When I get in the water I slow down and reflect. That’s the benefit of all that bobbing and waiting. I wait and wait and then I glide and flow. I process problems

---

<sup>101</sup> Winton, “The Wait and the Flow” in *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, 134.

<sup>102</sup> Russell West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 174.

<sup>103</sup> West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory*, 199.

<sup>104</sup> West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory*, 199.



without even consciously addressing them”.<sup>105</sup> The metaphor extends to Winton’s non-surfers. Once his characters process the complex influences that are reshaping their world, they can harness the energy of these flows to transform their environment. Keely highjacks the destructive forces of gang culture to defeat Clappy; Scully reinvents a more-than-European identity; Fox tastes the impossible dream of hybridity; Queenie inflects the course of local history by changing the town’s attitude towards whales; Ort uses the flawed faith passed on by Warburton to heal his father; Pike recodifies surfing from a macho pursuit of the sublime to a seemingly meaningless aesthetic of the beautiful, which also inflects toxic masculinity.

In their theory of flux, Deleuze and Guattari posit that we do not construct our identity or create meaning from stability or settledness, but from disorder, instability, and mobility.<sup>106</sup> Yet there may be danger in a philosophy that carries the seeds of chaos and relativism. Winton certainly resists these two notions and remains on the side of meaning. As in *Shallows*, those who remain “settled” are stuck to the past and perish. Pike’s father, who refuses to embrace change, dies before his time. Pikelet grasps the necessity of movement early in the novel: “Here in Sawyer people seemed settled – rusted on, in fact” (136). In front of this fixity he values the vital energy that emanates from Sando: “There was something about Sando that wasn’t settled. He wasn’t fixed like my father” (66). The beginning of *Breath* seems a celebration of movement, flows and fluxes. Loonie virtually lives in three places at the same time (Pikelet’s, Sando’s and his own). He is described as fluid, fast on his bike, unreachable on his board. Sando and Eva are also able to cross different elements (sea, air and snow). One must ask, why does this trio of characters get corrupted then? Why do Loonie and Eva have to die?

*Breath* departs from the temptation to celebrate movement for movement’s sake. Raw energy alone may just lead to self-destruction and chaos. The novel intimates that there are undesirable forms of movement. Eva, Sando, Loonie and for a time Pikelet himself, are individualistic in their pursuit of movement. Eva only pleases herself in her dangerous auto-erotic games. Sando’s initiation of the boys amounts to self-glorification. And all Loonie brings back to Pikelet from his overseas travels with Sando is the drugs that will cause his death. *Breath* may be set within a surfing clique in a provincial town, in the most remote state

---

<sup>105</sup> Winton, “The Wait and the Flow” in *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, 134.

<sup>106</sup> West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory*, 175.

of the most remote continent, but it is oceanic in its scope, as universal as breathing. Winton's surfer metaphor is rich in literary potential. It encapsulates a coherent set of principles which have value beyond literature: to reach balance, meaning, and an aesthetic of life that is also ethical. Because they can navigate flows, Winton's surfers and swimmers are invested with the potential to decolonise settler spatiality and to transform their communities and the wider environment.

### **Conclusion: Deterritorialisation and decolonisation of settler spatiality**

Far from being settled, non-Indigenous Australians are prey to complex spatial and existential crises that remain unresolved. Things have changed since Judith Wright reflected on Australia's "double aspect". Australian space has never been more unstable. Migrants and settlers have tried to make Australia their home for over two centuries and failed, partly because issues of national identity were founded on the wrong paradigms. Partitioning the land by erecting cattle, dog or rabbit fences has never been very efficient. Bushfires still regularly destroy settlements; tropical cyclones lift houses; tides eat away at the coast and undermine the foundations of houses; bad conscience and issues of guilt around the past and present treatment of Indigenous Australians continue to unsettle the minds of many Australians. Environmental degradation and crimes against refugees lawfully claiming asylum will likely come back to haunt the collective unconscious and further challenge myths of identity based on *terra firma* and settledness.

Winton's novels reflect a worrying state of affairs. The scale of the dislocation experienced by his non-Indigenous characters is intercontinental: they are estranged from the space of the motherland which is all but familiar; and the land "at home" proves to be a more elusive construct than they presumed. The diagnosis is even darker. Like Christos Tsiolkas in *Dead Europe*, Winton depicts his European (and American) characters as equally estranged from their environments. They too experience their own continent as unproductive non-places. Some, like Alex in *The Riders*, commit suicide; others, like Sando in *Breath*, are transnational. The two groups of characters are subject to crippling colonial/neo-colonial forces that trigger crises of non-belonging. The ongoing process of ruination affects everyone everywhere: everyone is a settler colonising space (Scully attempts to recolonise Ireland, Sando Australia); all are both agents and victims of Empire. This is a bleak realisation. In

fact, such a conclusion almost reads as the apotheosis of the settler colonial project as formulated by Lorenzo Veracini: the eradication or replacement of all native cultures.<sup>107</sup>

But Winton exploits the chink in the colonial armour – this acute spatial crisis of non-belonging. He destabilises his characters, exploring and unpacking the different facets of this multilayered crisis before imposing the realisation that a series of paradigm shifts is needed. Winton's poetics of unsettlement and unbelonging is presumably intended as a didactic lesson for his readership. More than presenting the symptoms of the individual or the nation in crisis, *The Riders*, *Breath* and *Eyrie* ponder strategies for Australians to ethically negotiate the various dimensions of the spatial crisis that affects their relations with place, space and people. What non-Indigenous Australians need to demonstrate, according to scholars like Peter Read, is a negative capability: "I belong but I do not belong; I seek a solemn union with my country and my land but not through Aboriginality; I understand our history but it brings me no relief".<sup>108</sup> Authors like Tim Winton and Ross Gibson are working on literary representations that take into account the settler colonial present while proposing a logic of fluidity, complexity, multiplicity and open-endedness. This valuable strategy keeps complacency in check, so that time, space, place and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are constantly re-assessed. My next chapter reflects on the works of Nicolas Rothwell, who embraces such features and takes things even further by proposing a poetics of Reconciliation, albeit one that does not go hand in hand with a belief in resolution. The protagonists of the works presented in my thesis are active builders of the future instead of the passive victims of the history and geography they inherited.

The fictional Australians portrayed by Winton have no other choice but to acknowledge that things exist in a state of dynamic flux. Unlike Deleuze and Guattari, they do not rejoice in this reality but struggle to exist in such complexity. They yearn for some codification and initially resist their postcolonial, postmodern condition. The protagonists momentarily withdraw into stasis and nostalgia, as though petrified by simplistic binary propositions. When the crisis deepens, they face a dizzying ontological vertigo where non-belonging leads to unbelonging. As they learn to let go of their preconceived relationships with time, space and place, they start to find a form of balance, and regain a modest sense of agency. In Winton's fiction, the alternative to order is not disorder or chaos. Rather, he suggests that

---

<sup>107</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Read, *Belonging*, 21.

meaning and belonging (albeit a less settled form of belonging) can be achieved. His characters are not directionless. They may be floating adrift, for a time, in an ocean of contradictory flows, local, national and transnational influences, but they eventually seize a board and pick an ethical course. Theirs' is a journey from belonging to unbelonging, stasis to movement, meaninglessness to meaning, wait to flow. On the wave the surfer has the creative ability to deterritorialise and reterritorialise the currents (historical, economic, social or cultural) and energies they tap into. They then become the decolonising movement or current that is born from previous flows.

## Chapter 3 An Imaginative Non-fiction for a Re-imagined Outback: Nicolas Rothwell's Geopoetics

“... Tomorrow  
the world won't be a safer or a fairer place,  
our willingness to wonder and to hurt will be the same.  
But the sea may come up and, if we're lucky  
and not too afraid, we might press ourselves  
against the edge of that one big wave, cling and let go”.

– Brook Emery, “Spring is still spring (summer)”.<sup>1</sup>

Tim Winton's emerging oceanic non-Indigenous Australians defined by the liquid element have much to gain from embracing a philosophy that gracefully steps away from place, time and belonging. Contemporary Australian poet Brook Emery, in the above quote, offers a potent image that evokes these possibilities. The authors studied in my thesis use a poetics of intimacy with immensity to invite characters and readers to abandon the logic of place for a logic of space. On their painful journey towards unbelonging, Winton's settler Australians eventually adopt a less settled form of existence in which they begin to come to terms with the specificities of Australian space. They learn to become more fluid, but movement experienced reluctantly, as an imposition, for the author denies them a state of settler contentment. Nicolas Rothwell favours a different strategy. In his narratives, movement and the instabilities of place are embraced as opportunities for a renegotiated identity. In fact, Rothwell's aesthetic choices magnify spatial instability, and culminate in the formation of a new literary genre. While his work is advertised, sold and distributed as non-fiction, this chapter argues that Rothwell's narratives are actually a hybrid form, which straddles fiction and non-fiction. Apart from his first book, *Heaven and Earth* (1999), a novel which he considers a false start, Rothwell's literary production falls into two categories.<sup>2</sup> *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (2003), *The Red Highway* (2009), *Belomor* (2013) and *Quicksilver* (2016) are composed of semi-independent fragments. Thematically coherent, the pieces are unified by a distinctive narratorial voice. *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and *The Red Highway* read almost like

---

<sup>1</sup> Brook Emery, “Spring is still spring (summer)”, in *Uncommon Light* (Carlton, Vic.: Five Islands Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Rothwell writes of *Heaven and Earth* as “a European-accented novel of ideas” that “reflected European beliefs about the novel as the supreme vehicle for conveying internal experience”. Nicolas Rothwell, *Journeys to the Interior* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010), 21. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text (abbreviated as *JJ*).

novels; but as the author refines his literary experimentations with the fragment, his publications have edged closer to independent essays. Wondering what to call *Belomor*, Silke Hesse argues that Rothwell has created a new genre: the narrative essay.<sup>3</sup>

Rothwell's other publications, *Another Country* (2007) and *Journeys to the Interior* (2010), are composed of much shorter expositions which read more like journalistic pieces. Some are adaptations from lectures and interviews; others are revised versions of articles he wrote as northern correspondent for *The Australian* newspaper. Because Rothwell ventures in contentious critical terrain, I believe he intended *Another Country* and *Journeys to the Interior* as companions to his other works, to dispel possible misunderstandings. All these books form a coherent literary project where each addition refines ideas previously expressed by the author as he observes the changes in the landscapes and communities he revisits. His self-reflexive prose dramatizes the progress and relapses of a first-person narrator in search of meaning in landscapes that prompt profound re-examination of the settler colonial present. Rothwell roams the debris of western civilisation in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin wall, 9/11, and in the context of the Aboriginal Turn: this is a post-Bicentenary, post-Mabo Australia in need of reinvention. With biting narrative irony he wonders how Australian writers can reflect on (and speak to) issues that play out on global, national and local scales. I read Rothwell's narrative essays as both a symptom of and an answer to these rapidly changing times and contested spaces. His works feature real-and-imagined characters caught between fiction and non-fiction, the lies in the land and the lie of the land. Rothwell's narratives deliberately create a form of generic disorientation that has a political, social and epistemological purpose.

Refusing neat resolutions, Rothwell points to trends which he believes are likely to provide positive outcomes for Australian society. In all his books, connectedness and disconnectedness contend, mirroring the processes that keep shaping the nation. Yet all trajectories (historical and contemporary, Indigenous and non-Indigenous) converge towards particular geographical locations that function as zones of intensity. Outback Australia, in Rothwell's oeuvre, is a site of both crisis and partial resolution. There, his protagonists are confronted with degraded landscapes, ailing ecologies, and Indigenous populations under

---

<sup>3</sup> Silke Hesse, "Nicolas Rothwell's *Belomor*: A New Genre," review of Nicolas Rothwell, *Belomor, Into the Red* (Nicolas Rothwell's webpage). Accessed 5 December 2017, <http://nicolasrothwell.com/nicolas-rothwells-belomor-a-new-genre/#more-500>.

considerable strain. At times, one is under the impression that Rothwell's work espouses W.G. Sebald's "literature of ruins".<sup>4</sup> Writers and critics like Paul Carter,<sup>5</sup> Stephen Muecke,<sup>6</sup> Andrew McCann,<sup>7</sup> Kay Schaffer<sup>8</sup> and Lisa Slater<sup>9</sup> have exposed the tendency for Australian literature to portray Indigenous Australians as a dying or vanishing race.<sup>10</sup> For McCann, as long as contemporary Australian literature continues to concern itself with "notions of Anglo-Australian belonging – nation, landscape, the literature of the soil", this "literature of extinction" is likely to endure.<sup>11</sup> McCann makes a persuasive case but falls short of proposing themes which could constitute a robust architecture for an alternative Australian literature. His article ends on the pessimistic observation that, were Australian authors to engage in this exercise, publishers, reviewers and readers would probably turn their backs on such a literature.

To propose a fresh direction for Australian literature, and in a bid to propose an alternative canon, Geordie Williamson looked to fiction,<sup>12</sup> but Rothwell draws from and contributes to other literary traditions. His narrative essays decolonise place, space and literary forms to articulate ethical models of non-belonging. McCann called for "a radical literature in Australia" which would abandon "regressive aesthetic forms" to avoid "those transferences between historical catastrophe and aesthetic gratification".<sup>13</sup> Rothwell offers alternatives to anthropocentric representations of nature, the novel, the sublime and rectilinear representation. His project is not to add another stone to the literature of ruins or extinction. If in earlier works Rothwell seems pessimistic about the ability of Indigenous Australians to recover from the catastrophe of colonisation, he actually depicts resilient communities which have been able to adapt and transform traditional practices. Rothwell's premise is that both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds are in crisis. A subtle author, he does not conflate

---

<sup>4</sup> See Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew McCann, "The Literature of Extinction," *Meanjin* 65, no.1 (2006): 48-54.

<sup>8</sup> Kay Schaffer, "Wounded Spaces/Geographies of Connectivity: Stephen Muecke's *No Road (bitumen all the way)*, Margaret Somerville's *Body/Landscape Journals*, and Katrina Schlunke's *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*," in *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*, eds Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014): 149-167.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Slater, "Intimate Australia: *Body/Landscape Journals* and the Paradox of Belonging," *Cultural Studies Review* 13, no.1 (2007): 150-169.

<sup>10</sup> Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> McCann, "The Literature of Extinction," 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> Geordie Williamson, *The Burning Library: Our Greatest Novelists Lost and Found* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> McCann, "The Literature of Extinction," 54.

the two – the anxiety and trauma experienced by the two communities are of a very different nature – but he seizes upon this reality as an opportunity to build a joint future.

This chapter argues that Rothwell's literary project formulates a literature of resilience that centres on ethical modes of representation for the type of poetics of space Williamson, Carter, Muecke, McCann, Schaffer and Slater called for. The chapter opens on the narrative function of the outback in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and *The Red Highway*. Rothwell's characters typically suffer from an existential crisis which is, in essence, a settler crisis of (non)belonging. The origin of their crisis lies in colonial representations that prevented productive spatial relations. Rothwell recasts the outback in a different light: he endows inland and tropical Australia with resolutely topophilic qualities, and rehabilitates these regions as sites for a potential metaphysical recovery. Rothwell offers a minimalistic sublime aesthetics that has much in common with Bill Ashcroft's horizontal sublime<sup>14</sup> and Christopher Hitt's ecological sublime.<sup>15</sup> I compare Rothwell's ethics of representation, characterised by a self-reflexive prose, narrative instability and narrative regression, to that of Anglo-German author W.G. Sebald, who uses very similar techniques in his evocation of a ruined Europe. While the two authors reflect on common themes (the dramatic failure of western thought and modes of representation) and adopt similar vehicles to convey their reflections, Rothwell sides with renewal rather than the eschatological. He may present man's propensity for a "Natural History of Destruction", but he is also intent on identifying the mechanisms at work in building the future.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Bill Ashcroft, "The Horizontal Sublime," *Antipodes* 19, no.2 (2005): 141-151. See also Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Hitt, "Towards an Ecological Sublime," *New Literary History* 30, no.3 (1999): 603-623.

<sup>16</sup> W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2003).



## Part 1 Self, Place and Nation in Crisis: From Metaphysical Void to Metaphysical Recovery

Most of Rothwell's books share a similar opening: an unsettled, seemingly restless narrator scours Australia's interior following a tenuous trail, often that of an explorer or an artist in search of inspiration. These forays into the interior very rarely yield the kind of enlightenment initially sought by the characters. Rothwell's narratives foreground Australia's immense space as resistant to such investigations. The main revelation gained by the central characters is that colonial western logic and its associated aesthetics meet a metaphorical or physical dead-end in Australia. Yet, the ubiquitous narrator keeps returning to these regions. What is the point of retracing the explorers' footsteps now? What did they see or experience that Rothwell wants to bring to light? Does this amount to nostalgia? Is the reader meant to conflate the first-person narrator and the author?

In what first appears as conventional non-fiction, the archetypal Rothwellian protagonist seems placeless amid Australia's vast immensities: he is like Tim Winton's surfers, but in the outback. The unnamed narrator visits scores of people in their familiar environments but his home is never mentioned. He wanders from one end of the continent to the other, or travels across continents. Constantly on the move, he seems set on a quest whose object eludes him. The prelude to *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, surveys the journals of the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt; the narrative *per se* then begins: "I set off one morning from Cairns, with only the vaguest plans or conception of where I was going".<sup>17</sup> A crisis of unspecified nature draws the protagonist to the outback. At the beginning of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, the narrator writes about "a period of prolonged uncertainty in my life" (37). If he tells his interlocutors the reason for his existential crisis, the reader is not privy to the conversation. Rothwell postures as would-be narrator only to defeat readers' expectations. He uses the trope of the individual immersing themselves in the wilderness to attain some degree of illumination, in order to expose literary genres that have been complicit in appropriating Indigenous space to resolve existential crises. From colonial journals of inland exploration to Patrick White's Voss or Randolph Stow's Heriot in Australian fiction, from Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* to Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* in travel writing, Australia's immense space has exerted an existential power of attraction for individuals in search of meaning, fame or absolution. Yet

---

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Wings of the Kite-hawk* (2003; Sydney: Picador, 2004), 15. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text (abbreviated as *WKH*).

this is what Rothwell denies his characters. His protagonists learn not to succumb to navel-gazing introspections, and find meaning that resides outside themselves.

Seeking more peaceful climes after extensive periods of time spent in the Middle East, war-torn Iraq or Post-1989 Eastern Europe, Rothwell's archetypal travelling protagonist returns to Australia but finds little relief: "Those days, as I described at the outset of these chapters, were ones of grief and emptiness for me ... I could see no pattern or path ahead in life – and if I made frequent journeys then, it was only in the hope that movement, any movement, might help me find my way back into the country".<sup>18</sup> Very much like the narrator of Ross Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, he finds in the deceptive silence of the outback another form of traumascapes resulting from the ongoing process of colonisation. The protagonist's crisis is exacerbated by the conflation of a series of Old World / New World traumas whose origins lie with the greed of Empire: World War Two and the Cold War. Rothwell draws his characters towards the outback to perform a fundamental "recalibration".<sup>19</sup> Timeless and immense, it is a prime site of reinvention endowed with an intrinsic magnetic quality that attracts Australians and foreigners indiscriminately. In *The Red Highway*, the Czech artist Karel Kupka declares: "There is a peculiar attraction in the Australian bush, the Outback" (9). The French surrealist André Breton believed the Australian interior to have "a poetic magnetism of its own" (*RH*, 17). This power of attraction is not necessarily benevolent. In *Belomor*, speaking of the Kimberley, the gallerist Tony Oliver declares: "It's like a pressure chamber, this landscape ... The past everywhere, pressing down".<sup>20</sup> Contrary to Chatwin or Davidson, Rothwell does not send his characters there to fulfil some romantic notion, but because of a sense of unfinished business – historical, social, literary, and of course political – that demands confrontation.

Rothwell's works speak to the paradox that lies at the centre of much of Australia's space: these regions are "Mapped but not known".<sup>21</sup> Few Australians travel through central Australia or the northernmost tropics; fewer still reside in these regions, yet remote Australia "is

---

<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *The Red Highway* (2009; Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2010), 244. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text (abbreviated as *RH*).

<sup>19</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Quicksilver* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016), 153. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text (abbreviated as *Q*).

<sup>20</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Belomor* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2013), 142. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text (abbreviated as *B*).

<sup>21</sup> Eaden, P.R., and F.H. Mares, eds, *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination – Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott*. Netley, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1986.

probably the most important historical signifier of cultural identity in Australia”.<sup>22</sup> A careful analysis of the *Cultural Atlas of Australia* reveals that the over-representation of remote Australia in cultural works has increased dramatically since the 1980s.<sup>23</sup> This coincides historically with the Aboriginal Turn, the Bicentenary and the Land Rights movement. With *terra nullius* legally overturned, the filing of native title claims and productive historical revisionism scrutinising the Frontier’s repressed past, a *bien-pensant* cultural fringe seized this opportunity to engage in narratives that questioned settler legitimacy. Yet, the outback, for non-Indigenous Australians, remains a mythical space because these regions are not *known* historically or geographically. The vast majority of cultural productions resulting from the Aboriginal Turn has come from writers, artists and directors who are foreign to these locations. The outback continues to be “a projection of metropolitan fantasy”.<sup>24</sup>

This is why Rothwell ceaselessly returns to the interior and the tropics. His self-confessed aim is to find the literary form that will best serve to communicate the real. His modes of investigation favour the minute, abandoning the explorer’s magisterial gaze for a poetics of intimacy with immensity. His modes of representation are topocentric rather than anthropocentric: “I don’t make very much distinction between the people and the landscape, and I feel that people are shaped by and are the landscape, and this is the lesson, the great lesson we have to learn”.<sup>25</sup> Rothwell avoids the novel because he believes that the country has seen enough literary and legal fictions that had catastrophic consequences for the native population and the environment. In colonial novels, the outback nourished fantasies of settlement; it stood as the dramatic backdrop for heroic conquests, a Romantic setting to elevate man and nation. When the outback resisted endeavours to subdue Australian space, it became a “Diminishing Paradise” and a privileged location for the Gothic.<sup>26</sup> Writers like Henry Lawson helped enshrine the hostile nature of outback Australia: “We wish to Heaven that Australian writers would leave off trying to make a paradise out of the Outback Hell”.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Cultural Atlas of Australia*, developed by Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton. Accessed 18 November 2017. <http://www.australian-cultural-atlas.info/CAA/index.php>.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton, *Imagined Landscapes: Geovisualizing Australian Spatial Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Nicolas Rothwell interviewed by Bill Bunbury, *Encounter*, aired 26 September 2010 (Sydney: ABC Radio National, 2015), radio Broadcast.

<sup>26</sup> Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> Henry Lawson in the *Bulletin*, 18 November 1893. This is the second recorded usage of “Outback” according to Wilkes’s *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*. The phrase was first coined by Rolf Boldrewood in 1875. G.A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. “Outback,” (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1985), 301.

A product of the settler colonial present, Rothwell's protagonists are ailing as a result of the colonial curse cast upon the land and Indigenous populations: "I felt almost like some colonial explorer who carries in his bloodstream a fatal bacillus, an infection so virulent it will destroy all that he sees" (*WKH*, 67). Rothwell highlights that much of colonial and contemporary Australians' failure to relate to the outback is due to issues of perception. He does not succumb to the temptation of an inversion that would make a "paradise out of the outback Hell", but with Rothwell, the "Middle of Nowhere" becomes "the Centre of Everywhere" (*WKH*, 321).

Rothwell subverts the image of the outback as "metaphysical void",<sup>28</sup> and it becomes instead a site for metaphysical recovery. Carrying the cross of colonisation, the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* almost succumbs to historical trauma. After contemplating suicide, he experiences an epiphany when he comes to understand that melancholy arises when one takes the measure of one's self. Because it is measureless, the outback acts as an antidote to melancholy. In the book's geographical centre, a friend of the narrator suggests that "what everyone who's drawn into the Outback wants [is t]o lose themselves – to escape – into the arms of time" (130). This is not the culmination of the narrator's journey. The Rothwellian counterpoint to this proposal is that the individual needs to lose themselves into space. Only then will the individual begin to resolve their crisis. The desert and the ancient geology of inland Australia (Rothwell's narrators keep returning to some of Australia's most ancient geological sites – the Pilbara and Hamersley Gorge) provide a setting where time is absorbed by space. The narrator who steps into these regions enters a productive state of dynamic unsettlement. To know himself, he will also have to investigate time. In most of Rothwell's books this starts with a deconstruction of Australia's earliest literary representations.

### **Deconstructing the explorers' journals: Seeing past the colonial**

Colonial journals of inland exploration exerted a considerable influence on Australian literature. However fascinating, most of these early accounts testify to a blindness to their surroundings. Rothwell walks into the explorers' footsteps, not as an admirer but a critical observer: "The images, the tropes, the ways of seeing: they were all imports. The explorers carried them in their saddlebags as they rode out towards the blue horizon line. The country

---

<sup>28</sup> Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 185.

was first laid down in their words, and that influence is still alive” (*Q*, 102). Far from what could initially be conceived as an exercise in filiation to enshrine his writing into some kind of pantheon, his books assess a deterministic heritage which needs to be transcended:

They're lost, poor things.

Lost! They live here. We've been driving down their pads all afternoon.

But they don't belong here. They're in the wrong country. They always look lost, and lonely, and unhappy, wherever I see them. They're desperate, in fact: full of sadness, and grief, and fear ...

Like us, you mean. (*WKH*, 305-306)

This exchange takes place between the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and a geologist, as they retrace the footsteps of the explorer Ernest Giles. The pair has been driving through the desert and encounters a camel herd trotting in front of the car. The comment “They're lost, poor things” does not simply refer to feral camels who have been roaming the Australian interior since the railway made Afghan cameleers redundant. The simile that follows, “Like us, you mean”, offers a wry commentary on settler Australia: an enduring people who tried to read the Australian continent with European eyes, and got lost. Explorers and settlers were ill-equipped and encumbered by a cultural heritage they were reluctant to leave behind. For Rothwell, the situation of many non-Indigenous Australians today is no different: “they don't belong here. They're in the wrong country” (306).

Rothwell attempts to change the status of the outback. He urges his contemporaries to leave a much-fantasised country and find their way to *Country*. The resistance met by colonial and contemporary Australians is not so much a result of the land's topography or the lack of food and water, but the failure of the European imagination. Looking for clues that would bring a form of resolution, the narrator sees his own crisis mirrored in Charles Sturt's journals. The explorer sought to lose himself in the desert as a way to cross “the kingdom of death”, survive the experience and be given a form of revelation (*WKH*, 142). Sturt's quest was therefore metaphysical; he hoped for a sublime moment that would see him “return with golden words on his lips” (*WKH*, 142). Sturt returned not with golden words, but with a curse. In his journals, he presents the desert as a foe intent on defeating the progress of civilisation and science. Rothwell is not the first to point to the resistance met by European logic and scientific probings of the Australian outback. As Paul Carter observes, the vast

majority of Australian journals “differ from classic accounts of colonial exploration elsewhere in that they do not culminate in major discoveries ... the explorers fail on the whole to locate economically, or even conceptually, profitable geographical objects”.<sup>29</sup> The inland sea was there, ironically, but under their feet; and the monuments explorers and early administrators failed to see were Indigenous Australians’ cathedrals of knowledge that tended to the subtle ecologies of *Country*.

The deconstruction of these early narratives, through the guise of the footstep narrative, allows Rothwell to correct the record. By treading the past and the present simultaneously, he points to lost opportunities. Investigating the explorers’ journals, the narrator realises that European ways of seeing and representing are the cause of his own, contemporary existential crisis – a complex spatial crisis of non-belonging linked to the legacy of colonialism, from its politics to its modes of representation. The footstep narrative is a potent tool to represent the replicative nature of colonialism. As a follower, the narrator perpetuates patterns of oppression and dispossession. A change of lens is needed. The distance between the fantasised object and the physical landforms must be bridged, insists Rothwell, because the contemporary failures of settler Australia to embrace an ethics or Reconciliation result from issues of perception and misrepresentation. The slow progress of the protagonist in transcending inherited modes of perception and representation reveals how deeply embedded colonial paradigms are. Near Mount Isa, for example, the narrator of *Wing of the Kite-Hawk* falls prey to the very failings he had identified in the journals he was deconstructing. He needs to invoke European images such as the Gothic battlements of a castle to describe the topography:

There was something about the shape and curve of the hill, about the picturesque confusion of its buildings, that was familiar to me ... It was of one particular castle: Hunedoara, in Romanian Transylvania ... I allowed myself a little inward smile at this memory: I could be confident ... that no one had drawn that comparison before. (27-28)

Rothwell derides his narrator. As with W.G. Sebald’s works, Rothwell’s narrators are not to be identified with his own voice, they are narrative personae. As soon as the protagonist feels a tingle of pride at the originality of his simile, he meets a European immigrant who draws

---

<sup>29</sup> Paul Carter, *Living in a New Country* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 12.

the same parallel. No novelty can be achieved through comparative practices that borrow elements from the motherland, be they Gothic or romantic. Early accounts of the outback were characterised by the failure of language.<sup>30</sup> Words deserted the explorers upon entering the tropics and the interior. The narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* evokes British ecologist, Francis Ratcliffe, who ventured into the margins of the Simpson Desert in the 1930s: “*It was some time before the empty vastness of the land was brought home to me in full force ... I shall not try to describe it, for I should certainly fail*” (Ratcliffe in *WKH*, 174). Encumbered by their existential crises, the explorers not only transferred a forbidding emotional stamp onto the landscape, they ensured the outback would remain a blank page.

Rothwell highlights another aspect of colonial exploratory journeys: their authors were defeated spiritually. The sublime moment they were after never came. In *Journeys to the Interior*, Rothwell revisits Sturt’s journals. Confronted with the parallel dunes of the Simpson Desert, Sturt laments:

Ascending one of the sand ridges I saw a numberless succession of these terrific objects rising above each other ... Their summits and about ten feet down each side were perfectly bare, and the hue of vegetation and of barrenness were as strongly marked as the limits of perpetual snow on the sides of the Andes ... The scene was awfully fearful: a kind of dread came over me as I gazed upon it. It looked like the entrance into Hell. (Sturt in *JJ*, 41-42)

Sturt’s attempt to describe his surroundings is a self-admitted failure. He remains at the level of fear and terror without ever reaching the transcendental moment because he cannot refrain from far-fetched comparisons. Likening the rolling dunes of the sandy desert to fields of snow in the Andes is unlikely to lead to a transformational revelation or a deeper understanding of the space he traverses. The most productive lesson learnt by the narrator through his deconstructive method is the necessity of departing from the models he initially sought to follow. Talking to a friend, he confesses that he used to consider Port Hedland and the Pilbara as nether regions: “It was blazing summer ... There was red dust blowing everywhere ... I felt desolate: I had the sense of arriving at the entrance into Hell” (*WKH*, 278-279). The narrator is acutely aware of the trope he is about to repeat: the language and imagery displayed in this passage are identical to Sturt’s descriptions.

---

<sup>30</sup> Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 83-87.

Spiritual failure, linguistic failure, the failure of the European imagination – the narrator, who initially followed the explorers in hope of a resolution of his own crisis is forced to admit that their trail only leads to the literature of ruins. The closing pages of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* introduce a character who completes the narrator’s enlightenment: “I was interested in the explorers myself once. I suppose I needed people to follow, and admire. When I first came out here, I used to live and breathe them and their journals. These days, I’ve changed my mind. They just don’t seem to suit the country” (322). Following the explorers proves to be a false lead; it amounts to an exploration of time. He who sought a point of convergence realises that what is needed is a point of divergence.

The narrator has not lost his time, though. The explorers’ journals offer him the premises by which he is able to articulate an alternative poetics of space. His critical engagement with these early representations of the outback helps him glimpse, on rare occasions, the moments when the explorers did manage to perceive and represent the outback differently. “May 21<sup>st</sup> 1845”, “January the 27<sup>th</sup>, 1845”, “April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1874” – three of the five chapters or fragments that compose *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* start with dates that correspond to precise moments in their exploratory journeys when explorers depart from known ways of seeing and reasoning. A prolonged stay in the outback had started to transform the explorers’ ways of seeing and representing: “The landscape stamps itself on Leichhardt’s mind. Its sounds, scents and rhythms enter him” (4). Where before Leichhardt wrote of “high sandstone rocks, *fissured and broken like pillars and walls and the high gates of the ruined castles of Germany*’, now the tree-clustered summits high above his party’s route ... resembled *‘the lifted crest of an irritated cockatoo’*” (5). Leichhardt pays closer attention to the intricate features of an outback which had hitherto been perceived as abstract space. He comes to view the Australian interior as “*my home, as I have no other one*” (Leichhardt in *WKH*, 57).

Conceptualising the Australian interior as “my home” constitutes an inversion of Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space, where the house is the known, intimate place where the mind may expand infinitely. Perhaps for the first time in Australian literature, in Leichhardt’s journal, the immensity of Australia’s interior becomes the space of intimacy. The explorer manages to internalise Australian space which is no longer experienced as an echo of his internal state of mind or the motherland. It becomes a productive space which mobilises his imagination. Calling this space “my home” is problematic, of course, as it gestures towards *terra nullius*, the *tabula rasa* ready for re-inscription. Rothwell infers that Leichhardt did not



perceive the interior as empty space; Indigenous presences permeate his narrative: why “do we so often feel another’s presence beside him? Why does he seem always to write with one eye looking over his shoulder?”, asks the narrator (12).

The dates Rothwell focuses on also correspond to moments when explorers deserted anthropocentric representations and came closer to perceiving their surroundings like Indigenous Australians. Ernest Giles, delirious with thirst, invests native species like the kite-hawk with spiritual powers. Charles Sturt, stuck at the depot waiting for rain, “had become at this time as responsive to the signs of nature as to the ideas of man” (*WKH*, 140). Rothwell seizes these moments of divergence (presented as early instances of cultural convergence) to articulate his own poetics of space. Intimacy with immensity, an immersive experience in the outback, metaphors inspired from the natural realm, as well as an emplaced sacred, are seen as fruitful foundations to articulate future spatial practices. Doing away with the colonial past entirely would be likely to result in further denial. Rothwell’s deconstructive strategy allows him to critically investigate the past and at the same time salvage fruitful elements from the culture of origin, to avoid appropriating Indigenous cultures and epistemologies. Like the explorers, his narrator first nourishes the romantic idea that a “prolonged immersion in the country might make it seem less foreign to my eyes” (*WKH*, 15) but he soon learns to question his masters.

### **Towards an ethical sublime: From a silent sublime to an ecological sublime**

Much is concentrated into Rothwell’s protagonists: the narrator, who crosses the outback to resolve a contemporary settler crisis of non-belonging, must devise new modes of representation and a new language that avoid rehearsing the voice of the coloniser. The narrator of *The Red Highway* is about to repeat colonial mistakes by initially seeking a sublime experience in the desert:

I spent the next days on the road alone, in an attempt to leach away the more disquieting memories of my Middle Eastern sojourn ... After some days in that landscape of sandstone bluffs and salt lakes, trying to align my thoughts with the country and its chords and echoes, I retraced my steps ... it was mid-evening ... Morning came. I woke in my hotel room. (100-101)

Many elements of the classical sublime are present in this passage: a character in crisis, solitude, a headlong journey, the wilderness, the search for elevation, the day's end – but nothing comes of it. This is an anticlimactic piece of writing that reads as a contemporary translation of Sturt's journals. Rothwell denies the narrator any form of relief because the way he sees, moves and thinks rehearses the magisterial eye/I of the explorer moving across smooth space. Sticking to known roads, travelling at speed, he registers little of the landscape he traverses, and perpetuates the myth of a land void of Indigenous presence. It is precisely when the narrator comes dangerously close to experiencing Indigenous space as smooth space or is tempted to appropriate sacred sites for his own benefit, that Rothwell introduces a character who challenges his modes of perception and investigation:

The Outback. The inland. You think you know it, but you don't. You make your week-long visits in your hired Landcruisers; you drive through, you write about it, but you always bring your theories and your ideas. You're looking at it with the eyes of your explorers. For you, it's a world of suffering, and exhaustion, and danger, and death, but for me, wherever I've been out in it, it's been alive, and bursting with life. All of it, western and Aboriginal, human and animal. (*WKH*, 165)

All that Rothwell allows these misguided characters, is a failed sublime experience delivered with biting irony. In Jerusalem, the narrator of *The Red Highway* meets Canadian missionary Jean Lamourette, who once sought the silence of a Christian mission in the Kimberley. Going through a spiritual crisis, Lamourette yearned for a sublime transcendental moment, a tangible sign of God's existence. Surrounded by sacred Indigenous land, Rothwell cannot possibly fulfil his desire. As Lamourette stares at the immense starry skies, the author gives him a cosmic sign of an unexpected nature: the lights of a passing satellite.

For some characters there will be a transformation, but Rothwell cannot allow his characters to attain enlightenment through a grand vertical sublime experience, for very good reasons. Instead of leading to a rapprochement between man and nature, the use of Edmund Burke or Immanuel Kant's sublime in literary works often results, according to William Cronon, in reinforcing the separation between the human and the non-human realms.<sup>31</sup> The moment of

---

<sup>31</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69-90.

humility that follows awe and terror is short-lived.<sup>32</sup> The Kantian third stage of the sublime sees the triumph of reason over nature, and culminates in the individual's self-apotheosis, validating the subject's dominion over the non-human environment.<sup>33</sup> The sublime, in the context of settler societies, is also problematic in other ways because the recipient of the sublime transformation is likely to have this experience in Indigenous space. For this reason, as we have seen, contemporary Australian authors like Tim Winton resist the sublime.

Does this mean we must abandon sublime aesthetics altogether? After identifying the dangers inherent in the sublime, Christopher Hitt argues that it is not “*fundamentally* or *intrinsically* maleficent”.<sup>34</sup> He advocates an “ecological sublime” which could either stop at the second phase of the Kantian sublime, where awe would keep the subject in a state of humility before the natural realm, or a transformation of the third phase of the sublime. Such a sublime, Hitt suggests, could be articulated on a form of transcendence which would see the subject acknowledge the failure of language instead of the triumph of logos and reason.<sup>35</sup> This is what Rothwell is doing. In Rothwell's works, the reader does not witness a subject who transcends nature through reason, but the subject's transcendence of reason itself.<sup>36</sup> Another marked difference is that the narrator is in search of horizontality, which constitutes an attempt to establish a dialogical relationship with nature where wilderness is experienced not as an inaccessible “other”, but in an intimate way. On the verge of suicide, Rothwell's melancholy protagonist lies down at the lowest possible point in the desert and experiences the first phase of the Romantic sublime:

I drove over this narrow causeway, through the stagnant pools that marked its lowest point ...  
The stillness of the bush, pure and uncaring, descended ... Slowly, with a sense of  
sentimental reverence growing inside me, I made my way down the Lynd [river] ... In the  
shade of some flowering grevilleas and ancient paperbarks I lay down on the thick sand.  
(*WKH*, 59)

---

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Weiskel identifies three phases of the sublime: a pre-sublime stage where “the mind is in a determinate relation to the object”, followed by a stage where the individual feels overpowered by nature (experiencing awe, fear or terror); and finally, a “reactive phase” where the subject re-asserts their dominance over nature. See Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” 608.

<sup>34</sup> Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” 605.

<sup>35</sup> Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” 609.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Dixon provides an analysis of Alex Miller's *The Tivington Nott* in these terms. See Robert Dixon, *Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2014), 12.

This scene provides the setting for the sublime moment to occur. It is in marked contrast to the Romantic sublime, which comes with jagged mountains, avalanches, and a chill in the air. Here it is desertscape, sun and heat beating upon the flattest surface. The sublime moment occurs lying down at the “lowest point” and it is Australia’s immense skies that will descend. Experiencing the sublime in a horizontal landscape is not new in Australian literature. Bill Ashcroft argues that in Australia, following a logic of antipodean inversion, the experience of the sublime is not triggered by vertiginous mountains like in Europe or the Americas, but by the horizontal surface of the outback where “the excess of space” inspires terror and the sublime moment.<sup>37</sup> Ashcroft traces the origins of the horizontal sublime to the journals of the explorers of the 1830s and 1840s, as well as the painters of the 1840s. The horizontal sublime slowly gained currency, and by the twentieth century became a staple feature of Australian art and literature with Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and Patrick White among its best-known representatives. In *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (2009), Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden write a compelling analysis of the horizontal sublime in Australian fiction, in the context of an earthed sacred.<sup>38</sup> Central to Rothwell’s horizontal sublime is a renegotiation of the third stage of the sublime.

In *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, Rothwell challenges his protagonist to relinquish his cultural expectations by calling up the Kite-Hawk as an agent of the sublime. Lying on his back, at the peak of his existential crisis, the narrator experiences the second phase of the sublime. He is seized by fear and terror: “My heart was pounding; sweat dropped from my eyebrows; I was dazzled by the sunshine, dazed by the heat ... I understood the danger” (60-61). But unlike the explorers, who despaired at their failure to experience a vertical, transcendental revelation, the protagonist surrenders to his surroundings. His horizontal position paradoxically constitutes a vantage point which enables him to pay attention to intricate details such as “dragonflies, with shimmering wings” or the patterns in the cries of the kite-hawk (59). The sublime moment does not occur through the triumph of reason, but the abandonment of reason. He surrenders to thoughts that lead outside the impasse of the European imagination and forms the impression that the kite-hawk holds the answer to his fate: “Three calls, and he would throw himself down; four, and he would live” (60). One last time his reason tries to dissuade him:

---

<sup>37</sup> Ashcroft, “The Horizontal Sublime,” 141-151.

<sup>38</sup> Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden, *Intimate Horizons*.

Judgement being passed on me. But whose – and why? Why now, so deep in the stream of life; why here, out in the backblocks? How ridiculous the whole thing was, how arbitrary ... I listened, in the sudden silence, full of regret. And so, I whispered, this, now, is the end of my journey. I closed my eyes. I leaned into the bright abyss, and then above me, a fourth time ... the kite-hawk cried. (61)

This is sufficient for the protagonist to regain his composure. He does not experience the third stage of the Kantian sublime and remains on a par with nature. By inverting the power relationships that are present in the sublime of Burke, Kant or Longinus, Rothwell develops an emplaced, topocentric sublime. The sublime moment derives not from a godly apparition or through the agency of large predators such as panthers or tigers, as in Burke's sublime, but from small native birds like kite-hawks or budgerigars, which he sees as "the spirit of the place".

The kite-hawk is a recurring motif in the book, a totemic animal that transcends time and cultures. The narrator registers its agency over Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, both in colonial and contemporary Australia.<sup>39</sup> The protagonist notes how Sturt considered the kite-hawk as a presence that "held power of life and death over him" (140), describing hundreds of them swooping his exploring party, as though to halt the progress of scientific exploration. Moving forward in time, the narrator meets a non-Indigenous mineral prospector, David Esterline, who identifies the kite-hawk as his totemic animal. Presented as a white Aborigine, Esterline prospects and prospers by following the kite-hawk across remote ranges, relying on the birds to guide him to precious ore and water. Sceptical about this technique, the protagonist joins him on one of his expeditions, but the trip stops short when Esterline collides with one of his totemic birds. The kite-hawk dies; the mission is aborted. Rothwell's repeated use of the kite-hawk as a totemic symbol could be interpreted as either a case of cultural convergence, or cultural appropriation. Rothwell lets the question linger until the end of the narrative. The reader eventually learns that Esterline has subsequently died in the desert, leaving open the interpretation of his death as punishment for killing his totemic animal, or for pillaging Indigenous spirituality.

---

<sup>39</sup> Richard Flanagan, in *Death of a River Guide* (1994), makes similar use of the eagle as a totemic animal in the narrator's acceptance of his Aboriginal heritage.

A subtle author, Rothwell does not deliver his sublime aesthetics all at once. It takes place gradually through different scenes, allowing the reader to witness a staged formulation of an ethical sublime. Another aspect of literary style that Rothwell aims to reform is the verbal profusion associated with Romantic sublimity. As Vijay Mishra observes, in the Romantic sublime, “speech is marked by a compulsion towards its own self-dissolution, its own nirvana, that narrative attempts to circumvent by prolonging through writing”.<sup>40</sup> Rothwell attempts the opposite. Aware of how words are used to dispossess and appropriate, he offers a minimalistic sublime aesthetics which stems from and returns to a meaningful silence. In another scene that involves native raptors, the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* recounts a life-changing moment which completes his transformative experience with the kite-hawks. Again, he is walking in a dry river bed and feels the compulsion to lie down. The desert silence around him is not vacuous, but the “kind of silence I associate with battlefields, the silence of places that have seen things” (168-169). In other words, he registers Indigenous presence and the colonial violence latent in the landscape: “I felt the mood of the landscape beginning to change: suddenly, the branches above me seemed low, the rock-face on the far bank was confining ... It was only with great difficulty that I was able to break its spell. I lifted myself up from the sand, and I knew it would be dangerous to lie down there again” (169). Perplexed, his travelling companion asks if this experience amounted to a kind of “revelation”. The narrator first denies it, but his next word is a concession:

Some revelation?

No, but it was so quiet there, so still, that I could hear distinctly something I had never heard before; something I imagine we aren't supposed to hear.

But what?

I can only tell you what I think it was ... a low, soft noise, like a wave, whispered, constant, impossibly far away. (169)

Silence, the result of colonial erasures, becomes a source of terror which leaves the narrator motionless and speechless. It is the sound of a humbling collective conscience that he hears. Once more, Rothwell relinquishes the third stage of the sublime, but there may be a revelation after all: that he cannot appropriate a space that has “seen things” to resolve his crisis. The place also teaches him to modify his reading grids: “the things I noticed there were the small details: driftwood wedged in tree-forks; the smell of the white gum bark; the

---

<sup>40</sup> Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 23.

patterns in the sand from kangaroo tails” (169). Becoming more intimate with the outback, he ceases to feel at odds with his environment. The desert is no longer the explorers’ prison or tomb, but “a place in which one could be remade” (169).

The possibility for self-reformation is revisited by Rothwell in a final passage which deploys the last element of his sublime transformations. At Eyre Creek, early in the morning, the protagonist emerges from his swag, which he refers to as “my canvas cocoon” (195). A transformation is announced. The image of the cocoon is reminiscent of Bachelard’s conception of the house as a shell. Rothwell, however, inverts Bachelard’s poetics of space: the individual is not transformed within the confines of the house; it is Australia’s immense space which operates the individual’s transformation. Floating midway in a riverbed, the narrator is caught between two infinite planes: the horizontal surface of the water and the verticality of the immense sky. Once more, his crisis is kept in check by the agency of birds. Descending from the sky, a flock of budgerigars comes in his direction from the horizon:

hundreds, thousands of them, budgerigars, swooping, darting near the water’s surface. They split in two, they joined together, they danced in my direction – all this in a space of seconds as they hovered, coiling, close above me, their rush of wings came circling, scattering, like a breeze, a murmur – and at that moment, as they swept beyond me, a green wing-tip, in summons, grazed my cheek. (195)

Here, Rothwell’s prose is sparse, unlike the Romantic sublime, where an excess of words tends to make up for the impossibility of precisely articulating the experience. His sentences are breathless, incomplete, with hardly an adjective or adverb to be found; verbs abound, emphasising movement – an intimation for the narrator to abandon self-contemplation and the impasse reached because of previous modes of perception and representation. The narrator’s response to this encounter is not linguistic. Instead of the triumph of logos and reason, the reader witnesses the breakdown of language in front of the abundance of space and wildlife. To unsettle the reader and invite reflection on the limits of language in front of Australian space, Judith Wright adopts a similar approach: “Using language as a means of invoking that which lies beyond the capacity of words to grasp, Wright petitions us to explore nature with our senses, rather than our words, using the silence of our suspended sentences as

a starting point for tacit exploration”.<sup>41</sup> Rothwell’s use of the dash is reminiscent of Francophone Caribbean poet Édouard Glissant, who uses this device to attract the reader’s attention to the processes of writing and meaning-making in a colonised space, where language is eminently political. Glissant does not advocate an Indigenous identity that would be defined as a counter-identity (an anti-settler position), but a positive poetics of relation that rejects transcendence and embraces imminence.<sup>42</sup> Central to Glissant’s poetics, the dash interrupts the syntax of the sentence to open a space of dynamic interaction. I read the dash in his poetry as both a signifier of the rupture of this Indigenous/non-Indigenous relation, and of the will to reconnect. Likewise, Rothwell’s linguistic deterritorialisation invites reflection on any hierarchical relations: from the sentence to the State.

Rothwell develops a minimalistic, silent, horizontal sublime which embraces the “‘collapse’ of the ‘linguistic apparatus’”.<sup>43</sup> Where his aesthetics differs from the Romantic sublime further still, is that it is silence itself (registered as absence) that triggers the sublime moment – not the roar of the tiger, a tempest or gushing waterfalls. The above passage also signals the sacred nature of Rothwell’s sublime. The scene comprises many elements that are reminiscent of a baptism: an immersion in water, sheer light, the visitation of birds. As in the Romantic sublime, the individual undergoes a personal transformation, but it does not go hand in hand with a triumphant elevation of the subject over nature. It is, rather, a humble sublime where the narrator lowers himself and seeks to relate to a nature that remains awesome and partly inaccessible. Such characteristics offer a response to Christopher Hitt’s call for an “ecological sublime”.<sup>44</sup>

Hitt argues that ecological catastrophes, such as the destruction of a particular habitat, are new objects of terror for the sublime experience. Hitt writes in the context of ecocides resulting from technological destructions. Rothwell adds a colonial twist to the equation. In *The Red Highway*, one finds expressions of a full-blown ecological sublime which interrogates degraded landscapes that were produced as a consequence of settler colonialism. The devastation caused by imported species and western farming practices leads the protagonist to experience a form of terror that makes him embrace non-anthropocentric ways

---

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Kankahainen, “Refiguring the Silence of Euro-Australian Landscapes,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.1 (2015), 11.

<sup>42</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1990; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” 616.

<sup>44</sup> Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” 603-623.



of thinking, living and representing. Travelling the Canning Stock Route, the protagonist and his friend, kangaroo shooter Charlie Firms, reach Georgia Bore. Near the wreck of a car and rusting fuel drums, among the rubbish left by backpackers and grey nomads, a dingo rummages for food. The narrator is moved by this tableau, where life hangs on miraculously in a setting reminiscent of the post-apocalyptic *Mad Max* tetralogy. For Firms, this featureless expanse with “red sand all around, and willy-willies patrolling the perimeter” is “the true, authentic, modern face of hell” (241-242). Without any warning, he shoots the dingo. The indignant protagonist demands an explanation. The roo shooter becomes the mouthpiece for the “god-in-the-landscape” traditionally found in the Romantic sublime: “Do you really want to know what the country’s telling you? Really want to know what’s at its core? We are! Our hand made all this. There is no nowhere now ... you’ve got your ideas, and all your love of nature, and your soft-heartedness. But you can’t even see the world we’re in” (243).

In the desert’s silence, with hell, death and existential terror as a backdrop, the transformative revelation comes as a lesson in degraded ecologies which brings down the foundations of the narrator’s romantic thought-world: the Stock Route destroyed “the desert’s equilibrium” and the dingo had been feeding off human excrement buried by eco-friendly tourists (243). Firms imparts to the narrator that all has been humanised and colonised. The protagonist concedes the sacred heart of Australia has been defiled: “I let the symbolism of this picture brush through my mind. The deep desert, I then murmured, inside myself: revelations; the curtain drawn aside” (244). Like the wedding guest at the conclusion of Coleridge’s ballad, the sobering revelation leaves the narrator transformed, “a sadder and a wiser man”.<sup>45</sup> The colonial project has not only decimated the Indigenous population, it has altered Australia’s immense space. This vast geography which had defeated the settlers’ assaults has been transformed to such an extent that Firms declares it conquered: “There is no nowhere now” (243). For Firms, time has defeated space: what was “nowhere” has turned into “NowHere”.<sup>46</sup>

The ineluctability of this proposal strongly resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarti’s thesis that, if we have indeed entered the Anthropocene and accept that all of nature has been irremediably transformed, we can no longer speak of cultural continuity or the possibility of establishing

---

<sup>45</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere,” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, eds Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2004), 98.

<sup>46</sup> This playful coinage has inspired a study of Modernity and non-linear spatial representations entitled “NowHere: An Introduction to Space, Time and Modernity”. See Roger Friedland and Deidre Boden “NowHere: An Introduction to Space, Time and Modernity,” in *NowHere: Space, Time and Modernity*, eds Roger Friedland and Deidre Boden (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

ethical relationships with the non-human environment.<sup>47</sup> What is needed is the relocation of these arguments in the wider framework of a more-than-human, or even post-human order, as recently suggested by Ian Baucom.<sup>48</sup> This is what Rothwell's works contemplate. The ecological sublime shocks narrator and reader into acknowledging that the Anthropocene is upon us. But *The Red Highway* does not mean to conclude on Charlie Firn's nihilistic statement. Firn does not quite predict the end of nature or wilderness – something will follow. His comments are meant as a summons, the need for a paradigm shift that embraces deep time and Indigenous epistemologies. Rothwell has been at the forefront of a now more widely-accepted conceptualisation of wilderness in an Australian context. Bruce Pascoe, Deborah Bird Rose and Bill Gammage have popularised the fact that when Europeans first beheld Australia, the land was no wilderness but an inhabited landscape already shaped and tended by Indigenous Australians for millennia.<sup>49</sup> The wilderness came afterwards, as a by-product of colonisation. For Indigenous Australians, it is damaging non-Indigenous land practices that have led to a terrifying wilderness.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Rothwell's protagonists do not see chaos in the natural realm, but form and order: standing at the limit of the tropical savannah on one side and the domain of cattle stations on the other, the narrator of *Quicksilver* beholds "the measured realm of nature, the hectic world of man" (165). The characters who come to this realisation manage to transcend their ego. This is a quality of the ecological sublime Brigid Rooney notes in Andrew McGahan's *Wonders of a Godless World*: "relinquishment of self and acceptance of difference enable another kind of transcendence: the transcendence of ego".<sup>51</sup> Rothwell grants this possibility to the characters who experience the ecological sublime and learn to become intimate with Australia's immensities while at the same time being able to remain at a distance from wilderness and Indigenous space.

The fact that Rothwell's narrator is unable to completely reconcile himself with his surroundings and remains in a state of dynamic unsettlement is not problematic; on the contrary, it precludes the politics of place associated with settlement. The lack of resolution, the failure of reason and the acknowledgement of the limits of language characterise

---

<sup>47</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarti, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no.2 (2009): 197-222.

<sup>48</sup> Ian Baucom, "History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no.1 (2014): 123-142.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (Broome, W.A.: Magabala Books, 2014); Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004); Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Brigid Rooney, "Pathological Geomorphology and the Ecological Sublime: Andrew McGahan's *Wonders of a Godless World*," *Southerly* 72, no.3 (2012): 72.

Rothwell's horizontal sublime. His works hint that it is necessary to move away from all-encompassing models of representation towards a subtle poetics and practice of space that account for the heterotopic nature of a settler society like Australia: "Conceptualising space as open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming, is a prerequisite for history to be open and thus a prerequisite, too, for the possibility of politics".<sup>52</sup> This begins with the necessity of reforming the way individuals conceive of time and space.

### Deep time, time-space and smooth time

In view of Chakrabarti and Baucom's theses, exiting anthropocentric modes of representation is a necessary first step to correct this destructive trajectory. Rothwell's attempts to reform how we conceive of time and space are valuable contributions to avoid perpetuating a "Natural History of Destruction".<sup>53</sup> The locations where Rothwell's characters undergo the most profound transformations are invariably gorges or riverbeds of the Pilbara, the Kimberley and the central deserts. This is not a coincidence. In these remote locations, where "Geology rules" (*WKH*, 107), space holds time. In the presence of some of the world's oldest rocks, amid geological time-layers the individual envisions different timeframes (from human time to geological deep time) and associated spatial representations (other-than-human, Indigenous, non-Indigenous, colonial, contemporary). Rothwell asks his protagonists, and his readers, to reconsider how they perceive and relate to time and space. He inverts the traditional axes of time and space, and makes his characters glimpse the possibility of conceiving of time synchronously rather than chronologically.

Since the Enlightenment, time has been seen as progress, a notion which, in the context of settler societies has to be questioned. Time has also traditionally been associated with the vertical axis (the accreting layers of history) and space with the horizontal axis, a flat surface over which one travels.<sup>54</sup> But "Conceiving of space as a static slice through time, as representation, as a closed system and so forth are all ways of taming it", as Doreen Massey argues, will not do: "If time is to be open to a future of the new then space cannot be equated with the closures and horizontalities of representation".<sup>55</sup> Contemporary geographers have

---

<sup>52</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 59.

<sup>53</sup> Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*.

<sup>54</sup> Massey, *For Space*. See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

<sup>55</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 59.

long been advocating for a renewal of these constructs, so that time and space could be conceived jointly. Jeff Malpas argues that “The concept of place cannot be divorced from space, just as space cannot be divorced from time”.<sup>56</sup> He finds Heidegger’s concept of “Zeitraum”, or “time-space”, a useful image to rethink our perceptions and representations of these constructs.<sup>57</sup> Doreen Massey comes to the same conclusion under a different name: “space must be conceptualized integrally with time ... the aim should be to think always in terms of space-time”.<sup>58</sup>

Rothwell adopts representational models that embrace such a merging of time and space. In *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, the narrator describes time as one describes a landscape: “the Outback seemed a place of echoes and repetitions, where one lives over things experienced before ... where time is not at all the smooth, unbroken flow we sense around us, but something yawning, full of rifts and voids, amidst which we navigate” (96). Against all odds, for one of the flattest continents on earth, Rothwell’s characters experience space vertically. In front of the slightest rise in the Pilbara, “You look up, and you seem to lose balance” (119). The sense of vertigo stems from the sudden compression of time, which can be witnessed physically in the well-defined strata of the landscape: “look at that rockface, and the stratigraphy of all the floods: a million years in a single meter” (93). Literally stepping into geological scale, the non-Indigenous Australian is compelled to reassess his sense of place, time and belonging against deep time: “When you get deep into these valley systems ... you see vast land-falls, then you begin to realise that you’re in a greater world: solid, inhuman ... The first time I saw the Gorge I realised I was escaping into a different domain, very close to us, and very alien” (93). Western thought is reduced to a mere blip in time. In an attempt to comprehend the space-time or time-space he has entered, the character is “reaching his hands down into time’s boundless murk”, but space has already engulfed time and new ways of conceiving space and time must be contemplated (113).

It is the Indigenous thought world that holds keys to the paradigm shifts that are needed. Leaving Carnarvon Gorge, the characters pass a convoy of cars, whose Aboriginal passengers are travelling to a funeral:

---

<sup>56</sup> Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 42.

<sup>57</sup> Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 2.

like some heraldic hunting-party, they swept by and dwindled in the rear-view mirror, their dust-trail dissipating, stained pale pink by the last rays of the sun.

Shaken by this encounter, as if we had passed a train of ghosts on their way to some supernatural ceremony, I pulled up some moments later by the diesel pump. (*WKH*, 114)

The vehicles precede the narrator's car. Symbolically, therefore, they come from the future. A moment later, they are observed in his rear-view mirror, as though travelling into the past. Throughout Rothwell's oeuvre, Indigenous Australians are represented as having the ability to exist simultaneously in different times. The author makes it clear that travelling up or down time fluidly is only accessible to Indigenous Australians, because of their most intimate relationship with *Country*, which unlocks the gates of time. In the above passage the protagonist registers but does not seek to appropriate that ability. In fact, to mark the narrator's inability to function synchronously, an ironic dialogue follows. The man at the petrol station asks him what he is doing so far into the outback. The answer rings hollow in light of the timelessness that precedes: "Just discovering a historic site" (114). The word "just" marks a limitation: the protagonist can only function in a temporal paradigm.

The text suggests that it is necessary to stop regarding time as a series of events that succeed one another, but rather, to perceive time as smooth time, in which events are experienced simultaneously instead of chronologically, and where space takes conceptual priority. Systems of representation that acknowledge the active principles of the past in shaping the present and the future could productively help reform settler society by changing the way the observer perceives place and space. The western observer enters a place filled with confidence, classifying perceived elements according to scientific, moral and aesthetic criteria. A place is thought of as beautiful or ugly, fertile or barren. Vertical, hierarchical relationships underlie such perceptions and influence the way the individual relates to place, determining subsequent spatial practices (exploitation vs conservation). The Indigenous person, on the other hand, enters the place as part of what is already there.<sup>59</sup> Instead of perceiving rigid barriers between past, present and future, the individual envisages the elements which constitute place as processes, relationally. This de-centring of the individual could go a long way towards stepping out of the anthropocentric paradigm that precipitated the Anthropocene.

---

<sup>59</sup> Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, 16-17.

The end of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* motions towards this new era. The narrator abandons the explorers' tracks and acknowledges the reality of another world that is, in essence, topocentric and multi-centred, rather than merely anthropocentric – an Indigenous thought world where, as Deborah Bird Rose puts it:

there is a three-way relationship between the people, the species, and the country. The totemic relationship invariably requires that people take responsibilities for their relationship with another species, and learn that their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species. Where the totemic relationship also involves land, people are further implicated in a set of responsibilities toward that land, and their well-being is linked to the well-being of that land.<sup>60</sup>

Upon invitation, Rothwell's narrator reaches the remote Aboriginal community of Patjarr. There, to his surprise, he realises that the "centre of the inland" is an oasis where water is abundant and traditional knowledge unequivocally alive (318). The women sing in language along the way; desert artists paint; Mr Giles, an influential elder, is the custodian of "a whole universe you know nothing about" (318). The last character he meets is an Indigenous woman who has devised a nomadic modern lifestyle which conjugates traditional and western ways of life. Artist, radio producer, mother of six children, and a bikie, she is characterised by the ability to adapt: "I like changing. I don't like to stay anywhere too long" (325). Full of life and humour, she is, perhaps, the least stilted character in the gallery of personages the reader encounters in the book. The narrator, who came to the outback in order to answer questions about the history of its representation, the explorers, and his cultural heritage – finds himself confronted with more enigmas. Virtually every single sentence he utters is a question.

In a symbolic act, at the location where Ernest Giles was (it is thought) first defeated by the outback and turned back, the narrator farewells the sites where the explorers lost their ways. He abandons the European name (the Alfred and Marie Ranges) and tastes the name in language, "Minna Minna", prefiguring new beginnings: "I turned the name over, silently, as if saying goodbye, in those moments, to the Alfred and Maries; goodbye to all that was vanishing and passing in my life" (326). These sentences denote a readiness to embrace

---

<sup>60</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 28.

paradigm shifts. After closing the chapter on the explorers, another one begins. The settler leaves “European prehistory” and enters time-space (317). Rothwell’s text signals that settler Australians will not move beyond settler anxiety unless they learn to re-negotiate their perceptions, representations and relations to both time and space, at the contact with contemporary Indigenous Australia. The author challenges Eurocentric spatial representations from rectilinear representations to the sublime, from Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* to Henri Lefebvre’s “trialectics of space”.<sup>61</sup> He brings down conceptual divisions of space, so as to re-establish spatial coherence, insisting that Australians abandon their inherited perceptions (“perceived space”) and projected fantasies (“conceived space”) in order to engage with the reality of space and culture (“lived space”) in all its complexity and contradictions.

*Wings of the Kite-Hawk* ends with an invitation, a prelude to new beginnings. The protagonist is ushered into a new culture but his impatient questions are, to say the least, clumsy. When he asks bluntly, “And where are all those special places?”, he is immediately rebuked: “Why? You like dreams or something?” (326). Knowledge of this kind is not for him to receive; access to Indigenous culture must come as an invitation. His host accepts to be his guide for the journey to come, but the relationship must be reciprocal to be ethical. Proper introductions must be made. First, the narrator learns the name of the place in language and he must give his name in return: “you can’t go self; I can take you. You have to be careful. Say your name to the country, to the rock-holes, so they know you – who you are” (326). This is a basis to establish intimacy with immensity, an interpersonal relationship where the individual looks after the place, and in return, may be looked after by *Country*. Had the explorers sought to establish contact with Indigenous Australians instead of plunging into the continent with the customary European arrogance, instead of losing themselves in the outback both physically and metaphysically, they could have gained a whole world in return. This is the wisdom gained by the narrator after engaging with a live Indigenous culture, rather than the introspective journeys of European explorers struggling to escape colonial world views. Rothwell’s poetics of space shares much with Ross Gibson’s, who advocates a poetics of space that aims at integrating human and *Country*.<sup>62</sup> This implies the kind of non-anthropocentric, horizontal relationships with the natural world favoured by Rothwell. The symbols and aesthetics he develops drive this paradigm shift towards Indigenous ways of

---

<sup>61</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1974; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>62</sup> Ross Gibson, “Changescapes,” in *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Spaces*, eds Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010), 17-34.

conceptualising time-space, so that non-Indigenous Australians may relate to *Country* ethically, and as a result adopt ethical spatial practices.

### **From the lies in the land to the lie of the land: A home-grown symbology**

The ultimate goal for authors who work on spatial representations is to forge a way of writing based on the land forms they explore: a geopoetics. For Rothwell, the writer should aspire “to be one with the rocks and stones and trees, that’s the one rhythm”.<sup>63</sup> Paul Carter articulates this ideal in *The Lie of the Land* (1996), where he celebrates the writing of anthropologist Carl Strehlow, and his son, the linguist Theodor (Ted) Strehlow who managed to develop a form of environmental poetics that takes into account the “local lie of the land” and “announces the possibility of a new, authentically Australian literature”.<sup>64</sup> By immersing himself in Aranda land, culture and language, Theodor Strehlow started to embed elements of his object of study into his prose: like the waterways of arid Australia, his *Songs of Central Australia* (1971) presents a central subject (the Aranda people) and a multitude of creeks that feed it (land, language, mythology, art). Strehlow does not expound each aspect of Aranda culture exhaustively in separate sections, but merges analyses of these different components within a given paragraph or sentence. He also allows some of his analyses to peter-out unanswered, as desert creeks do. Carter concludes: “Strehlow may have denied that he was a poet, but some of his translations of Aranda song are reverent mimes whose word weaving embodies an environmental conception of poiesis as kinesis”.<sup>65</sup>

Rothwell also seems to espouse such principles. It is not surprising that Carl and Theodor Strehlow are recurrent figures in his work. In his 2014 Eric Rolls Memorial Lecture and in *Quicksilver*, Rothwell identifies the authors he believes to be at the forefront of a writing style that attempts to capture Australia’s physical geography:

I see a special tradition without match elsewhere, a tradition of works made in the likeness of the landscape, work attentive to the country, its look, its feel, its reticence. This is a tradition that would embrace Eric Rolls and Les Murray, but it stretches back before them, to the

---

<sup>63</sup> Nicolas Rothwell interviewed by Bill Bunbury, *Encounter*, 26 September 2010.

<sup>64</sup> Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 26.

<sup>65</sup> Carter, *The Lie of the Land*, 90.



romantic landscape pioneers of exploration literature, and they have descendants, too, writers of our day. (147)

Prominent among these authors are Geoffrey Blainey, Cecil Madigan, Elliott Lovegood, E.L. Grant Watson, Francis Ratcliffe, George Seddon, John Mulvaney, Bill Gammage, Tom Griffiths, Mark McKenna, Tim Flannery, Darrell Lewis and Germaine Greer. This disparate group of writers shares a common desire to establish a literature “made in the likeness of the landscape”. The authors he mentions do not form a literary movement; Rothwell uses more flexible terms: “A school had formed ... I said a school, but perhaps that’s not quite right. It’s more like a camp, a gathering of clear, collaborating voices” (*Q*, 147-148). In his search for an alternative canon, it is surprising (and regrettable) that Rothwell does not reflect on an Aboriginal literary canon which would include the likes of Alexis Wright, Kim Scott and many others.

What are Rothwell’s literary contributions to this camp? Much like Theodor Strehlow, whose writing reflects the “different metres of the ground”, there is an organic quality to Rothwell’s works.<sup>66</sup> He develops a home-grown symbology, using native animals (hawks, parrots, eagles) as agents of the sublime, or the geology of gorges to inspire a reconceptualisation of time and space; but this is not the extent of Rothwell’s geopoetics. Rothwell uses the motif of the parallel dunes across Australia’s central deserts as metaphors for the difficulty to exit the reiteration of the past. The shifting sands of the interior also stand for the spatial instabilities that undermine a settler culture in crisis. In Rothwell’s hands, the gibber plains become the physical manifestation of cultures that lie in ruin (both western and Indigenous), echoes of a shattered world that inspire a poetics of the fragment. The cover of Rothwell’s latest book, *Quicksilver*, represents a shattered mirror. Across his oeuvre, narrators strive to collect shards of these cultures that have the potential to cut and illuminate, inviting watchful reader participation for meaning-making as the author seeks to reform literary modes.

Rothwell shares Carter’s self-confessed goal of departing from conventional narration: “I have slowly come to believe that a linear way of thinking and imagining yields scant return in remote Australia, and that more rhythmic, reduplicated mental patterns fit better with the

---

<sup>66</sup> Carter, *The Lie of the Land*, 114.

deserts and the tropics, with the savannah and the plains of spinifex”.<sup>67</sup> But there may be a price to pay in paving the way for a new genre. Paul Carter’s encyclopaedic knowledge allows his prose to jump across continents and historical times fluidly. Within paragraphs, the reader is transported from Indigenous antiquity to contemporary Australia, to the Italian Renaissance, to the South America of Columbus and Cortes, to the poetry of the French Paul Valéry, or the Italian post-modernity of Italo Calvino. This daring writing applies what Carter praises in the figures he presents: a non-linear way of re/presenting time and space where divergence and digression become the tenor of his narration. These time-jumps, juxtapositions, philosophical reflexions mingled with linguistic and poetic considerations may, however, lose the neophyte and only attract limited readership. Rothwell adopts similar goals and techniques and refines them.

I believe that Rothwell’s prose deploys writing qualities that expose the lies in the land, stays close to the lie of the land, and remains accessible to a wide readership. Rothwell is also more openly critical of the models he proposes. He clearly signposts, for instance, that Theodor Strehlow, for all his qualities, also rehearsed appropriative, insensitive, colonial attitudes. Like Carter, he evokes in quick succession the past and the present, and his narratives span across continents in a fragmentary way. He also draws daring parallels that first seem counterintuitive, but the threads which connect the different fragments remain apparent and serve to guide the reader in what could otherwise be a postmodern minefield. In *Quicksilver*, for instance, he draws comparisons between the scorching, treeless Australian deserts and Russia’s arctic forests. The author connects Europe and Australia, sometimes extending his voyages to Russia and the Americas because these continents are historically and culturally intertwined, bound together for better and for worse.

Nevertheless, I note an evolution in his writing: *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and *The Red Highway* were fragmentary, but the overall narrative arch remained obvious. Frequent narratorial interventions clearly connected the semi-independent stories – sometimes perhaps too conspicuously. As an exponent of the fragment, Rothwell has perfected his narrative technique. He is increasingly reticent to connect people, places and events explicitly. In *Belomor* and *Quicksilver*, the elements that infer connections between each fragment are minimised; “the narrator remains in the background”, observes Silke Hesse in a review of

---

<sup>67</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Another Country* (Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2007), 7. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text (abbreviated as AC).

*Belomor*.<sup>68</sup> The narrator of *Quicksilver* prepares his reader and provides didactic clues suggesting how the fragments could be read:

I would like to proceed from this beginning indirectly, in a mazy, elliptical fashion, by means of an answering set of stories ... It is not my aim to draw them to some fierce and willed conclusion, so much as to let them stand side by side, and send shafts of implication between their various narratives. (59-60)

Rothwell grows more and more wary of causal links. Cartesian logic and reason may have contributed to Europe's development, but they also provided justifications for colonisation, two world wars, the Shoah and the Gulag (all invoked repeatedly in his oeuvre). By extension, they are also responsible for the settler crisis of non-belonging which affects his characters. Rothwell clearly associates the novel with the demise of western civilisations. He therefore prefers to let his fragments float side by side. They are connected thematically, more than by plot or narrative. In his last two books, Rothwell's fragments are less artificially connected, a sign, perhaps, that after an initial stage of preparation, Rothwell now trusts his readers to find the directive threads with less guidance. With fewer narratorial interventions, meanings multiply. A juxtaposition, rather than an orchestration of fragments, allows the complexity and paradoxes of Australia's heterotopic space to be represented more effectively.

Developing a geopoetics that stays close to the lie of the land and whose constitutive elements are borrowed from native wildlife and landforms seems an inspired pursuit, but a hard question needs to be asked: does Rothwell's literary project eventually serve "a land-producing literature"?<sup>69</sup> A long-standing tradition in Australian letters has been for authors who wish to forge a national literature, to select distinctively native elements and elevate them to the rank of national symbols. The Jindyworobaks were the literary group that attracted the most criticism in this respect. They have frequently been accused of appropriating elements of Indigenous culture such as dreaming narratives and totems. Another charge against the Jindyworobaks is that they were "far less interested in existing Aborigines than in exhuming a dead Aboriginal culture from the distant past and claiming expert knowledge".<sup>70</sup> Rothwell is no neo-Jindyworobak. His calls for a rapprochement

---

<sup>68</sup> Hesse, "Nicolas Rothwell's *Belomor*: A New Genre"

<sup>69</sup> Stadler, Mitchell and Carleton, *Imagined Landscapes*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, 269.

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia resist the temptation of appropriation. Importantly, there is no suggestion of ultimate cultural translatability in his works. The narrator (and reader) get fleeting glimpses of a universe they have no right fully to comprehend. His prose is strategically elliptical. The narrator often remains at the margins of Indigenous communities, unwilling to disturb or interrupt; he also backs away from sites that are perceived as sacred. Unlike the Strehlows, he is not about to repeat the kind of colonial scientific enterprise that led the explorers and all their followers to perdition. Instead, like Emily Apter, he subscribes to the idea of the untranslatability of some cultural constructs.<sup>71</sup>

Rather than adding to the nationalistic edifice of a land-producing literature, or the trope of the land producing its literature, Rothwell's prose favours other directions. For his narrators in search of representational models, the outback is not so much a place to write, but a place where the individual is written. His protagonists acknowledge the active elements within the landscape that transforms them and eventually help them find the beginning of a resolution to their multiform crisis: "I am a creature of new rhythm, and the desert, and the inland, are writing me" (*Jl*, 53). After a prolonged immersion in *Country*, in the depth of gorges, and through contact with Indigenous Australians, he acquires new reading grids that enable him to question unproductive colonial modes of perception and representation. He also warns that the pendulum can go too far in the other direction. He occasionally puts his protagonist in a position to correct those who romanticise or essentialise Australian space and Indigenous Australians. He also adopts the opposite strategy and resorts to dramatizing his narrator who is being rebuked when he relapses into colonial modes of thinking. The reader witnesses what I would call a regressive progress which interrogates the ethics of representation.

---

<sup>71</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

## Part 2 Ethics of Representation and Self-reflexivity: Nicolas Rothwell's Narrative Essays

Much of the criticism surrounding Rothwell's books stems from the mistake of identifying the narrator with the author. The opening of Peter Cochrane's scathing review of *The Red Highway* reads:

*The Red Highway* is a memoir in the form of four long essays documenting Nicolas Rothwell's travels in the far north following his return in 2005 from a stint as *The Australian's* Middle East correspondent, during which time he reported from war-ravaged Iraq. The writing is driven by Rothwell's search for meaning ... it is clear from the outset that Rothwell's quest is romantic, almost Wordsworthian: a search for intangibles such as sweetness, beauty and grace, and for what he calls "the truth of things", in the far reaches of the far north.<sup>72</sup>

Rothwell is *not* the narrator of his books. Still, some of the views expressed by his protagonist appear inconsistent. Indigenous culture, for instance, is presented as vibrant one moment and doomed the next. I believe that much can be gained from differentiating between Rothwell the author, and the first-person narrator of his books. Rothwell intentionally leads his narrator astray, giving the reader direct access to the reflective processes that informed his own search for an ethical poetics of space. Rothwell's literary project may not be as messy as it seems, as long as the reversals that take place are analysed as the narrator's regressive progress towards more ethical modes of perception and representation.

A close study of *The Red Highway* demonstrates how Rothwell dramatizes his narrator to underline the pervasive nature of colonialism. He resorts to a deterritorialisation / reterritorialisation of the conceptual ground in front of his narrator, narrative instability, and narrative regression in order to articulate an ethics of representation that avoids the trappings of neo-colonialism. His writing suggests that he does not believe Australia has entered a post-colonial phase. In *The Red Highway*, the protagonist continues to rehearse certain colonial tropes (occasional appropriation of Indigenous space and culture, essentialisation, nostalgia) even as he picks out a route towards an ethical model of (non)belonging and its

---

<sup>72</sup> Peter Cochrane, "Roadhouse Poets Too Good to Be True," review of Nicolas Rothwell, *The Red Highway*, *The Australian*, 6 May 2009. Accessed 5 May 2018. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/roadhouse-poets-too-good-to-be-true/news-story/6c23b43d2a316128c12c0863b3a6963d?sv=70f8a1465ca36ba7e5c25209d9052179>.

corresponding aesthetics. Exposing these failings enables Rothwell to represent the active structures of settler-colonialism and their consequences on the human and non-human realms. The overall image that emerges from *The Red Highway* is that of a narrator wandering the rubble of colonialism. Rothwell's works have been compared to W.G. Sebald's.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, much like Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995),<sup>74</sup> *The Red Highway* "piles up the sediment of history not in order to fill sandbags against the tide, but so that it can be scrutinised for signs of the processes that made it".<sup>75</sup> Rothwell also makes apparent the processes by which the narrator espouses more ethical spatial practices. His situation is more complex than in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*: he does not only find himself caught between colonial and contemporary Australian representations. He needs to process the idealised projections of contemporary westerners who look for a form of refuge (physical and spiritual) in an essentialised outback. He also treads with great care the thought world and physical space of Indigenous Australians.

Despite a genuine interest in developing progressive, topophilic relationships with the outback and Indigenous Australians, the first four characters Rothwell presents have fallen into the trap of idealisation or essentialisation. The Czech artist Karel Kupka, who was at the forefront of an enthusiastic re-engagement with Indigenous Australia, ended up appropriating Indigenous cultures; Canadian missionary Jean Lamourette yearns for a sublime experience on Indigenous sacred land; an orthodox nun in Jerusalem envisions a site of massacre as a "the Promised Land"; and while Dutch artist Henk Guth wants to celebrate the Red Centre and desert tribes, all he achieves is the compression of Australia's immense space in Flemish fashion, and the exposure of sacred objects to public display. Through a variety of narrative devices and narratorial interventions, Rothwell draws the reader's attention to the inadequacies of these characters' engagements with Australian space.

### **Rothwell's meta-fiction: A self-reflexive prose**

First, Rothwell resorts to a prose that is deliberately self-reflexive in order to create a platform to present the ethical safeguards that must be in place before articulating any

---

<sup>73</sup> Robert Dixon, "Ground Zero: Nicolas Rothwell's Natural History of Destruction," *Studies in Travel Writing* 15, no.2 (2011): 187. See also Peter Craven, "Appointment with the Sublime," review of Nicolas Rothwell, *The Red Highway*, *The Australian*, 5 August 2009.

<sup>74</sup> W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995; London: Harvill Press, 1998).

<sup>75</sup> John Beck, "Reading Room: Erosion and Sedimentation in Sebald's Suffolk," in *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, eds J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 81.

representational aesthetics. *The Red Highway* opens with the ambivalent portrait of Czech artist Karel Kupka to prime the reader's attention. Despite the best intentions, Kupka rehearses the trope of the outsider who projects fantasies of renewal onto a distant land. Kupka saw his world collapse twice: once in the devastation of World War Two and then under communist Russia. In search of mankind's new beginnings, he turned his attention to Australia because its native population was literally Aboriginal: a "people whose living conditions and way of life most closely approach those of the first man" (5). Relentlessly, he explored Arnhem Land's "most potent sacred sites", persuaded that Indigenous art embodied a "hidden field of knowledge [which] would prove the most beautiful to European eyes" (10). Kupka's *démarche* initially appeals to the narrator because it offers a potent inversion: European settlers used to look back to the "motherland" to find their origins, now they look to Australia to find the roots of humanity and the arts. But Rothwell's text interrogates Kupka's motives. In his enthusiasm, Kupka endows Indigenous land, art and culture with redemptive qualities.

Much of non-Indigenous Australians' engagement with Indigenous culture has been tainted by essentialising pursuits. The language used by the narrator alerts the reader to how neo-romanticism easily gives way to the rehearsal of appropriative colonial tropes:

At this point in Kupka's progress, near the end of his first, triumphant collecting season, it seems a simple thing to imagine the thoughts and plans, and hopes that enticed him on, that led him to believe there was a role for him in northern Australia ... He told himself that he was searching for the origins of art, its motive forces, the nature of the need that it was striving to fulfil. Such was his overarching idea, but it was also a compulsion: what was original, and pure, and untainted by the mark of Western culture could have redemptive force – could allow him to gaze beyond the world he knew. (10)

Kupka is represented as an artist who was genuinely interested in Aboriginal culture, but words like "triumphant", "led himself to believe", and "He told himself" alert the reader to possible ulterior motives. The narrator's *élan* must give pause for critical reflection. The danger of essentialisation is present in the terms "original", "pure" and "untainted". The outsider who considered himself a true friend and brother to the Indigenous artists he met was probably guilty of trespass as he collected redemptive trophies for a western world in crisis. The reader's suspicions are confirmed later in the paragraph. Kupka made it his mission to

reveal these sacred art forms to the general public: “he would give prominence to works of primal splendour; he would uncover them” (11). Rothwell’s tableau turns into the portrait of an artist who ended up replicating the very colonial tropes he sought to escape: “it was the collector’s disease, that unsleeping impulse to acquire, to classify” (11).

Rothwell is well aware of the western propensity for probing the realms of Indigenous land, art and beliefs. In an interview with David Cohen, who asks Rothwell whether he shares Kupka’s pursuits, the author replies very clearly: “Kupka’s view is not mine”.<sup>76</sup> In *Journeys to the Interior* and *Another Country*, Rothwell writes numerous essays which single out past and present misappropriations of land and culture. But the author rarely stops at the simple level of criticism; he suggests possible ways forward even as he deconstructs past practices. Writing about Rothwell’s aesthetic choices in *Belomor*, Kim Mahood declares: “It is a highly crafted artifice that signals its structural underpinnings and its philosophical preoccupations from the beginning”.<sup>77</sup> To avoid re-inscribing the values he aims to expose, Rothwell’s sentences defuse the conceptual ground before proposing an alternative way of thinking and writing. His sentences contain both the poison of colonisation (the spectre of neo-colonialism), and its antidote.

Another technique adopted by Rothwell as part of his ethics of representation is a form of deterritorialisation / reterritorialisation at the level of the sentence which signals the complexity of settler colonial space and the perilous task of the settler colonial writer seeking to articulate an ethical poetics of space. He frequently interrupts his narrative to invite reader scrutiny of the construction of his representational project, which gives his work a kind of meta-*non*-fictional quality. The choice of the long sentence allows Rothwell to elucidate his aesthetic choices and opens a window presenting the writer navigating an ethical minefield:

I went back to my home in Darwin, and started trying to forge my thoughts into a continuous narrative, a smooth stream of words – but soon I fell into composing in fragments; I would write nothing more than stray snatches of story; and it was not just that I was failing in my tasks ... No: the fragment, the symbol-laden fragment, rather than the flowing sequence, was

---

<sup>76</sup> Nicolas Rothwell quoted in David Cohen, “True North: An Interview Carried in *Bookseller and Publisher*,” May/June 2009. Accessed 5 May 2018. <http://nicolasrothwell.com/true-north-an-interview-carried-in-bookseller-and-publisher/#more-433>.

<sup>77</sup> Kim Mahood, “Into the Void,” review of Nicolas Rothwell, *Belomor*, *Sydney Review of Books*, 26 April 2013. Accessed 5 May 2018. <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/into-the-void/>.



the necessary form for what I had to say: what I meant was in fragments, and dust; it was best told in fragments – fragments were all that I could manage, and even they seemed too controlled, too much a bid to reimpose order on a flux. (*Jl*, 296-297)

In this self-portrait, the writer carefully chooses his words, pauses mid-sentence, catches himself, reformulates. The writing process is not meant to appear effortless but effortful. Rothwell first evokes the literary tradition he comes from, and then distinguishes himself from it. The writer is standing at a cusp, writing “the new way” as he deterritorialises the old. Reluctant to “reimpose order on a flux”, the writer appears as a funambulist. This is a judicious representational strategy, since “the only healthy territorialities are those which have the capacity to monitor their own nefarious tendencies, to constantly reorganize themselves so as to preserve a sane modicum of contingency”.<sup>78</sup> The danger in adopting a prose which teeters on the verge of self-dissolution is that Rothwell sometimes pushes the limits of writing. The sentences come close to cancelling the very propositions they contain, which could perplex the reader, in regards to what views are endorsed by the narrator and his author.

Yet, one perceives a didactic dimension in this risky choice. *The Red Highway* starts with a lengthy analysis of Kupka’s work and motives because it serves as a model for questioning the views of other characters whose journeys rarely escape neo-colonial proclivities. The narrator occasionally comments on their failings, such as when he recoils in horror before a collection of sacred Aboriginal artefacts displayed in Henk Guth’s Panorama Gallery in Alice Springs. Worryingly, in other instances, the narrator fails to identify the implications of unethical proposals put before him. Karen Dayman, who works at the Mangkaja Arts Centre in Fitzroy Crossing, sings the praise of Indigenous cultures: “More and more, I feel desert people are put here to have our dreams for us, and tell them to us, and keep our hearts alive” (94). To conceive that the function of the Indigene (“put here ... for us”) is to reveal to the non-Indigenous person something of the world, or something about themselves, is highly problematic. Time and again in his books, Rothwell points to the contemporary tendency for non-Indigenous Australians to appropriate elements of Indigenous culture, beliefs or their sacred places, in order to resolve their own crises. Why, then, is the narrator so close to following the same path? Rock-art specialist George Chaloupka suspects, with reason, that

---

<sup>78</sup> Russell West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 198.

his friend-cum-narrator may be going down the path of cultural appropriation. He challenges him: “And what do you really think you were looking for ... in all this story of Kupka’s life?” (59). The narrator is forced to concede: “A rhyme – a parallel, I said, surprised by the directness of the question, which was most unlike him. I shrugged” (59). Narrative regression is a characteristic feature of *The Red Highway* that is also common to most of Rothwell’s books.

Ontological progress is short lived, for the narrator is hopelessly prone to relapses. He seems naturally inclined towards Romanticism, swinging between the extremes of idealism and nihilism. Is this a flaw, a contradiction in Rothwell’s representational project? Or can this be read as a ploy he uses to illustrate the difficulty of escaping European modes of representation? It will be difficult to come to a conclusion on this particular matter, but Rothwell’s prose is informed by considerable research and erudition. It seems unlikely that the author would fall into the trap he so eloquently exposes in his essays. I interpret the narrator’s slow, and somewhat regressive progress as a symptom of the pervasive nature of settler colonialism and the active structures that underpin its ideology. Musing over the fate of those who perished in the interior, the narrator imagines

that the desert claims those of sweetness and kind temper, for they alone can soothe the clang of its stillness; that it needs them, and they belong there, and they rest in its arms at peace – and the temptation towards such thoughts seems fanned by desert country, as if the landscape seeks the touch of man, and longs for us. (219)

These lines are a far cry from the deconstructive prose which scrutinised Kupka’s thought and language in the opening pages of *The Red Highway*. They seem to come straight from a nineteenth-century manuscript. The narrator’s inner battle between romantic and less anthropocentric conceptualisations of the outback is perceptible in the phrase “the temptation towards such thoughts”, but there is no doubt that he succumbs to Romanticism when he conceives that the landscape seeks “the touch of man, and longs for us”. No wonder his travelling companions lose patience with the protagonist when he is prone to such flights of fancy. Rothwell usually brings his narrator back down to earth when he becomes overtly romantic. His companions’ rebukes act both as correctives and as comic relief.

In the geographical centre of the book, after the narrator admits to roaming a picturesque outback in search of the god-in-the-landscape, the botanist Peter Latz tries to illuminate the protagonist on the dire state of the Australian deserts. His matter-of-fact description counters the narrator's romantic inclinations with a sobering dose of realism. He paints the desert as a god-forsaken, degraded landscape whose subtle ecosystems are hanging by a thread. The narrator is compelled to re-assess how he perceives the outback, but in a last-ditch effort tries to justify his romantic position: "And you don't mind what's happening? You don't miss the old desert: the dunes and parklands full of bloodwoods, and vines, and coolibahs; and the old Aboriginal men in their camps, singing, rainmaking and performing their ceremonies for months on end?" (178-179). Here, Rothwell exposes another pervasive trait associated with colonialism: he infects his narrator with the kind of "imperialist nostalgia" decried by Renato Rosaldo, the settler colonist's regret for the loss of the thing he himself has destroyed.<sup>79</sup> The protagonist takes his cues from vignettes of the past – an essentialised Centre – and functions on the mode of loss ("miss", "the old desert", "the old Aboriginal men"). Rothwell cannot let him dwell in such unethical misconceptions and gives Latz the last word:

you know very well there never was a golden age. There never was a past. If you look back into time in the desert, you run out of it right away. It was always newness. It's always life coming into being, changing, shifting: plants, animals, people too. Almost everything the old anthropologists used to think of as the essence of Aboriginality is new. (179)

Rothwell stages an ideological contest. He swings the pendulum of spatial representations between the extremes of romanticism and realism, topophilia and topophobia. *The Red Highway* is structured on a series of exchanges where different views or visions of the outback and its inhabitants compete. "Vision" is, indeed, the title of the central section in which this heated dialogue takes place. Brutally realistic depictions of the desert succeed to an idealised or essentialised interior. Rothwell places his narrator at the end of this pendulum. He is in turn challenged, mocked or illuminated through a series of re-adjustments, until he accepts the idea that it is pointless to affix a given image to the outback or Indigenous Australians. Cultures and ecologies evolve and transform.

---

<sup>79</sup> Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26 (1989): 107-122.

The dramatization of the protagonist's reversals is achieved in another way. After being corrected by other characters, Rothwell places his narrator in a position where he illuminates others. He reminisces, for example, about a trip to Jerusalem where he met a nun at the White Russian Orthodox monastery. Sister Sophia is particularly taken by a small canvas of a desert scape that she sees as "The Promised Land", "an image of paradise" (85). The narrator, who happens to know both the place and the artist, Daisy Andrews, takes the nun on a journey from Promised Land to Paradise Lost.<sup>80</sup> Her paradise is a site where many Aborigines were massacred. Rothwell's prose insists on the ethics of representation, and that not all stories are for the telling. The narrator starts with a degree of reluctance: "I began, in cautious fashion" (87). Rothwell's strategy is reminiscent of the way Sebald summons the Holocaust in *The Emigrants* (1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001). Sebald resorts to embedded narratives, a technique which "foregrounds the narrator's mediating role" to "counter the danger of appropriating the other's history".<sup>81</sup> Rothwell makes sure to leave elements in the text that encourage reflection on the representational process so that "the articulation of buried histories [goes] hand-in-hand with constant reflection on the difficult and indirect mediation, preventing the text from collapsing into identification of narrator and protagonist".<sup>82</sup>

First, Sister Sophia is told how the narrator became the recipient of the story (a story within a story). The account of the massacre is delivered through additional narrative layers. It is told by the narrator's then travelling companion, Karen Dayman, who heard this account from Daisy, who herself received the facts from a direct eye-witness, her "beloved cousin-brother, Boxer Yancar" (88). By the time the reader gets to the core of the traumatic story, the narrator has almost disappeared and Daisy's voice is the one that stands out. This *mise-en-abîme* allows the story to emerge as though unmediated, yet, upon the climactic revelation of this suppressed history, all the narrative layers collapse at once back into the narrative present. This type of narration allows the tale to retain its potency (the nun is stunned and wide-eyed when she learns about the origins of her Edenic vision) and at the same time avoids an unethical emotional transfer.

---

<sup>80</sup> Daisy Andrews is a recurring character in Rothwell's oeuvre: a whole essay is dedicated to her in *Another Country* (166-170).

<sup>81</sup> J.J. Long, "W.G. Sebald: A Biographical Essay on Current Research," in *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, eds Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neuman, 19).

<sup>82</sup> Long, "W.G. Sebald: A Biographical Essay," 19.

The ethics of representation are central to Rothwell's oeuvre. He is aware that the material he works with is not simply historical: it is a live matter. Like Ross Gibson, he demythologises the outback by bringing its suppressed stories to the fore. His narratives give an impression of immediacy and at the same time attract the reader's attention to the fact that they are contrived acts of re-presentation. The author delivers the story not second hand, but third or fourth hand. J.J. Long lauds how Sebald, in the context of the Holocaust, manages to integrate, in part, the voices of the victims and provoke empathetic unsettlement within the reader; but where Long rejoices at Sebald's ability to write "on behalf of the victims of history", I see a reluctance, on Rothwell's part, to adopt this strategy.<sup>83</sup> The reader must be informed, but the second-hand witness of trauma must not be the victim. The story should not go on living in his reader's imagination when it remains so potently present for its original recipients: "I always paint that place. Because my brother Boxer told me. I think of it, and the story, I can see it all the time, I'm looking at it in my mind" (97). Daisy Andrews' painting is the location where fictions are unmade (the outback as Eden) and the reality of the place (its physicality and its histories) is re-established. In Rothwell's narratives artworks are privileged sites which favour mediation and exchange (of stories, histories and beliefs). They become potent sites of Reconciliation. If issues of representation brought the Fall, discussions must start around representations. Rothwell is adamant that new literary forms must be found to transcend the centrality of colonialism.

### **Rothwell's narrative essay: The blurring of fiction and non-fiction**

Rothwell deliberately blurs the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction to offer a commentary on Australia's supposedly postmodern and postcolonial nature. Some characters are real historical figures or clearly identifiable contemporaries (writers, artists, anthropologists); others appear to be chance-encounters, or fictional characters that serve to give coherence to underlying themes. Two opposite movements tend to occur. In the case of real people, the narrator deconstructs the image they aim to project, shaking the fiction out of the real. This is not limited to the explorers; the author does not spare his contemporaries. In *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, the protagonist initiates a conversation with Pauline Hanson, which exposes the politician, her party and the nation as elaborate constructions. On the other hand, following the literary conventions of non-fiction, characters met by chance in road houses,

---

<sup>83</sup> Long, "W.G. Sebald: A Biographical Essay," 17.

museums or the bush are presented as the genuine article. But, on closer inspection, “bikies” sound too much like philosophers (J.C. in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, Peter Severin in *The Red Highway*), a first-generation Romanian migrant working in a mine speaks surprisingly unaccented, flawless English (*Wings of the Kite-Hawk*). Upon publication of *The Red Highway*, Rothwell was severely criticised by Peter Cochrane for fictionalising real encounters:

one has to ask how often does Rothwell put his own words into the mouths of other figures in this book, in particular the more or less anonymous acquaintances who move in and out of the story ... if the genre of memoir is to have any integrity at all then that is surely the limit. Concocting events and conversation for dramatic purposes is not on.<sup>84</sup>

Cochrane identifies a salient trait in Rothwell’s non-fiction, but these comments sound too much like the voice of the gate-keeper wishing to keep a genre pure. Could it be that Rothwell created these apparently stilted dialogues for a particular reason? Sebald, for instance, was praised for resorting to the same strategy to generate empathetic unsettlement in his readers.<sup>85</sup>

Trying to encapsulate Rothwell’ hybrid literary object, Silke Hesse coined an appealing phrase in a lengthy review of *Belomor*. She argues that he created “a new genre” – the narrative essay:

Rothwell’s novel-length narrative essay, to give it a name is, like the novel, a realistic genre. All the same, no visible distinction is made between invented persons with their imagined reality and real-life persons whose biographical details can be checked and verified ... And mingling with these live people are characters from history.<sup>86</sup>

Hesse does not comment on the function of Rothwell’s “new genre”, but the term narrative essay is particularly judicious. It is a form that holds together the paradoxes of settler society. Settler colonial structures of power rely on fictions to ensure settlement and appease the settler. Disturbing historical facts are smothered; native populations are displaced or suppressed; and the colonists’ own myths are superimposed onto much older histories and

---

<sup>84</sup> Cochrane, “Roadhouse Poets Too Good to Be True,” 6 May 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Long, “W.G. Sebald: A Biographical Essay,” 19.

<sup>86</sup> Hesse, “Nicolas Rothwell’s *Belomor*: A New Genre”

mythologies in a bid to cement a sentiment of belonging. Rothwell does not wish to fictionalise Australia any further: “I have a persisting sense that the novel sits uneasily in the Australian context, in the Australian landscape” (*JL*, 301). Non-fiction is therefore Rothwell’s medium of choice, yet his books remain narratives. This is not necessarily a contradiction of the author’s self-avowed aim to abandon fiction. The sum of stories grouped in his books composes the story of Australia and its representations. And if the interlocutor’s voice ends up sounding like the narrator’s, it is proof that the story has become an integral part of his being. A recipient of a collective memory, the narrator becomes a crossroads, a node through which many trajectories pass. The node is, of course, a zone of intensity in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s spatial philosophy – a privileged site for reinvention and a disrupter of the established order.

Rothwell’s writing is rhizomic, with a narrator who resurfaces in different stages of his evolution, book after book. The narrative is anything but linear: it is reduplicative, roams, stalls, doubles-back. Rhizomic writing is inherently political. Imperialist structures of power may have historically been hierarchical and tree-like, but as Bill Ashcroft argues, imperialism now mainly operates “rhizomically, producing its effects by a complex, diffracted, discontinuous layering rather than necessarily by acts of brute force”.<sup>87</sup> Rothwell’s hybrid narrative essays and his ethics/aesthetics of the fragment undermine imperial structures in all their forms (tree or rhizome) by spreading a *counter-rhizome*: a denunciation of legal fictions, a deconstruction of spatio-temporal paradigms, a new literary genre. Far from replicating the divisive, binary tactics of imperialism, Rothwell dismantles and remakes. He multiplies points of view but manages to draw together Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (not simply in an Australian context, but across several continents), as well as the human and non-human realms. Yet no single voice dominates the narrative; his books are truly polyphonous, which does not mean that all voices have the same weight.

The Rothwellian protagonist is reminded that complexity must be embraced if he is to understand settler society and the subtle nature of an environment like the outback: “One can think two things at once, you know – consistency’s a much over-praised virtue” (*WKH*, 280). Rothwell’s writing could be misunderstood as being inconsistent or antithetical; but the juxtaposition of contradictory points of view can be interpreted as a sign of what Edward

---

<sup>87</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 50.

Said called contrapuntal reading.<sup>88</sup> The most memorable voices that populate his works represent marginal views expressed by migrants and Indigenous Australians, or writers and thinkers who are not considered canonical.

Rothwell focusses on minority literature and relatively obscure historical characters. Apart from a deep engagement with the explorers' journals, he habitually spends little time on Australia's most celebrated authors and historical figures. For Rothwell, the answers to the ravages of colonialism must be found outside the majority tradition which fathered the destruction of Australia's ecosystems and traditional forms of knowledge. Tim Winton and Peter Carey's fictions are briefly mentioned in *Journey to the Interior* but only as the representatives of a mainstream "shadow tradition" (32). Rothwell goes further than proposing a contrapuntal reading of Australia's literary and historic heritage, *his writing* is contrapuntal – in the sense that his prose is self-corrective, and that his narrators keep readjusting their thinking. Rothwell's seemingly antithetical aesthetics acts as a reminder that the structures of colonialism have the uncanny ability to persist. It is also evidence that it may not be possible to escape the colonial models which structure our thoughts and relationships with people and the environment. Instead of witnessing the narrator's steady progress towards a more illuminated thought world, the reader is therefore confronted with the kind of narrative regression I evoked earlier.

A narrative where any sort of progress is thwarted could easily lead towards relativism and aporia. There are moments, indeed, when the endless repetition of the past almost paralyses the narrator and the narrative. Does Rothwell intend to convey an impression of despair, in response to the legacy of settler colonialism?

### **Fragments and progressive aporia: A tenuous sense of hope**

Melancholy, unfinished sentences, narrative regression, narrative paralysis – these are aporetic elements in Rothwell's texts which sometimes give the impression that "the discourse accretes rather than proceeds".<sup>89</sup> The accumulation of mediated stories does not necessarily lead to a clear sense of direction; this narrative strategy even threatens the possibility of resolution. As in Samuel Beckett's *L'innommable* (*The Unnamable*, 1952), the

---

<sup>88</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 93.

<sup>89</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), 221.



reader finds a “narrative voice talking to itself, or transcribing its thoughts as they occur, longing for extinction and silence”.<sup>90</sup> Rothwell’s narrative essays tend towards self-dissolution and remind the reader of another foundational aporetic text by Beckett: *Endgame* (1957) and its post-apocalyptic standpoint. In *Quicksilver* Rothwell reflects on his oeuvre: “I wrote earlier of the West in ruins, north Europe in ruins, and this was not figural ... How, after this, to believe in man’s order, and in his religion? How to live when the centre has not been able to hold?” (119). The allusion to W.B. Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming” reinforces the idea of an eschatological view of history. Rothwell seeks life’s enduring traces in an apocalyptic landscape where only fragments of Indigenous culture and Australia’s native fauna and flora remain. The dramatic settings he represents, the silences in which his characters wander, the fragments they collect, are the result of the settler colonial project.

His books expose the lasting ecological and cultural consequences of colonisation, and so it is fitting that they are written as fragments. Rothwell’s fragmentary style shares much in common with W.G. Sebald’s *The Rings of Saturn*, in which the author offers:

a landscape of fragments, of stories of past time, which are intricately, often surprisingly, but perhaps also arbitrarily woven together in a melancholy narrating consciousness ... The walk is through a disintegrating landscape. This is a world of the past, an end-time world, falling apart, a post-economic world of ravaged nature.<sup>91</sup>

Similar descriptions abound in Rothwell’s narratives: “we stand at the end of European civilisation. Not at its midpoint, or in the days of its autumnal decline, but at the end” (*J1*, 22). It would be tempting to conclude that Rothwell, like Sebald, positions his narrator in a logic of “melancholy despair”.<sup>92</sup> For Sebald, there is no “return to home and hearth ... The walk peters out in desolation”.<sup>93</sup> There is no going home either for Rothwell’s narrators: the motherland has been exposed as toxic. It lies in ruins, and so does colonial Australia. But this does not suggest a nihilistic standpoint. Rothwell inscribes the narrator’s journeys in a logic of returns: his narratives are always circular in nature.

---

<sup>90</sup> Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 221.

<sup>91</sup> David Darby, “Landscape and Memory: Sebald’s Redemption of History,” in *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, eds Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (Berlin:de Gruyter, 2006), 275.

<sup>92</sup> Beck, “Reading Room,” 82.

<sup>93</sup> Darby, “Landscape and Memory,” 271.

Very much like in *The Rings of Saturn*, Rothwell's aesthetics of the fragment represents a pulverised world and the evidence of historical catastrophe, but the image that dominates is a world in reformation through the gravitational pull of Australia's vast interior, Australia's margins once again achieving the status of centre. For Rothwell, meaning is still possible and the narrator's walk is not so much through a disintegrating landscape, but a reforming one. The accent is on future possibilities, on postcolonial transformations. Narrative models centred on debris or ruins are problematic, argues Ann Laura Stoler, because they tend to make the colonial apparatus appear vestigial. They also produce the literature of loss, melancholy and despair. Because the structures bequeathed by Empire continue to affect settler societies long after independence, Stoler prefers the term "ruination".<sup>94</sup> Rothwell's work often treats ruins as a radio-active product where the potency of destruction generated by colonialism is ever present (this is not simply a metaphor; the Maralinga testing grounds for the development of a British atomic bomb are very real). Like Stoler, he considers ruins as "epicentres of renewed collective claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate both despair and new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected collaborative projects".<sup>95</sup>

The outback is a privileged site where Indigenous and non-Indigenous anxieties intersect. A careful writer, Rothwell does not conflate these experiences; he only points to opportunities to build a communal future from the fragments of shattered lives, degraded landscapes and the shards of aesthetic models that have not been able to prevent these historical upheavals. I want to stress that Rothwell's bleak summation, when he evokes an apocalyptic scenario, refers to the end of western civilisation. He does not extend this argument to contemporary Indigenous Australia in the same way. Aboriginal Australia is in crisis, but he does not herald its death. Arguably, the narrator introduces the reader to primary sources which present Indigenous Australia as a world gone by. In *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, for example, the narrator momentarily succumbs to Theodor Strehlow's view that desert Aboriginals are doomed. Likewise, in *Quicksilver* he re-examines documentary film maker Ian Dunlop's *Desert People* and concludes, "It does not show a vanishing realm any more: its entire world has gone" (74). But, these are historic sources. In an interview with Bill Bunbury on the topic of traditional Aboriginal societies, Rothwell makes his stance clear: "I think the Indigenous religious domain clearly varies across the face of the continent, and it has many present

---

<sup>94</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 7.

<sup>95</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 14.

expressions which are direct descendants of what was here before we arrived. There are traditions which are still integral and vibrant in the Centre and in the North”.<sup>96</sup>

Despite passages in Rothwell’s writing that chronicle the passing of elements of traditional Indigenous society or the degradation of Australia’s ecosystems, the overall emphasis is on resilience, adaptability (of cultures and species), renewal and transformation: “Traditional Aboriginal society ... is shifting, undergoing metamorphosis, becoming something else” (*JJ*, 36). The same message is relayed in *Quicksilver* where Rothwell reflects on the work of Helmut Petri, a German ethnographer who studied Australia’s desert tribes in the years leading to World War II. Petri describes “a culture under stress and in collapse”, but as the “established religions of the northwest were failing; new cults of extraordinary vigour were sweeping through” (41-42). Rothwell finds a similar energy present in Indigenous traditional societies today. He traces the contours of Indigenous spiritual and cultural revival, which takes root in the ferment of troubled socio-political times, the like of which gave birth to Messianic times when the pressures of the Roman Empire brought about a radical transformation of Judaism and the dawn of Christianity. Rothwell does not announce the end of Indigenous culture but its revival: “The old law fails. It is overturned, a new law is preached. It will tend to borrow elements from the oppressive, threatening new master-power abroad in the world. It adapts, it assimilates, it resists – it proclaims year zero, and awaits a dawn” (45). A cautious optimist, Rothwell focuses on resilience rather than despair. It is no coincidence that his latest book is entitled *Quicksilver*, a metal known for its ability to take on new shapes, to adapt to its environment, to re-form.

The hybrid literary form adopted by Rothwell and its associated narrative strategies (the reduplicative, the regressive, the contrapuntal, the self-reflexive, *metanon*-fiction and deterritorialisation) allow the reader to observe and reflect on the author’s ethics of representation at work. Like the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* or *The Red Highway*, Rothwell stands on the threshold of two worlds, opening a door to remind the reader that another Australia, *Another Country*, exists and that much could be gained by acknowledging its reality. He presents a multiplicity of voices from the widest possible backgrounds (political, social, cultural, scientific, ecological, spiritual) to circle the issues faced by an Australia that some profess to have entered postcolonialism. The answers cannot be simple.

---

<sup>96</sup> Nicolas Rothwell interviewed by Bill Bunbury, *Encounter*, 26 September 2010.

In this mined terrain, like the foreign correspondent in war-torn countries he used to be, Rothwell advances gingerly, poised between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous, the human and the non-human, the local, the national and the trans-national – his sentences taut, often of the verge of self-annihilation. After studying the narrative strategies put in place by Rothwell to guarantee an ethics of representation, I now turn my attention to the spatial practices that are associated with his representational project.

### Part 3 Nicolas Rothwell's Ethics of Non-belonging: From "relations of co-dependency" to a "soft kind of reverse assimilation"

Much of mainstream Australia's engagement with Indigenous space and culture has been in the wake of anthropology or missionary interest. Rothwell attempts to steer away from anthropology; he proposes spatial practices that invoke cultural convergence, "relationships of co-dependency" and a "soft kind of reverse assimilation" (*JJ*, 163 and 212). However progressive they may seem, these proposals need to be scrutinised: Australia's immensities remain the location where Rothwell's characters are looking for resolution. Another issue is that the vast majority of the Indigenous people encountered by Rothwell's protagonists are painters, elders, healers and dancers living in the outback. Why so little engagement with Indigenous Australians who reside, for the most part, in towns and cities? Is the Indigenous person an exotic or romantic object to be offered to the non-Indigenous narrator in search of relief or absolution? In *The Red Highway*, speaking to an Indigenous hitch-hiker, the narrator delivers an embarrassing conclusion:

I half believe, these days, that people who come to northern Australia come here because they're lost, or searching, or on the edge of life, and silence, and they're chasing after some kind of pattern, some redemption they think might be lurking, on the line of the horizon, out in the faint, receding perspectives of the bush. (126)

An echo of this idea appears in *Another Country*: in remote Australia, it is "as if the landscape were constantly inviting one on, offering its redemptive silence and the austere grace of its indifference" (*AC*, 6-7). Can the land be ethically perceived as "indifferent" after seeing so much bloodshed? What is the extent of that "redemptive silence"? Is Australia's immense space there to "redeem" the individual, the settler?

The renewal of interest in Indigenous societies and cultures during and after the Aboriginal Turn of the 1980s corresponded to a flurry of anthropological fieldwork that nourished a misplaced belief in the wider population that "Aborigines could redeem settler Australians. As the first peoples of the land, they could understand the country in ways that later waves of peoples could not, and so they could help settler Australians to know this place and thus feel

at home in it”.<sup>97</sup> Rothwell’s works are steeped in Indigenous Australia but the author is critical of a tenacious propensity to document and anthropologise; he dissociates his work from literary anthropology. *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* acknowledges the achievements of works like Strehlow’s *Songs of Central Australia*, but the narrator finds issue with its conclusions. Strehlow became convinced of the inevitability of “the passing of the Aranda realm” and “regarded himself not only as the recorder of a disappearing world, but as its last custodian” (208). Rothwell is wary of the kind of pessimistic realism that provides justification to satisfy a neo-colonial thirst for knowledge. At its worst, anthropology is science as Medusa: it ossifies living cultures. To demonstrate the persistence of colonial mindsets in contemporary Australia, Rothwell introduces the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* to Wighard Strehlow, a grandson of Carl and a nephew of Theodor, who has formed the idea that “Aboriginal culture holds [answers] for the crisis we find ourselves in” (210). For him, researching and appropriating elements of sacred Aboriginal knowledge and culture to resolve the settler’s existential crisis is not a problem.

Rothwell’s narrator rejects these views and recoils in horror at an Adelaide auction where objects amassed by Strehlow are about to be sold: “all the secrets of Aboriginal Australia – its past, its myths, its dreams, its hopes – that had been picked through, dismembered, put up for sale” (255). Rothwell creates filiations only to emphasise the necessity of breaking them. He presents Strehlow’s death (he died of a sudden heart attack while explaining Aranda beliefs to his guests, on the very day his exhibition opened) as a retribution for exposing the rites of a civilisation whose belief system is based on secrecy. The narrator concludes that Strehlow was, after all, a “white Aborigine” (208). The attendant who wields the price list for the items on display declares that this place is the “Ground Zero of the whole Aboriginal world” (256). Still under the influence of Strehlow’s apocalyptic vision of the extinction of Indigenous knowledge and culture, the narrator gives the sentence a sinister meaning: “I saw the fireball, seething, roaring, spreading across the sand-dunes and the plains”; but the attendant disarms the narrator when he characterises Ground Zero not as the place where everything ends, but “where everything begins” (256).

Two versions of the future of Indigenous Australia contend here. Is Ground Zero the place where everything begins or ends? It is important to determine where Rothwell stands on this

---

<sup>97</sup> Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 24.

question. Robert Dixon offers a productive reading of Rothwell's narratives and establishes that for Rothwell, both settler and Indigenous "cultures, in their traditional sense ... are on the edge of irreversible decline; but they are also in the process of reforming and reconfiguring their traditional means of representation".<sup>98</sup> He concludes that Ground Zero is the place "where everything ends *and* begins".<sup>99</sup> Rothwell envisages Ground Zero as an opportunity, a common ground, a zone of intensity, in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, to jointly rebuild both societies. He dares to dream of cultural exchanges capable of altering the course of colonialism: "I see a culture that remains unplayed-out, conscious of what lies before it rather than the golden chapters of an impossibly vanished, all-dominating past it feels obliged to desecrate; conscious too, of the indigenous realm that at once questions and underpins it" (*Q*, 146-147).

While Rothwell is undeniably curious about the cultural expressions this renewal might take, as a non-Indigenous Australian, he would be ill-advised to present the way Indigenous Australians are renegotiating their Aboriginality. Contemporary authors have tried and fallen into the trap of what Robert Clarke calls "celebrity colonialism".<sup>100</sup> Central to celebrity colonialism is the tendency to stage an authorial narrator who speaks with authority about native cultures.<sup>101</sup> One of its most striking representatives is Bruce Chatwin, whose *Songlines* (1987) was a catalyst for Clarke's scrutiny.<sup>102</sup> Another example is Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980).<sup>103</sup> In those works, the authors draw on the global cultural marketplace's appetite for particular wisdoms attributed to Indigenous peoples, and Aboriginality becomes "a symbolic commodity".<sup>104</sup> Rothwell is fully aware of the criticisms surrounding Chatwin's work. In *Quicksilver*, he writes openly about this outsider who "was in essence a stylish travelling publicist" (123). He openly criticises cultural and spiritual tourism, and the commodification of culture in his essays. Neither does Rothwell pretend to be endowed with superior knowledge on things Aboriginal. On the contrary, on this subject, his prose is more elliptical and tentative than ever. Sensitive to the Indigenous sacred, he does not communicate the

---

<sup>98</sup> Dixon, "Ground Zero," 186.

<sup>99</sup> Dixon, "Ground Zero," 186.

<sup>100</sup> Robert Clarke, "Introduction," in Clarke ed., *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 9.

<sup>101</sup> Rebecca Dorgelo, "Our Man in India: William Dalrymple as Traveller and Public Intellectual," in *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, ed. Robert Clarke (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 143.

<sup>102</sup> Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987).

<sup>103</sup> Robyn Davidson, *Tracks* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980).

<sup>104</sup> Robert Clarke, "Star Traveller: Celebrity, Aboriginality and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*," *Postcolonial Studies* 12 (2009): 230.

exact location of sacred sites he accesses unless they are already in the public domain. And unlike celebrity colonialists, who normally complete their journeys and see their existential crises alleviated, remote Australia cannot be a site of resolution for Rothwell's characters. In his works, the characters who enter the outback with such intentions see their hopes dashed, from explorers to contemporary Australian and foreign travellers. The journey never ends because this landscape has seen "so many nightmares, and such disruption" (*RH*, 190). If there is no closure for Indigenous Australians, Rothwell cannot allow closure for his non-Indigenous characters.

The desire to know and relate to Australia's vast landscapes intimately remains. Rothwell's narrators are familiar figures: the educated or culturally curious Australian in search of meaningful attachment to a land that remains elusive. A growing number of non-Indigenous Australians look to an induction into *Country*, mediated by Indigenous Australians. Such demands for interpretation are problematic because they are unlikely to escape appropriation. For Alison Ravenscroft, non-Indigenous Australians' readiness to appropriate *Country* is evidence of a misplaced desire that drives the settler to reach into Indigenous art, dance and spirituality.<sup>105</sup> For this reason, Andrew McCann is suspicious of authors and critics, who promote intimate, sacred experiences in Australia's immense space (he takes issue with Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden's *Intimate Horizons*).<sup>106</sup> Ravenscroft is deeply suspicious of literatures that encourage hybridity or Reconciliation, on the grounds that they tend to erase difference. A more ethical literature would allow the "aporias to remain" so that the settler might "*not* read" in the ways of Indigenous Australians, and "*not* [attempt] to fill in the gaps".<sup>107</sup> An aesthetics of untranslatability would then seem the way forward. On the other hand, other critics and writers, like Philip Mead, regret that there is no history of Australian culture as creolisation. In *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*, he sees the future of Australian literature in works that encompass different world views and synthesise different modes of representation.<sup>108</sup> Can non-Indigenous Australians present, or rather represent, Aboriginal ways of living and perceiving the world without attracting the ire

---

<sup>105</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

<sup>106</sup> Andrew McCann, "Patrick White's Late Style," in *Patrick White Beyond the Grave: New Critical Perspectives*, eds Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang (London: Anthem Press, 2015), 117-128.

<sup>107</sup> Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*, 2.

<sup>108</sup> Philip Mead, *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry* (2008; Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2010), 400.



of critics and Indigenous people themselves? Should we resign ourselves to existing on parallel trajectories that never intersect?

Rothwell ponders the same ethical questions: “Is the time one of cultural theft, or harmonious rapprochement between worlds? Must the consequences of colonisation inevitably be colonial?” (*JL*, 286). He delivers literary works that pursue intimate relations with Indigenous space and people, without claiming place in a physical sense. I believe he achieves the kind of balancing act that Ravenscroft commends – the title of one of his collections of essays, *Another Country*, clearly acknowledges “difference”. At the same time, his works answer to Philip Mead’s call for creolisation. He creates a new genre which straddles fiction and non-fiction and embraces Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of seeing and relating to the natural world. While doing so, he ensures that the cultural exchanges that take place are reciprocal rather than settler oriented.

To signpost the ethical principles that govern his work, and to avoid confusion between narrator and author, in *Journeys to the Interior* Rothwell signs the prologue (aptly entitled “Apprehension”) with his own name. There he reminisces on two similar incidents when he chanced upon rock carvings and paintings in the middle of the desert. In both cases, as soon as he notices signs of Aboriginal presence, his response is unambiguous: “I stopped” (xiv) and “I retreated” (xv). Rothwell does not use the place to satisfy his curiosity or sate his existential crisis. Neither does the rock art described in these passages relegate Indigenous culture to the past. Although the sacred place is introduced in a sentence composed in the passive voice, with the verb conjugated in the past perfect (“Every inch of the surface had been incised with patterns”) within a matter of three sentences everything changes: “The sun’s beams picked out the marks on the rock; they shimmered and abruptly there was movement everywhere” (xiv). Movement, the active voice and presence now characterise the place. Rothwell makes a point of stressing this word. He registers “an awareness of the landscape’s depth and the presences that rest within it” (xv). The author does not feature as a white Aborigine, but a self-conscious, ethical non-Indigenous Australian who knows when to step away from Indigenous space.

Rothwell is equally careful not to appropriate Indigenous culture. In *Convincing Ground: Learning to Fall in Love with Your Country* (2007), Indigenous Australian writer Bruce Pascoe offers a clear warning regarding spatial practices that stem from a desire to acquire

traditional knowledge of the land: true knowledge, he insists, comes with a historical understanding of the place, however troubling it may be, as well as “un-Australian” knowledge, by which Pascoe means Indigenous knowledge.<sup>109</sup> To be ethical, this knowledge must be shared willingly, upon invitation by Indigenous hosts. This is what Rothwell’s texts suggest. In the epilogue of *Another Country*, he demonstrates a similar understanding of the prerequisites for ethical cross-cultural relations: “I took up an invitation from my Western Desert friends to travel out with them into their country, which had lain unvisited for decades” (269). Rothwell weighs his words. It is their *Country*. The author will withhold most names and events, and even wonders “if this is a story for the telling” (269). Indigenous elder Ian Ward<sup>110</sup> asks him the hard question: “we sometimes ask what you want out here ... why you like to come out into this country ... Maybe we’ve got something else you want” (294). While the guest deliberately sits on the margins, Ward says, “don’t sit alone. Come and sit with us”. Rothwell’s response rings ethical: “It’s your show ... Maybe it’s best for me to watch on the sidelines” (292). The elder insists on sharing the place with him: “But we came here for you, as well as for us. We wanted you to see this place. It’s important you know – that we’ve got this country in our hearts” (292). These lines suggest that upon invitation, among friends, elements of traditional knowledge may be passed on, and *Country* may be shared, so that people keep looking after it, and are nurtured by *Country* in return.

It is easy to picture what non-Indigenous Australians gain from these exchanges; but do traditional Indigenous cultures also benefit from engagement with the mainstream? Does this exchange amount to cultural surrender? It is not Rothwell’s place to comment on the state of “Aboriginality” or to suggest to Indigenous Australians how they should negotiate these changes, but he questions whether the wider public’s renewed interest in Indigenous knowledge should be welcomed:

With their art and their troubles, their spirituality and their mesmerising difference, Aboriginal people in the bush have become ever more necessary to the mainstream. It is a strange dance. As we waltz into the future, a relationship of co-dependency, marked by the bright ring of racial thinking, controls our fate. (*Jl*, 163)

---

<sup>109</sup> Bruce Pascoe, *Convincing Ground: Learning to Fall in Love with Your Country* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 235-236.

<sup>110</sup> The Indigenous elder who died ignominiously in an overheated police van on the way to custody for a minor offence on Australia day 2008. Rothwell dedicates his next book of essays, *Journeys to the Interior*, to his memory.

The author senses that this relationship of co-dependency is unlikely to rhyme with equality. This “strange dance” is likely to be marked by imbalance, with Indigenous Australians losing more than they gain. Confronted by the inevitability of momentous changes (“fate” is invoked), Rothwell takes a pro-active approach. He envisages a mainstream Australia changed at the contact with Indigenous Australia and writes about “a soft kind of reverse assimilation” (*Jl*, 212). In an interview with Bill Bunbury, Rothwell explains this concept further:

We have shaped the Aboriginal domain to us and it has in a reverse fashion, deeply colonised us. And if you go to parts of the western inland and to the West and the North, you'll find, I think, very strong evidence that the European population, or the mainstream population, has been Aboriginalised a great deal, even in places where the Aboriginal presence has been decimated or has gone underground.<sup>111</sup>

Two versions of reverse assimilation are evident in Rothwell’s work: a geographic one, where the landscape transforms the individual immersed in *Country* – from the colonial explorers to contemporary Australians; and a cultural reverse assimilation, where non-Indigenous Australians may be slowly transformed through contact with Indigenous Australians. For Rothwell, it is a matter of necessity that the settler (his proposal does not apply to Indigenous Australians, who have already undergone their fair share of assimilation) must adopt new ways of seeing, living, creating and believing. Should this fail, the nation will be turned into a geographic and cultural desert where the monocultures of Empire or the capitalistic West reign supreme over the headstones of minorities and socio-cultural diversity.

Hybridity, however, can easily favour the dominating culture. What sort of hybridity does Rothwell advocate? In his gallery of personages, George Chaloupka is perhaps the character who best embodies an ethical model of reverse assimilation. Chaloupka is an acclaimed rock art academic who has published very widely on Indigenous cave paintings in the northern tropics. He features prominently in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, where he acts as a foil to characters like Grahame Walsh, who nourish less ethical relations with Indigenous space and culture. After many years of immersion in *Country*, Chaloupka reflects: “I wonder if the Aboriginal influence upon me is coming out? Have I become part of their world, without

---

<sup>111</sup> Nicolas Rothwell interviewed by Bill Bunbury, *Encounter*, 26 September 2010.

fully knowing it?” (77). This reverse assimilation is ethical because it has taken place through his “closest companions” and has not resulted in an appropriation, but a cohabitation that accommodates complexity (73). One belief, or way of seeing, does not supersede the other: “there are two layers of belief in me” (76). Many other non-Indigenous characters in Rothwell’s narrative essays have undergone a degree of reverse assimilation. They are not exactly hybrids who claim Aboriginality – how could they? But they have integrated cultural elements shared by Indigenous Australians. In *Belomor*, the gallerist Tony Oliver encounters Aboriginal elders who alter the course of his life. He ends up adopting less fixed ways of living, to the point of almost becoming nomadic. Yet, he is not after comprehensive knowledge, but embraces the mystery of what he cannot be privy to: “All the spirits of the Kimberley: they have their energy, and force. How persuasive they were, how seductive. But they’re not for us” (167).

Settler descendants used to justify ownership through forms of utilisation of the land; now they claim “a relationship with the land that is ‘spiritual’ and not simply economic, that they, too, belong to the land, and that their identity and culture is bound up with that identification”.<sup>112</sup> Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have endowed the land with a sacred status. These experiences of the sacred are, of course, distinct and must not be conflated. Rothwell sees this point of convergence both as an issue and an opportunity. Perhaps the sacred could be the basis for spatial practices that re-invigorate cross-cultural exchanges.

Rothwell’s advocacy of hybridity, relationships of co-dependency and reverse assimilation is likely to attract criticism, and he knows this: “Until recently, of course, the taboos against westerners involving themselves in any way in indigenous art were strong ... artists walking down the road of postmodern appropriation found themselves under heavy critique” (*J1*, 284). But for Rothwell, the future of Australian art (one could extend the proposal to Australian literature and Australian society) lies in cultivating cultural exchanges: “Increasingly, notions of cross-pollination and mutual exchange hold sway in the constant conversation chambers of Australian art” (*J1*, 286). Rothwell accompanies his proposals with ample warnings against the commodification of Indigenous culture, the ethical problems underlying the

---

<sup>112</sup> Gareth Griffiths, “Afterword: Apprehending ‘Disputed Territories,’” in *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies*, eds David Trigger and Gareth Griffiths (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 300.

representation of sacred sites or totemic symbols (Geoff Bardon, the founder of the Papunya art movement which saw the rise of dot-painting, is scrutinised in *Belomor*).

Where writers like Chatwin and Davidson crossed outback Australia in confident straight lines, Rothwell pauses at each step, meanders and returns to the same places, unpeeling the successive layers of history. Before taking a step that will inevitably reterritorialise Australian space, he ponders his sentences as well as his footfall, reluctant to “reimpose order on a flux” (*JJ*, 297). The author does not favour a systematic approach or a foolproof aesthetics. Far from being dogmatic or prescriptive, he prefers to express possibilities – flexible forms of thinking and writing. Rothwell does not wish to replace one colonial centrality with another. His fragmentary mode of attempts is a rhizomic form of writing which helps overthrow “the myth of centrality fundamental to imperialism”.<sup>113</sup> It allows Rothwell to “accommodate the various subject positions an individual may occupy within colonial discourse”.<sup>114</sup> But also to look beyond. Rothwell probes the margins for models capable of accounting for the heterotopic complexity of settler society and the social and political realities it faces. He invites his readers to locate the traces of previous occupation, to make them realise that the land is not empty, but full of signs. Contemporary Australians do not face a wilderness. Aboriginal culture is everywhere, if we learn to look. Rothwell’s deterritorialisation and self-reflection engage with a nation-wide dynamic, intellectual and sensory process of re/discovery which involves the acceptance of unsettlement and non-belonging.

### **Conclusion: Rothwell’s decolonising texts of Reconciliation**

The particular position of the non-Indigenous writer in settler societies has been efficiently encapsulated by Canadian poet Dennis Lee: “if you are Canadian, home is a place that is not home to you”; the task of the writer is, therefore, not to articulate belonging or place but placelessness and non-belonging, “to find words for our space-lessness”.<sup>115</sup> Therein lies Rothwell’s literary project. His non-Indigenous protagonists do not have a physical claim to place. Rather, they carry an emotional attachment to place, which travels with them, without putting an indelible stamp on wilderness or a sacred place. His narrators are continually on

---

<sup>113</sup> Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 51.

<sup>114</sup> Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 51.

<sup>115</sup> Dennis Lee, “Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space,” *Boundary* 23, no.1 (1974): 163.

the move: the traveller never arrives; the quest for meaning never ends; resolution always is a step away. On the other hand, Rothwell's oeuvre celebrates Indigenous Australians' ability to resist colonial impositions. Rothwell's is a literature of resilience which invigorates both cultures. In times of resurgent, inherently divisive nationalisms, when governments shy away from practical or even symbolic engagement with Indigenous communities, literary works like Rothwell's (which focus on cultural convergence, relationships of co-dependency, and advocate a reverse assimilation) are not only timely but necessary.

The contentious terrain Rothwell treads precludes simple answers. His most valuable contribution, perhaps, is to propose a literary genre that is both a symptom of, and an answer to, the issues he raises. Surely it would be safer to write behind the screen of fiction, to engage in less polemical subjects, to turn overseas, as many successful Australian authors already have. Rothwell did the opposite: a foreign correspondent for many years, he came back to write about Australia. Here he found devastation similar to that which he witnessed in Europe and the Middle East. In the rubble of civilisations pulverised or in decline, he collects fragments for an ethical poetics of space, and spatial practices that could, perhaps, inform genuine postcolonial transformations. Rothwell does not go back to the frontier to experience the gaze of the explorer "discovering" new space. This would constitute a nostalgic, neo-colonial attitude. Nor does he want to access an Australia of the origins (an ab-original, pure, essentialised Australia). He revisits the frontier at a particular time in history to highlight what was missed. For a brief moment, there was a possibility of seeing, thinking and relating to space and people differently. These colonials could have set Australia on a different trajectory, had they embraced Indigenous ways of perceiving, living or believing. Ross Gibson's *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* makes the reader ponder the social, cultural and linguistic opportunities that existed at Sydney Cove in 1788. Kim Scott in *That Deadman Dance* (2010) revisits Western Australia's "friendly frontier", which also, for a brief period of time, offered unique opportunities.

But Rothwell's literary project is not speculative historical fiction; it is an invitation to transform the course of contemporary Australian literature and society. The current generation is an informed public; the past is more accessible than ever; Indigenous literature, art, cinema and dance have become central to a distinctively Australian culture: "Our generations alive today may be the first wave of settlers to try to grasp the enormity of conquest, and to understand it as a continuous process ... We cannot help knowing that we

are here through dispossession and death”.<sup>116</sup> What is the general public going to do with this wealth of information? Will non-Indigenous Australians cultivate the kind of cultural convergence Rothwell suggests might be possible, or will they perpetuate the status quo in hope of completing the settler colonial project – the eradication or replacement of all native cultures?<sup>117</sup> These are the kind of questions Rothwell’s work stimulates. Politically, important decisions and discussions have taken place (the debates around the Bicentenary, Mabo and native title, the apology to the Stolen Generations). With the Federal government’s refusal to embrace the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the recognition of Indigenous Australians in the constitution may have taken the backseat, but states like Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory are working towards treaties. There are also signs that the general population may be more accepting of Indigenous constitutional recognition than their leaders.<sup>118</sup> Rothwell’s narratives promote ethical renegotiations of spatial and cultural relations on the mode of topophilia. The author displays cautious optimism which steers away from “the literature of ruins”<sup>119</sup> or “the literature of extinction”<sup>120</sup> and heralds a literature of resilience, reconciliation and re-creation.

Australian literature has been producing progressive “decolonizing texts of reconciliation”.<sup>121</sup> Kay Schaffer suggests that the future of Australian literature lies with experimental authors like Stephen Muecke, Margaret Somerville, Katrina Schlunke, Mark McKenna and Martin Thomas, who have developed texts which aim to find “ways of living in a decolonized landscape, of finding non-exploitative ways of belonging to country”.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, Lisa Slater praises hybrid texts which represent “the-subject-in-crisis” on an impossible quest for belonging – narratives that try to “generate a postcolonial writing practice that makes room for heterogeneous and multiple stories of belonging”.<sup>123</sup> To achieve this end, these authors enact a crisis of representation and selfhood which initiates an active reflection on one’s

---

<sup>116</sup> Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*, 6.

<sup>117</sup> This is the fundamental difference with colonialism, which seeks to use the Indigenous population as a source of labour, argues Lorenzo Veracini in *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>118</sup> According to a recent survey led by the Australian National University 73% of Australians are in favour of the recognition of Indigenous Australians in the constitution. See *The Guardian*, 27 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/27/75-of-australians-want-indigenous-recognition-in-constitution-study>. A much wider survey comprising 196,952 respondents confirmed very similar results a year later. See Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “Vote Compass: Most Australians back constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians,” Accessed 20 May 2016. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-20/vote-compass-indigenous-recognition/7428030>.

<sup>119</sup> Stoler, *Imperial Debris*.

<sup>120</sup> McCann, “The Literature of Extinction,” 48-54.

<sup>121</sup> Schaffer, “Wounded Spaces,” 150.

<sup>122</sup> Schaffer, “Wounded Spaces,” 156.

<sup>123</sup> Slater, “Intimate Australia,” 152 and 150.

culture and epistemologies, which results in the protagonist leaving the “zone of settler belonging” to seek ethical relations and exchanges with the “Indigenous other” whose resilience and adaptability opens future spaces of possibilities.<sup>124</sup> These texts, in turn, “engage the reader in an unmaking and a remaking of subjectivity, time and space, an immersive recovery of the presence of the past, in all its messy densities”.<sup>125</sup>

Rothwell’s narratives activate such paradigm shifts. Their premise is the failure of European ways of seeing and representing (rectilinear representation, Romanticism, the sublime) and the failure of the European imagination. The author deconstructs colonial ways of knowing before proposing a geopoetics that informs ethical spatial practices. To this avail he questions artificial divides established by Henri Lefebvre (perceived, conceived and lived space) and inverts Gaston Bachelard’s poetics of space. He sends his unsettled protagonists on journeys of non-belonging that lead them to embrace new conceptions of time and space. The regressive progress of his characters signals the need to remain vigilant in front of the pervasive nature of settler colonialism. The circular, fragmentary nature of his hybrid narratives suggests that no clear resolution to settler anxiety is likely to be found. The reduplicative assists Rothwell in presenting contending versions of Australian space and history. A multitude of stories, people and cultures across whole continents are put in relation, but the ultimate mediators in Rothwell’s oeuvre remain Indigenous Australians. W.B. Yeats’s love song to Maud Gonne and to an Ireland undergoing profound transformations concludes on the line: “Tread softly for you tread on my dreams”.<sup>126</sup> If new relationships marked by topophilia and a genuine interest in Indigenous knowledge and culture are to develop ethically, a possible motto for the non-Indigenous Australian could be: “Tread lightly, for you tread on someone else’s Dreaming”.

---

<sup>124</sup> Schaffer, “Wounded Spaces,” 154.

<sup>125</sup> Schaffer, “Wounded Spaces,” 164.

<sup>126</sup> W.B. Yeats, “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,” in *W.B. Yeats Collected Poems*, ed. Augustine Martin (1990; London: Vintage, 1992), 68.



## Chapter 4 Tim Winton's Decolonising Poetics of Space: Intimacy with Immensity

"You think maybe we don't belong here, like we're out of our depth, out of our country?"

"We don't belong anywhere."

...

"This is the country, and it's confused. It doesn't know what to believe in either. You can't replace your mind country with a nation, Lest. I tried."

– Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*.<sup>1</sup>

Oriel Lamb's diagnosis for the crisis faced by her family extends as a commentary for the state of the nation affected by a crisis of non-belonging. Her words are reminiscent of the pronouncement by Nicolas Rothwell's narrator in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, that the feral camels of the outback "don't belong here. They're in the wrong country".<sup>2</sup> Winton and Rothwell's portrayal of such sentiments reflects how, despite economic and social privilege, non-Indigenous Australians experience a sense of precariousness. As Peter Read argues, "Neither possession nor dispossession are any longer realisable categories; authority is arbitrary, the binary dissolves, and all of us are in place and out of place simultaneously".<sup>3</sup> Questions have been raised over Read's amalgamation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous placelessness.<sup>4</sup> But if both Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies are in crisis, one element of Read's proposition retains legitimacy: that it might be possible to construct a more ethical future in partnership. Such a project need not be articulated around the concept of belonging. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, Rothwell indicates how settler Australia might be taken into an era of "relations of co-dependency" and "a soft kind of reverse assimilation".<sup>5</sup> Like Ross Gibson, Paul Carter and Rothwell, Tim Winton presents characters who are "in place and out of place simultaneously".<sup>6</sup> He seizes this instability as an opportunity to re-imagine Australians' relationships with time, place, space and the non-human environment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* (1991; Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1998), 231-232.

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Wings of the Kite-hawk* (2003; Sydney: Picador, 2004), 306.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Probyn, "How Does the Settler Belong?," *Westerly* 47 (2002): 75-95.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Journeys to the Interior* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010), 163 and 212.

<sup>6</sup> Read, *Belonging*, 19-20.

My first two chapters studied how Winton unsettles his characters, leaving them floating in a state of dynamic irresolution amid a non-place that threatens to engulf the totality of Australia's territory. These opening chapters established a diagnosis of placelessness across much of Winton's fiction, and reflected on the causes of the characters' crises of non-belonging: recognition of Indigenous precedence, settler anxiety resulting from the colonial heritage, the destabilising forces of capitalism, tourism and globalisation, double aspect and inadequate ways of seeing. I now turn my attention to *That Eye, the Sky* (1986), *Dirt Music* (2001) and *The Turning* (2004). These works make it clear that Winton is not content with merely offering a diagnosis: he also suggests constructive directions (one cannot speak of solutions *per se*, since Winton does not believe in resolution) as to how Australians might negotiate perceived spatial instabilities. Lyn McCredden's recent study of Winton's fiction debunks previous critical assumptions that would make of Winton a conservative writer bent on belonging. For McCredden, "Winton is the poet of *non-belonging* who also dreams, and finds imaginative form for, the possibility of belonging".<sup>7</sup> But McCredden concludes that Winton's fiction explores the possibility of "restorative belonging", a statement which, on surface, could appear as a contradiction of her thesis.<sup>8</sup> Is it impossible, then, to determine whether Winton is unequivocally on the side of belonging or non-belonging, place or placelessness? Is the author inconsistent in his ontology?

My own thesis leads toward the conclusion that Winton's fiction bypasses these binary divisions and presents fundamental paradigm shifts which transcend commonplace binaries that underpin myths of identity. For Winton's characters, Australia's immensities act as a force of attraction that invites them to renegotiate their relationships with the non-human realm. There they discern the possibility of being remade. Like Rothwell, Gibson and Carter, Winton endows the bush and the outback with a recalibrating function, but before his characters can attain any form of plenitude, they must learn to renegotiate known ways of seeing, representing and relating to their surroundings. These authors suggest a change of scales (temporal and spatial) to achieve a form of intimacy with immensity, but they articulate these shifts through different literary strategies. If, in Rothwell's narrative essays or Carter's spatial histories this is initially achieved through a deconstructive, self-reflexive, literary analysis of landscape representation in the journals of colonial explorers, in Winton's fiction it is his representation of the non-human environment that provides the tools for this

---

<sup>7</sup> Lyn McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016), 109.

<sup>8</sup> McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 110.

recalibration. He decentres his protagonists so that they can acquire a much wider frame of reference in which time and place merge with space, the non-Indigenous with the Indigenous, the immense with the intimate, wilderness with wildness, and the human with the non-human.

In this chapter I argue that much of Winton's fiction resonates strongly with the conceptual frameworks provided by ecocriticism. Winton openly acknowledges the lasting influence of biologist and philosopher Charles Birch on his work.<sup>9</sup> He tends to represent "nature" as a subject in its own right, rather than object.<sup>10</sup> In his novels, beyond the subjective perspectives of his characters, one also discerns the kind of dialogical interspecies ethics advocated by Australian ecologist Val Plumwood.<sup>11</sup> Conceiving of dialogical relationships between the human and non-human is not only central to his characters' recovery; it is also instrumental in transcending notions of belonging, unproductive binary opposites and a nationalistic literature of place. In Winton's fiction, the concept of *Country* is central to these renegotiations. Winton disorients his non-Indigenous protagonists and forces upon them a crisis that leads them to become reacquainted with space and the non-human environment until they start conceiving of place as *Country*, a "nourishing terrain".<sup>12</sup> The conclusion of Winton's book of memoirs, *Island Home* (2015) makes his interest in this prospect plain. Reflecting on Indigenous traditional knowledge, "philosophies, medicine and spiritual practices", he declares:

Perhaps the simplest and most profound lesson to be learnt from Aboriginal lawmen and women is that the relationship to country is corporeal and familial. We need a more intimate acquaintance with the facts. We need to feel them in our bodies and claim them and belong to them as if they were kin.<sup>13</sup>

But country and *Country* are contentious political terrains. Is it possible, or ethical for non-Indigenous authors to envisage *Country* as the basis for Reconciliation? What does Winton mean by claiming Indigenous Australians' knowledge and philosophies, or by belonging to these traditions and land? How does the author navigate issues of appropriation?

---

<sup>9</sup> See Salhia Ben-Messahel, "An Interview with Tim Winton," *Antipodes* 26, no.1 (2012): 9-12.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Birch, *Biology and the Riddle of Life* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> See Chapter 8, "Towards a Dialogical Interspecies Ethics" in Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 167-195.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2015), 229.

The chapter opens with an analysis of two short stories from the collection, *The Turning* (2004), in which Winton renegotiates relationships with space and time. In “Big World”, on the immense surface of a desert salt pan, the protagonist undergoes a redefining scalar shift during which he perceives time merging with space. The narrator of “Aquifer” is compelled to renegotiate his relationship with time as he delves into the strata of a suburban swamp and journeys through deep time. The motif of the strata assists Winton in challenging imperial concepts of identity and in conducting a re-writing of the bildungsroman as short story cycle. In *That Eye, the Sky* (1986), Winton decolonises modes of perception and the sacred. Young Ort Flax demonstrates an acute sensory ability which enables him to conceptualise place and the non-human environment in ways that are reminiscent of the Indigenous thought world. This narrative is singular in Winton’s literary production. In *That Eye, the Sky* the protagonist does not need a pristine environment to establish a meaningful relationship with the natural realm. In this novel Winton’s conceptualisation of the non-human realm is very close to William Cronon’s: nature’s agency is just as potent in the suburban backyard as it is in “the wilderness”.<sup>14</sup>

In *Dirt Music* (2001), Winton’s renegotiations of the concept of nature are most manifest. To decolonise “centric relationships” with nature, ecocritics like Plumwood insist on the need to exit the dualisms (coloniser/colonised, centre/periphery, subject/object, male/female, human/non-human) that characterise imperialism.<sup>15</sup> Using an ecocritical lens, I analyse *Dirt Music* as a decolonising text of Reconciliation that decentres the non-Indigenous subject in an attempt to establish an intercultural and interspecies dialogue. Unlike Rothwell, who relies on a sublime aesthetics to operate these paradigm shifts, Winton mistrusts sublimity. In *Dirt Music*, one even finds Romanticism on trial. Winton, however, uses Romanticism, and more importantly Henry David Thoreau’s form of Transcendentalism, as vehicles to take non-Indigenous Australians towards what Deborah Bird Rose calls “an Aboriginal land ethic”.<sup>16</sup> Winton operates this bold rapprochement through the protagonist, *Luther* Fox, a potent, subversive agent of Reformation who is at work undermining the structures of Empire, and decolonising relationships with both the non-human environment, and Indigenous Australians and their culture.

---

<sup>14</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69-90.

<sup>15</sup> Val Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, eds William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003), 43.

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, “Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic,” *Meanjin* 47, no.3 (1988): 378-387.

## Part 1 Renegotiating Relationships with Space and Time: “Big World” and “Aquifer”

Early scholarly criticism about Winton’s fiction emphasised the importance of place in his novels.<sup>17</sup> A sense of place and belonging are primary to human identity, but place often acts as a prison in his fiction. In his first autobiographical collection of essays, *Land’s Edge: A Coastal Memoir* (1993), Winton makes it clear that it is space, rather than place, that defines the Australian identity and imagination: “Australians are surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by desert – a war of mystery on two fronts”.<sup>18</sup> The author forces spatial crises onto his characters until a more ethical spatial engagement is developed, or is at least sketched. This starts with a conscious acknowledgement of first peoples and the primacy of the non-human environment, its fundamental right to exist.<sup>19</sup> Inscribed in a much wider framework, the individual learns to form an attachment to the land that is not synonymous with belonging or nationhood. As in Rothwell’s narrative essays, Winton’s protagonists are transformed, even colonised by Australian space.

Place is riddled with time. It follows that space is an attractive proposition for characters who struggle to transcend personal, national or global forms of historical oppression. In *An Open Swimmer* (1982), for example, Jerra Nilsam seeks a secluded beach to escape from domestic tensions. It takes a visitation of whales for Cleve Cookson in *Shallows* (1984) to leave the colonial past and the trappings of genealogy. Consumed by guilt for his brother’s drowning, Quick Lamb also seeks the solace of the interior in *Cloudstreet* (1991). *Dirt Music*’s Luther Fox leaves his farm for the Kimberley after losing all the members of his family. In *Breath* (2008), scarred by his divorce and the deaths of Eva, Loonie and Sando, Bruce Pike suffers a mental breakdown and ends up sharing a humpy with a reclusive defrocked priest “beside a dry salt lake that rippled and swam against itself all day”,<sup>20</sup> a scenario that is explored in greater depths in Winton’s latest novel, *The Shepherd’s Hut* (2018). But the lesson learnt by

---

<sup>17</sup> See Peter J. Boss, “Character and Environment in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” (MA Diss., Monash University, 1997), 6. See also Salhia Ben-Messahel, *Mind the Country: Tim Winton’s Fiction* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2006); Rachel Anne Maughan Galvin, “Constructing Landscapes: Representations of the Environment in Tim Winton’s Narratives,” (MA Diss., University of Queensland, 2000); and Beth Watzke, “On the Verge: Place in the Early Fiction of Tim Winton,” in *Reading Tim Winton*, eds Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Tim Winton, *Land’s Edge: A Coastal Memoir* (Sydney: Macmillan, 1993), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Winton interviewed in Geoffrey Bennett’s documentary film, *The Edge of the World: Tim Winton* (Lindfield, NSW: Film Australia, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Tim Winton, *Breath* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2008), 210.

his protagonists is complex because seeking open spaces does not guarantee absolution or resolution.

The persistence of the past all too often causes history to repeat itself: “Winton often anchors his characters historically, providing specific dates for their stories. He also exploits repetitions and images of circularity which support a cyclical view of history “.21 Jerra soon realises that the hermit he encounters has peopled the “new” space with his memories, allowing time to recolonise space. Due to their intimate experience with Australian space, the defrocked priests in *Breath* and *The Shepherd’s Hut* are first perceived by the younger protagonists as individuals who hold potential wisdom and keys to their crises, but they fail to deliver. These false prophets are still prisoners of time: “In each book the role of the older man in the quest of the young for understanding is to appear as a source of enlightenment only to fail”.22 To avoid the repetition of the past, space needs to be apprehended differently. The boys in the short story “Big World”, young Ort Flax in *That Eye, the Sky*, or Jaxie, the troubled teenager from *The Shepherd’s Hut* do not make the mistakes of these older adults who have turned space into place by staying there. Winton, within a given novel tends to pair characters who represent old and new paradigms, a poison and its antidote.23 The younger characters become immersed in Australia’s immense space temporarily, and return to a human community where they will be able to impart different ways of seeing, thinking, moving or believing. Therein lies the value of Winton’s fiction: posing as conventional novels and stories, his narratives possess an activating function which has the potential to change the course of mainstream Australia.

The opening line of “Big World”, the first story in the collection *The Turning*, dramatizes the oppressive nature of time by compressing it into a storm cell: “After five years of high school the final November arrives and leaves as suddenly as a spring storm”.24 Unlike his acolyte, “Biggie”, who feels part of Angelus, the nameless narrator feels confined by time and place. He has no significant attachment to the community and dreams of open spaces to escape a

---

<sup>21</sup> Ffion Murphy, “That Eye the Past: History and Tim Winton’s Fiction,” in *Reading Tim Winton*, eds Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Brian Matthews, “Childhood in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” in *Reading Tim Winton*, eds Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Examples include Jerra and the old man in *An Open Swimmer*; Cleve and the Coupar dynasty in *Shallows*; Ort and Warburton in *That Eye, the Sky*; Fox and Jim Buckridge in *Dirt Music*; Pikelet and Sando in *Breath*; Jaxie and Fintan in *The Shepherd’s Hut*.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Winton, *The Turning* (Sydney: Picador, 2004), 1. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

small-town mentality that stifles the possibility of a future. Having lost his bearings in more ways than one (his family has split up; his mother is seeing someone new; he failed his exams) the protagonist hungers for movement: “Some days I can see me and Biggie out there as old codgers, anchored to the friggin place, stuck forever” (2). The character senses a force I previously identified in Rothwell’s narrative essays: the magnetic pull of the north.<sup>25</sup> He should be staying home to support his mother and figure out a career, but Australia’s immensities draw him inexorably inland: “I dream of escaping, of pissing off north to find some blue sky” (2). The magnetic nature of the interior and the north is a recurring feature in Winton’s fiction, but why are they attracted to these remote regions?

The leitmotiv that needs to be kept in mind when analysing Winton’s fiction, is that the white, often male, protagonist in crisis stands as a symbolic figure for the non-Indigenous Australian heir to colonialism. The narrator of “Big World” has reached an impasse and admits to having contemplated suicide after failing his exams. A change of lens is needed: “Some mornings out in the misty ranges the world looks like it means something, some simple thing just out of my reach, but there anyway” (9). Space is perceived as a form of deliverance; the immobilising power of the past has no currency there. At the end of this short story, in front of Australia’s immensities, time is further compressed until it ultimately stops:

The sun flattens itself against the saltpan and disappears. The sky goes all acid blue and there’s just this huge silence. It’s like the world’s stopped.

Right then I can’t imagine an end to the quiet. The horizon fades. Everything looks impossibly far off. In two hours I’ll hear Biggie and Meg in his sleeping bag ... In a week Biggie and Meg will blow me off in Broome and I’ll be on the bus south for a second chance at the exams. In a year Biggie will be dead in a mining accident in the Pilbara and I’ll be reading Robert Louis Stevenson at his funeral ... I don’t care what happens beyond this moment. In the hot northern dusk, the world suddenly gets big around us, so big we just give in and watch. (14-15)

Experiencing Australia’s immense space abates the protagonist’s existential anguish. There, time no longer represents a threat. It is defeated and merges with space: time, the horizon, the

---

<sup>25</sup> Jaxie, in *The Shepherd’s Hut*, becomes immersed in the desert on his way to the aptly-named town of “Magnet” in northern Australia.

sun – all are absorbed by the immensity of the desert. As the narrative present indicates, the moment holds infinity. Past, present and future are conflated in the phrase, “Right then I can’t imagine an end”. In a dizzying prolepsis (“In two hours”, “In a week”, “In a year”) the narrator envisions the lives of all the characters evoked in the short story. Time expands spatially into the immensity of this saltpan, offering the possibility of being remade. But is it ethical for Winton to offer Australia’s immensities to his non-Indigenous protagonists (and by extension, to his readers) as a site for enlightenment and self-reinvention? An important caveat underpins the protagonist’s epiphany: he does not territorialise space. He experiences Australia’s immensities as a temporary retreat and returns to his community. Rather than colonising space, it is the character who is colonised by space. Now equipped with a crucial spatial dimension he was lacking, he can undertake a renegotiation of identity that is not chiefly articulated around time or history – this is the paradigm shift Winton offers to non-Indigenous Australians wishing to transcend the settler condition.

Winton couples these important spatial negotiations with a significant reworking of literary representations. It is very likely that the nameless narrator of “Big World” is Vic Lang, the central character of a short story cycle that is presented as a rewriting of the bildungsroman. The bildungsroman is traditionally a lengthy, linear narrative that spans a significant amount of the protagonist’s life, from infancy or childhood to maturity. This genre, which flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, frequently corresponds to the development of a national (and often nationalistic) literature where time reigns supreme. The growth of the protagonist is often associated with the growth of the nation: novels of education are focalised by a character who initially feels an outsider, but eventually finds their place in society. What takes place in *The Turning* is quite singular. The seventeen short stories do span the formative years of a central protagonist, Vic Lang, across three decades, and most of these stories focus on transformative experiences that lead Vic to re-assess his ways of seeing, living or relating to his environment. But where, in a bildungsroman, time “happens” to characters who learn to negotiate the upheavals of history,<sup>26</sup> in *The Turning*, geography, or more specifically space, “happens” to the protagonist, who becomes unmoored from time and nationhood. If *The Turning* is a rewriting of the bildungsroman, a genre where the character’s journey towards meaning echoes a form of national progress, Winton’s collection of short

---

<sup>26</sup> The normative interventions of the state in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*; the urbanisation of Germany in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; the Napoleonic wars in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* or *Vanity Fair*; the industrialisation of Great Britain in Charles Dickens’ *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations*.



stories suggests that to enter the next stage of its development, Australia must reacquaint itself with space, a much neglected element of Australian identity.

A renegotiation of identity based on space is all very well, but what is one to do with the temporal dimension? The short story “Aquifer” re-introduces the nameless narrator who is now grappling with ways to redefine relationships with time. In this short story, Winton deconstructs and decolonises western concepts of time as chronological and presents a shift towards synchronous, multiple times, deep time and cyclical time. “Aquifer” has been interpreted by Elspeth Tilley as a neo-colonial narrative that “constructs a relationship of legitimacy and belonging for white people in Australian space”; “a grounded history expressed in metaphors of sedimentary white presence in the ground and palimpsestic overwriting of the land with white progress”.<sup>27</sup> While my analysis explores the sedimentary quality of time in *The Turning*, my conclusions are diametrically opposed to Tilley’s. The “white progress” she mentions is indeed present in “Aquifer”, but as a criticism of western conceptualisations of time and history presented as the march of modernity.

The story opens on a banal suburban scene. The nameless narrator, now adult and still living in Angelus, watches the news late at night from his sofa. A police forensic team pulls human remains from a lake. His settled life capsizes when he identifies the swamp as the playground of his youth when his parents moved to a new subdivision. He remembers a critical moment of his childhood when he witnessed the local bully’s drowning. Tall and fair, Alan Mannering is immediately identified as the aggressive son of “unhappy Poms whose house smelled of boiled cabbage” (41). Lending Mannering these traits and steeping the short story in suburbia invites reflection on the colonial impulse to anchor one’s self to place. But everything in the story points to the failure of this enterprise. An autobiographical essay in *Island Home* gives further insight into the colonial significance of the swamp for the author himself. As a child growing up in the outer suburbs of Perth, Winton describes his interactions with a receding swamp likely to have been the inspiration for “Aquifer” – a political and environmental reflection entitled “Settlers at the Edge”. The foundation of the subdivision is described as an act of aggression, a “military action” that made the neighbourhood feel like “a remote colony”.<sup>28</sup> Given the centrality of time in this short story, the aggressive levelling of the land

---

<sup>27</sup> Elspeth Tilley, *Rethinking Australia’s Lost-in-the-Bush Myth* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012), 309.

<sup>28</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 44 and 40.

reads as the force of history-as-modernity performing erasure – *tabula rasa* as colonial re-enactment of *terra nullius*.

Winton exposes this vain attempt at suppressing pre-colonial history and culture. In this narrative, all suppressed histories eventually come to haunt the living. The subdivision is built on dust, sand and ashes and the protagonist's dizzying journey through time and space signals the urgent need for temporal and spatial renegotiations. The advance of suburbia feeds on the annihilation of the non-human environment, as well as the dispossession and alienation of Indigenous Australians, represented by the cycle of eviction faced by the Jones family. As for the settler, notions of place and belonging are but a thin varnish, which, when peeled away, leave the protagonist more unsettled than ever. Yet, instead of progressing towards nostalgia or a return to golden days of innocence, the short story scrutinises time and history, and ends unresolved. The narrator cannot find closure; no one comes to confront him over the death of Alan Mannering: "the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over" (53). "Aquifer" points to the necessity of conceptualising identity differently, in terms that are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-being,<sup>29</sup> or Massey's trajectories,<sup>30</sup> where chronological time meets deep time and geology.

Chronological time as metronome is presented as a relic from the colonial era, as settler time. Even as a child, the narrator mistrusts accepted conceptualisations of time. Aged "five or six" when the first public telephone box appears in the neighbourhood, he initially develops a fascination for the reassurance offered by the "man with a BBC voice" who announces "the exact time" (40). But he soon perceives the British time representative as an unreliable and essentially colonial figure who has little authority in an Australian context where time and space are of a different nature:

I was beginning to have second thoughts about the 1194 man. My parents bought a kitchen clock which seemed to cheat with time. A minute was longer some days than others. An hour beyond the fence travelled differently across your skin compared with an hour of television. I felt time turn off. Time wasn't straight and neither was the man with the BBC voice ... I surrendered to the swamp without warning. (43)

---

<sup>29</sup> See Russell West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 174-201.

<sup>30</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005).

Instead of putting his trust in colonial time, the narrator places his trust in the non-human realm just beyond the fence. There he becomes intimate with the cyclical rhythms of nature as a surer measure of time. The swamp becomes his referent and he loses track of the dictates of modernity.

Grounding one's self in chronological time and belonging are exposed as a settler's cheap trick to trump space. It does not work. "Aquifer" opens on a momentous eruption of time into the narrator's lounge room, suggesting that even in familiar suburbia, nothing is as settled as one may think. Winton describes time traversing the protagonist, resulting in disorientation and confusion: "I forgot where I was. Life moves on, people say, but I doubt that. Moves in, more like it" (37). As he physically travels through space, back to the suburbs of his youth, not only does the narrator feel like falling through space, he is falling through time.

Chronological, western time and history as the march of modernity are ill-matched for Australian space. The land does not lend itself to these conceptualisations. The narrator surveys time like an explorer would space; he pictures the place further back in time by adding zeros to the timeline. Settler time is soon dwarfed in front of millennia of pre-European human occupation and geological time:

At the age of twelve I contemplated the others who might have drowned in our swamp. Explorers, maybe. Car thieves who drove too close to the edge. Even, maybe people like the Joneses before they became working class like us ... I imagined a hundred years, then a thousand and a million. I surveyed the zeroes of a million. Birds, fish, animals, plants were drowned in our swamp. On every zero I drew a squiggly tadpole tail and shuddered. All those creatures living and dying, born to be reclaimed, all sinking back into the earth to rise again and again: evaporated, precipitated, percolated. (49)

The paradigm shift suggested by Winton is that the scale that is needed for the non-Indigenous individual to function is not historical time but deep time, a feature that has become increasingly prominent in his oeuvre. The narrator of "Aquifer" concludes: "The brown land, I figured, wasn't just wide but deep too" (49). Winton resorts to the motif of the strata to encapsulate time in its complexity: time undifferentiated from space, time as multiple and cyclical. His use of the strata is similar to Rothwell and Gibson's: it acts as a

chronotope.<sup>31</sup> Once the surface stratum has been unpeeled and the colonial past exposed, the narrator is subject to a form of vertigo in front of deep time welling up to the surface:

beneath the crust, rising and falling with the tide, the soup, the juice of things filters down strong and pure and mobile as time itself finding its own level ... All the dead alive in the land, all the lost who bank up, mounting in layers of silt and hummus, all the creatures and plants making thermoclines in seas and rivers and estuaries ... I have, boy and man, felt the dead in my very water. (50)

Perceiving time on a geological scale allows the narrator to perceive all times, all forms of land occupation (colonial and precolonial, human and non-human) simultaneously as interlinked, in a constant state of transformation. Mannering, the colonial bully is claimed by the swamp. During the decomposition process his solids merge with the substratum, becoming part of the land, and his fluids are reabsorbed by the environment: "I thought of Alan Mannering raining silently down upon the lawns of our street. I thought of him in lettuce and tomatoes, on our roses. Like blood and bone ... My neighbour had gotten into everything; he was artesian" (48-49). Picturing this series of transubstantiations, the narrator comes to a more universal understanding of time and place as continuous processes of becoming-being, of all lives being interconnected. The short story favours the long view, a change of scale, and possibly motions towards cultural convergence: "Aboriginal time is cyclical rather than linear, and not readily separated from space ... the dead are transformed into the country, so remaining present for their kin ... there is no linear procession of generations and events, rather a recurring cycle of existence".<sup>32</sup>

But how are we to interpret Mannering's artesian nature? At first glance, his disappearance seems to purport the death of the settler, the dead-end of colonial logics of exploitation of the non-human realm, Indigenous land and people. But what is the reader to make of the fact that he returns and rains down on the land? Elspeth Tilley sees in this return the re-colonisation of Australian space.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps in this image Winton represents the pervasive structures of colonialism and advocates the need to remain vigilant. But one would be hard-pressed to see

---

<sup>31</sup> Mikhail, Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics". In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (1981; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Veronica Strang, *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 248.

<sup>33</sup> Tilley, *Lost-in-the-Bush*, 309.

there a mere repetition of the past: Mannerism has been substantially transformed. He returns, but as fertiliser (“blood and bone”) to enrich the earth rather than colonising it. As for the narrator, this experience nourishes an acceptance of displacement and unsettlement rather than a settler colonial attitude: “I chewed on these things in classroom daydreams until the idea was no longer terrifying all the time. In fact at moments it was strangely comforting” (50).

Engaging in more progressive views of time has repercussions for the conceptualisation of space. In “Aquifer”, Winton adopts spatial renegotiations that are very close to those advocated by Doreen Massey. For Massey, space must be seen as a process, not as a fixed moment in time. She emphasises the need to conceptualise space as “the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist ... Without space, no multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space. If space is indeed the product of interrelations, then it must be predicated upon the existence of plurality”.<sup>34</sup> Winton’s use of the strata in “Aquifer” adheres to these principles. But where Massey argues for the need to stop considering time and space together, authors like Winton, Rothwell and Gibson instinctively resist introducing further divides. In their works, the strata serve as a chronotope where deep time meets immense space, two infinite planes that provide the context for a necessary re-assessment of the foundations of personal and national identity.

As a literary motif, the stratum has postcolonial appeal. This organic chronotope offers the possibility of reconciling divisions between the horizontal and vertical axes of time and space, the past and the present, coloniality and futurity. As sites of sedimentation and re-invention, the swamp and the strata feature prominently in contemporary Australian literature, most particularly in the works of Indigenous writers. The swamp is central to Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013), a novel where “values of all times, past, present and future [are] working together – as all times being linked and important to us”.<sup>35</sup> The narrative structure of Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance* (2010) functions on the mode of the strata: stories are told and re-told, each time with subtle variations, allowing the tale to emerge as if organically, by accretion, a ploy that foregrounds the contemporary relevance of storytelling as a tool for reformation.<sup>36</sup> “Aquifer” initiates the reader into synchrony, “past, present and

---

<sup>34</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Alexis Wright, Mabo Lecture, “Shaping the Future” (Alice Springs, June 3-5, 2013) quoted in Philip Mead, “The Unjusticiable and the Imaginable,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 16, no.2 (2016): 6.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance* (2010; Sydney: Picador, 2013).

future working together – as all times”, to take Wright’s phrase, but *The Turning* as a whole also makes the reader experience the dynamic nature of time within the strata. To piece together Vic Lang’s life, the reader needs to be a geologist of sorts, navigating different times in a given place. The individual stories connect the characters at different stages in their development; their trajectories intersect. Winton enrolls the reader in the paradigmatic changes suggested in his short stories, a strategy he already explored, perhaps less successfully, in an earlier collection, *Minimum of Two* (1987), where seven of the fourteen short stories explore various stages of Jerra and Rachel Nilsam’s life.<sup>37</sup> Making the reader experience the lack of cohesion in the time sequence and the spatialisation of the narratives (which alternate between Angelus and White Point) initiates “a turning”, the desired re-assessment of traditional perceptions and representations of time and space – a narrative strategy that is politically-charged since it encourages a questioning of historical national narratives.

*The Turning* exposes time and the nation as dubious landmarks upon which to articulate identity. In this bildungsroman of sorts, Vic Lang’s life lies in fragments, a state of affairs that corresponds, in Winton’s fiction, with the condition of the nation: non-Indigenous Australians in crisis, flotsam in search of anchorage points after being subjected to the full force of history (personal, intergenerational, national and international), or Indigenous Australians disconnected from their land, striving to rediscover or re-invent an interrupted culture. As in canonical novels of education, each story composing *The Turning* follows the protagonist’s journey from meaninglessness to meaning; but this journey of personal illumination and growth is only achieved after an immersion in Australia’s space and the non-human environment. The narrator of *The Turning* is presented as an individual in flux, formed and reformed by the active processes that shape the environment he is part of. Literary works which are steeped in “a processual knowledge of a geography and its history”, and which multiply temporalities, have the potential to revivify “transhistorical humanism”, writes Philip Mead in his analysis of the chronotope in Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*. As they “Indigenise narrative modes and styles, they reterritorialise literary forms ... they bypass the question of identity, they defamiliarise the subtle politics of oppression”.<sup>38</sup> Winton’s use of

---

<sup>37</sup> Tim Winton, *Minimum of Two* (Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> Philip Mead, “Connectivity, Community and the Question of Literary Universality: Reading Kim Scott’s Chronotope and John Kinsella’s *Commedia*,” in *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, eds Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), 154.

the strata as chronotope in *The Turning* performs a similar function and activates a reflection on modernity:

I was right to doubt the 1194 man on the telephone. Time doesn't click on and on at the stroke. It comes and goes in waves and folds like water; it flutters and sifts like dust, rises, billows, falls back on itself. When a wave breaks, the water is not moving. The swell has travelled great distances but only energy is moving, not the water. Perhaps time moves through us and not us through it. (53)

“Aquifer” invites a re-conceptualisation of time as cyclical and multiple, of time experienced not as a constant, but a variable where it may compress or expand. The figure of the circle in *The Turning* has been interpreted as the melancholic “Cycle of Love and Loss”.<sup>39</sup> I am more inclined to read the circle as a reflection on the nature of history. In relation to Richard Flanagan’s fiction, Robert Dixon establishes that Flanagan uses “the circle as a figure for oral histories embedded in the local experience of community and place; the line as a symbol of historicist narratives of nationalism, imperialism and totalitarianism”. Like Flanagan’s, Winton’s fiction conveys “a suspicion of narratives of progress”.<sup>40</sup> Both authors are intent on representing an altermodernity of Australians living their lives on the margin, rather than inscribing their characters onto mainstream historical narratives.<sup>41</sup> In *The Turning* individuals are of a sedimentary nature; they are the sum of all the shifting, individual histories that compose a local community, a view of history which is conveyed through a particular narrative strategy. Each short story turns back on itself, inviting a reassessment of self, community, nation and trans-nation. The emphasis is on change, rather than fixed conceptualisations of time and identity (of identity *as* time). Mannering’s death puts an end to the hegemonic historical narrative of Empire. After the death of history, the narrator is able to glimpse Indigenous deep time and non-human temporal scales. What triumphs in *The Turning* is a circular plurality of time and history (precolonial, colonial and contemporary) that reflects life’s natural cycles, a quality that Bill Ashcroft identifies in Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*.<sup>42</sup> This sense of history as processual also encourages comparison with

---

<sup>39</sup> Bridget Grogan, “The Cycle of Love and Loss: Melancholic Masculinity in *The Turning*,” in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 199-220.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Dixon, “Circles of Violence: Historical Constellations in *Death of a River Guide* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*,” in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>41</sup> See Sahlia Ben-Messahel, “Richard Flanagan’s ‘Post-post’ and the Mapping of the Altermodern,” in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 103-118.

<sup>42</sup> Bill Ashcroft, “Rewriting History: *Gould’s Book of Fish*,” in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 87-102.

an Indigenous conceptualisation of time where past and future “are *embedded materially in the present*”.<sup>43</sup>

These circular histories intersect, and gradually the fictional communities of Angelus and White Point come into sharper focus. Widening the circle, these interconnected stories join the web of other fictional narratives: Angelus, the backdrop of “Big World” is the whaling town depicted in *Shallows*; White Point is central to *Dirt Music*; and the swamp of “Aquifer” is very similar to the geography that features in *That Eye, the Sky*. Winton’s fictional communities have come to form an Australian version of William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. But these communities exist, and the bildungsroman meets biography.<sup>44</sup> Angelus is easily identifiable as Albany where Winton spent much of his adolescence; the swamp depicted in “Aquifer” and *That Eye, the Sky* features prominently in *Island Home*. Winton has increasingly resorted to the autobiographical essay to further communicate his reflections on these places and communities, anchoring his fiction in the real. Fictionalising Albany or swamps around suburban Perth allows Winton to reflect theoretically on the possible futures of these places. What may start as a nostalgic impulse also triggers re-workings of the past and the present into imagined futures, a key utopian function of literature Ernst Bloch calls “*vorschein* or ‘anticipatory illumination’: the capacity not only to rail at the ugliness of the world, but to imagine a different world”.<sup>45</sup> Winton’s protagonists return to the communities they left, charged with the potential to inflect the national and transnational forces of history.

The spatial and temporal renegotiations undertaken in *The Turning* are significant. The paradigm shift that consists of moving away from western, colonial conceptualisations of time towards deep time and cyclical time accommodates a necessary account of the plurality of experiences and histories which undermines any monolithic conceptualisation of “identity”. In Winton’s fiction the individual is perceived as a process (a becoming-being) among other processes that take place synchronously. Organic motifs like the strata bind the individual to the non-human realm, which is the ultimate repository of all human activities. Starting as isolated, questing individuals, Winton’s characters learn to function in the vastest

---

<sup>43</sup> Ashcroft, “Rewriting History: *Gould’s Book of Fish*,” 98.

<sup>44</sup> Ben-Messahel mapped some of these real-and-imagined places in *Mind the Country*, x.

<sup>45</sup> Ashcroft, “Rewriting History: *Gould’s Book of Fish*,” 101.



of frameworks, becoming part of “all-time” and space.<sup>46</sup> His fiction promotes more ethical, less anthropocentric understandings of time, space and the non-human environment. Winton also engages in a decolonisation of modes of perception and of the sacred.

---

<sup>46</sup> Alexis Wright in Mead, “The Unjusticiable and the Imaginable,” 6.

## Part 2 Decolonising Ways of Seeing: *That Eye, the Sky*

*That Eye, the Sky* (1986) is Winton's third novel, written when he was in his mid-twenties. It does not have the narrative complexity or thematic depth of works like *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* or *The Turning* and, on the surface level, it seems a conservative novel of place heavily inflected with Christian theology. Declamatory statements from Winton himself only fuelled the critical backlash that followed its publication: "I know my continent, I know my country, I certainly know my landscape as to what it means to me. No-one's really going to be able to convince me that I don't belong here ... I'm not ashamed to be here as a white Australian".<sup>47</sup> A closer look at the epigraph of the novel, however, an extract from Les A. Murray's poem "Equanimity", reveals the more progressive themes developed in the novel:

From the otherworld of action and media, this  
interleaved continuous plane is hard to focus:  
we are looking into the light –  
it makes some smile, some grimace.<sup>48</sup>

The poem advocates the need for a renewed relationship with the non-human environment based on a form of intimacy that bridges the distance between man and nature. "Equanimity" suggests this can be attained by sharpening the senses and learning to perceive from a non-anthropocentric perspective "where all are, in short, off the high comparative horse / of their identity".<sup>49</sup> Murray and Winton explore representational models where the non-human environment is not the "other" space; it is the anthropocentric perspective that is "otherworld". For these authors, the suburban sprawl is space enough to initiate a renegotiation of the concept of "nature". In *That Eye, the Sky*, the transformations undergone by Ort Flax and his family come from the liminal space of the forest just beyond the fence. But Murray in "Equanimity" and Winton in *That Eye, the Sky* bridge another distance: both authors hope that non-Indigenous Australians "trapped in the point" maybe be able to perceive

---

<sup>47</sup> Tim Winton quoted in Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, eds, *Reading Tim Winton* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993), 13.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Winton, *That Eye, the Sky* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1986), epigraph from Les A. Murray, "Equanimity". All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>49</sup> Les A. Murray, "Equanimity," in *The People's Otherworld* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1983), 24.

A field all foreground, and equally all background,  
Like a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent  
Like God's attention. Where nothing is diminished by perspective.<sup>50</sup>

The coda evokes Indigenous ways of seeing which may unlock the sacred. Becoming intimate with each constitutive part of the environment, where all is foreground and background simultaneously, has the potential to deploy infinity. In a European context, Gaston Bachelard famously theorised this phenomenon in the familiar environment of the house.<sup>51</sup> In *That Eye, the Sky*, Winton transposes this form of intimacy to the outdoors – not Australia's immense space, as is usually the case in his novels, but the intimate space of the backyard.

Whichever way we look at it, *That Eye, the Sky* is a novel that refuses to leave place. Apart from attending school and an excursion to the beach, the church and the hospital, Ort does not leave the confines of a very small world. At the start of the narrative, all the characters are caught in some form of marsh: Sam Flax, the father, is in a deep coma, the senile grandmother sounds like a scratched record, and Ort's sister Tegwyn pines for an escape. Etymologically, Morton means "moor or marsh settlement".<sup>52</sup> Yet, the child protagonist is introduced by Winton as a blank slate, which heralds the possibility of new beginnings for the settler descendent: "My name is Morton Flax, though people call me Ort for short ... It also means zero (you know, like nought)" (4). At the novel's close all characters are about to transcend their state of inertia. The narrative motions towards renewal; it spans a period from Christmas to Easter, an obvious reference to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Winton focalises the narrative from the perspective of a child who tries to make sense of the world. His house, where dysfunctional characters dwell, the school where he is severely bullied, the church – none of these enclosed environments holds any answers for Ort; they just add to his puzzlement. But immersed in the non-human realm, Ort gathers a sense of meaning and purpose that has the potential to change the lives of others.

Winton effectively relocates the prime space of intimacy and immensity, from the house to the outdoors. Bachelard argued that the individual develops a sense of the immense in the

---

<sup>50</sup> Murray, "Equanimity," 25.

<sup>51</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1969; Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, "Morton." Accessed 18 November 2018. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/morton>.

intimacy of the house: the house “is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word”.<sup>53</sup> One could easily dismiss Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* in twenty-first century Australia. Trying to sketch a poetics of space in an Australian context, Jennifer Rutherford rejects the premise that houses produce the subject.<sup>54</sup> Paul Carter, in the same critical volume, questions Bachelard’s assumption that universality can be derived from the phenomenological study of poetic texts.<sup>55</sup> These criticisms are productive because they invite scrutiny of a foundational text often called upon in literary criticism to examine literary spatial representation. I believe, nevertheless, that it is possible to salvage the key principles that govern *The Poetics of Space* and use them in an Australian context. In Winton’s fiction, most of the elements that constitute Bachelard’s poetics of space can be found, but displaced or inverted. The individual does deploy an immense imaginary space, but this does not take place in the intimacy of the house.

For Bachelard, from attic to cellar, the house is a felicitous space governed by a vertical principle.<sup>56</sup> Neither topophilic nor vertical, the Australian house has coloniality in its foundations. In Winton’s novels, very few houses are conducive to infinite reverie. The house is more often a site of violence and oppression. The colonial past plagues the houses of *In the Winter Dark* and the Coupars’ in *Shallows*; Lu Fox’s place in *Dirt Music* is the site of family tragedy; Loonie is routinely beaten by his violent father in *Breath*, and so is Jaxie in *The Shepherd’s Hut*. Bachelard’s formulation that intimacy with a particular place unlocks the infinite, is still valid. Paying attention to ants, Ort is aware of the whole web of life around him. Unable to fathom what is happening inside the house, the boy spends considerable time on the verandah, in the backyard or adjacent forest, observing the outdoors at close range. He feels the dieback and the life force within the trees: “The forest moves quiet tonight. Jarrahs move a long way up, and out of sight. Now and then I hear little animal noises. All these trees are dying, and these little animals will have nowhere to live” (42).

The novel foregrounds the importance of abandoning, or at least reforming, western modes of perception if Australia is to transcend its status as an oppressive settler society (oppressive

---

<sup>53</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Rutherford, “Undwelling; or Reading Bachelard in Australia,” in *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*, eds Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010), 115.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Carter, “The Forest in the Clearing: The Environmental Poetics of John Shaw Neilson,” in *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*, eds Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010), 133-157.

<sup>56</sup> “A house is imagined as a vertical being ... Verticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic”. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 17.

towards Indigenous Australians and the non-human environment). *In the Winter Dark* was Winton's platform to expose the European Gothic as a harmful colonial relic which contributed to othering the non-human realm. *That Eye, the Sky*, and *In the Winter Dark* are two sides of a diptych. While Ort understands, and to some extent communicates with the forest on an intimate level, Maurice the settler farmer misreads the bush with devastating consequences. Winton further decolonises modes of perception by choosing the view point of a child at ground level, as opposed to the colonial magisterial gaze of the explorer that will not allow the same attention to details. Doing his homework, Ort refers humorously to Burke and Wills: "They don't seem very bright blokes" (4). Used to observing his surroundings so keenly, the boy has effectively developed new ways of "seeing" and moving:

I follow Henry Warburton ... Birds scoot across. I walk carefully over logs and dry sticks, make myself small to go through prickly bushes ... He walks without thinking of snakes, and he doesn't mind making a noise. You'll never see any animals if you walk like that. In the bush you walk real wary, real slow. You put your feet down like you're not sure it's quicksand or not. You listen with your eyes and see with your ears. (81)

Contrary to the aptly named Warburton,<sup>57</sup> who seems blind to his surroundings, the boy has learned to develop his five senses to a level bordering on the animal, a quality shared by Winton's most adaptive characters. The attentive way he moves and perceives his surroundings allows him to attain a form of "Equanimity" which assists him in bridging the distance between the human and non-human realms. *That Eye, the Sky* suggests that non-Indigenous Australians who have come to observe and know their local environment intimately may, of their own accord, have started to experience their surroundings in ways that might be similar to Indigenous Australians'. The novel invites a rapprochement between the two cultures without being motivated by a desire to pillage Indigenous ways of seeing or their cosmology. Evoking the possibilities of post-colonial transformations, Bill Ashcroft gives a balanced interpretation of the poem Winton chose as the epigraph for his novel: "The equanimity of perception reflects a controversial alliance in Murray's poetry with indigenous forms of representation. But in this case the balance is one which specifically contests the dominance of perspective and that Eurocentric objectification which encloses and commodifies space".<sup>58</sup> *That Eye, the Sky* reiterates Murray's thoughts on cultural

---

<sup>57</sup> Colonial explorer Peter Egerton Warburton authored *Journey Across the Western Interior* (1875).

<sup>58</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 191.

convergence; after several generations of land occupation, some non-Indigenous Australians “have come to the sense, which the Aborigines had before us, that ... the land is mightier than we are ... Unlike North America, it is not a vaster repeat performance of primeval Europe, a new Northern Hemisphere continent with familiar soils and seasons into which a liberal variation on inherited European consciousness might be transplanted with prospects of vast success. It is something other, with different laws”.<sup>59</sup>

Ort is busy discovering these laws by himself, swimming, running, crawling, or observing the land at close range. But what does it mean, to arrive at the same conclusions as Indigenous Australians? That non-Indigenous Australians do not need the Indigenous? How does this not undermine the unique attachment to *Country* developed by Australia’s first peoples over 60,000 years of continuous occupation? To say we can attain similar ways of seeing or knowing the land, of perceiving the sacred even, seems to suggest that the land has universal qualities discoverable by all. This proposal is both problematic and enticing. It promotes common ground to help abolish paradigms based on othering. At the same time, it is an essentialising manoeuvre that works against cultural specificities. The proposal of cultural convergence will indeed make “some smile, some grimace”. Perhaps foregrounding the premise of cultural convergence so transparently in the epigraph is meant as a warning to invite these nagging questions and prompt a re-assessment of our epistemologies. To be sure, Winton’s subsequent novels do not embrace the concept so readily, as my analysis of *Dirt Music* will establish shortly. If Winton dares to utilise cultural convergence in *That Eye, the Sky* I believe it is as a decolonising tool, rather than a neo-colonial leveller.

### Decolonising the sacred

Two forms of the sacred openly contend in *That Eye, the Sky*: organised religion and a more intuitive, earthed sacred that Ort derives from his immersions in the non-human environment. Warburton first appears as a John the Baptist in need of disciples. The prophet in the wilderness comes back to civilisation in order to preach and baptise after a period of voluntary seclusion. With a glass eye and a significant speech impediment, the preacher is not altogether convincing as a visionary. Ort soon notices that God’s self-appointed agent neglects his duties: “He only sometimes does the Lord’s Supper with us now ... and mum

---

<sup>59</sup> Les A. Murray, “Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia,” in *A Working Forest: Selected Prose* (Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997), 136.

and me are left to do it on our own. Talk talk talk” (117). Listening in on Warburton, Ort realises that the preacher’s deeds are driven by a pursuit of absolution: “I want to love properly. I want to *heal* you, Sam Flax. You will save me, Sam. Your healing will save me” (141). Worse, at the end of the novel, Warburton elopes with Ort’s teenage sister, leaving his Bible behind. Warburton is exposed as a fraud or, at the very least, a flawed prophet. As for organised religion, a farcical parody of a church service derides the institutionalised sacred (123-127). Ort does not need religious intermediaries to intercede. He derives his ministry from a sacred that is “grounded in the earthed, observable world”.<sup>60</sup> It is the boy who, armed with a bottle of ordinary kitchen oil, will anoint and possibly resurrect his father. Ort is the true agent of reformation.

In Winton’s fiction, institutional Christianity is flawed because it is, by definition, anthropocentric. A baptism in the non-human environment is almost always conditional to his characters accessing the sacred. Ort develops an understanding of the sacred after spending a considerable amount of time immersed in the non-human realm which he comes to perceive relationally – horizontally, I would add, for Winton does not favour vertical, transcendental revelations. Grace may be bestowed upon some characters, especially children (Fish Lamb in *Cloudstreet*, Bird in *Dirt Music*, Abel Jackson in *Blueback*), but only because these protagonists have managed to establish a deep connection with their natural surroundings. Winton endows Ort with superior powers of perception that are Blakeian in their scope – for “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite”.<sup>61</sup> The ending of the novel is ambiguous, but Ort is either able to mobilise the sacred that he perceives in the non-human environment, or this sacred comes to his aid. In the final scene, the characters become an extension of the non-human environment, a pervasive force which comes into the intimate space of the house and literally transfigures them:

The smell of bush flowers comes in real strong. I can smell milk. I can smell the honey from the bees. The dying trees look strong and thick and all the colours come in the window like someone’s pouring them on us ... up through the boards – that beautiful cloud creeps in. This house is filling with light and crazy music ... it’s like the whole flaming world’s suddenly making sense. (149-150)

---

<sup>60</sup> McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*, eds Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1979), 93.

Favouring an immanent sacred perceived relationally is no return to a pantheistic or pagan sacred. Winton is openly Christian, but he decolonises traditional expressions of the Christian sacred (when conceived as transcendent, vertical and hierarchical), which have served colonial structures of power. The novel culminates in the image of the non-human realm spiritually taking over the house, displacing the Bachelard site of intimacy/immensity and organised religion in a conclusive manner.

That is not to say that Winton's sacred is merely an alternative rendering of British or continental Romanticism. *That Eye, the Sky* also dethrones Romanticism's propensity to turn the wild into an open-air church. The influence of the Romantic sacred sublime has often driven conservation politics. Environmental historian William Cronon remarks that until 1934, all North American sites earmarked as National Parks were places that possessed the requisite features to ensure the individual could have a vertical transcendental sublime experience. The horizontal swamps of the Everglades were then added to the list, but grasslands are yet to achieve that status. Cronon concludes that a paradigm shift is needed: all of "nature" has been under the influence of some form of human activity (pre- and post-colonisation); "there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness".<sup>62</sup> Humans must, therefore, cease to rely on the premise that "nature, to be natural, must also be pristine – remote from humanity and untouched by our common past".<sup>63</sup> Establishing an intimate relationship with the non-human environment is still a valid pursuit, but not necessarily in the "wilderness": "the wildness in our backyards" demands equal attention.<sup>64</sup>

This is what Winton proposes in *That Eye, the Sky* and "Aquifer". Peri-urban environments are not wilderness; they are quintessentially Australian, strewn with car wrecks and the remains of industry. Yet this does not preclude the sacred. Ort experiences a tangible immanent sacred there; the rusting sawmill in the forest even acts as a church bell announcing his father's resurrection at the end of the novel. Winton abandons "the dualism that sees the tree in the garden as artificial – completely fallen and unnatural – and the tree in the wilderness as natural – completely pristine and wild".<sup>65</sup> In Winton's suburbia, the tree in the backyard shares the same genetic material as the tree in the forest and has the same sacred transformational potential for his characters. Ort's close observations of the cycles of nature,

---

<sup>62</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 79.

<sup>63</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 83.

<sup>64</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 86.

<sup>65</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 88-89.



the water levels, animal and vegetal life are reminiscent of Thoreau at Walden Pond. The quality Winton develops in his characters is “wildness”, a fundamental virtue extolled in Thoreau’s writing that is critical to Winton’s sacred. *That Eye, the Sky* may be an early novel in Winton’s literary production, but it already contains the seeds of his eco-poetics.

If we consider the diptych *That Eye, the Sky – In the Winter Dark* in light of the preparations for the Bicentenary (the novels were published in 1986 and 1988 respectively), it was timely to write two novels of place that challenged the fundamentals of settler identity: from modes of perception to modes of representation, as well as the sacred. Under the guise of a conventional young-adult novel, *That Eye, the Sky* performs important recalibrations for the characters that are most likely intended to reform the reader. Ort is an Australian version of Huckleberry Finn, a guide intended to reform the American segregationist South. On his makeshift raft, a car roof hacked off a rusting wreck, Ort navigates new relationships with the non-human environment and the sacred that are reminiscent of Huck’s relationship with the Mississippi river. Where Twain’s novel questions the values of the American South after the Civil War and champions a change of heart regarding race relations, Winton challenges traditional modes of perception, transfers the site of intimacy from the house to the non-human realm, relocates the sacred in the ground and invites his characters to develop an intimate connection with a local geography. These strategies promote a more progressive sense of place where attachment (emotional and spiritual) to the land resonates with Indigenous Australians’ and replaces material ownership and belonging. Instead of colonising the land, the individual undertaking these paradigm shifts is colonised by the land and becomes an extension of the non-human realm, which is understood dialogically.

*That Eye, the Sky* does not reach the literary heights of Twain’s novel, but I find Winton’s focalisation of the novel through a child narrator with a cognitive impairment to lead the nation towards a more progressive society an enlightened choice. Ort contracted meningitis in his infancy, which led him to lose several years of physical and intellectual development. Challenging the Cartesian humanist tradition, *That, Eye the Sky* promotes the perspective of the “weak other”, a post-humanist standpoint which, in alliance with Winton’s engagement with ecocriticism, contests dominant epistemologies.<sup>66</sup> Winton’s fiction is very much the literature of the weak other, focalised through a handicapped character (Ort Flax, Fish Lamb),

---

<sup>66</sup> See Cary Wolfe, “Learning from Temple Grandin: Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Comes after the Subject,” in *What is Posthumanism?*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 127-142.

young naïve children (Abel Jackson), child-like or depressive adults (Lu Fox, Scully, Jerra Nilsam, Cleve Cookson, Bruce Pike, Tom Keely). My analysis of *The Turning* and *That Eye, the Sky* showed Winton at work decolonising relationships with place, time, and ways of seeing and the sacred; I now turn to *Dirt Music*, where Winton decolonises relationships with the non-human environment.

### **Part 3 Renegotiating Relationships with the Non-human Realm: Dialogical Interspecies Ethics in *Dirt Music***

There are two main phases in Winton's oeuvre: earlier works, from *An Open Swimmer* to *Cloudstreet*, that are more concerned with place, and the novels of space, where Winton literally uproots his protagonists from their familiar environment to steep them into Australia's immensities (the Pilbara and the Kimberley in *Dirt Music*, the ocean in *Breath*, the desert in *The Shepherd's Hut*). These novels are still exploring the possibility of articulating an ethical sense of place, but in a different mode. One could find Winton's obsession with spatiality tedious, but the fact that he remains one of Australia's most popular writers bears proof that these concerns resonate with mainstream Australians. As Massey argues:

There is the need to face up to – rather than simply deny – people's need for attachment of some sort, whether through place or anything else. None the less, it is certainly the case that there is indeed at the moment a recrudescence of some very problematical senses of place, from reactionary nationalisms, to competitive localisms, to introverted obsessions with "heritage". We need, therefore, to think through what might be an adequately progressive sense of place.<sup>67</sup>

Winton's writing career has been centred on articulating a more progressive sense of place. Looking at the time between book releases, it is striking to note that Winton was publishing a novel every second year on average, up to the publication of *The Riders*, but seven years elapsed before the publication of his next novel, *Dirt Music*. This long gestation corresponds to a profound reassessment of the author's objectives, aesthetics and ontology. *Dirt Music* is probably the corner stone in Winton's oeuvre, marking a deep engagement with contemporary spatial and ecological philosophy, which corresponds to a redirection of the author's energies from place to space. The publication of *Breath* and *The Shepherd's Hut* confirms this re-orientation.

With *Dirt Music*, Winton had reached an impasse: a completed manuscript of 'twelve hundred pages, weighing 6.5 kilos' ready to go to press which he decided to completely

---

<sup>67</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 151.

rewrite in fifty-five days.<sup>68</sup> For the first time in his life, the prolific writer seriously started to doubt his creative abilities: “I wondered if there would be other novels. It began to feel there might be nothing left, no stories, no craft, no sustaining impulse. I was sick, ashamed, bitter, afraid”.<sup>69</sup> The final version available to the public sees his poetics of space overturned. Instead of observing a protagonist reworking his sense of place by seeking a form of intimacy with and within his familiar surroundings, the reader is witness to what looks like a social experiment whereby the character is uprooted from his known environment and immersed in one of Australia’s most remote wilderness areas. *Dirt Music* and the novels that followed still investigate this fundamental human need to develop a sense of place, but not according to the old paradigms of place-making or belonging. Winton is a lot more confident with the instabilities of place and delivers spatial representations that seem to embrace Massey’s spatial philosophy. The short story cycle in *The Turning* is the writing of place as “constellation”.<sup>70</sup> *Breath* and *Eyrie* (which followed *The Turning*) take into account what Massey calls “a global sense of the local, a global sense of place”; they dramatise outside influences on Australian communities, from the forces of global capitalism to the Americanisation of Australian society.<sup>71</sup> Winton also views place as “a *meeting* place” where individual “relations, experiences and understandings” intersect.<sup>72</sup> Such paradigm shifts share much with the spatial philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who consider place as a node in the rhizome, a point where several trajectories intersect.<sup>73</sup>

This rich philosophical material is particularly well suited for the study of *Dirt Music*, a novel that conceptualises place as a meeting place where a plurality of trajectories intersect (most notably Indigenous and non-Indigenous). The focalisation alternates between male and female viewpoints, locals and outsiders, conservative White Pointers and the more mobile Luther Fox. Winton represents place as a dynamic process, always in flux since people’s individual trajectories modify previous perceptions. The reader is also presented with non-human perspectives which affect the characters’ sense of place: “there is probably more eco-philosophy underpinning in *Dirt Music* than any of the other books. Not much of it makes it to the surface, but I was trying to find a poetical/musical prose to carry this sense of an animated world of layers and complex streams of time – all laid across a pretty conventional

---

<sup>68</sup> Tim Winton, *The Boy Behind the Curtain* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2016), 245.

<sup>69</sup> Winton, *The Boy Behind the Curtain*, 246.

<sup>70</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 154.

<sup>71</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 156.

<sup>72</sup> Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 154.

<sup>73</sup> West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory*, 241-242.

superstructure, a romance”.<sup>74</sup> It is this eco-philosophy and a fundamental rethinking of the non-human realm that bring about the characters’ transformations, from a deceptively secure sense of place at home to an acceptance of more dynamic, processual spatial relations.

The novel opens on a restless Georgie Jutland, who feels stuck in place after abandoning her nursing career to live in the fishing town of White Point with the formidable Jim Buckridge and his two boys. The introductory paragraphs read as an inventory of the different spaces that constitute her environment: the virtual space of the Internet, the proxy space of video games and television, which feel like a “World without consequence”.<sup>75</sup> Domestic space is then surveyed and perceived as perfunctory luxury. Like the vodka she gulps down, these spaces are experienced as “all sensation and no taste” (4). The only space experienced with any degree of intensity, is the non-human environment. As soon as she steps outside, her senses are mobilised: “the air was cool and thick with the smells of stewing seagrass, of brine and limey sand, of thawing bait and the savoury tang of saltbush” (5). Introduced as a prisoner of place, at a crisis point in her life, Georgie feels it is time to move out of White Point.

Winton makes this fishing community the embodiment of a predatory settler society in all its colonial glory: white, patriarchal, racist, protective and aggressive (the locals are called “White Pointers”, after the great white shark), but at the same time it is an insecure community. Ganging up on outsiders, they resort to violence to exclude Lu Fox the hippy shamateur, Beaver’s “mail-order bride”, and, to some extent, Georgie. The White Pointers colonise the land, their houses stretching horizontally as though to secure additional anchorage points. They also colonise the sea with their boats and cray pots. A sense of frontier spirit infuses the town: “addicted to the frontier way, White Pointers remained a savage, unruly lot” (17). Jim’s forebears were settler-farmers who founded the township through violent means. Jim himself is described as a ruthless fisherman who must not be interfered with. The White Pointers embody the appropriative and exploitative nature of settler society: Jim’s boat is called the *Raider*; other boats in the fleet are named *Slayer* or *Reaper*. Georgie cannot help notice that their names are “aggro-extractive” (30).

---

<sup>74</sup> Ben-Messahel, “An Interview with Tim Winton,” 9-12.

<sup>75</sup> Tim Winton, *Dirt Music* (Sydney: Picador, 2001), 4. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

Georgie, on the other hand, is the figure of the anti-settler. She is a subversive character who undermines place and its established order: “If everyone wanted to go north Georgie Jutland went south. She was divergent as though by compulsion” (166). Georgie refuses to inherit her father’s property; when she is given his yacht, she sells it and transfers the money to benefit a sister in need. All the characters are plagued by place, but Georgie seems the only one able to identify the roots of this disease with clarity: “sentimental attachment to geography irritated her, Australians were riddled with it and West Australians were worst of all” (6). She is able to do what other characters cannot: pack her bags and start her life over somewhere else (the narrative evokes a past life as a nurse in Saudi Arabia). Winton endows her with a quality all the other characters envy: mobility. Her identity is not tied to place. This is a quality also shared by Queenie, one of the most resilient characters in Winton’s oeuvre.<sup>76</sup> Georgie is another version of Queenie, a character who keeps re-appearing throughout Winton’s fiction (*Shallows*, *Minimum of Two*, *Breath*). For Winton, this ultimate fluidity (since it is trans-fictional) seems to be a key to be able to negotiate the complexities of settler colonial space.

*Dirt Music* exposes the determinism of place; what keeps non-Indigenous characters back is a toxic attachment to place. While he lords it over White Point, Jim bemoans his heritage and is terrified about being trapped in the repetition of the past, at a genetic level: “can anybody change?” is the question he tries to answer throughout the novel (288). The toxicity of White Point rubs off on its inhabitants; the place expects of Jim a particular type of behaviour: “In White Point, no matter what I do, I’m still my father’s son” (401). What Jim fears most is that he might have passed on some dreadful colonial bacillus to his offspring. He forms the opinion that his sons must neither live off the land nor the sea but should enter other careers, and sends them off to boarding school, away from the corrupting influences of White Point. Jim and Fox become Georgie’s lovers, as if they both desired her ability to exist independently from place. In contact with Georgie, they not only question their unreasonable attachment to place, they end up acting on it, and in so doing, alter the expected White Point trajectory. As both a beneficiary and a victim of the colonial ascendancy over place, Jim’s conflicted relationship with his heritage reads as Australian society looking for redemption and new directions.

---

<sup>76</sup> “Young Queenie embodies, as the queen, the key to a transcultural solidarity that reaches far beyond any given notion of multiculturalism, for Queenie embraces all species”. Sissy Helff, “Transcultural Winton: Mnemonic Landscapes of Australia,” in *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, eds Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly (Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014), 229.

Luther Fox eventually epitomises movement and placelessness, but he is initially stuck in an impasse as well. If Jim carries the sins of his father's deeds, the town's, as well as his own, Fox feels responsible for the death of his relatives when their van rolled over in the driveway. He senses that he needs to abandon place for open spaces, but lacks the willpower to leave. Musing over the tragedy that struck down Fox's relatives, Georgie asks him:

I don't understand what you're doing, she said. Living like this. I mean, why stay on?

Things, places, they're hard to shake off.

Georgie tried not to grimace. She had never understood the grip that places had over people.

That sort of nostalgia made her impatient. It was awful seeing people beholden to their memories, staying on in houses or towns out of some perverted homage.

I did think about goin north, he said. Just wanted to leave everythin and bolt. (98)

It will take another act of violence that sees his boat, car and dog destroyed, before he fully realises that place is not the answer to his problems but the cause of his woes. White Point and the family farm are a cross to bear, heavy with personal tragedy, family feuds and colonial bloodshed. Fox eventually escapes the settler logic of place to enter an experimental existence predicated on movement, transience and a close relationship with the non-human realm – in other words, a form of nomadism and a return to a hunter-gatherer's lifestyle. Changes of this magnitude do not occur in White Point or in the backyard. The epigraph of *Dirt Music*, a poem by Emily Dickinson, confirms that a Bachelard-style intimacy with place and deep introspection, "A soul admitted to itself", only leads to "Finite infinity". Winton transports the plot to the Kimberley, an area perceived as one of Australia's last wilderness areas, not so much to offer his characters a form of resolution, as to engage a critical renegotiation of our relationships with the non-human environment.

Rather than reading *Dirt Music* as "an exploration of Robinsonade themes of solitude, survival, and settling", which displays an aesthetics inspired from Romantic sublimity, I contend that the novel is not concerned with "place-making", but unmaking place.<sup>77</sup> Winton plunges Fox into this otherness (the other-than-human, the Indigenous) to make it central to his new existence. Gradually, his settler attributes dissolve in the bush. By inviting the reader to witness Fox's transformations, Winton embarks the reader into a post-settler dynamic of

---

<sup>77</sup> Kylie Crane, *Myths of Wilderness in Contemporary Narratives: Environmental Postcolonialism in Australia and Canada* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 78 and 64.

non-belonging which embraces movement, fluidity and hybridity. These important paradigm shifts come after questioning Australia's literary heritage and a reflection on modes of representation – Romanticism and the sublime in particular.

### Romanticism on trial

As I argue in relation to the sublime in Rothwell's narrative essays, there are very good reasons why Australian authors might want to resist a Romantic sublime aesthetics: the "danger of diagnosing Australia as a sublime space is that it replays rather than transforms imperialism".<sup>78</sup> For Winton the Romantic sublime is a disease:

it seems to me that the less a writer/composer/filmmaker knows about a landscape or ecosystem the more likely they are to indulge in Sublime's Disease ... The Sublime often seems like a bunch of Fine Feelings that go nowhere ... Many Romantics studied the surfaces of the Sublime. Their patience did not always stretch to studying what lay underneath, what the relations were between the forms and creatures they saw and how these related to the poet or painter himself. The rise of ecology has made the Sublime look a bit one-dimensional.<sup>79</sup>

In Winton's fiction, characters who read the sublime in their natural surroundings, or who are prone to romanticise the non-human environment, perish or come close to dying. Winton does not utilise the desert, the bush or the ocean to bring about a transformative sublime revelation to his characters. They need actively to work on their identity or spiritual crisis if they want to journey towards a form of resolution. Winton resists the sublime for another reason: it provides but a limited engagement with the non-human environment. The individual who experiences terror also knows, deep down, that a return to civilisation is possible: "playing with fear while knowing we are safe" is "an aesthetic luxury reserved only for those already in a position of dominance over the very 'nature' they profess to desire in its untamed state".<sup>80</sup> Winton throws Fox into the deep end of nature with no prospect of return. He literally burns all his bridges at White Point: his dog has been killed, his ute destroyed and he believes Jim burnt down his house. Fox seeks sanctuary in the Kimberley but he will have to change his romantic mindset to survive there. In *Dirt Music*, "The Romantic trope of the

---

<sup>78</sup> Ian McLean, *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 161.

<sup>79</sup> Tim Winton to Stephane Cordier, 28 September 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 262.



individual seeking a kind of sublime reverie in solitude is obvious, yet ‘wilderness’ does not stand as some privileged ground accommodating the transcendental self”.<sup>81</sup>

If Winton endows his protagonist with key attributes of Romanticism, it is to denounce them: Fox stands as a test case against Romanticism. His views on the non-human environment initially resemble the Romantics’ response to the Industrial Revolution. Fox laments the degraded landscape around him: mining operations gouging the land, the wheat belt and its monoculture. He reads Keats and quotes Blake when talking to his dog. Leaving White Point, he cherishes “The idea of a place to be truly alone in – wilderness” (294). To denounce the fallacy of Fox’s romantic designs, Winton slowly kills his character in two ways: starvation and madness caused by isolation. The text also unpicks the Romantics’ inclination to essentialise the non-human environment. Fox initially forms the idea that the wilderness is “somewhere clean” and pure (294). Worse, Fox’s romantic “idea of wilderness seems to rest on a concept of a space which is void of cultural meaning”.<sup>82</sup> The protagonist is oblivious to the fact that he stands on the continent that is home to the world’s oldest continuing culture. He realises the Kimberley is no virgin territory when, within an hour of clumsy bush-bashing, he blunders into two unforgettable Indigenous characters, Menzies and Axle, who will determine how he should relate to the space he is about to traverse:

In an hour or so he’s nearly buggered. His skin feels flayed by speargrass. Ahead a sandstone spur promises the first change of elevation. The map had shown scores of ridges unfolding seawards. This rock might offer him a view. It’s claustrophobic in all this jungly undergrowth. He gazes at the spur and bears towards it. And then a man appears on it. Fox keeps walking. The man is still there when he arrives. (301)

The scene is a parodic rehearsal of colonial exploratory journeys. Map in hand, trying to orient himself, Fox is an ill-adapted newcomer in an environment he does not understand. On the other hand, Winton represents his Indigenous characters at home, “still there when he arrives. Fox is made aware that the land he first perceived as empty space has been place for many millennia: “How long you blokes been here?” asks Fox. “All time, says Axle. Everywhen” (303).

---

<sup>81</sup> Stephen Harris, “Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*: Sounding Country/Re-Siting Place,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.1 (2015), 10.

<sup>82</sup> Kylie Crane, “The Beat of the Land: Place and Music in Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*,” *ZAA* 54, no.1 (2006): 25. Accessed 19 March 2019, [http://www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/?attachment\\_id=814](http://www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/?attachment_id=814).

Winton clearly signposts that Fox's romantic inclinations are misguided and unethical. His essentialising conceptualisation of nature as a regenerative entity, informed by his readings of Blake, Keats and Wordsworth, proves to be a serious liability. Without Axle's precious kayak, there is little chance Fox would be able to cross the body of water that separates the islands from the mainland without attracting the attention of watchful crocodiles. The salutary encounter with Axle and Menzies acts as a reality check. From then on Fox transitions from a romantic mindset, to a pragmatic, yet respectful, relationship with his natural surroundings. Yet, however practical he proves to be, the initial misconception that he could survive there on his own drives him to distraction. The misanthrope discovers that solitude can kill. Trapped in the loop of inner monologue, Fox "yells until his throat is sore" (355) and "believes he's going mad" (367). The Romantics who sought lonely moors and mountains for a bout of inspiration or godly rendezvous, came down to the village for a rustic dinner and dry paper to immortalise their sublime transactions. Winton denies Fox this possibility. This is tropical Australia. By way of soothing company the author sends Fox sharks for playmates, gives him a leaking cave for shelter, and a cyclone to water down any prospect of a relapse towards Romanticism.

Winton uses the cyclone scene as a platform to examine "the nature of nature". The tropical rains transport Fox back to a memorable storm in his boyhood where Winton stages a debate between a Cartesian, mechanistic view of nature, represented by Fox's father, and a Blakeian view of nature, represented by his mother. A nine-year old Fox brings a snakeskin home to show his parents. The mother, for whom everything is holy,<sup>83</sup> declares:

Look how good the world is, look at the things it leaves us. It means us no harm.  
The boy senses he's stumbled into a debate in progress.  
Doesn't count, mutters the old man hardly looking up...  
Holy, she says with a hint of teasing. Holy, holy, holy.  
Shit and gristle, that's all. (361)

---

<sup>83</sup> A key tenet of the proto-Romantic poet William Blake, the phrase "everything that lives is holy" appears in multiple works: "Vision of the Daughters of Albion"; it is also the last line of the "Chorus" of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Finally, it features in *America: A Prophecy*. See *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, eds Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1979), 80, 102 and 113.

Winton puts an end to the mother's touching naiveté regarding the benevolent nature of nature with savage irony: she dies during a storm, impaled by a falling branch, united with nature in ways that young Fox will not easily forget. Winton has no issue with a character perceiving the constitutive parts of the non-human environment as "holy" or sacred, but in Winton's fictional world, it is a capital mistake to see *only* godly benevolence in nature. Fox, as the progeny of both philosophies, eventually embodies a progressive middle ground and ends up a more pragmatic kind of Romantic:

Holy? He always wanted to believe it, and it felt instinctively true from a thousand days spent dragging a stick through the dirt while crows cleared their throats benignly at him and those stones whined gentle upon the hill. But there she is in the end with a tree through her ... The world is holy? Maybe so. But it has teeth too. (361)

Exposing the reader to the characters' mistakes, *Dirt Music* engages in a critical re-evaluation of Romanticism and its heritage on a cultural, social, spiritual and ecological level.

Deconstructing romantic, Gothic or sublime modes of representation (which, of course, influence modes of perception) is a foundational step for Winton before introducing a renegotiation of relationships with the non-human environment in a bid to bridge the divide that separates man from nature, and the divine. Winton represents this paradigm shift through a change of focus. Fox gradually perceives the non-human environment non-anthropocentrically, from the perspective of the elements (animal, vegetal and mineral) that compose the ecosystems he is immersed in.

### **Representing nature as subject: Death to Descartes, rebirth by Charles Birch**

One long-lasting effect of Romanticism and the sublime on spatial representations, is that the "natural environment has been subdued to landscape".<sup>84</sup> Winton, Rothwell and Gibson, do the opposite. They restore the power of the Australian environment and subdue humans to landscape, so that the non-human environment becomes a subject in its own right. Leaving the Pilbara and entering the gorge country, Fox muses over the landscape which he comes to perceive as a living entity:

---

<sup>84</sup> Bruce Clunies Ross, "Landscape and the Australian Imagination," in *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination – Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott*, eds Philippa Robin Eaden and Francis Hugh Mares (Netley, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1986), 230.

Up there the clefts harbour shadows black enough to unnerve him. Sit here looking long enough, he thinks, and those shadows'd suck the mind right out of you. Just one indrawn breath from all those gill-like fissures. These ranges look to him like some dormant creature whose stillness is only momentary, as though the sunblasted, dusty hide of the place might shudder and shake itself off, rise to its bowed and saurian feet and stalk away at any moment. (236)

This descriptive passage invests the place with a life of its own to warn the non-Indigenous traveller that he is not alone and must contend with the potent forces of geology, a particular climate and pre-European mythologies connected to the land. Winton challenges the subject-object divide introduced by Descartes by representing nature as subject, a paradigm shift introduced by the Australian biologist-philosopher Charles Birch, who refused to study the natural realm from a Cartesian, mechanistic perspective. Winton acknowledges how influential Birch has been for him in the way he conceives the non-human environment: 'I think the biologist Charles Birch had quite an impact on me over the years. His notion of the natural world as subject rather than object really thrilled me. I felt that he'd said aloud what I'd always sensed'.<sup>85</sup> Winton translates this principle in a literary form in *Dirt Music*. The first stage in this paradigm shift consists of turning Luther Fox back into a human animal. After his narrow escape from the White Pointers, Fox "crawls in where there's a bed of leaf litter and lies down amidst the fidgeting noises of small creatures" (147). Winton represents this transformation linguistically too. After Fox leaves White Point and reaches Coronation Gulf, language gradually breaks down. Sentences are stripped of flourish; adjectives become more scarce. Winton's trademark literary style, which I would define as realistic lyricism, gives way to matter-of-fact clauses often reduced to the most basic elements: a subject, a verb and complement: "His days are lived according to the tide. From the spit he casts for queenfish and trevally and now and then he takes a spanish mackerel. Amongst the rocks he jigs for mangrove jacks, fingermark, bluebone and pikey bream. He gathers driftwood as he goes and he carries it strapped to his back" (352). This is a far cry from the florid prose of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or its appropriations (the existential Crusoe of French author and philosopher Michel Tournier in *Friday* and J.M. Coetzee's metafictional *Foe*).<sup>86</sup> Fox's existence, from thought to action and language, is dictated by his immediate environment.

---

<sup>85</sup> Tim Winton quoted in Ben-Messahel, "An Interview with Tim Winton," 9-12.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Tournier, *Friday*, trans. William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd and Doubleday & Co., Inc. (1967; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986).

Unlike Crusoe, Fox leads a life that has minimal impact on the environment. He does not want to subjugate or embellish his surroundings.

The Cartesian binaries of man-subject and nonhuman-object are momentarily inverted by Winton, who represents his protagonist as an object of inquiry. Winton further undermines his protagonist's subjectivity by eliding the subject of his clauses: "Thinks of the kid out here making himself up as he goes along. Wants to return the kayak. Wonders about Menzies" (423). Reduced to the bare minimum of humanity, Fox edges closer to the fox. This transformation allows Fox to relate to his environment on a much more intimate level. As a human animal, he starts to perceive phenomena from the perspective of the vegetal and mineral realms:

Fox stands here beside himself and slips his hand into the stone fissure for the tea can, and the limestone stirs against him, its hip on his as he leans in. It's hot and damp inside and slippery on his arm as though felted with wet moss. The tin is out of reach. When he strains deeper, the rock moans and cries out in his ear. (371-372)

What is of interest here is Winton's choice to relay non-human subjectivities. Fox experiences his own actions from the rock's perspective, as a violation.

Winton goes further than Birch: he abolishes the divide between subject and object altogether by turning Fox into a hybrid creature: human and non-human, subject and object. Not only does Fox start to perceive the constitutive parts of the non-human environment as subject, he ceases to differentiate himself from his non-human surroundings:

Now and then he sees her at the shore, sees himself there, too. They're like trees. They *are* trees. All morning they reel their shadows in from the west only to troll them ever eastwards across the shell bed in the afternoon. At dusk he gets up and shuffles down to stand beside himself ... He watches himself looking on from lower boughs. He sees a naked creature swimming up against a tree ... A ragged man with flayed shanks. (404-405)

The protagonist starts to perceive himself from outside his human self, as tree and then watches himself from the tree's perspective, as other. The longer he stays in the bush, the further away he moves from anthropocentric representations in the way he verbalises what he

perceives. One discerns a move towards biocentric forms of representation in the pivotal cyclone scene, which marks a shift in the way he perceives natural phenomena: “Lightening bleaches the trees and a waterspout rises like an angry white root from the dirt-colour sea; it comes hissing and spitting across the water sucking small dark objects into the air” (359). All the similes are rooted in the non-human realm. On the other hand, the wasted artefacts Fox brought to Coronation Gulf remain unidentified.

Winton, however, is not about to introduce another division by merely inverting the old paradigm (man as object, nature as subject). To define new relationships against a particular system would constitute a simplistic reactive strategy likely to carry the very flaws of the system one seeks to reform. For Winton, the human and the non-human are one and indivisible. This is what Fox must eventually discover. To transcend his sense of isolation, Fox devises a musical instrument, a bush harp which consists of nylon fishing line attached to naturally occurring vegetation, a branch he bends so the tree remains uncompromised. This hybrid instrument becomes a centre for reconciliation between constructs that have long been considered as binary opposites: human and non-human, culture and nature, material and spiritual. While playing the instrument, Fox enters a trance and becomes a sound-wave that transcends matter, time and space. Like Alan Mannerling in “Aquifer”, Fox changes state and merges with the cosmos, literally in tune, at one with the world:

Just one note. One, one, one, one. Yes Bill. You Bill. *One command. One joy. One desire. One curse. One weight. One measure. One King. One God. One Law.* One, one, one, one ... You're so damn far into ones you're not one anything. You're a resonating multiplication. You're a crowd. You're the stones at Georgie's back and the olives shaken to the dirt at her feet. (388)

The Bill in question is William Blake who, in *The Book of Urizen*, revisits the Christian myth of creation and The Fall which resulted in the separation between man, God and nature. For Blake, the arch-enemy is not Descartes but Newton, and scientific and rational thinking: “your reason”. Many, if not all, of Winton's narratives consist of restoring these relationships. These attempts take two major forms: the individual is either re-acquainted with the non-human realm and God in the confines of place, a reconnection that can occur in suburbia, as in “Aquifer” or *That Eye, the Sky*; or the individual is immersed into a space perceived as wilderness, as in *Dirt Music, Breath* or *The Shepherd's Hut*. Winton traces the

origins of the story of *The Fall* back to the age “when we began to see ourselves outside nature. Divided from nature, divided against ourselves ... humans are from and in and inextricably bound up in nature. Our future depends upon accepting this”.<sup>87</sup> For the author and his adult characters, there is a fundamental need to re-establish an intimate connection with the non-human environment. This quest underpins much of Luther Fox’s odyssey:

As a boy he thought the place was alive somehow. At night in bed he felt the ooze of sap, the breathing leaves, the air displaced by birds, and he understood that if you watched from the corner of your eye the grasstrees would dance out there and people wriggle from hollow-burnt logs ... You could stand there, stump-still, mind clean as an animal’s, and hear melons splitting in the heat. A speck of light, you were an ember. And happy. Even after his mother died he had it, though it waned. (104)

The “it” remains elusive, but in light of Winton’s oeuvre, and *That Eye, the Sky* in particular, I believe it is possible to interpret the phrase “he had it” as “he used to have a symbiotic relationship with nature”, a quasi-angelic ability Fox attributes to his niece, Bird. If we consider the loss of that connection as *The Fall*, *Dirt Music* can be read as an attempt to recover these connections: Grace through the agency of nature, more than a transcendental God. Yet a seemingly cruel paradox underpins Fox’s climactic reunion with God and nature: the moment he accesses a non-human world view, he realises he must leave for fear of destabilising the ecosystem. The connection will not be lost upon his departure, for the deepest of transformations have occurred:

Feels every living thing, each heating, cooling form lean in on him. His skin crawls with things that were and with those pending. They hang there in the steady note of his song, in his matted hair, in the oil on his cheeks, and when he opens his eyes the quoll is right by him on the rocks ... There’s nothing left of him now but shimmering presence. This pressing in of things. He knows he lives and that the world lives in him. And for him and beside him. Because and despite and regardless of him. A breeze shivers the fig. The rock swallows the quoll. He sings. He’s sung. (451)

Winton’s is a logic of reconciliation that encompasses the human and the non-human, the linguistic and the pre-linguistic, the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous. Fox is reconciled

---

<sup>87</sup> Tim Winton to Stephane Cordier, 28 September 2016.

with the world when he finally perceives himself as a becoming-being, part of an organic superstructure where past, present and future are experienced simultaneously. The author juxtaposes elements that are traditionally presented as antithetical, or perceived as binary opposites: “for him and beside him”, “Because and despite”. The text demonstrates that these terms need not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary. Winton even reconciles antithetical principles on a grammatical level: an intransitive verb becomes transitive: “A breeze shivers the fig”; the active voice is reversed into the passive, with a reference to Indigenous cosmology (“he’s sung”).<sup>88</sup> Recast as a hybrid character birthed from an immersion in Australia’s immensities, Fox apprehends the human and non-human as a continuum, rather than as subject-object, or mutually exclusive terms.

Fox could be compared to David Malouf’s Gemmy Fairley in *Remembering Babylon* (1993), whose hybridity unleashed fierce critical debates.<sup>89</sup> But where Malouf’s character alters the course of colonial society indirectly, and almost despite himself, Fox is conscious of the paradigmatic changes he is about to introduce. Winton foregrounds Fox as a knowing recipient of newly acquired epistemologies. The air he breathes into Georgie’s lungs in the final scene is no mere kiss of life; it represents a transmission. The transformations undergone by Fox will be carried out of the wilderness, into the human realm: “He’s not the same creature. The world itself has changed” (455). The world has changed because he is not the same creature, for Fox can now perceive his surroundings from many different perspectives. By making him regain a human community, Winton turns the fox into *Luther Fox*, an agent of Reformation who has the potential to transform mainstream society.

### **Towards a dialogical interspecies ethics: An antipodean nature-writing tradition**

With its scientific drive to classify and document, and a centralised administration that controlled epistemologies, colonialism determined future relationships with the non-human environment. Val Plumwood views as one the logic of colonisation that claims new territories, their people, women and nature: domination achieved through othering.<sup>90</sup> She attacks the pillar of othering to bring down a whole series of dualisms (coloniser/colonised,

---

<sup>88</sup> In the Indigenous thought world, the individual is not merely conceived, but sung into the world.

<sup>89</sup> See Don Randall, *David Malouf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 125-146.

<sup>90</sup> Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” 53.



centre/periphery, male/female, culture/nature). For Plumwood, solutions lie in “the interplay of self and other” and “the interweaving and interdependence of nature/culture narratives of the land” – without presenting them in binary opposition, but along the lines of continuity.<sup>91</sup> *Dirt Music* constitutes a literary expression of these decolonising strategies.

To enter a progressive land ethics, the author decentres his protagonist. Inexorably, as Fox loses his privileged status of subject, he enters a new type of relationship with his environment which he comes to perceive as a web of inter-related subjectivities. Like the mystic Francis of Assisi, who conversed with fowls, Fox considers himself as a species among others and communicates verbally with the mammals, birds and reptiles he encounters, not to evangelise them, but to be evangelised by them. Fox’s immersion in the non-human realm reads as a baptism which helps him abandon anthropocentric thought. The themes of baptism, death and resurrection run strongly throughout the novel, but rather than taking water as the medium for Fox’s rebirth,<sup>92</sup> I believe Fox’s transformations take place after an immersion in the land, in *Country*. The same process takes place in Winton’s latest novel, *The Shepherd’s Hut*, where Jaxie is transformed after immersion in and crossing of the desert. Likewise, in *Breath*, young Pikelet undergoes a series of transformations after repeated immersions in the ocean, but it takes immersion in the immense space of an outback salt lake before the adult Bruce Pike can overcome the worst of his existential crisis.<sup>93</sup> All these characters eventually learn to consider themselves as being *from* nature, and weave intimate relationships with the non-human realm so it becomes known to them. Winton’s fiction adopts principles that are similar to Plumwood’s eco-philosophy, which advocates the acknowledgement of “non-humans as ‘other nations’, as ‘positively-other-than’ ... to allow a more inclusive, interspecies ethics”.<sup>94</sup>

*Dirt Music* considers the possibility of taking into account interspecies subjectivities and questions over-reliance on human forms of agency. Fox “finds that if you sit still long enough the bush or the sea will produce an event” (354). Like Ort in his backyard, Fox is literally tuned to the languages of non-human species, as suggested by the euphony of this passage:

---

<sup>91</sup> Val Plumwood, “Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism,” in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, eds J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 676.

<sup>92</sup> See the perceptive analysis of the symbolism of water in Winton’s fiction by Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden, *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature* (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2009), 295-298.

<sup>93</sup> Tim Winton, *Breath* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2008), 201-211.

<sup>94</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 194.

“The sound of the world is raw. At his ear, in the fig beside him, a leafball of green ants chickers a scratchy gossip and beyond it he hears the wingbeats of outward-bound bats and the frothing mandibles of crabs at feast amongst the mangrove” (369). He ritually plays with sharks, converses with eagles, kites and crocodiles, which he perceives as legitimate predators. He establishes relationships of inter-dependency with his surroundings, and achieves “A more dialogical and less hyper-separated interpretation of the subject/object relationship”.<sup>95</sup> For the protagonist these relationships are not solely valued for sustenance. He needs the sharks as social and recreational opportunities; he needs the tree that he bends to form his hybrid harp, to the point where “he wonders whether the tree isn’t bending him now, if he’s the singer or the sung” (403). He needs the quoll who visits him at night: “Like a big, handsome, red rat, it appears osmotically from the sandstone ... If he even breathes the quoll disappears as though inhaled by the stone itself, and he almost cries every time it goes” (404).

Winton’s protagonists experience the immensity of Australian space intimately, which leads them to reconceptualise the non-human: not as other but as part of themselves, a key tenet of American poet and essayist Gary Snyder, who “argues that nature is not something apart from us, but intrinsic”.<sup>96</sup> His characters first perceive their environment as distant, unrelatable, abstract space and gradually learn to internalise the non-human realm. Upon arrival in Coronation Gulf, Fox is confused about the particular topography he is soon to experience. He views it from the plane as otherworld: “Fox sees how old and beaten-down the land is with its crone-skin patterns, its wens and scars and open wounds ... All rigid geometry falls away; no roads, no fences, just a confusion of colour” (299). After a prolonged stay, he learns to function in this apparent smooth space, and comes to the realisation that “the world lives in him” (451). This does not mean that he makes space *place*, for this would amount to a neo-colonial reterritorialisation of space.<sup>97</sup> Fox rediscovers that he is part of something greater than himself, which assists him in transcending his existential crisis. He will, however, be forced to leave the environment he became part of. Does this signal a paradox in Winton’s eco-poetics, which advertises that the human and the non-human are one and indivisible? Why sever the link that Fox developed at such a high personal cost? Does Winton’s ecological engagement embrace the rather radical positions of deep ecology, such as the

---

<sup>95</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 44.

<sup>96</sup> Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics. Aesthetics. And Watersheds* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), front flap of the hardback 1<sup>st</sup> edition.

<sup>97</sup> Crane, *Myths of Wilderness*, 20.

exclusion of humans from particular habitats and a call for population reduction through voluntary sterilisation?<sup>98</sup>

Winton has been involved with conservation movements, including the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and the Save Ningaloo Reef campaign,<sup>99</sup> and has been a strong advocate for Indigenous peoples' right to manage their lands traditionally as a spokesperson for Jubilee Australia, but he refuses the title of eco-warrior.<sup>100</sup> Early in his writing career, he sensed that environmental activists could display social insensitivity in their idealistic pursuits. His second novel *Shallows* presents the two-faced Cachalot & Company (Greenpeace thinly disguised) and their callous lack of concern for the community of Angelus (Albany) in their endeavours to stop whaling. Winton's fiction avoids extreme forms of eco-politics and radical eco-philosophies which advocate excluding man from wilderness areas, a dramatic reduction in human economic activities or an organised, gradual disappearance of our species. Deep ecology's discourse and proposed remediation measures are opposite to Winton's goal of bridging the divide between man and nature, since they result in the re-introduction of the separation between man and nature. If, in *Dirt Music*, the non-human environment is represented as going about its own business, it does not mean it is indifferent to Fox's plight – for who would enter in a dialogical interspecies ethics, if the other interlocutor was indifferent? The phrase “despite and regardless of him” in the passage “He knows he lives and that the world lives in him. And for him and beside him. Because and despite and regardless of him” (451) could easily be misinterpreted. The repetition of the conjunction “and” asserts that all the constitutive parts of the ecosystem, including Fox, exist in relation to each other.

The strength of Winton's eco-poetics is that it is also inscribed within an eco-politics that engages with the wealth of knowledge gathered by Indigenous Australians over millennia. Winton's poetics of space revolves around relationships of mutual obligation, which underpin Indigenous Australian cultures, a thought system that takes into account human and non-human species seen as moral agents with a responsibility towards the surrounding eco-systems.<sup>101</sup> Winton not only makes Fox experience his surroundings from a non-human

---

<sup>98</sup> See the provoking essay “Four Changes with a Postscript” advocating voluntary sterilisation, in Snyder, *A Place in Space*, 32-46.

<sup>99</sup> See Winton's essays “Repatriation” (59-80) and “The Battle for Ningaloo Reef” (153-172) in *The Boy Behind the Curtain*.

<sup>100</sup> “While I was always passionate about nature, I never saw myself as an ecowarrior”. Winton, *Island Home*, 105.

<sup>101</sup> Bird Rose, “Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic,” 378-387.

perspective, he makes him experience the land from the perspective of an “Aboriginal land ethics”, where “Dreaming [or the Law] and ecology intersect constantly, providing a rich understanding of universal and local life”.<sup>102</sup> In “Paying Respect”, the essay concluding *Island Home*, Winton makes it clear that he sees the future of Australia’s environment and society in a land ethics that unites Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>103</sup> The essay form adopted in *Island Home* provides Winton with a platform where he elucidates what is implicit in the exchanges that take place between Fox, Axle and Menzies in *Dirt Music*. The author celebrates two Indigenous visionaries who informed his own land ethics: Ngarinyin lawman David Banggal Mowaljarlai from the Kimberley coast, and Kakadu elder Bill Neidjie: “Decades before ‘mutual obligations’ became a catchphrase beloved of politicians, Mowaljarlai was advancing it as a uniting principle that applied to much more than the benighted recipient of welfare. Two-way living is foundational, it springs from the earth itself”.<sup>104</sup> In an era dominated by anthropogenic climatic change and impending environmental catastrophes, there is great value in literary works like Winton’s, which question relationships with the non-human environment and experiment with non-anthropocentric representational models, especially when these models also seek to bridge cultural divides.<sup>105</sup>

But, is there any point in advocating dialogical relationships with the non-human realm if we have entered the Anthropocene? As Dipesh Chakrabarti<sup>106</sup> and Ian Baucom<sup>107</sup> argue, now that man has agency over the climate itself, all of nature has been irremediably transformed. Three decades ago, American environmental journalist Bill McKibben had already theorised man’s final disconnect with nature in *The End of Nature* (1985). In his apocalyptic reflections, McKibben argues that we are “no longer able to think of ourselves as a species tossed about by larger forces – now we *are* those larger forces”.<sup>108</sup> If we agree that this is the state of affairs and that nature is dead, I would add to their theses, that we have then entered a perpetual *monologue*. In the current geological era, maintaining that a dialogical relationship

---

<sup>102</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (1992; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 218.

<sup>103</sup> See the essay “Paying Respect” in *Island Home*, 219-235.

<sup>104</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 232.

<sup>105</sup> See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarti, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no.2 (2009): 197-222.

<sup>107</sup> Ian Baucom, “‘Moving Centres’: Climate Change, Critical Method, and the Historical Novel,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 76, no.2 (2015): 137-157. See also Ian Baucom, “History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no.1 (2014): 123-142.

<sup>108</sup> Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (1985; New York: Random House, 2006), xviii.

with the non-human realm is still relevant may constitute a case of denial and fruitless nostalgia, and therefore place severe limitations on the reach of an author's work.

Thematically and representationally, I demonstrated earlier that Rothwell, through his use of the fragment, is quite close to espousing McKibben's apocalyptic predictions and the advent of the Anthropocene. Where does Winton stand on this important question?

For Winton, it seems we are on the brink of catastrophe; yet, a tenuous sense of optimism lingers. One does not find in his novels the post-apocalyptic landscapes of Rothwell's *The Red Highway*, or Gibson's *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. Nor does Winton succumb to cynicism, a tone that can sometimes be present in Alexis Wright's novels.<sup>109</sup> Cynicism can be a powerful form of wit intended as an electric shock to force reflection on contemporary issues, but it can also involve a form of detachment from the very topic presented in the work. For Winton, cynicism and pessimism are not an option. As a father and a grandfather, he cannot *not* believe that what he holds most dear will not be experienced by his offspring. It comes as no surprise that he throws much of his energy into citizen activism directed towards environmental rehabilitation and conservation projects. But an important distinction needs to be made: the end of nature is not the end of the world. "Nature" will continue to exist in a different form (hybrid and partly humanised). For Rothwell, the miracle is that there is something left. He celebrates resilience and adaptability in humans and nature alike, though he is careful not to over-emphasise the resilience of nature, for that could justify the continuation of its conquest. Four decades ago American authors Leslie Marmon Silko and Rachel Carson<sup>110</sup> resorted to eschatological metaphors to force a rethinking of environmental relations, inaugurating "the literature of ecological apocalypse".<sup>111</sup> The Anthropocene has completely reshaped ontological debates around the vexed relationship between human and non-human realms. Acknowledging the possibility that we have reached the end of nature and actively engaging with McKibben, Chakrabarti or Baucom's theses may therefore be a more perceptive choice than pretending that we still function in the old paradigm. Perhaps the future of literature lies in other works, such as

---

<sup>109</sup> See Geordie Williamson, "Alexis Wright Stages a Counter Intervention with *The Swan Book*," review of Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*, *The Australian*, 10 August 2013. Accessed 18 January 2019. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/alexis-wright-stages-a-counter-intervention-with-the-swan-book/news-story/01891a074e8371288af74460c0f0f69e>.

<sup>110</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977) and Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

<sup>111</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 285.

Alexis Wright and Margaret Atwood's, who have started these courageous discussions in their respective fictions.

But Winton's is no ordinary nature writing; the representational strategies he adopts are significant because they offer a departure from previous models of ecologically-minded narratives. For Lawrence Buell, founding father of ecocriticism, nature writing as a literary genre tends to present place as "associatively thick, space thin": "So we speak of place-attachment rather than of space-attachment. We dream of a "place" rather than a "space" for me or for us".<sup>112</sup> Nature writing as a genre comes from North America, Henry David Thoreau being one of its first exponents. Australian ecocritic and author Mark Tredinnick deplores that Australia lacks such a literary tradition: "In Australia, where I live, there is no tradition yet of such writing".<sup>113</sup> For Tredinnick, the reason lies in the two countries' historical foundations.<sup>114</sup> America was born out of idealism and manifest destiny, Australia out of a pragmatic, secular enterprise – conditions that were hardly conducive to a keen sense of observation and celebratory odes or wonderment. I would argue that one of the reasons why Australia has not seen a Thoreau, an Emerson or a Barry Lopez is because Australian ecologically-minded authors have intuitively shied away from a nature-writing tradition associated with the literature of place. Place is still too contentious a terrain, too much remains unresolved to write from the perspective of a place literature. Yet, unlike Tredinnick, I contend that there is in Australia a nature-writing tradition. Tom Griffiths' historical investigations identified some of its earlier representatives; but where he establishes that "Early Australian definitions [and representations] of wilderness echoed the American version", I believe it is possible to theorise that *contemporary* Australian nature writing is founded on principles that are antithetical to its American counterpart.<sup>115</sup>

The authors studied in my thesis are exemplars who could be said to embody a nature-writing tradition based on space. As an exercise in antipodean inversions, one could invert Buell's or Tredinnick's observations on the nature of place and space. Winton, Rothwell, Gibson and Carter (one could possibly widen these observations to much of Australia's contemporary

---

<sup>112</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Carlton, Vic.: Blackwell, 2005), 63.

<sup>113</sup> Mark Tredinnick, *The Land's Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, & James Galvin* (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>114</sup> Tredinnick, *The Land's Wild Music*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 260.

literature) develop characters who literally dream of a *space* for them; they form a magnetic attachment to Australia's immensities. And where Buell conceptualises place as thick and space thin, Carter, Gibson, Rothwell and Winton represent space as heterotopic, multiple, dense and heavily stratified. Arguably, their works are also invested in articulating an ethical sense of place, but their primary concern lies in finding ways to transcend the literature of place. Rothwell identifies a contemporary nature-writing tradition anchored in an Australian literature of space: "I see a special tradition without match elsewhere, a tradition of works made in the likeness of the landscape, work attentive to the country, its look, its feel, its reticence ... A school has formed".<sup>116</sup> In *Quicksilver*, Rothwell names some of its luminaries: Eric Rolls, Mark McKenna, John Mulvaney, Tom Griffiths, Geoffrey Blainey, Cecil Madigan, Francis Ratcliffe, George Seddon and many more. Though Winton is mostly a novelist, he could well be part of this list of authors (one also hopes to see Rothwell include female voices to this list, as he expands his theories). In the autobiographical essays that compose *Island Home*, Winton reflects conceptually on key themes that underpin his fiction:

Space was my primary inheritance ... for each mechanical noise, five natural sounds; for every built structure a landform twice as large and twenty times more complex. And over it all, an impossibly open sky, dwarfing everything ... In the desert the night sky sucks at you, star by star, galaxy by galaxy, until you begin to feel you could fall out into it at any moment.<sup>117</sup>

Space, immense skies, overbearing deserts, swathes of bush – Australia's immensities are forces Australians must reckon with. For Winton, much of existence consists of trying to make sense of a multiform infinite that bears down on the individual from all sides, to put it down into words, into narratives, a life-long pursuit to make the immense intimate. Such a nature-writing tradition requires paying attention to the languages of the non-human realm, translating the intimate transactions that take place between species. But there is another reason for Winton to persevere in advocating dialogical relationships with the non-human realm: *Country* underpins Winton's proposal for a rapprochement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.

---

<sup>116</sup> Nicolas Rothwell, *Quicksilver* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016), 147.

<sup>117</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 18.

### Renegotiating relationships with non-Indigenous Australia: The lure of *Country*

Winton engages a decolonisation of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a productive way: by focussing on “the main common element between the two groups: that is, the land” – a strategy Ben Holgate identifies in Tasmanian novelist Richard Flanagan’s *Death of a River Guide* (1994) and *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001).<sup>118</sup> Winton does not hide his interest in the prospect of using *Country* as common ground for a cultural rapprochement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians: “The animated landscape of Aboriginal Australians is not fanciful. Landforms, plants and bodies of water possess the sort of power that’s palpable to even an heir of industrialized scientism like me ... The studious disenchantment of a modern education is no protection against it” (144-145). The author re-enchants the ground for his non-Indigenous characters, a quality that Indigenous Australians have never lost sight of.<sup>119</sup> In *Dirt Music*, Fox’s successive transformations, which include transitioning towards a biocentric world view and an earthed sacred, invite reflection on points of cultural convergence between Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views. In fact, Fox seems to acquire an alarming number of traits that literary and popular cultures frequently attribute to Indigenous Australians. Winton creates a hybrid character that straddles Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities – a perilous narrative strategy that demands close examination.

It is very clear that Fox adopts a hunter-gatherer’s semi-nomadic lifestyle in the Kimberley, but even in White Point he is characterised by mobility: he neglects the family melon farm and prefers raiding the local fishermen’s craypots for self-sustenance. From settler-farmer to poacher, Fox is characterised by his ability to cross different spaces mostly undetected. He is able to function in striated space, using backroads, highways and even airways to his advantage when necessary; and in smooth space, swimming, kayaking, or trekking long distances over sea and land. It is because of his mobility and a lifestyle on the fringes of the settlers’ property, that Fox is perceived by the White Pointers as a subversive element, a white Aborigine who needs to be eliminated. Once Fox reaches the Kimberley, Winton lends

---

<sup>118</sup> See Ben Holgate, “Greening a Narrative Mode: Antipodean Magic Realism and Ecotourism in Richard Flanagan’s Fiction,” in *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018), 48.

<sup>119</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 177.



his protagonist additional traits commonly associated with Indigenous identity. Fox's sense of identity is shifting towards a multiple, spatialized individuation. Marcia Langton explains:

Aboriginal beliefs about the place of humans in the natural world construct a different concept of personal identity from that which is conventionally understood in Western thought. The Aboriginal person – as a socialised cultural being – is conceived of, not merely as a body enclosing a singular conscious being, but rather, as spatialized by virtue of totemic affiliations.<sup>120</sup>

As the steward of a particular species or environment, the individual develops an intimate knowledge of a given ecosystem that can eventually lead the person to experience place from the non-human perspective.<sup>121</sup> Fox seems to share this ability and appears to “understand the workings of the food chain, both from [his] own perspective and from the perspective of many other species within the system” (birds, sharks, quoll, and even trees).<sup>122</sup> He “senses”, rather than merely observes, climatic change from the perspective of the whole ecosystem: “In the wake of the cyclone the season wanes and the days become clear and hot, the atmosphere drier. Fox senses the beginning of a contraction, a scarcity of berries, a browning of grasses” (363). Gradually, the feral Fox becomes the quoll, a native mammal that could be interpreted as Fox's totemic figure: the quoll routinely checks on Fox when he is at his worst. Winton seems to set Fox on a journey towards a form of “Aboriginalisation” which shares characteristics with another fictional character: the eponymous protagonist created by Indigenous writer Bruce Pascoe in his novel *Fox* (1988).<sup>123</sup> There are striking similarities between the two fictional works. In Pascoe's novel, Jim Fox is on the run from the police and ends up in a wilderness (the desert) where he rediscovers his aboriginality through the agency of his totemic animal, the mallee fowl, who, in a ritual dance, initiates the protagonist into traditional beliefs. Winton's Fox is similarly on the run and becomes immersed in a wilderness area. He performs a type of transformative ritual which lends him the ability to travel mentally over *Country*:

---

<sup>120</sup> Marcia Langton, *Burning Issues: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia* (Darwin: Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resources Management, 1998), 27-28.

<sup>121</sup> Langton, *Burning Issues*, 14.

<sup>122</sup> Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human*, 99.

<sup>123</sup> Bruce Pascoe's novel was published 13 years before *Dirt Music*, by McPhee Gribble, the publishers who worked with Winton from 1986 to 1991 (from *That Eye, the Sky to Cloudstreet*). See Bruce Pascoe, *Fox* (Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1988).

He beats a path south, across deserts and mountains to the coastal plain of the central west. He strides across the parched, alkaline paddock to the verandah steps and down the dim hallway to the library ... After some days of chanting, he finds he can travel beyond the library, move through the house with exquisite intimacy ... Fox sings himself down sheep pads and yellow washaways to walk up the dry riverbed towards the farm. (369-371)

The phrase “sings himself” is reminiscent of teleportation and levitation, which poses further issue: the appropriation of Aboriginal spirituality.<sup>124</sup> Fox perceives himself as being able to leave his body and travel across space, which could mark a territorialisation of Indigenous space. Fox is literally all over Indigenous *Country* during his stay in the Kimberley. Is *Dirt Music* a simulacrum of white indigenisation? Does Winton offer Coronation Gulf to his character *as Country*? What is his purpose in lending Fox all these traits present in traditional Indigenous Australian cultures?

As a non-Indigenous Australian writer, Winton is aware of the ongoing nature of colonialism. The author does not seek to make his protagonist immune to the settler colonial present. On the contrary: while the novel showcases ethical advances, with Fox trying to forge a path towards postcolonialism, Winton also clearly presents Fox rehearsing some of the tropes he wishes to transcend. If Winton initially positions the protagonist as a white Aborigine, it is to expose cultural appropriation as an unethical experimentation doomed to failure. The author all but kills his protagonist, signalling that Fox is misguided in his naïve design to live on *Country*. An increasing number of contemporary Australians suffer from “the anxiety of misrelation” and despair when they glimpse the depth of relationship to place established by Indigenous Australians.<sup>125</sup> In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, despair “is the opposite of correct relation – the opposite of belonging. It is a pathological state of being in which the individual is not properly connected to others or themselves”.<sup>126</sup> One way of coping with despair, argues Linn Miller, consists of non-Indigenous Australians yearning for belonging outside their culture by incorporating elements of Indigenous culture in their world views.<sup>127</sup> This is precisely the type of misrelation and misappropriation *Dirt Music* exposes. Fox seeks belonging in the space and culture of the other. He thinks he can live like a nomad or a

---

<sup>124</sup> Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human*, 122.

<sup>125</sup> Linn Miller, “Belonging to Country – A Philosophical Anthropology,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no.76, (2003): 221.

<sup>126</sup> Miller, “Belonging to Country,” 220.

<sup>127</sup> Miller, “Belonging to Country,” 220.

custodian, moving from camp to camp as seasons change and resources dwindle. The island is much more than a host to him; it becomes “his island” (364). As the narrative unfolds it becomes clear that the author does not give his protagonist the ability to leave his body at will, levitate or teleport himself; he does not give Fox a totemic animal, let alone *Country*.

Winton represents the temptation of non-Indigenous Australians to belong to *Country* in ways identical to Indigenous Australians. Fox confesses to experiencing envy after his exchange with Axle, who is animated by a clear sense of purpose in the way he negotiates his identity in relation to *Country*: “Fox lies there thinking of Axle’s hot conviction that he means something, that he’s central to something ... He envies him” (309). Fox considers Coronation Gulf a site for self-reinvention, but a fundamental part is missing. Deep as it is, his attachment to place is parasitic. Rather than gifting Fox with attributes associated with Indigenous culture, Winton disqualifies his protagonist from *Country* after a brief experience of its physical, cultural and spiritual scope. The moment he manages to feel at one with his environment, Fox realises that Coronation Gulf cannot be his place:

He’s exhausting the food around him; the only way to keep this up is to continue moving up the coast to new reserves of water and fish. Staying only a few days at each place, goaded on by hunger. But he just can’t see himself doing it. He’s not a nomad, he can’t even imagine such a life. It’s not just exhaustion that disqualifies him but his instinct to linger, to repeat, to embellish. A way of living isn’t enough. Fox has to stay, to inhabit a place. It’s as though his mind can only settle when he’s still. He feels he’s dragging a life and a whole snarled net of memory across foreign country. None of it lives here; it doesn’t spring from here and it will neither settle nor belong. (419)

Winton makes Fox come to a conscious realisation that his endeavours are culturally and ethically misguided. In Indigenous cultures, *Country* is founded on a system of obligations that is mutually beneficial. The individual’s totemic affiliation confers particular responsibilities to the person who must look after a given habitat and ecology.<sup>128</sup> Fox’s interactions with his surroundings are one-sided; he takes without giving anything in return. Where Bruce Pascoe’s Jim Fox runs away from the law until he reaches an Aboriginal community where he re/discovers his aboriginality, Winton sends Luther Fox to *Country* –

---

<sup>128</sup> Marcia Langton, “The ‘Wild’, the Market and the Native: Indigenous People Face New Forms of Global Colonization,” in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, eds William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003), 95.

not to claim any right to aboriginality – but to accept that he is merely a whitefella. The fact that Fox perceives himself as being able to leave his body and travel across *Country* remains problematic, but these journeys of the mind only lead him to a solid house on the edge of White Point, not a rock shelter, to his beloved books rather than an oral tradition. That is Fox's true home, culture and *Country*. The author indigenises his protagonist momentarily so he can briefly experience his surroundings from the perspective of an Indigenous world view. But all he gives Fox is an understanding of *Country* and what it represents for Indigenous Australians. He immerses Fox in *Country* until he is able to experience the land from a non-anthropocentric perspective, as a “nourishing terrain”.<sup>129</sup> Then, he pulls him back from Coronation Gulf and sends him to whatever community he and Georgie will integrate with. This is a narrative choice that is consistent with what I would call an ethics of deference, which stands in sharp contrast with other literary works contemporary to *Dirt Music*, which tend to nourish “the fantasy that non-Indigenous Australians have a relationship with the Australian landscape that mirrors or perhaps supplants the Indigenous relationship”.<sup>130</sup>

The authorial removal of the non-Indigenous protagonists from *Country* serves a didactic function in Winton's fiction. Fox leaves the Kimberley after acquiring new ways of seeing, moving and believing, better equipped to reform the settler society he left momentarily. Winton represents *Country* as an active force with a transformational potential; at the same time, his literary works also question to what degree one should seek or claim relationship with *Country*. Fox embodies the complexity and paradoxes non-Indigenous Australians must navigate if they are to relate ethically to the non-human environment and Indigenous Australia. Fox develops a degree of intimacy with his surroundings, yet Coronation Gulf must remain “foreign country” (419). Unlike the characters of many Australian fictions, Fox does not merge into the landscape by dying there. Winton is very conscious of this literary tradition. In *Island Home*, he writes about his admiration for Patrick White's *Voss* and Randolph Stow's *To the Islands*: *Voss* “aims to master country and fill its apparent emptiness by his sheer presence, with his ego and his sense of European destiny. In the end he's swallowed operatically by desert, a victim of his own ignorance”.<sup>131</sup> As for Heriot, “he surrenders to immensity and merges with the landscape, turning a European *failure to arrive*

---

<sup>129</sup> Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*.

<sup>130</sup> Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, “The Sorry Novels: Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*, Greg Matthews' *The Wisdom of Stones*, and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*,” in *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*, ed. Nathanael O'Reilly (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010), 143.

<sup>131</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 150.

into a tragic antipodean acceptance, even an apotheosis".<sup>132</sup> Winton acknowledges his debt to these literary forebears, who informed his own reflections on literary representations of space, but clearly departs from the trajectories of their respective protagonists in *Dirt Music*. On the other hand, the Aboriginal characters, who were there before Fox's arrival, remain there after his departure. The novel suggests that if non-Indigenous Australians may need actively to engage with the non-human environment, they also need to acknowledge Indigenous precedence and retreat. In *Dirt Music*, the wilderness is no playground for the apprentice explorer or the bereft. National Parks should be rethought: not as touristic destinations, but as places that bear witness to the way Indigenous Australians founded cultures that adhered to the land relationally. Winton's narrative further complicates the issues raised by Linn Miller in the quest for an ethical formulation of place and belonging.

Not only does *Dirt Music* take into account the sentiment of misrelation non-Indigenous Australians may experience as they renegotiate a sense of place that takes into account Indigenous legitimacy to the land they occupy; the text also points to a sentiment of misrelation towards the non-human environment itself. Most of Winton's protagonists end up leaving Australia's immense spaces: Fox walks out of the tropical islands of the Kimberley, Queenie abandons the coast, Jerra the bush, Quick and Jaxie the outback. Their removal from Australia's immensities does not amount to a defeat; it is an ethical step taken with respectful acknowledgement that man is, at best, tolerated there, as one species among others. The mode of defeat would be unproductive and simply hark back to the topophobic accounts of Australian space by colonial explorers or early settlers – they would result in the same separation between man and nature. Winton's recurring motif of a retreat from nature after a temporary immersion in its midst is doubly symbolic. When the characters defer to nature, they also defer to the land's traditional owners. The protagonists only begin to see their crisis resolved when they acknowledge that the land they stand on is not merely nature but Indigenous *Country*. The text also marks an authorial retreat: Winton resists presenting Indigenous culture and identity from the perspective of Indigenous characters, leaving Indigenous writers to explore these fertile creative grounds themselves.

---

<sup>132</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 152.

## Representing Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians' relationships with *Country*: A federating bricolage

It would be imprudent for a non-Indigenous author to indulge in a speculative articulation of Indigenous culture and identity. On the other hand, completely abstaining from representing Indigenous characters would likely result in erasure. Winton navigates these narrative extremes through the creation of two Indigenous Australians, Axle and Menzies, who are, like Fox, busy reinventing themselves.<sup>133</sup> Unlike the rest of *Dirt Music*, the two chapters centred on Axle and Menzies do not adopt a determinate focalisation; they favour dialogue, which avoids expressing what would be an Indigenous consciousness. What transpires most from this characterisation is Axle and Menzies' determination to renegotiate their aboriginality and relationships with *Country* post-Mabo and post-Stolen-Generations – on their own terms. Menzies is identifiable as a victim of the Stolen Generations. A half-caste cut off from his people and *Country*, raised a Christian at New Norcia monastery, he is nevertheless a surrogate elder for young Axle. Most importantly, Winton gives Menzies a memorable physical characteristic: “Fox studies Menzies wondering what it is that seems odd. And then he sees it – the man has no navel” (304). This could seem a dubious narrative choice, since Indigenous Australians have long been represented in Australian literature in terms of deficiency, abjection or otherness. I interpret this salient feature as a symbol that allows Winton to evoke a regressive literary tradition, before deterritorialising the conceptual ground and presenting a renaissance.

Menzies is cast as a new Adam. The fact that he “belong[s] to Jesus Christ” does not signal a redemptive Christian teleology on Winton's behalf, nor does it bespeak the disappearance of Indigenous beliefs and culture (305). Menzies designates Axle as an uninitiated Aborigine out of *Country*, but this cultural interruption does not stop him from constructing his own Aboriginality. Fox is impressed at “the kid out here making himself up as he goes along” (423). Inspired by the symbolism of Menzies' physical appearance, Axle took to the knife, operating a form of ritual scarification: “Cut himself up to be like me. Nearly cut himself three bellybuttons”, an initiation followed by an extensive walkabout of two years on *Country* (304). Deep in the Kimberley, Fox finds fresh ochre handprints on rock faces, and a pictorial rendition of a man carrying a guitar, indicating that Axle has been experimenting with cave

---

<sup>133</sup> See Section V of *Dirt Music*, pages 301-312.

painting. Far from purporting the end of Aboriginal culture, Winton celebrates its ability to adapt and transform itself, a leitmotiv which is also present in Rothwell's oeuvre. These two Adamic figures herald new beginnings, but one could contest that this is an Aboriginal renaissance in the mode of bricolage. It could also be argued that Winton conveniently chose to create Indigenous characters who do not represent a clear threat to settler society, since they cannot claim *Country* legally.<sup>134</sup> But, half-caste or not, Axle and Menzies know their *Country*; they are able to issue Fox with spiritual warning.

For all his jocular friendliness, Menzies is adamant: some of the islands Fox plans to reach are sacred places forbidden to the uninitiated. When Fox asks Menzies whether he can "stay" on the larger island, Menzies reminds him not to think like a settler: "You can visit" (311). Fox remembers the advice and instinctively announces his arrival, like Indigenous people do upon entering sacred space or *Country* that is not theirs: "Hello, he whispers. Just visiting" (365). But should he have entered that space at all? Fox proves to be insensitive to Indigenous culture when he establishes his camp at the entrance of a cave where stand two large middens. His choice is utilitarian; there is shelter, a creek of fresh water and food, but this does not justify his sojourn when he could simply camp close to where the fishing guide left his stores. Whatever strategy Fox adopts, the longer he lingers in Coronation Gulf, the closer he comes to perishing there. Winton does not let Fox and Georgie territorialise Coronation Gulf; they must remain visitors. Axle's gift of his kayak as a "present for the music" (Fox tunes Axle's guitar) may be interpreted by some as a lopsided exchange, but the kayak ensures that Fox remains fluid and leaves few traces (310). Axle also sees a function in sending Fox to the outer islands; he believes more Indigenous people live there: "You paddle out there, out Widjalgur, past there. Find that mob" (308). *Dirt Music* promotes social and cultural renewal on the basis of respectful exchanges; Winton makes Fox's survival conditional on adhering to the instructions issued by his Indigenous hosts.

At the height of the social transformations that affected France during the 1960s, challenging conservative Gallic patriarchy, French poet Louis Aragon wrote: "*l'avenir de l'homme est la femme*" (the future of man is woman).<sup>135</sup> If Axle and Menzies represent the new Adam, are they intended as prototypes for the future of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous

---

<sup>134</sup> See Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 91.

<sup>135</sup> Louis Aragon, *Le Fou d'Elsa* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1963). The translation is mine.

Australians? Does Winton's novel imply that Indigenous Australians are the future of all Australians? Some intellectuals have indeed put this formulation forward, most notably Germaine Greer who, provokingly, argues for an Aboriginal republic where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would embrace their Aboriginality.<sup>136</sup> Her Swiftian modest proposal may at first appear "a shallow appropriation of indigenous culture and identity", comments Indigenous writer and historian Tony Birch, but he finds attractive the mirror image she brandishes in her bid to reform Australian society.<sup>137</sup> *Dirt Music* does not embrace this proposal. On the contrary, Fox and, to a lesser degree Georgie, also feature as prototypical characters heralding new beginnings for non-Indigenous Australians. In the first chapters of the novel Georgie is easily identifiable as a stereotypical Eve, the temptress swimming naked, seducing a naïve Fox. During the course of the narrative, Winton also literally strips Fox off before he can be remade. From his character, he takes away his family, dog, house, job, boat, car, guitar, clothes and culture. Winton presents the many facets that compose Fox's identity and invites reflection on each transformation he undergoes: Fox the Romantic, Fox the pragmatic, Fox the hippie musician, Fox the farmer, Fox the poacher (Fox the fox), Fox the beatnik traveller, Fox the white Aborigine, Fox the quoll and Fox Luther. Fox the settler dies in the bush and a new creature emerges from the baptismal jungle and waters of Coronation Gulf, a hybrid assemblage of western and Indigenous identities, part human, part non-human, physical and spiritual, male and female. The text foregrounds Fox as a blueprint for more progressive relationships with the non-human realm and Indigenous Australians.

We do not therefore have one prototype paving the way for the future of the nation, but two sets of Adamic figures, each engaged in a form of temporal and spiritual bricolage as they seek to reform their culture and identity. Winton does not pitch them against each other; he represents Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians renegotiating the fundamentals of their identity in parallel. Winton effectively achieves "a doubleness of place – locatedness and otherness – a representing of place from radically different perspectives".<sup>138</sup> In light of my analysis of non-human representation in *Dirt Music*, I would even propose that the author effects a tripling of place. The narrative inscribes a non-Indigenous world view within the framework of *Country*, which involves "a three-way relationship between the people, the

---

<sup>136</sup> Germaine Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood* (London: Profile Books, 2004).

<sup>137</sup> Tony Birch in Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 171-179.

<sup>138</sup> McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 12.



species, and the country”.<sup>139</sup> Winton’s persistent engagement with dialogical relationships forms the crux of a poetics of Reconciliation which is consistent with a recent turn in the politics of decolonisation taking place in settler societies: “a crucial aim of de-colonial politics in the post-colonial era is to transform a bad relation into a good relation”, rather than advocating the return of the settler to the motherland.<sup>140</sup> In *Dirt Music* the two cultures and the non-human realm exist independently and in relation to each other. Axle’s kayak enables the guest to move fluidly between Indigenous and non-Indigenous land and culture, between past colonising attitudes and the future of a renegotiated belonging, nature and culture. *Dirt Music* makes a reality of Mark Tredinnick’s proposal that *Country* be used as a cornerstone for articulating an ecologically-centred politics of Reconciliation.<sup>141</sup>

Representing Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies in the midst of active renegotiations of identity and culture in the mode of hybridity and bricolage is a perilous literary exercise that could easily result in a messy conflation of their respective losses and crises. *Dirt Music* clearly acknowledges difference and at the same time stresses elements of cultural convergence. Indigenous Australians are represented renegotiating their relationships with *Country* and traditional culture after the devastating effects of colonisation, while on the other hand, non-Indigenous characters are portrayed as actively questioning their own sense of place in the wake of the Aboriginal Turn, the High Court Mabo and Wik decisions, a recent re-evaluation of Australia’s colonial history, and an increasing awareness of the instabilities of place associated with anthropogenic environmental changes that may well engulf their known world by drought, fire or water. Winton seizes the opportunity that this contemporary period of questioning offers, to suggest a rapprochement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians based on the concept of *Country*. All over Aboriginal Australia, the word *Country* is now used “to name the place where a person belongs”.<sup>142</sup> *Country* is also the term an increasing number of non-Indigenous Australians have adopted to convey deep attachment to the land, respect for the local ecology, and, to some degree, a spiritual connection to place:

---

<sup>139</sup> Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains*, 28.

<sup>140</sup> Ghassan Hage, “Another De-colonial Politics is Possible,” Ghassan Hage, blog, 24 December 2018. Accessed 20 March 2019. <http://hageba2a.blogspot.com/2018/12/another-de-colonial-politics-is-possible.html>.

<sup>141</sup> Tredinnick, *The Land’s Wild Music*, 7.

<sup>142</sup> Jay M. Arthur, *Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 115.

Despite the difficult relationship between Aboriginal and white Australians, it appears that their cosmological constructs are, gradually, beginning to converge. Beliefs and values are being exchanged as Aboriginal groups learn the language of science and the white Australians search for a more holistic interaction with their environment.<sup>143</sup>

For cultural anthropologist Veronica Strang, the fact that pastoralists themselves have come to perceive the land as “a spiritual and emotional resource” indicates that Australia is perhaps entering a post-settler phase in its development.<sup>144</sup> Winton himself finds encouraging the fact that “Australians have come to use the word ‘country’ as Aborigines use it, to describe what my great-great-grandparents would surely have called territory. A familial, relational term has supplanted one more objectifying and acquisitive”.<sup>145</sup> Novels like *Dirt Music* provide a literary expression of the possibilities offered by this crucial point of cultural convergence, most notably in a re-siting of the sacred.

### **An immanent Australian sacred: Henry David Thoreau on *Country***

Alert to the forces that are reshaping the nation, Winton’s fiction therefore makes transparent the process of cultural convergence that has driven an increasing number of Australians to cultivate an affective and spiritual relationship with the land, a process that resulted in a “reintegration of spiritual and moral values in the land”.<sup>146</sup> What can be observed in his novels is a move from a vertical, transcendental sacred, towards an immanent sacred which shares common ground with Indigenous conceptualisations of the sacred. But far from pillaging the pillars of Indigenous culture, Winton brings his protagonists and readers to *Country* through cultural and philosophical pathways well-known to a non-Indigenous audience. I demonstrated earlier that *Dirt Music* puts Romanticism on trial, but it does not mean that Wordsworth’s exhortation to immerse one’s self in the non-human realm, Coleridge’s sense of infinitude in front of the creation, or Blake’s immanent sacred are thrown out with the bathwater. Winton uses key aspects of Romanticism and its American counterpart Transcendentalism as passports to *Country*. Fox senses the sacred in elemental forces, the animal, vegetal and mineral realms, lives a low-impact, frugal existence, and leaves few footprints. Standing outside his newly-completed bough-shelter, Fox cannot

---

<sup>143</sup> Strang, *Uncommon Ground*, 275.

<sup>144</sup> Strang, *Uncommon Ground*, 131.

<sup>145</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 28.

<sup>146</sup> Strang, *Uncommon Ground*, 128.

repress a sense of contentment that is reminiscent of David Thoreau's upon completion of his log cabin at Walden Pond. Fox is more an heir to Transcendentalism than to the British Romantics.

Thoreau's philosophical project is underpinned by elements of Classical Greek philosophy. From Socrates, he borrows the meditative posture of the observer seeking inner knowledge through nature. Like the Cynics, he sees a life led in nature as a political statement against a narrow cultural life. Like the Epicureans, Thoreau conceives of happiness as the absence of trouble and finds virtue in frugality.<sup>147</sup> Like the Stoics, he conceptualises the sacred and life's force as one principle, whose "laws" can be discerned through acute observations of nature. For French thinker Michel Onfray, the Walden Pond experience constitutes "a concrete political utopia".<sup>148</sup> Winton's oeuvre is not so programmatic, but *Dirt Music* does offer a philosophical life and "political utopia" of sorts, which shares much in common with Thoreau's. Fox displays many attributes present in Classical Greek philosophy and Transcendentalism.<sup>149</sup> Like Socrates, it is through the observation of nature that Fox learns to know himself. Like the Cynics, he is fiercely independent and misanthropic at heart. His frugal existence in the bush is Epicurean in its essence. Where Thoreau constructs a primitive cabin in America's golden age, Fox builds a bough shelter during Australia's mining boom. Disappointed by a callous, consumerist society, a misanthropic Fox leaves the company of his fellow humans to live according to the rhythms of nature. He consumes no more than he needs; his clothes only serve to protect his body; his shelter is inconspicuous; he works to sustain himself and does not live to work – all the remaining time being spent developing the most intimate knowledge of his surroundings and an earthed spirituality. In short, Coronation Gulf is Fox's Walden Pond.

Winton makes use of Transcendentalism to foreground the changes he suggests would lead to a more progressive society. Some have deplored that *Walden* valorises "a wilderness devoid of any reference to indigenous people",<sup>150</sup> but book-length studies like Robert F. Sayre's seminal *Thoreau and the American Indians* (1977) demonstrate the influence First Nations

---

<sup>147</sup> Contrary to commonly received ideas, Epicureans did not advocate satiating one's desires, but *the construction* of one's desire. This presupposed a practice of chastity, continence and frugality.

<sup>148</sup> Michel Onfray, *Vivre une Vie Philosophique: Thoreau le Sauvage* (Paris: Le Passeur, 2017), 57-78 (the translation is mine).

<sup>149</sup> There are as many Transcendentalisms as there are Transcendentalists. Vast chasms exist between Thoreau and Emerson. My thesis narrows in on the expression of Transcendentalism in Thoreau's writings.

<sup>150</sup> Marcia Langton, "What Do We Mean by Wilderness? Wilderness and *Terra Nullius* in Australian Art," *The Sydney Papers* 8, no.1 (1996), 20.

cultures had on Thoreau's Transcendentalism.<sup>151</sup> Laurence Buell argues that "Though it took him some time to get past the platitudes of romantic savagism, [Thoreau] became the first major Anglo-American creative writer to begin to think systematically of native culture as providing models of environmental perception rather than as a mysteriously compelling vestige".<sup>152</sup> Winton shares Thoreau's double engagement with Indigenous and ecological thought; this is explicit in his non-fiction.<sup>153</sup> In *Dirt Music* he looks to Transcendentalism to reform the sacred. Martin Luther initiated a revolution when he advocated doing away with the special status of religious authorities and saints who acted as intermediaries between people and God. Luther Fox points to the need for a reorientation of the sacred in the ground, a manoeuvre which operates a spiritual rapprochement with Indigenous cultures through Thoreau's Transcendentalism. For the Transcendentalists, the embodied God of Judeo-Christianism had to be rethought, chiefly because these religions had contributed to alienating humans from nature. They conceived nature as a map that "mirrored the currents of higher law emanating from God".<sup>154</sup> The attentive observer could find in the non-human realm the laws of the universe, which does not mean that the Transcendentalists were pantheist or pagan; they still believed, like Winton, in the monotheist Christian God. I must also make clear a point of terminology: Transcendentalism does not imply a vertical relationship with God; quite the contrary. What the Transcendentalists sought to transcend were the social and religious structures of power which might prevent a direct relationship between God, man and nature. In this respect, Transcendentalism is a particularly apt form of sacred that answers to contemporary ecocritical concerns.

The sacred, in *Dirt Music*, is not located in the sky, like in canonical Christianity; it emanates from the ground, where the dead and the living are interconnected in the very "ecological fabric of the world".<sup>155</sup> Fox senses the sacred everywhere around him. He has the "instinctive feeling that there is indeed some kind of spirit that rolls through all things, some fearsome memory in stones, in wind, in the lives of birds" (370). Fox intuitively relocates the sacred in the ground, moving closer to Indigenous spirituality, but he will have to stick to the Christian trinity he knows, instead of appropriating a culture he cannot ethically aspire to. What Winton gives his character, is a Thoreauvian quality central to Transcendentalism: wildness,

---

<sup>151</sup> Robert F. Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>152</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 211.

<sup>153</sup> See the essay "Paying Respect" in Winton, *Island Home*, 219-235.

<sup>154</sup> Roderick Frazier, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (1967; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 85.

<sup>155</sup> Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 225-226.

a transformative, imaginative and spiritual quality activated through an immersion in the non-human environment which can be transported to the backyard (Ort in *That Eye, the Sky*), the city (Keely in *Eyrie*) or even overseas (Scully in *The Riders*).<sup>156</sup> Winton meets Australian society where it is. Through Transcendentalism, he transports the settler towards an Indigenous Australian conceptualisation of the sacred, which has long considered *Country* as the source of an earthed sacred. The author senses hope in this common relatedness, but at the same time respects cultural specificities by affirming difference within convergence. Winton clearly signposts that there are different degrees of intensity in the way Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians conceive, perceive or relate to *Country*:

The island insists, it continues to confound, enchant and appal. It fizzes, groans, creaks and roars at the perpetual edge of consciousness. For Indigenous Australians the apprehension is as deep and intimate as it is ancient. It's the fruit of countless generations of experiences. For newer arrivals the feeling is fainter, inchoate, intermittent, even confused, but however tentative and vulnerable this sense of relatedness might be, it's a sign of hope. In all its range of sensitivities and perceptions, our geographically thin skin is a boon to this culture.<sup>157</sup>

A text like *Dirt Music* infers that *Country* may indeed be the lowest common denominator for a poetics of Reconciliation (which does not underwrite resolution). A recurring memory, formulated as a haunting question, troubles Luther Fox. His niece, Bird, a child presented as a model of innocence, conceals folded pieces of paper with the word “***SORRY***” around the house and amidst shells and blossoms (104). Bold, italicised, capitalised, the word is mysterious to Fox: “What does a six-year-old have to apologize for? And who was she writing to?” (105). Winton lets the question hang, and the reader must connect the dots. *Dirt Music* was published four years after the 1997 “Bringing Them Home” report, which investigated the plight of 100,000 Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their homes.<sup>158</sup> In the wake of its publication, “Sorry Books” were placed in civic centres across the country to give Australians an opportunity to record their thoughts and feelings on this dark chapter of Australian history. It becomes quite plain that Bird apologises to the Stolen Generations. She learns about History through local history: “Kids used to run away from the camp, Bird. Lookin for their families. Your grandad used to let em stay down the creek where no one

---

<sup>156</sup> “I have to say I tend to use wildness as much as possible rather than wilderness. The former emphasizes a positive, an active force, while the latter seems to denote mostly absences”. Tim Winton to Stephane Cordier, 28 September 2016.

<sup>157</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 27.

<sup>158</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, “Bringing Them Home Report,” 1997. Accessed 19 March 2019. [https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social\\_justice/bringing\\_them\\_home\\_report.pdf](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf).

would find em” (114). This makes *Dirt Music* a “Sorry Novel” – in an analysis of literary responses to the Bicentenary and the Stolen Generations report, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower identifies two main currents in such works: empathy and defensiveness. While the novels she studies seek to articulate ethical models of belonging, she deplores how authors like Peter Carey and Kate Grenville evacuate colonial guilt by transporting the plots of their novels to the past, “displacing guilt onto one’s ancestors” through the trope of the good or unintentional coloniser.<sup>159</sup> *Dirt Music* pursues an altogether different avenue: a contemporary non-Indigenous child apologises to the Stolen Generations when the nation wouldn’t (Prime Minister John Howard was resolute in his refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations and Australians had to wait for Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology to move forward in the Reconciliation process). Bird the child, Fox and Georgie the hybrid blueprints for a more ethical settler society, Axle and Menzies the new Adams, all pave the way for new beginnings.

But perhaps writers like Winton, Rothwell and Gibson are misguided in proposing *Country* as the site for the re-invention of self, nation and possibly trans-national identity. Challenging the notion of a World Literature (be it Goethean *Weltliteratur*, Pascale Casanova’s *World Republic of Letters*, or David Damrosch’s contemporary World Literature) which supports the possibility of finding equivalence for particular cultural concepts, Emily Apter argues that some cultural concepts are untranslatable.<sup>160</sup> Critics like Alison Ravenscroft are convinced of “the impossibility of correspondence, the impossibility of perfectly translating one world into the other”.<sup>161</sup> Like Ravenscroft, I believe that non-Indigenous Australians will probably never be able fully to comprehend the depth of feeling and relationship Indigenous Australians have established with *Country*. But for Winton, Gibson and Rothwell’s characters (and their authors, as evidenced by their biographical essays) some spiritual presences can be felt in the landscape. Far from claiming an affiliation with these ancestral beings or spirits, the characters often withdraw from the spaces where these presences are felt. Rothwell’s narrators frequently acknowledge powerful presences and retreat; Winton’s protagonists end up leaving sites experienced as sacred; and the persona of *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* leaves the land to the ghosts that have been disturbed.

---

<sup>159</sup> Weaver-Hightower, “The Sorry Novels,” 139.

<sup>160</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 41-42.

<sup>161</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, “Sovereign Bodies of Feeling – ‘Making Sense of Country’,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no.3 (2014): 1.

It would be grossly inappropriate for non-Indigenous authors to pretend they could translate or teach *Country* to their readers. What Winton, Rothwell and Gibson impart to their audience is how the land has shaped them, and what they have learned from interactions with Aboriginal people. Rather than speaking *for Country*, their works focus on the active, transformational force it represents. If they persevere in trying to communicate what could be identified as aspects of *Country*, it is because they perceive *Country* as common ground that binds Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the human and non-human, the spiritual and the physical, time and space. With the increasing number of Australians registering an interest in the cultural dimension of *Country*, to be resigned to the untranslatability of *Country* could lead to aporia. One could hardly envisage a Reconciliation process on the basis of indifference. Hence, their works present various attempts at bridging the two cultures and finding common grounds. They rely on cultural referents already known to non-Indigenous people (Romanticism, the sublime, Transcendentalism, an emplaced sacred, nomadism, Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, Lefebvre's trialectics of space, La Capra's empathetic unsettlement) as vehicles to take the reader closer to *Country*. But these exercises in translation must remain approximations. That they do not manage to translate *Country* is not tantamount to failure. On the contrary, it leads to the important recognition of difference. An *understanding* of *Country* and Indigenous culture is enough because it leads to returns and additional exchanges which are fundamental for a post-settler dynamic of non-belonging that precludes complacency.

### **Conclusion: Winton's poetics of Reconciliation**

Winton challenges conventions that traditionally underpin myths of identity, engaging with contemporary discourses and literatures that "seek ways to resist fixed or essentialist boundaries of self and other".<sup>162</sup> Fox's hybridity makes him a possible blueprint for the future of settler Australia. He moves fluidly across different elements (earth, sea and air), straddles the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous, the human and the non-human. Winton also recasts prevalent patriarchal myths of gender. In sharp contrast with Jim Buckeridge, Fox "was a man trying to live like a man, by force of will. But it was against his nature" (415). With his adult male protagonists flawed almost to the point of disintegration, or child-men in need of

---

<sup>162</sup> McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 36.

critical reinvention, Winton blurs the boundaries commonly assigned to gender.<sup>163</sup> As evidenced in his recent series of public lectures on “toxic masculinity”, Winton is adamant that the future of Australian society (one could easily extend the scope) lies in dismantling the triad of colonialism, patriarchy and racism.<sup>164</sup> In *Dirt Music*, the author brings together the divisive elements that plague Australian society. The characters’ physical and existential “salvation” is articulated around inter-dependent actions and destinies. Considering that Jim represents the conservative farmer-fisherman, Georgie’s family the neoliberal impulse towards evermore wealth, and Fox a Green, hippy alternative lifestyle, there is much political capital in this novel. In a grand finale, Winton pulls these seemingly independent trajectories together in a triple mutual salvation. Fox rescues Georgie. Georgie resuscitates Fox. Their reunion ensures Jim’s own salvation.<sup>165</sup> *Dirt Music* provides a socio-political platform for a multiform poetics of Reconciliation.

Winton’s fiction decolonises the foundations of settler identity by re-evaluating relationships with time and space, adopting synchrony and circularity, an aesthetic of the strata where time and place merge with space. More than decolonising modes of perception, his fiction decolonises modes of representation like Romanticism and the sublime which are partly responsible for a separation between man and nature. Winton also favours modes of representation that take into account the perspective of the non-human environment, through a tripling of space, and a decentring of the human able to perceive nature as subject, to ultimately move towards interspecies dialogical relationships. In his attempts to found a fiction that avoids repeating colonising attitudes of the past, Winton looks to *Country* for cultural points of convergence that are likely to encourage dialogues and exchanges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; and through a productive use of Transcendentalism, he relocates the sacred in the ground, which invites a triple engagement with the non-human environment, the Indigenous thought world and the sacred.

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”, declared Shelley.<sup>166</sup> This may be wishful thinking but because of its political, social and environmental engagement, Winton’s

---

<sup>163</sup> On Winton’s alternative recasting of gender, see McCredden, *The Fiction of Tim Winton*, 35-47.

<sup>164</sup> A series of lectures Winton gave in 2018 in the context of the launch of his latest novel, *The Shepherd’s Hut*.

<sup>165</sup> Lyn McCredden rightly perceives in Winton’s novels a “Poetics of Resurrection”. See Lyn McCredden, “Tim Winton’s Poetics of Resurrection,” *Literature and Theology* 29, no.3 (2015): 323-334. Accessed 20 March 2019, doi-org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/10.1093/litthe/fru054.

<sup>166</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays* (1821; The Project Gutenberg, 2013). Accessed 24 March 2019. [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5428/5428-h/5428-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0010](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5428/5428-h/5428-h.htm#link2H_4_0010).



work may have a part to play in setting Australia, other settler societies and possibly other regions of the world on a less destructive course. Winton's strongly-west-Australian accented fiction and its vernacular writes back to all forms of Empire and hegemonies. Les A. Murray once deplored that "Space, like peace, is one of the great, poorly explored spiritual resources of Australia".<sup>167</sup> Winton's fiction explores this potential through Eurocentric *and* Indigenous paradigms which acquaint the individual with different forms of intimacy with immensity. His spatial renegotiations are not synonymous with peace, but a close examination of the individual's immediate surroundings initiates an examination of time and place that can unlock the infinite in secular and sacred forms. One could think of worse starting points for journeying towards a more progressive society.

---

<sup>167</sup> Murray, "Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia," 137.

## Conclusion and Caveats: Towards a Post-national Literature

“I hate conclusions. A good book, essay, course, or lecture should open up its subject, not shut it down. Conclusions are chronically hamstrung by the temptations to reach closure or attempt prophecy in the narrow sense of prediction”.

– Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*.<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary authors studied in this thesis attempt to establish an ethical literature whose themes, structure, symbolism and characterisation herald new beginnings for the settler society. They establish pathways that gesture towards the way Indigenous Australians perceive, represent and relate to *Country*. Ross Gibson’s non-fiction, Tim Winton’s fiction, Nicolas Rothwell’s hybrid narrative essays, and Paul Carter’s spatial histories deconstruct time as a prerequisite for re-invention. In their works, past and present merge before entering into deep time and synchrony. They investigate sites that could provide a symbolic “Ground Zero” for the spatial, temporal, social, spiritual and environmental relationships they wish to reform. They look to Australia’s immensities (areas perceived as wilderness, deserts, the outback, the forested bush, the ocean) to articulate a poetics of intimacy with immensity which leads, eventually, to an engagement with Indigenous Australia and the concept of *Country*. Presented as an element of cultural convergence, *Country* offers an opportunity for constructive exchanges and a possible reformation of Australian identity and society.

Intimacy with immensity marks an Antipodean departure from the literature of place and Eurocentric conceptualisations of space like Lefebvre’s and Bachelard’s, which locate the foundations of identity in anthropocentric constructs of house and state. The new beginnings proposed by these authors lead to *Country* because intimacy with immensity and *Country* are expressions of a human need to know and relate to the land intimately. But in these texts, space does not become place, nor do the characters stay on *Country*. They are denied a resolution; they return to the communities they left and *Country* remains a quest. Settling is not an option. Their physical journeys are a re-visitation of colonial exploratory journeys in the mode of intimacy, an enterprise which yields yearning rather than disappointment and despair. From within the settler colonial present, intimacy with immensity heralds a post-settler dynamic of non-belonging, with placelessness and movement as key markers of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Carlton, Vic.: Blackwell, 2005), 128.

renegotiated identity, which effectively reverses the trope of the Indigenous nomad. On the other hand, *Country*, for the Indigenous characters featuring in their works, is not represented as a quest, but as a tangible reality. Indigenous Australians are represented in place, in *Country*, while non-Indigenous Australians are represented as guests or transient visitors who strive to establish relationships on their hosts' terms.

My own foray into representations of space in contemporary Australian literature leads to a theoretical question that is sketched in the works I have studied: could *Country* replace country? Winton, Rothwell and Gibson's works speak to a growing sense that in *Country* may lie the future of the nation: "Blackfellas are not and never were the problem. They were the solution".<sup>2</sup> The foundations of settler societies like Australia are undermined by the violence associated with their birth. The Aboriginal Turn of the 1980s opened a serious re-examination of settler colonial history which continues to yield productive historical revisionism that compels all Australians to face the facts, rather than the myths, underlying national identity. After staring at the murder and rape of Indigenous people and their culture,<sup>3</sup> now comes the painful examination of past and present environmental crimes that continue to decimate plant and animal species. Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and refugees who arrived by boat will come next. Novels like Michelle De Krester's *Questions of Travel* (2012) have initiated the reflective process. "Murder will out", goes the adage. As ethical concerns gradually catch up with past and present deeds, the national narrative of settler societies unfolds like a common whodunit. Gibson's opening in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, which presents the Central Queensland hinterland as an immense historical and environmental "crime-scene", is particularly judicious and could be extended to the scale of the nation.<sup>4</sup> When the state apparatus continues to function according to settler colonising paradigms that led to intergenerational trauma in the Indigenous population, nation-wide shame or guilt in the majority culture, and widespread irreversible land degradation, I do not see how Australians could found their identity on the concept of nation.<sup>5</sup> We are very much in Lorenzo Veracini's colonial present.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the particular ethical dilemmas faced by

---

<sup>2</sup> Germaine Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 2.

<sup>3</sup> See the recent interactive map published by The Centre for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Humanities, "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Easter Australia 1788-1930," (ARC project led by University of Newcastle). Accessed 31 January 2019. <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>5</sup> I must make it absolutely clear to the reader that I do not conflate the intergenerational trauma sustained by Indigenous Australians as the result of conquest, and the crises or malaise experienced by non-Indigenous Australians. These are of two very different natures.

<sup>6</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

settler societies, the idea of nation has been rendered increasingly abstract for Australians, who, like the rest of the planet, are affected by the destabilising forces of neo-liberalism, a global economy, and the free flow of capital and labour.<sup>7</sup> Anthropogenic environmental changes on a planetary scale and the lack of political will to collaborate trans-nationally to curb the destructive trajectory set for humankind and the ecosystems all species depend upon, only exacerbate the inadequacy of the concept of nation to provide a solid referent for the articulation of identity. Despite Federation, the ANZACs, two world wars and State-sponsored myths of nationhood, it is towards the regional that Australians turn to seat their identity: the state before the nation, the local community before the state. Robert Dixon demonstrates how this reality is reflected in the realm of Australian literature where

The older spatialities of that time before the nation seem to have re-emerged today in what Philip Mead calls a “post-national”<sup>8</sup> – though I would prefer to call a post-nationalising – Australia ... This is in some respects a return to a pre-Federation spatial imaginary in which localities, city-regions, and “colonial nations”, as well as Indigenous forms of “country”, have replaced the scale of the continental nation, while also being directly linked in to supranational networks.<sup>9</sup>

Australians’ perennial mistrust in Canberra and other forms of centralised government is not an anomaly, it is a feeling shared by most western democracies, but I would like to single out how Australians increasingly resort to the uniquely Australian concept of *Country* (as an alternative to nation) to articulate identity, a phenomenon which presents Australian writers with rich grounds on which to tease out the feasibility of this fantasy. There is therefore much value in the narratives offered by Winton, Gibson and Rothwell, who make visible the “post-nationalising” mechanics that are shaping key aspects of Australian identity, society and culture. Their works quite openly deconstruct the nefarious structures of Empire to decolonise modes of perception, representation, time, space and the sacred, as well as relationships with Indigenous peoples and the non-human realm. Key to their spatial poetics is a reorientation towards *Country* and regional identities. For a general public disenchanted

---

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 2 studied the representations of these forces in Tim Winton’s *Breath and Eyrie*.

<sup>8</sup> See Philip Mead, “Literature, Nation, Location,” *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, ed. Peter Pierce (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 551.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Dixon, “Australian Literature, Scale, and the Problem of the World,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.3 (2015): 4.

by “the general structure of centric relationships” characterising colonisation, this may appear as an opportunity to regain some measure of individual agency.<sup>10</sup>

This disenchantment is reflected in the critical field. Looking back on seminal texts that generated postcolonial literary criticism, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra find limitations in the syncretic enterprise of works like *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), which partly fail to account for the specificities of settler colonial modes of writing, because they conceive of postcolonial theory as a unitary project.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* re-affirms cultural specificity (rather than large-scale critical projects) and questions the federating efforts of critics working in the field of World Literature.<sup>12</sup> Writers invested in the critical field, like Ross Gibson, Paul Carter, Stephen Muecke, Richard Flanagan and Kim Scott, also emphasise the local in order to avoid “homogenising tendencies”, or the risk of diluting individual voices, languages and cultures in the process of hybridisation.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the scalar shift towards evermore specialisation (the settler colonial within postcolonialism, New World Literature within World literature, New Historicism) has led academics like Tony Hughes-d’Aeth to wonder whether “a specific study of settler colonial literature [can] retain ‘close reading’, or at least textual exegesis, as its foundational epistemology”.<sup>14</sup>

The push and pull of the general and the particular is not a new tango. Some will see serious limits to literatures and fields of investigation that emphasise the particular, but a narrowing in the critical or geographical scope does not necessarily lead to relativism. Winton, Gibson, Rothwell, Carter, Scott and Wright speak to the concerns raised by Hughes-d’Aeth, Apter, Hodge and Mishra. They adopt dynamic representational models whose principles (irresolution, complexity, multiplicity of perspectives and trajectories) suggest an alter-modernity that accommodates the local as well as the global. Steeped in their respective geographies, they do not claim universality; yet, their works offer decolonising strategies that

---

<sup>10</sup> Val Plumwood, “Decolonizing Relationships with Nature,” in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, eds William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan, 2003), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, “What is post(-)colonialism?” *Textual Practices* 5, no.3 (1991): 399-414. Note: I do not personally believe that *The Empire Writes Back* was conceived as a “totalising enterprise”. The 2002 edition acknowledges that “one future of the field itself hinges on the balance between the articulation of theoretical generalisations and the analysis of *particular* material post-colonial realities”, therefore suggesting a theory in progress. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989; London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Kim Scott, “Covered Up in Sand,” *Meanjin* 66, no.2 (2007): 124.

<sup>14</sup> Tony Hughes-D’Aeth, “Cooper, Cather, Prichard, ‘Pioneer’: The Chronotope of Settler Colonialism,” *Australian Literary Studies* 31, no.3 (2016): 6.

can be transposed to other settler societies. The narratives I have discussed in this thesis are heavily invested in new beginnings, ground zeros, and the figure of “the new man” and “the new woman”, but with a marked difference compared to their colonial counterparts. Where previously the “new biopolitical citizen has been washed clean of the burden of both the old country and the moral doubt concerning the title of the new country”, the prototypical characters in these contemporary works carry the full moral weight of history (often conveyed as an infection) and a cumbersome cultural heritage that forces reflection.<sup>15</sup> The contemporary authors presented in my research do not form a conscious literary movement: they have not produced a common manifesto, nor do their works constitute a coherent whole since they span many different modes and genres. Yet, their respective literary projects speak to each other, and, taken together, they provide a model to exit settler colonial paradigms.

As well as writing back to Empire, they write from and to the settler colonial present, decolonising the conceptual ground before proposing self-reflexive narratives that strive to steer contemporary Australian literature and society towards more ethical models. The works of the authors studied in my research indicate that we have not entered the post-colonial: Australia is not a republic; Indigenous Australians are still victims of prejudice and flagrant socio-economic inequalities; and cultural exchanges have mostly been one-way.<sup>16</sup> These facts pertain to the postcolonial condition (the individual living in a settler society). What about postcolonial theory itself? For critics like Hughes d’Aeth,<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Wenzel and Simon Gikandi, “there is now a sense of exhaustion” in the field, which is perhaps a sign that it has fulfilled its function as a decolonising tool.<sup>18</sup> I would argue that literary postcolonialism is well and truly alive in the very productions of writers and artists who have now seized postcolonial theory to reform settler society.<sup>19</sup> Postcolonialism has left the realm of theory and become a practised reality. Contemporary authors like Gibson, Rothwell, Carter, Winton, Scott and Wright provide representational models that double as critical tools.

Intimacy with immensity is a poetics of space, a practice of space and a method of investigation which reconciles some of the issues identified by Hodge, Mishra, Carter, Hughes-d’Aeth and Apter (all-encompassing theories that risk diluting difference), by

---

<sup>15</sup> Hughes-D’Aeth, “The Chronotope of Settler Colonialism,” 17.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Scott, “Covered Up in Sand,” *Meanjin* 66, no.2 (2007): 120-124.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes-D’Aeth, “The Chronotope of Settler Colonialism,” 1-30.

<sup>18</sup> Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Jennifer Wenzel, Patricia Yeager and Susie Tharu, “The End of Postcolonial Theory,” *PMLA* 122, no.3 (2007): 633-651.

<sup>19</sup> David Carter, “After Postcolonialism,” *Meanjin* 66, no.2 (2007): 114-119.

requiring a constant zooming in and out on the subject under study. Rather than deploying nation-wide frescoes, these authors adopt a poetics of intimacy with immensity which allows them to orient their reflections and narratives towards the specificities of intimately known localities, foregrounding *Country* as the vehicle for a multi-centred and indeed “pre-federation” political conceptualisation of “post-nation”.<sup>20</sup> On Australia Day 2019, journalist and writer Paul Daley was invited on ABC Radio National to present a different kind of patriotism where the love of *Country* would replace the love of nationhood: “To my mind, the Indigenous experience of loving one’s country is closest to the purest form of Australian patriotism I can find”.<sup>21</sup> Winton reflects on patriotism conceived as *Country* in similar terms: “A patriot need no longer devote himself to an abstraction like the state. Now a patriot will be as likely to revere the web of ecosystems that make a society possible, and a true patriot is passionate about defending this – from threats within as much as without – as if the land were kith and kin”.<sup>22</sup> Winton elevates *Country* above the nation state and acknowledges that many of his literary endeavours stem from the desire to redirect the energies of patriotism towards *Country*: “This is why we write about it. This is why we paint it”.<sup>23</sup> On another front, Richard Flanagan, buoyed by the status conferred by his Booker win for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), criticized the Federal government for its refusal to take into account the Uluru Statement of the Heart, in a keynote address at the 2018 Garma Festival. If political officials in Canberra are not ready for the paradigm shifts suggested by Indigenous leaders and communities, Australian citizens themselves might prove better listeners: “The Uluru statement was a historic moment for our nation and, by refusing it, the Turnbull government chose to write itself out of history. Of them, only shame will endure. But if Canberra needs Australia, Australia does not need Canberra”.<sup>24</sup>

We have come full circle: where patriotism and nationalism in colonial times were bent on destroying *Country* (the physical, social and spiritual web that connects Indigenous Australians to the land and its ecosystems) to substitute a proxy England to *Country*, the

---

<sup>20</sup> Dixon, “Australian Literature, Scale, and the Problem of the World,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Daley, “Australian patriotism: It’s not about war, it’s in our love of the land,” *The Guardian*, 7 May 2016. Accessed 26 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2016/may/07/australian-patriotism-its-not-about-war-its-in-our-love-of-the-land>. See also Paul Daley, *On Patriotism* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2015), 28-29.

<sup>23</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Flanagan in a speech given at the Garma Festival on 4 August 2018. Full transcript available in Richard Flanagan, “The world is being undone before us. If we do not reimagine Australia, we will be undone too,” *The Guardian*, 5 August 2018. Accessed 31 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/aug/05/the-world-is-being-undone-before-us-if-we-do-not-reimagine-australia-we-will-be-undone-too>.

voices of prominent authors, scientists and public intellectuals are now calling for *Country* and Indigenous Australians to instruct the nation. The authors I have studied do rely on western literary movements, critical fields of investigation and philosophical concepts, but as vehicles to bring their readers towards *Country* and Indigenous cultures. Upon engagement with this common ground, the subversive potential of *Country* is re-activated and the majority culture may be reformed. Positioning *Country* as central to country is a strategy that establishes the Indigenous thought world as a decolonising force in its own right.

If very few early settlers made genuine attempts to engage with the Indigenous thought world,<sup>25</sup> I would argue it is because *Country* was perceived as inherently subversive. The colonial mindset is likely to have sensed *Country* as a threat to a centrist colonial society: “In Dreaming ecology there is a political economy of intersubjectivity embedded in a system that has no centre”.<sup>26</sup> *Country* does not easily accommodate vertical structures of power, but derives its laws, social organisation and cosmology from the very earth as a living becoming-being.<sup>27</sup> *Country* implies fluidity, movement, nomadism. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, nomadism is a regime of production and nomadology a regime of thought which aim to subvert dominant (western and capitalistic) ideology.<sup>28</sup> I argue that, like nomadology, *Country* is, in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms, a war machine with an inherently subversive potential (for nation and Empire, that is). For Deleuze and Guattari, nomadology offers the possibility to re-form spatial relations:

Space is the fluid environment in which we make our homes ... We are embodied signs in zones of intensities within a spatial continuum. We share that continuum with all other becoming-beings. “Space” is the word which, coined anew, can be used to name our common belonging within a constantly evolving field of infinite connected and related differences.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> One notable exception, studied by Ross Gibson in *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* (2012) is William Dawes, who spent considerable time with the Indigenous populations around Botany Bay and Sydney Cove.

<sup>26</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (1992; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 220.

<sup>27</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 7.

<sup>28</sup> John Noyes, “Nomadism, Nomadology, Postcolonialism: By Way of Introduction,” *Interventions* 6, no.2 (2004): 162.

<sup>29</sup> Russell West-Pavlov, *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 241-242.



Conceptual philosophers have been derided as armchair philosophers.<sup>30</sup> But had Deleuze and Guattari travelled to Australia, they would have been able to see their utopian spatial philosophy concretely at work in Indigenous communities, for *Country* could easily be substituted for the word “space” in the aforementioned passage. Deborah Bird Rose uses a terminology that borrows terms from Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy when presenting the structures of power governing Yarralin society: “Local initiatives ... are coordinated independently of central instance ... The result is a set of inter-related parts which is always in a state of flux”.<sup>31</sup> In fact, she concludes that the rhizome could be seen as “an accurate model” to depict “the Yarralin people’s world view”.<sup>32</sup> Since the publication of the influential *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (1984),<sup>33</sup> a collaborative work openly influenced by the philosophical work of Deleuze and Guattari, spatial geographers,<sup>34</sup> ethnologists<sup>35</sup> and postcolonial theorists<sup>36</sup> have been drawn to Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy to explicate *Country*, or to help articulate a more progressive sense of place or a truly postcolonial literature. Reflecting on the future of spatial representations, Stephen Muecke suggests that Australian literature should embrace local knowledges, the sensorium, difference and nomadism, as opposed to colonial narratives founded on the nation, the visual, patriarchy, omniscience and the urban.<sup>37</sup> The Deleuzo-Guattarian qualities inherent in Muecke’s proposal are attractive but formulating change in terms of binary opposites, as a reactive model, rehearses traits of the system it seeks to undermine.<sup>38</sup> I think it is possible to conceive of non-reactive modes of representation which would reconcile difference through hybridity, without necessarily entailing appropriation.

A poetics of intimacy with immensity which shares common ground with *Country* allows Winton, Rothwell and Gibson to re-activate the subversive quality inherent in nomadism and *Country* to effectively decolonise relationships with place, space, time and the sacred, as well

---

<sup>30</sup> See Michel Onfray on Deleuze, Derrida and Sartre in Michel Onfray, *Vivre une Vie Philosophique: Thoreau le Sauvage* (Paris: Le Passeur, 2017), 57-78.

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze and Guattari in Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human*, 220.

<sup>33</sup> Krim Benterack, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (Fremantle, W.A.: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 151-156.

<sup>35</sup> Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human*, 220.

<sup>36</sup> See Bill Ashcroft on the rhizome and postcolonial space in Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 50-52 and 151-161.

<sup>37</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992), 11-12.

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze and Guattari deplore that most thinkers struggle to reach “an understanding of multiplicity”. The conceptual and representational tool they developed, the rhizome, is aimed as an alternative to binary logic. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (1988; London: Athlone Press, 1992), 5.

as relationships with Indigenous Australia and the non-human realm. And if Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual tools are invaluable to help understand *Country* or principles of nomadology, one does not need Deleuze or Guattari to decolonise settler societies. In Gibson, Rothwell and Winton's narratives, *Country* itself can be observed as a war machine that has a transformative potential capable of remodelling the pervasive structures of Empire. For Winton and the other authors grouped in my research, the land itself "retains a real, ongoing power to bend people out of shape, to transform them".<sup>39</sup> Cultural convergence is used as a strategy to lead the protagonists (and by extension the readers) to *Country* so that Indigenous thought and culture may reform settler society through the kind of soft, reverse assimilation suggested by Rothwell.

*Country* and the Indigenous thought world are also at work decolonising spatial representations. Australian poet Martin Harrison argues that *Country* has become so central to Australian culture, that it is what sets Australian writing apart from English or American poetry.<sup>40</sup> And where Muecke finds in contemporary landscape representations an aesthetic expression of nomadology (as a decolonising war machine), key principles of *Country* have been reshaping Australian literature:

Contemporary landscape painters, then, have to be "on the move"; they have to use all their senses, not just the gaze; they have to become invisible themselves, through perhaps staying for a very long time and dealing with the "land ethic" ... This is supposed to be a "non-human-centred view of the cosmos, an a-centred society", like a rhizome in the Deleuze and Guattari coinage ... This is an anti-romantic attitude, one that decentres the creative individual.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, central to Winton, Gibson and Rothwell's literary works are movement, a close investigation of one's surroundings through the five senses, a decentring of the individual, a critical re-evaluation of Romanticism and the sublime, a land ethics, and a plurality of points of view achieved through a tripling of space that includes the non-anthropocentric and the Indigenous. In their narratives, time and space are intertwined in the folds of the strata, making a literary reality of Carter's call for a spatial history and Muecke's nomadology. They

---

<sup>39</sup> Winton, *Island Home*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Harrison, *Who Wants to Create Australia? Essays on Poetry and Ideas in Contemporary Australia* (Broadway, NSW: Halstead Press, 2007), 54.

<sup>41</sup> Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, 177.

represent place as process, as plural, as palimpsest, reflecting the very nature of settler societies, where “Place is never simply location, nor is it static, a cultural memory which colonization buries. For, like culture itself, place is in a continual and dynamic state of formation”.<sup>42</sup> In this productive spatial instability, Bill Ashcroft sees “a rhizomic network by which place maintains its dynamic, emergent quality”.<sup>43</sup>

If place is rhizomic, spatial representations should ideally adopt a rhizomic form.

Fragmentary, unresolved and reduplicative, the works I presented are, indeed, rhizomic.

Some of Winton’s characters are even rhizomic: Jerra, Rachel and Queenie spill into different narratives across novels and short stories. They return. Being able to transition smoothly from land to sea, from city to bush, they truly embody movement, nomadism and fluidity – key attributes necessary for the individual to function in a settler society characterised by acute spatial instabilities. These qualities are also those of the nomad living on *Country*: more than simply movement, a key attribute of the nomad is that he or she returns.<sup>44</sup> Australia is probably more receptive to nomadology and rhizomic thinking (and its associated aesthetics) than may first appear. Australian society developed from the British Empire, an eminently centrist power, but it quickly followed more independent routes which led to inherently resistant, haphazard forms of rhizomic settlement. Perhaps in reaction to this development, imperialism also ended up operating rhizomically.<sup>45</sup> The territories that lay west of the ever-moving frontier during the colonial period in northern America were fundamentally rhizomic because the transactions with local populations often took place outside state-sanctioned structures, argues American academic Alex Trimble Young.<sup>46</sup> I believe this premise transposes well to an Australian context where a counter-cultural rhizomic West and North continue to undermine centric seats of power and modes of representation. I do not think it is a coincidence that Kim Scott, a Noongar man from Western Australia and Alexis Wright, a member of the Waanyi nation in the Gulf of Carpentaria, have been taking the Miles Franklin Literary Award by storm.<sup>47</sup> Since the year 2000, their works have significantly reshaped Australia’s literary landscape, reterritorialising Australian space by re-inscribing Indigenous

---

<sup>42</sup> Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 161.

<sup>44</sup> James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Alex Trimble Young, “Settler Sovereignty and the Rhizomatic West; or, the Significance of the Frontier in Postwestern Studies,” *Western American Literature* 48, nos.1&2 (2013): 115-140.

<sup>47</sup> Kim Scott won the award twice: in 2000 for *Benang, from the Heart* and in 2011 for *That Deadman Dance. Taboo* was also shortlisted in 2018. Alexis Wright won the Prize in 2007 for *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* was shortlisted in 2014.

culture and language in the land. As Indigenous author and academic Jeanine Leane argues, contemporary Indigenous writers are engaged in a process of “writing Country back to nation”,<sup>48</sup> effecting an “Indigenous transformation of Australian literary landscapes”.<sup>49</sup> Winton, Gibson and Rothwell’s rhizomic poetics of intimacy with immensity, with its focus on the local, an immanent sacred, and its points of intersection with *Country*, also help dismantle the monolithic metanarrative of nation. They too participate in what Trimble Young calls a decolonising enterprise through ‘the proliferation of competing *petits récits*’ [incidental narratives] which re-introduces plurality and minority viewpoints.<sup>50</sup> The rhizomic West and North, to which one must certainly add Tasmania’s Southern dissenting voice, long considered the margins, have been reshaping the centre.

To decolonise settler societies, the literatures of settler societies must constitute a counter rhizome. Central to the Australian imaginary are the convict (anti-state), the nomadic bushranger (outlaw) and the exile whose unpredictability is also rhizomic. Winton, Gibson and Rothwell exploit to their advantage these points of convergence between *Country*, nomadology and settler society mythotypes. The protagonists in their narratives are on the road, on the run (exiles and outcasts form the majority of Winton’s key characters) or an elusive quest. Not easily controllable due to a semi-nomadic lifestyle, they are often perceived by the established communities they live in or traverse as destabilising elements. Taking stock from archetypal colonial figures of discord, the blueprints they offer spread as a counter rhizome with a capital for reformation. The poetics of space of the authors I have studied lead to an eminently political questioning of the fundamentals of identity (personal, local, national and transnational). I have endeavoured to present and assess their proposals and their ethics of representation. I would now like to invite my Indigenous friends and colleagues to critique the works of these non-Indigenous writers and determine whether their engagement with Indigenous culture and *Country*, their hope for *Country* (as an agent of Reformation and Reconciliation) are something to celebrate or deplore.

What can be observed in contemporary non-Indigenous literature is also central to the works of Indigenous writers like Wright and Scott. I prefer to let Indigenous scholars analyse spatial

---

<sup>48</sup> Jeanine Leane, “Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no.3 (2014): 15.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Osborne and Gillian Whitlock, “*Carpentaria*: Reading with the Dirt of Blurbs and Front Pages,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 16, no.2 (2016): 5.

<sup>50</sup> Trimble Young, “Settler Sovereignty and the Rhizomatic West,” 116.

representations in Wright and Scott's respective oeuvres, especially in relation to their representation and literary use of *Country*, but I sense that both authors may be interested in the idea of *Country* being a meeting place for the negotiations that need to take place between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Scott's chronotope of the "friendly frontier" in *That Deadman Dance* helps interrogate whether "moments in history that appear to be concluded, past, in fact [can] start up again".<sup>51</sup> Through the chronotope of the strata, the authors I have studied similarly offer reflections on past moments of opportunity and exchanges that can be seized again. Their spatial investigations force their protagonists to also become intimate with time. As their characters physically reach into the past, intergenerational trauma and settler anxiety consubstantial to the settler colonial project are reactivated; but even as they fall into deep time, the characters recover a sense of agency which might help shape more ethical relationships and sense of place. The individual stepping into their poetics of space would rehearse: "I walk in this moment where I sense other spaces and times around and below me. I am aware the present is the product of an accretion of layers, and that I am producing space with each step I take into all-time and all-space". The circular and open-ended nature of their unresolved narratives invites speculation and hope. Rather than emphasising the repetition of the past, a callous, multifaceted examination of the colonial legacy (historical, social, environmental and literary) suggests that a mature society should be able to embrace complexity and look in multiple directions as it steps into the future. Some of these contemporary authors even dare to envisage the possibility of a "Commonwealth of kinship", of dialogue, after two long centuries of monologue:

Indigenous Australia is offering the possibility of completing our commonwealth of Australia, a commonwealth brutally deformed at its birth by its exclusion of its First Nations.

Commonwealth is an old middle-English word that derives from an older word, COMMONWEAL, which was understood as a general good that was shared, a common well-being. It suggests a mutuality and shared strength. It evokes relationships, the idea of a common inheritance. It is, you could argue, the counterpoint to the Yolngu word for selfishness, for lack of kinship. Commonwealth IS kinship.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Philip Mead, "Connectivity, Community and the Question of Literary Universality: Reading Kim Scott's Chronotope and John Kinsella's *Commedia*," in *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, eds Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012), 151.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Flanagan in a speech given at the Garma Festival on 4 August 2018. Full transcript available in Richard Flanagan, "The world is being undone before us. If we do not reimagine Australia, we will be undone too," *The Guardian*, 5 August

Decolonising a territory is one thing, “Decolonising relationships has proven much harder”.<sup>53</sup> Herein lies the fundamental value of the narratives presented in my research. They contribute to decolonising relationships with time, space, place, genders, cultures and the non-human. But where Lorenzo Veracini relies on binary opposites to suggest reactive models that would decolonise settler colonialism (his premise lies in Spinoza’s “*omnis determinatio est negatio*”, all determination is negation),<sup>54</sup> intimacy with immensity allows these contemporary authors to embrace multiplicity and complexity after an initial period of unsettlement. The reformed individual advances gingerly, paying attention to the past, to deep time, Indigenous cultures and the non-human environment, one colonising foot leaving the track of place, the other poised over space that needs to be carefully negotiated, not on their own terms, but through intercultural, a-centred, cross-species, dialogical relationships.

Literature’s ability to enact large-scale societal change is best left as a theoretical proposition, but because the spatial representations in the works I studied may inflect the reader’s modes of perception, they have the potential to impact on lived space and intersubjective relationships. If the representations are ethical, there is a chance that future *relations* will also be ethical. After decentring characters and readers (through multiple disorientations involving scalar changes from the immense to the intimate), the authors position them in front of temporal and spatial hinges that can be apprehended anew: “the friendly frontier” in *That Deadman Dance*, the colonial archive in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, the age of exploration in Rothwell’s narrative essays, “first contact” in *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* and Carter’s spatial history, the 1988 Bicentenary in *The Riders* and *In the Winter Dark*. Is it going a step too far to conclude that these narrative strategies serve as a way of preparing the reader to seize the moment again and enter a new era? Ontological vertigo, empathetic unsettlement, antipodean inversions, a re-evaluation of canonical literary forms and anthropocentric modes of representation, the rhizome, the reduplicative, the fragment and irresolution do not lead to despair, but to constructive questioning and dynamic modes of representation that are necessary to navigate a less fixed sense of self, place and nation.

---

2018. Accessed 31 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/aug/05/the-world-is-being-undone-before-us-if-we-do-not-reimagine-australia-we-will-be-undone-too>.

<sup>53</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, “Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation,” *Borderlands e-journal* 6, no.2 (2007): 7. Accessed 7 March 2019. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2342&context=lhapapers>.

<sup>54</sup> Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present*, 2.

Nomadism gave way to the age of settlement. We have now entered “the age of unsettlement”.<sup>55</sup> In 2011, an estimated ten percent of the global population were either refugees or internally displaced persons.<sup>56</sup> Since then, the Syrian conflict alone has seen 5.5 million additional people displaced.<sup>57</sup> Geopolitical strategists already consider climate change as the engine of many conflicts to come.<sup>58</sup> As the world is bracing for displacement on an unprecedented scale, representational models centred on productive unsettlement and ethical poetics of space may prove fruitful far beyond the scale of settler societies.

---

<sup>55</sup> Tony Fry, “Urban Futures in the Age of Unsettlement,” *Futures* 43, no.4 (2011): 432-439.

<sup>56</sup> UNHCR, “The Emergency in Syria.” Accessed 18 February 2019. [https://www.unrefugees.org.au/emergency-response/syria/?utm\\_code=OAWSYR0019&gclid=CjwKCAiAhp\\_jBRaxEiwAXbniXQHmYX5Je6FgookTmIUSHCza7evx5SplHX9WC9QAfVBR7tDjBNeRBoCgDsQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.unrefugees.org.au/emergency-response/syria/?utm_code=OAWSYR0019&gclid=CjwKCAiAhp_jBRaxEiwAXbniXQHmYX5Je6FgookTmIUSHCza7evx5SplHX9WC9QAfVBR7tDjBNeRBoCgDsQAvD_BwE).

<sup>57</sup> Tony Fry, “Urban Futures in the Age of Unsettlement,” *Futures* 43, no.4 (2011): 432-439.

<sup>58</sup> The Syrian civil war and conflicts in Darfur and South Sudan have been attributed to scarcity of resources due to global warming. See Cullen Hendrix, “Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War”, *Political Violence at a Glance*. 19 September 2017. Accessed 6 March 2019. <http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2017/09/19/climate-change-and-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

## Bibliography

Adams, William M. "Nature and the Colonial Mind." In *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, edited by William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, 16-50. London: Earthscan, 2003.

Adams, William M. and Martin Mulligan, eds. *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*. London: Earthscan, 2003.

Agnani, Sunil, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamadou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Jennifer Wenzel, Patricia Yeager and Susie Tharu. "The End of Postcolonial Theory." *PMLA* 122, no.3 (2007): 633-651.

Albrecht, Glenn. "Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity." *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3 (2005): 41-55.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso, 2013.

Aragon, Louis. *Le Fou d'Elsa*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1963.

Arizti, Barbara. "The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton's *The Riders*." *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 24, no.2 (2002): 29-45.

Arthur, Jay M. *Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Ashcroft, Bill. "Rewriting History: Gould's Book of Fish." In *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Dixon, 87-102. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018.



---. "Water." In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly, 16-48. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.

---. "The Horizontal Sublime." *Antipodes* 19, no.2 (2005): 141-151.

---. *On Post-Colonial Futures: Transformations of Colonial Culture*. London: Continuum, 2001.

---. *Post-Colonial Transformation*. London: Routledge, 2001.

Ashcroft, Bill, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden. *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature*. Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2009.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. (1989) London: Routledge, 2010.

Attwood, Bain. "The Founding of 'Aboriginal History' and the Forming of Aboriginal history." *Aboriginal History* 36 (2012): 119-171.

---. *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2005.

Augé, Marc. *L'Impossible Voyage: Le Tourisme et ses Images*. Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 1997.

---. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe (1995) London: Verso, 2008.

---. *A Sense for the Other: The Timeless and Relevance of Anthropology*. Translated by Amy Jacobs. (1994) Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Auguste, Isabelle. "On the significance of saying 'sorry': Apology and reconciliation in Australia." In *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memories and Indigenous Australia*, edited by Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 309-324. Canberra: ANU Press, 2010.

- . "Rethinking the Nation: Apology, Treaty and Reconciliation in Australia." *National Identities* 12, no.4 (2010): 425-436.
- Australian Broadcasting Corporation. "Vote Compass: Most Australians back constitutional recognition for Indigenous Australians." Accessed 20 May 2016.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-20/vote-compass-indigenous-recognition/7428030>.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Australian Social Trends, 2008: Population Distribution." Last modified 23 July 2008. Accessed 5 May 2016.  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Chapter3002008>.
- Australian Government Productivity Commission. "Tables 16.A.9 and 16.A.18." 2019. Accessed 13 September 2019. <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/community-services/child-protection/rogs-2019-partf-chapter16.pdf>.
- Australian Human Rights Commission. "Bringing Them Home Report." 1997. Accessed 19 March 2019.  
[https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social\\_justice/bringing\\_them\\_home\\_report.pdf](https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf).
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Flame of a Candle*. Translated by Joni Caldwell (1961) Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988).
- . *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. (1969) Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.
- . *La Poétique de L'Espace*. (1957) Vendome: PUF, 1974.
- Baines Alarcos, Pilar. "She Lures, She Guides, She Quits: Female Characters in Tim Winton's *The Riders*." *Journal of English Studies* 8 (2010): 7-22.
- Baines, Pilar. "The Haunting of History and Feral Self in Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 17 (2011): 71-84.

Baker, Simon, dir. *Breath*. Gran Via, Windalong Films & See Pictures, 2017.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics". In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist, 84-258. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (1981) Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

Barnes, John. "Through Clear Australian Eyes." In *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination – Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott*, edited by Philippa Robin Eaden and Francis Hugh Mares, 86-104. Netley, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1986.

Baucom, Ian. "'Moving Centres': Climate Change, Critical Method, and the Historical Novel." *Modern Language Quarterly* 76, no.2 (2015): 137-157.

———. "History 4°: Postcolonial Method and Anthropocene Time." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1, no.1 (2014): 123-142.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

Beck, John. "Reading Room: Erosion and Sedimentation in Sebald's Suffolk." In *W.G. Sebald: A Critical Companion*, edited by J.J. Long and Anne Whitehead, 75-88. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Ben-Messahel, Salhia. "Richard Flanagan's 'Post-post' and the Mapping of the Altermodern." In *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Dixon, 103-117. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018.

———. "An Interview with Tim Winton." *Antipodes* 26, no.1 (2012): 9-12.

———. *Mind the Country: Tim Winton's Fiction*. Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2006.

- Bennett, Bruce. *An Australian Compass: Essays on Place and Direction in Australian Literature*. South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1991.
- Bennett, Geoffrey, dir. *The Edge of the World: Tim Winton*. Lindfield, NSW: Film Australia, 1998.
- Benterrack, Krim, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe. *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*. Fremantle, W.A.: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Birch, Charles. *Biology and the Riddle of Life*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999.
- Birns, Nicholas. "A Not Completely Pointless Beauty: *Breath*, Exceptionality and Neoliberalism." In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly, 263-282. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.
- Blake, William. "Auguries of Innocence." In *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, 209-212. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1979.
- . *The Book of Urizen*. In *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, 142-159. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1979.
- . *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, edited by Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, 85-102. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1979.
- Bloch, Ernst. *The Utopian Function of Art and literature: Selected essays*. Translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Bogle, Deborah. "Australian Novelist Tim Winton, Author of *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* and New Book *Eyrie* Uses Words to Ponder Change." Review of Tim Winton, *Eyrie*, *The Advertiser*, 20 October 2013. Accessed 20 March 2019.

<https://www.adelaidenow.com.au/lifestyle/sa-lifestyle/australian-novelist-tim-winton-author-of-cloud-street-dirt-music-and-new-book-eyrie-uses-words-to-ponder-change/news-story/bae1266765f4dc047067cfd5700b3d53>.

Boss, Peter J. "Character and Environment in Tim Winton's Fiction." MA Diss., Monash University, 1997.

Bourassa, Stephen. *The Aesthetics of Landscape*. London: Belhaven Press, 1991.

Buber, Martin. "Distance and Relation." *Psychiatry* 20 (1957): 97-104.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Carlton, Vic.: Blackwell, 2005.

---. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Bunbury, Bill. *Encounter*, aired 26 September 2010 (Sydney: ABC Radio National, 2015). Radio Broadcast.

Cantero, Hervé. "Representations of Innocence and Experience in the novels of Robert Drewe and Tim Winton." PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2010.

Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.

Carter, David. "After Postcolonialism." *Meanjin* 66, no.2 (2007): 114-119.

Carter, Paul. "The Forest in the Clearing: The Environmental Poetics of John Shaw Neilson." In *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*, edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway, 133-157. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010.

---. *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

- . *The Lie of the Land*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
- . *Living in a New Country*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.
- . *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Casanova, Pascale. *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999.
- Chakrabarti, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no.2 (2009): 197-222.
- Chatwin, Bruce. *The Songlines*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1987.
- Clancy, Laurie. "Imagined Landscapes: Thoughts on Some Recent Australian Fiction." In *Australia's Changing Landscapes – Proceedings of the Second EASA Conference*, edited by Susan Ballyn, Doireann MacDermott and Kathleen Firth, 47-53. Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1993.
- Clarke, Paul and Nick Carroll. "Bombora: The Story of Australian Surfing," directed by Paul Clarke, off-air recording of ABC-TV broadcast March 26 and April 2, 2009 (Sydney: ABC TV, 2008), Television Broadcast.
- Clarke, Robert. "Star Traveller: Celebrity, Aboriginality and Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines*." *Postcolonial Studies* 12 (2009): 229-46.
- Clarke, Robert, ed. *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*. Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Clifford, James. *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Clunies Ross, Bruce. "Landscape and the Australian Imagination." In *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination – Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott*, edited by Philippa Robin Eaden and Francis Hugh Mares, 224-243. Netley, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1986.

Cochrane, Peter. "Roadhouse Poets Too Good to Be True." Review of Nicolas Rothwell, *The Red Highway*. *The Australian*, 6 May 2009. Accessed 5 May 2018.  
<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/roadhouse-poets-too-good-to-be-true/news-story/6c23b43d2a316128c12c0863b3a6963d?sv=70f8a1465ca36ba7e5c25209d9052179>.

Coetzee, J.M. *Foe*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1986.

Cohen, David. "True North: An Interview Carried in *Bookseller and Publisher*." May/June 2009. Accessed 5 May 2018. <http://nicolasrothwell.com/true-north-an-interview-carried-in-bookseller-and-publisher/#more-433>.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere." In *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano, 58-99. New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2004.

*Collins Dictionary of the English Language*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1986) London: Collins, 1990.

Convery, Stephanie. "Tim Winton on Class and Neoliberalism: 'We're not Citizens but Economic Players'." Review of Tim Winton, *The Boy Behind the Curtain*. *The Guardian* (UK), 14 October 2016.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/14/tim-winton-class-neoliberalism-essays-tony-abbott>.

Cooke, Stuart. *Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008.

Cordier, Stephane Christophe. "Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark* and the Settler Condition." *Antipodes* 32, nos.1&2 (2018): 58-72.

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. *Walking Together: The First Steps*. Canberra: AGPS, 1994.

— — —. *Key Issue Paper No.4: Sharing History*. Canberra: AGPS, 1993.

Crampton, Jeremy W. "Space, Territory, Geography." In *A Companion to Foucault*, edited by Christopher Falzon, Timothy O'Leary and Jana Sawicki, 384-400. Chichester, UK: Blackwell, 2013.

Crane, Kylie. *Myths of Wilderness in Contemporary Narratives: Environmental Postcolonialism in Australia and Canada*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Crane, Kylie. "The Beat of the Land: Place and Music in Tim Winton's Dirt Music." *ZAA* 54, no.1 (2006): 21-32. Accessed 19 March 2019. [http://www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/?attachment\\_id=814](http://www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/?attachment_id=814).

Craven, Peter. "Appointment with the Sublime." Review of Nicolas Rothwell, *The Red Highway*. *The Australian*, 5 August 2009.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 69-90. New York: Norton, 1995.

*Cultural Atlas of Australia*. Accessed 18 November 2017. <http://www.australian-cultural-atlas.info/CAA/index.php>.

Daley, Paul. *On Patriotism*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2018.

— — —. "Australian patriotism: It's not about war, it's in our love of the land." *The Guardian*, 7 May 2016. Accessed 26 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/postcolonial-blog/2016/may/07/australian-patriotism-its-not-about-war-its-in-our-love-of-the-land>.



- Darby, David. "Landscape and Memory: Sebald's Redemption of History." In *W.G. Sebald: History, Memory, Trauma*, edited by Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh, 263-275. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006.
- Davidson, Robyn. *Tracks*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1980.
- De Kretser, Michelle. *Questions of Travel*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2012.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. (1988) London: Athlone Press, 1992.
- Dimendberg, Edward. "The Will to Motorization: Cinema, Highways, and Modernity." *October* 73 (1995): 90-137.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. "Deep Time: American Literature and World History." *American Literary History* 13, no.4 (2001): 755-775.
- Dixon, Robert. "Circles of Violence: Historical Constellations in *Death of a River Guide* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*." In *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Dixon, 21-41. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018.
- . "Australian Literature, Scale, and the Problem of the World." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.3 (2015): 1-10.
- . *Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2014.
- . "Ground Zero: Nicolas Rothwell's Natural History of Destruction." *Studies in Travel Writing* 15, no.2 (2011): 177-188.
- . "Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* and the Field of Australian Literature." *Westerly* 50 (2005): 240-260.
- Dixon, Robert and Philippa Kelly. "Brave Myth-takes: Re-writing Romance in Tim Winton's *The Riders* and Amanda Lohrey's *Camille's Bread*." *Westerly* 42, no.2 (1997): 49-70.

- Docker, John. "Epistemological Vertigo and Allegory: Thoughts on Massacres, Actual, Surrogate, and Averted – *Beersheba, Wake in Fright, Australia*." In *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia*, edited by Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 51-72. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010.
- Doogue, Geraldine. "Reflections on National Identity." *Saturday Extra*, aired 26 January 2019. (Sydney: ABC Radio National, 2019). Radio broadcast.  
<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/saturdayextra/patriotism/10719852>.
- Dorgelo, Rebecca. "Our Man in India: William Dalrymple as Traveller and Public Intellectual." In *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, edited by Robert Clarke, 141-158. Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Douglas-Henry, Jessica. "Modern Prophets," episode 1 - Tim Winton, screened April 15, 2017 (Sydney: ABC TV, 2017). Television Broadcast.  
<http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s4641893.htm>.
- Eaden, Philippa Robin and Francis Hugh Mares, eds. *Mapped But Not Known: The Australian Landscape of the Imagination – Essays and Poems Presented to Brian Elliott*. Netley, S.A.: Wakefield Press, 1986.
- Elkins, Caroline and Susan Pedersen, eds. *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Emery, Brook. *Uncommon Light*. Carlton, Vic.: Five Islands Press, 2007.
- Eyre, Edward J. *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia, and Overland from Adelaide to King George's Sound, in the Years 1840-1*, Vol.2. London: T. and W Boone, 1845. Facsimile edition by the Library Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1964.
- Falzon, Christopher, Timothy O'Leary and Jana Sawicki, eds. *A Companion to Foucault*. Chichester, UK: Blackwell, 2013.

Flanagan, Richard. "The world is being undone before us. If we do not reimagine Australia, we will be undone too." *The Guardian*, 5 August 2018. Accessed 31 January 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/aug/05/the-world-is-being-undone-before-us-if-we-do-not-reimagine-australia-we-will-be-undone-too>.

— — —. "'Our Politics Is a Dreadful Black Comedy'." Speech given at The National Press Club on 18 April 2018; published in *The Guardian* 18 April 2018. Accessed 23 April 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/apr/18/richard-flanagan-national-press-club-speech-full-politics-black-comedy>.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Places." Translated by Jay Miskowiec (1967). *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (1986): 22-27.

Frazier, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (1967) New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Friedland, Roger and Deidre Boden. "NowHere: An Introduction to Space, Time and Modernity." In *NowHere: Space, Time and Modernity*, edited by Roger Friedland and Deidre Boden, 1-60. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Fry, Tony. "Urban Futures in the Age of Unsettlement." *Futures* 43, no.4 (2011): 432-439.

Gall, Adam. "Re-imagining Australian Modernity: Performative and Non-Performative Indigenisation in Three White Australian Cultural Texts." In *Frontier Skirmishes: Literary and Cultural Debates in Australia after 1992*, edited by Russell West-Pavlov and Jennifer Wawrzinek, 217-230. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2010.

Gammage, Bill. *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011.

Gascoigne, John. *The Enlightenment and the Origins of European Australia*. Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Gelder, Ken. "Postcolonial Gothic." In *The Handbook of the Gothic*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 301-319. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Gelder, Ken and Jane M. Jacobs. *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998.

Gibson, Ross. "A Forest. A Clearing." In *Changescapes: Complexity Mutability Aesthetics*, 194-212. Crawley, WA.: UWA Publishing, 2015.

---. *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91*. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2012.

---. "Changescapes." In *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Spaces*, edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway, 17-34. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010.

---. *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2002.

---. *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992.

---. *Dead to the World*. Melbourne: AFI Distribution, 1991.

---. "Thomas Watling: This Prison This Language: Thomas Watling's Letters from an Exile at Botany-Bay (1794)." In *Island in the Stream: Myths of Place in Australian Culture*, edited by Paul Floss, 4-28. Leichhardt, NSW: Pluto Press, 1988.

---. *Camera Natura*. Sydney: Ronin Films, 1985.

---. *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia*. Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1984.

- Gill, Nicholas. "Transcending nostalgia: pastoralist memory and staking a claim in the land." In *Dislocating the Frontier: Essaying the Mystique of the Outback*, edited by Deborah Bird Rose and Richard Davis, 67-84. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. (1990) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Government of South Australia, Department of State Development. "Treaty Discussions." Accessed 6 May 2018. <https://statedevelopment.sa.gov.au/aboriginal-affairs/aboriginal-affairs-and-reconciliation/initiatives/treaty-discussions>.
- Greer, Germaine. *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood*. London: Profile Books, 2004.
- Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan. Palestine. Iraq*. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 2004.
- Griffiths, Billy. *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*. Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2018.
- Griffiths, Gareth. "Afterword: Apprehending 'Disputed Territories'." In *Disputed Territories: Land, Culture and Identity in Settler Societies*, edited by David Trigger and Gareth Griffiths, 297-316. Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003.
- Griffiths, Michael R. "Winton's Spectralities or What haunts *Cloudstreet*?" In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredde and Nathanael O'Reilly, 75-96. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.
- Griffiths, Tom. *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Grogan, Bridget. "The Cycle of Love and Loss: Melancholic Masculinity in *The Turning*." In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredde and Nathanael O'Reilly, 199-220. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.

- Hage, Ghassan. "Another De-colonial Politics is Possible." Ghassan Hage, blog, 24 December 2018. Accessed 20 March 2019.  
<http://hageba2a.blogspot.com/2018/12/another-de-colonial-politics-is-possible.html>.
- . *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2003.
- Harris, Stephen. "Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*: Sounding Country/Re-Siting Place." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.1 (2015): 1-13.
- Harrison, Martin. *Who Wants to Create Australia? Essays on Poetry and Ideas in Contemporary Australia*. Broadway, NSW: Halstead Press, 2007.
- Hartcher, Peter. "Bipolar Nation: How to Win the 2007 Election." *Quarterly Essay* 25 (2007): 1-60.
- Hassall, Anthony J. "Over There: The Dream / Nightmare of Europe in Tim Winton's *The Riders* and George Johnston's *Clean Straw for Nothing*." *Overland* 161 (2000): 26-30.
- Haynes, Roslynn D. *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Healy, Chris. *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Hegglund, Jon. *World Views: Metageographies of Modernist Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Helff, Sissy. "Transcultural Winton: Mnemonic Landscapes of Australia." In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly, 221-240. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.

Hendrix, Cullen. "Climate Change and the Syrian Civil War" *Political Violence at a Glance*. 19 September 2017. Accessed 6 March 2019.

<http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2017/09/19/climate-change-and-the-syrian-civil-war/>.

Hesse, Silke. "Nicolas Rothwell's *Belomor*: A New Genre." Review of Nicolas Rothwell, *Belomor. Into the Red* (Nicolas Rothwell's webpage). Accessed 5 December 2017.

<http://nicolasrothwell.com/nicolas-rothwells-belomor-a-new-genre/#more-500>.

Hitt, Christopher. "Towards an Ecological Sublime." *New Literary History* 30, no.3 (1999): 603-623.

Hobbs, Harry and George Williams. "The Noongar Settlement: Australia's First Treaty." *Sydney Law Review* 40, no.1 (2018). Accessed 6 May 2018.

<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/SydLRev/2018/1.html>.

Hodge, Bob and Vijay Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991.

Hodge, Bob and Vijay Mishra. "What is post(-)colonialism?" *Textual Practices* 5, no.3 (1991): 399-414.

Holgate, Ben. "Greening a Narrative Mode: Antipodean Magic Realism and Ecotourism in Richard Flanagan's Fiction." In *Richard Flanagan: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert Dixon, 43-58. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2018.

Hope, A.D. *Collected Poems 1930-1970*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972.

Horakova, Martina. "The Unbearable (Im)Possibility of Belonging: Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* as a Postcolonial Novel." In *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*, edited by Nathanael O'Reilly, 109-128. Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010.

Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

- Hughes-D'Aeth, Tony. "Cooper, Cather, Prichard, 'Pioneer': The Chronotope of Settler Colonialism." *Australian Literary Studies* 31, no.3 (2016): 1-30.
- Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*. The Hague: Mouton 1971.
- Judis, John B. *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016.
- Kankahainen, Nicholas. "Refiguring the Silence of Euro-Australian Landscapes." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.1 (2015): 1-12.
- Kearns, Jonathan and Philip Lowe. "Australia's Prosperous 2000s: Housing and the Mining Boom." Reserve Bank of Australia, 2011. Accessed 21 July 2019.  
<https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/confs/2011/kearns-lowee.html>.
- Korff, Jens. "A Guide to Australia's Stolen Generation." Accessed 13 September 2019.  
<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/stolen-generations/a-guide-to-australias-stolen-generations>.
- Kossew, Sue. "Voicing the 'Great Australian Silence': Kate Grenville's Narrative of Settlement in *The Secret River*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42, no.2 (2007): 7-18. Accessed 7 March 2017. doi: 10.1177/0021989407078574.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry* 25, no.4 (1999): 696-727.
- Langton, Marcia. "The 'Wild', the Market and the Native: Indigenous People Face New Forms of Global Colonization." In *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, edited by William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, 79 -107. London: Earthscan, 2003.



- . *Burning Issues: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia*. Darwin: Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resources Management, 1998.
- . "What Do We Mean by Wilderness? Wilderness and *Terra Nullius* in Australian Art." *The Sydney Papers* 8, no.1 (1996): 10-31.
- Leane, Jeanine. "Tracking Our Country in Settler Literature." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no.3 (2014): 1-17.
- Lee, Dennis. "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space." *Boundary* 23, no.1 (1974): 151-168.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. (1974) Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.
- Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction* London: Penguin, 1992.
- Long, J.J. "W.G. Sebald: A Biographical Essay on Current Research." In *W.G. Sebald and the Writing of History*, edited by Anne Fuchs and J.J. Long, 11-29. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008.
- Macintyre, Stuart and Anna Clarke. *The History Wars*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2003.
- Macpherson, C.B., ed. *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978.
- McAuley, Gay, ed. *Unstable Ground: Performance and the Politics of Place*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2006.

- McCann, Andrew. *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity*. London: Anthem Press, 2015.
- — —. “Patrick White’s Late Style.” In *Patrick White Beyond the Grave: New Critical Perspectives*, edited by Ian Henderson and Anouk Lang, 117-128. London: Anthem Press, 2015.
- — —. “The Literature of Extinction.” *Meanjin* 65, no.1 (2006): 48-54.
- McCann, Andrew, Jeff Sparrow and Christen Cornell. “The Spectres Haunting Dead Europe.” *Overland* 181 (2005) 26-31.
- McCredden, Lyn. *The Fiction of Tim Winton: Earthed and Sacred*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2016.
- — —. “Tim Winton’s Poetics of Resurrection.” *Literature and Theology* 29, no.3 (2015): 323-334. Accessed 20 March 2019. doi-org.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/10.1093/litthe/fru054.
- — —. “‘Intolerable Significance’: Tim Winton’s *Eyrie*.” In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reilly, 306-329. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.
- McCredden, Lyn and Nathanael O’Reilly, eds. *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.
- McGirr, Michael. “A Lot to Say.” In *Tim Winton: A Celebration*, edited by Hilary McPhee, 29-35. Canberra: Pan Macmillan Australia, 1999.
- McGregor, Russell. *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880-1939*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997.
- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. (1985) New York: Random House, 2006.

- McLean, Ian. *White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- McMahon, Elizabeth. *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Anthem Press, 2016.
- McPhee, Hilary, ed. *Tim Winton: A Celebration*. Canberra: Pan Macmillan Australia, 1999.
- McPhee, John. "The Symbolic Landscape." In *John Glover and the Colonial Picturesque*, edited by David Hansen, 110-121. Hobart: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Art Exhibitions, 2003.
- Mahood, Kim. "Into the Void." Review of Nicolas Rothwell, *Belomor*, *Sydney Review of Books*. 26 April 2013. Accessed 5 May 2018. <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/into-the-void/>.
- Malouf, David. *Remembering Babylon*. (1993) Sydney: Random House, 2009.
- Malpas, Jeff. *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. London: Sage, 2005.
- . *Space, Place, and Gender*. (1994) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Matthews, Brian. "Childhood in Tim Winton's Fiction." In *Reading Tim Winton*, edited by Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, 59-71. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993.
- Maughan Galvin, Rachel Anne. "Constructing Landscapes: Representations of the Environment in Tim Winton's Narratives." MA Diss, University of Queensland, 2000.
- Mead, Philip. "The Unjusticiable and the Imaginable." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 16, no.2 (2016): 1-10.

- . "Connectivity, Community and the Question of Literary Universality: Reading Kim Scott's Chronotope and John Kinsella's Commedia." In *Republics of Letters: Literary Communities in Australia*, edited by Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon, 137-155. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012.
- . *Networked Language: Culture and History in Australian Poetry*. (2008) Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2010.
- . "Literature, Nation, Location." In *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*, edited by Peter Pierce, 549-567. Port Melbourne, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Miels, Yvonne. "Singing the Great Creator: The Spiritual in Tim Winton's Novels." In *Reading Tim Winton*, edited by Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, 29-44. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993.
- Miller, Linn. "Belonging to Country – A Philosophical Anthropology." *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no.76 (2003): 215-223. Accessed 5 May 2017. doi: 10.1080/14443050309387839.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Gothic Sublime*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Morrison, Fiona. "Figures of the Many and the One: Genre and Narrative Method in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*." *Sydney Studies in English* 25 (1999): 133-151.
- Muecke, Stephen. *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*. Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992.
- Mulligan Martin and Stuart Hill. *Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- Murphy, Ffion. "That Eye the Past: History and Tim Winton's Fiction." In *Reading Tim Winton*, edited by Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, 73-86. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993.
- Murray, Les. *The Best 100 Poems of Les Murray*. Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2012.
- Murray, Les A. "In a Working Forest." In *A Working Forest: Selected Prose*, 57-73. Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997.
- . "Some Religious Stuff I Know about Australia." In *A Working Forest: Selected Prose*, 130-147. Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1997.
- . *The Daylight Moon*. North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1987.
- . *The People's Otherworld*. North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1983.
- Murray, Les A. and Geoffrey Lehmann. *The Ilex Tree*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1965).
- Naess, Arne. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Translated by David Rothenberg. (1976) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Neidjie, Bill, Stephen Davis and Allan Fox. *Kakadu Man: Bill Neidjie*. Queanbeyan, NSW: Mybrood, 1985.
- Ng, Lynda. "Dead Europe and the Coming of Age in Australian Literature: Globalisation, Cosmopolitanism and Perversity." *Australian Humanities Review* 54 (2013): 120-135.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Northern Territory Government, Department of the Chief Minister. "Treaty." Last modified 27 March 2018. Accessed 6 May 2018. <https://dcm.nt.gov.au/supporting-government/office-of-aboriginal-affairs/our-priorities#heading2>.

Noske, Catherine. "Seeing the Cosmos: Ross Gibson's 'Simultaneous Living Map'." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no.3 (2015): 1-11.

Noyes, John. "Nomadism, Nomadology, Postcolonialism: By Way of Introduction." *Interventions* 6, no.2 (2004): 159-168.

Onfray, Michel. *Vivre une Vie Philosophique: Thoreau le Sauvage*. Paris: Le Passeur, 2017.

Online Etymology Dictionary. "Morton." Accessed 18 November 2018.  
<https://www.etymonline.com/word/morton>.

O'Reilly, Nathanael and Jean-François Vernay. "Terror Australis Incognita?: An Introduction to Fear in Australian Literature and Film." *Antipodes* 23 (2009): 5-9.

Osborne, Roger and Gillian Whitlock. "Carpentaria: Reading with the Dirt of Blurbs and Front Pages." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 16, no.2 (2016): 1-11.

Otto, Peter. "Telling Tales about Crossing Borders: David Malouf, Germaine Greer, and the Reception of *Remembering Babylon*." In *Frontier Skirmishes: Literary and Cultural Debates in Australia after 1992*, edited by Russell West-Pavlov and Jennifer Wawrzinek, 231-245. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2010.

Pascoe, Bruce. *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* Broome, W.A.: Magabala Books, 2014.

---. *Convincing Ground: Learning to Fall in Love with Your Country*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007.

---. *Fox*. Ringwood, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1988.

Perera, Suwendrini. *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats, and Bodies*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Pierce, Peter *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Plumwood, Val. "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature." In *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-colonial Era*, edited by William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, 52-78. London: Earthscan, 2003.

---. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. London: Routledge, 2002 .

---. "Wilderness Scepticism and Wilderness Dualism." In *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, 652-690. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Probyn, Fiona. "How Does the Settler Belong?" *Westerly*, 47 (2002): 75-95.

Randall, Don. *David Malouf*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Ravenscroft, Alison. "Sovereign Bodies of Feeling – 'Making Sense of Country'." *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no.3 (2014): 1-9.

---. *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012.

Read, Peter. *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

---. *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Reynolds, Henry. *The Law of the Land*. Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1987.

---. *The Other Side of the Frontier*. Townsville, Qld: James Cook University, 1981.

Richardson, Henry Handel. *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. (1930) Penrith: The Discovery Press, 1968.

Rio Tinto. "BHP and Rio Tinto endorse Uluru Statement from the Heart." 31 January 2019. Accessed 6 March 2019. [http://www.riotinto.com/media/media-releases-237\\_26862.aspx](http://www.riotinto.com/media/media-releases-237_26862.aspx).

Rogoff, Irit. *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Rooney, Brigid. "From the Sublime to the Uncanny in Tim Winton's *Breath*." In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredde and Nathanael O'Reilly, 241-262. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.

---. "Pathological Geomorphology and the Ecological Sublime: Andrew McGahan's *Wonders of a Godless World*." *Southerly* 72, no.3 (2012): 55-77.

Rosaldo, Renato. "Imperialist Nostalgia." *Representations* 26 (1989): 107-122.

Rose, Deborah Bird. *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004.

---. *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2002.

---. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996.

---. *Dingo Makes us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture*. (1992) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

---. "Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic." *Meanjin* 47, no.3 (1988): 378-387.



Ross, Kristin. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995.

Rossiter, Richard and Lyn Jacobs, eds. *Reading Tim Winton*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993).

Rothwell, Nicolas. *Quicksilver*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2016.

---. *Belomor*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2013.

---. *Journeys to the Interior*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2010.

---. *The Red Highway*. (2009) Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2010.

---. *Another Country*. Collingwood, Vic.: Black Inc., 2007.

---. *Wings of the Kite-hawk*. (2003) Sydney: Picador, 2004.

---. *Heaven and Earth*. Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove, 1999.

Rumford, Chris. *The Globalization of Strangeness*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Rumsey, Alan. "Tracks, Traces, and Links to Land in Aboriginal Australia, New Guinea, and Beyond." In *Emplaced Myth: Space, Narrative, and Knowledge in Aboriginal Australia and Papua New Guinea*, edited by Alan Rumsey and James Weiner, 19-43. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i press, 2001.

Rutherford, Jennifer. "Kairos for a Wounded Country." In *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*, eds. Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway, 1-11. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010.

- . "Undwelling; or Reading Bachelard in Australia." In *Halfway House: The Poetics of Australian Space*, edited by Jennifer Rutherford and Barbara Holloway, 113-125. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2010.
- . "The Colonising Victim: Tim Winton's Irish Conceit." In *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, edited by Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron, 153-163. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2001.
- . *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy*. Carlton South, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2000.
- Ryan, Simon. *The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.
- Sayre, Robert F. *Thoreau and the American Indians*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Schaffer, Kay. "Wounded Spaces/Geographies of Connectivity: Stephen Muecke's *No Road (bitumen all the way)*, Margaret Somerville's *Body/Landscape Journals*, and Katrina Schlunke's *Bluff Rock: Autobiography of a Massacre*." In *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*, edited by Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer, 149-167. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014.
- Schürholz, Hannah. "'Over the cliff and into the water': love, death and confession in Tim Winton's fiction." In *Tim Winton: Critical Essays*, edited by Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O'Reilly, 96-121. Crawley, WA: UWA Publishing, 2014.
- Scott, Kim. *That Deadman Dance*. (2010) Sydney: Picador, 2013.
- . "Covered Up in Sand." *Meanjin* 66, no.2 (2007): 120-124.
- . *Benang: From the Heart*. (1999) Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2014.

Sebald, W.G. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. New York: Random House, 2003.

— — —. *The Rings of Saturn*. (1995) London: Harvill Press, 1998.

Seddon, George. *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays* (1821). The Project Gutenberg, 2013. Accessed 24 March 2019. [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5428/5428-h/5428-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0010](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5428/5428-h/5428-h.htm#link2H_4_0010).

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking, 1977.

Slater, Lisa. "The Land Holds All Things: Kim Scott's *Benang* – A Guide to Postcolonial Spatiality." In *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott*, edited by Belinda Wheeler, 37-48. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2016.

— — —. "Intimate Australia: *Body/Landscape Journals* and the Paradox of Belonging." *Cultural Studies Review* 13, no.1 (2007): 150-169.

Slee, Amruta. *Late Night Live*, aired 12 October 2015 (Sydney: ABC Radio National, 2015). Radio Broadcast.

Smith, Bernard. *The 1980 Boyer Lectures: The Spectre of Truganini*. Sydney: ABC, 1980.

Snyder, Gary. *A Place in Space: Ethics. Aesthetics. And Watersheds*. Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995.

Soja, Edward. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996.

— — —. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso, 1989.

Stadler, Jane, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton. *Imagined Landscapes: Geovisualizing Australian Spatial Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.

Stanner, W.E.H. *The 1968 Boyer Lectures: After the Dreaming*. Sydney: ABC, 1969.

State Government of Victoria. "Aboriginal Victoria, Treaty." Accessed 6 May 2018. <https://www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/treaty.html>.

Steger, Jason. "It's a Risky Business." Interview of Tim Winton. *Sydney Morning Herald* 25-27 April 2008. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/interview-tim-winton-20131010-2v99d.html>

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013.

Strang, Veronica. *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values*. Oxford: Berg, 1997.

Stratton, Jon. "Deconstructing the Territory." *Cultural Studies* 3, no.1 (1989): 38-57.

Taylor, Andrew. "Tim Winton's *The Riders*: A Construction of Difference." *Westerly* 43, no.3 (1998): 99-112.

The Centre for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Humanities. "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788-1930." ARC project led by University of Newcastle. Accessed 31 January 2019. <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/>.

The Guardian. "73% of Australians want Indigenous recognition in constitution – study." 27 March 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/27/75-of-australians-want-indigenous-recognition-in-constitution-study>.

Tilley, Elspeth. *Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012.

- Tinamin, George. "One Land, One Law, One People." In *Spirit Song: A Collection of Aboriginal Poetry*, edited by Lorraine Mafi-Williams, 4. Norwood, SA: Omnibus, 1993.
- Tompkins, Joanne. *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Tournier, Michel. *Friday*. Translated by William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd and Doubleday & Co., Inc. (1967) Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Tredinnick, Mark. *The Land's Wild Music: Encounters with Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, Terry Tempest Williams, & James Galvin*. San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 2005.
- Tsiolkas, Christos. *Dead Europe*. Milson Point, NSW: Random House, 2005.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.
- Tumarkin, Maria. *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2005.
- Turcotte, Gerry. "Australian Gothic." In *The Handbook of the Gothic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Mary Mulvey-Roberts, 277-87. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Turner, Graeme. *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1993.
- UNHCR. "The Emergency in Syria." Accessed 18 February 2019.  
[https://www.unrefugees.org.au/emergency-response/syria/?utm\\_code=OAWSYR0019&gclid=CjwKCAiAhp\\_jBRAXEiwAXbniXQHHmYX5Je6FgooKTmIUSHCza7evx5SplHX9WC9QAfVBR7tDjBNeRBoCgDsQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.unrefugees.org.au/emergency-response/syria/?utm_code=OAWSYR0019&gclid=CjwKCAiAhp_jBRAXEiwAXbniXQHHmYX5Je6FgooKTmIUSHCza7evx5SplHX9WC9QAfVBR7tDjBNeRBoCgDsQAvD_BwE).

Veracini, Lorenzo. *The Settler Colonial Present*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

———. *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

———. “Settler Colonialism and Decolonisation.” *Borderlands e-journal* 6, no.2 (2007): 1-11. Accessed 7 March 2019.  
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2342&context=lhapapers>.

Walker, David. *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1999.

Watzke, Beth. “On the Verge: Place in the Early Fiction of Tim Winton.” In *Reading Tim Winton*, edited by Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, 15-28. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993.

Weaver-Hightower, Rebecca. “The Sorry Novels: Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda*, Greg Matthews’ *The Wisdom of Stones*, and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*.” In *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*, edited by Nathanael O’Reilly, 129-156. Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010.

Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.

Westphal, Bertrand. *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. Translated by Robert T. Tally Jr. (2007) Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

West-Pavlov, Russell. *Space in Theory: Kristeva, Foucault, Deleuze*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009.

Wilkes, G.A. *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1985.

- Williamson, Geordie. "Alexis Wright Stages a Counter Intervention with *The Swan Book*." Review of Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*. *The Australian*, 10 August 2013. Accessed 18 January 2019. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/alexis-wright-stages-a-counter-intervention-with-the-swan-book/news-story/01891a074e8371288af74460c0f0f69e>.
- . *The Burning Library: Our Greatest Novelists Lost and Found*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2012.
- Windschuttle Keith. *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol.1 Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*. Paddington, NSW: Macleay Press, 2002.
- Winton, Tim. *The Shepherd's Hut*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2018.
- . *The Boy Behind the Curtain*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2016.
- . *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2015.
- . *Eyrie*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2013.
- . *Breath*. Melbourne: Penguin, 2008.
- . *The Turning*. Sydney: Picador, 2004.
- . *Dirt Music*. Sydney: Picador, 2001.
- . *Blueback*. Sydney: Macmillan, 1997.
- . "Time and Tide", *The Good Weekend*. Sydney: John Fairfax and sons, 8 November 1997).
- . *The Riders*. Sydney: Macmillan, 1994.
- . *Land's Edge: A Coastal Memoir*. Sydney: Macmillan, 1993.

- . *Cloudstreet*. (1991) Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1998.
- . *In the Winter Dark*. (1988) Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1996.
- . *Minimum of Two*. Fitzroy, Vic.: McPhee Gribble, 1987.
- . *That Eye, the Sky*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1986.
- . *Scission*. (1985) Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1996.
- . *Shallows*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984.
- . *An Open Swimmer*. (1982) Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 1998.
- Wolfe, Cary. "Learning from Temple Grandin: Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Comes after the Subject." In *What is Posthumanism?*, edited by Cary Wolfe, 127-142. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- . *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8, no.4 (2006): 387-409.
- . *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*. London: Cassel, 1999.
- Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2013.
- Wright, Judith. *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. (1966) London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Yeats, W.B. *Collected Poems*, edited by Augustine Martin. (1990) London: Vintage, 1992.



Young, Alex Trimble. "Settler Sovereignty and the Rhizomatic West; or, the Significance of the Frontier in Postwestern Studies." *Western American Literature* 48, nos.1&2 (2013), 115-140.