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The Fiction of Tim Winton: Relational Ecology in an Unsettled Land

Abstract I: A complicare il processo di appartenenza degli australiani non indigeni, c'è la consapevolezza di vivere in una terra sconfinata e composita, un posto di cui non sono nativi. La narrativa del celebre romanziere anglo-australiano Tim Winton riecheggia il pensiero della poetessa Judith Wright, per la quale "Due sentimenti sono diventati parte di me – l'amore per la terra che abbiamo invaso e il senso di colpa per averla invasa. È un luogo stregato" (Wright 1991: 30). Il presente saggio esplora i romanzi di Winton nei quali si avverte un intenso senso di malessere e perdita, in relazione ai luoghi e alla terra, da parte dei personaggi principali. I personaggi di Winton - Wueenie Cookson che testimonia dolorosamente alla cattura barbarica e alla mattanza delle balene; Fish Lamb quasi annegato in mare; Lu Fox alla ricerca di un rifugio nella natura selvaggia, da profeta, dopo la tragedia della morte della sua famiglia – sono tutti accompagnati da un senso spettrale di insediamento fallito ed esilio, in cui le forze naturali – il mare e le sue creature, le distanze e i rischi del posto – si contrappongono e fanno ravvedere gli aspiranti dominatori.

Abstract II: Complicating the processes of belonging in place, for non-Indigenous Australians, is the growing realization that they live in a huge, diverse land, a place in which they are not native. The fiction of popular Anglo-Saxon Australian novelist Tim Winton echoes the understanding of poet Judith Wright, for whom "two strands – the love of the land we have invaded and the guilt of the invasion – have become part of me. It is a haunted country" (Wright 1991: 30). This essay will explore Winton's novels in which there is a pervasive sense of unease and loss experienced by the central characters, in relation to place and land. Winton's characters - Queenie Cookson and her traumatic witnessing of the barbaric capture and flaying of whales; Fish Lamb's near-drowning in the sea, and Lu Fox's quest for refuge in the wilderness, prophet-like, after the tragedy of his family's death - are all written with a haunting sense of white unsettlement and displacement, where such natural forces – the sea and its creatures, the land's distances and risks – confront and re-form the would-be dominators.

Tim Winton, Australian novelist of place, land and identity, writes from a curiously ambiguous position in Australian culture. Winton is a literary author but also a popular one, writing in vernacular language, with a keen sense of earth and ecology, even as his prose simultaneously reaches towards what might be called a *transcendent* understanding of place

and human/extra-human relations. While Indigenous and white-settler figures are included in his novels, critics have argued that his Indigenous characters are often seen at a distance, as ghosts or troubled souls in the land. I will argue, in this paper, that the struggle to find oneself *in place*, humans in relationship to land, is a fraught, unfinished business for *both* Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, though in different ways. The honour and awe with which so many of Winton's characters hold a sense of place and belonging in Australia is informed primarily and necessarily by a white-settler, non-Indigenous set of understandings, but the writings, in their respect for place – oceans, deserts, the hugeness of Australian skies and distances – contribute powerfully to the dialogues around identity and land in Australia. Winton's are not, and *cannot be*, *Indigenous* approaches; but as this essay will argue, his works develop passionate and dialectical representations of land and place that speak with Indigenous beliefs and practices. They are crucial dialogues which are shaping Australians' understanding of relational ecology.

In Winton's early novel *Shallows* (1984), the scene is the fictional Western Australian town of Angelus, the last outpost of land-based whaling in Australia's 150-year history of whaling. The novel develops a plot that references the colonial 1830s and the postcolonial 1980s, at "the southernmost tip of the newest and oldest of continent, the bottom of the world" (Winton 1984: xi)¹. Angelus: "this town, scar between two scrubby hills [...] not a big town [...] it has few sustaining industries. But against all odds, all human sense, by some unknown grace, Angelus prevails" (xiv). And in this nut shell we have characteristic Winton, son of white settlers in the land, aware of both the scarred, toiling struggles of whites in Australia, and even honouring them; but at the same time Winton, here and throughout his writing life, is aware that another element – "some unknown grace" – has brought non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians to live alongside each other – sometimes violently and brutally, sometimes for each other's good – *in this place*.

What sense can be made of these colonial struggles towards a post-colonial world, the desire to imagine a land *in balance*? What sense is *Winton* making with these historical, ecological imaginary landscapes? The two young white protagonists of Winton's early novel *Shallows*, Cleve and Queenie, are differently shaped by this history and this place. Cleve pores over the violent history of settlement and whaling through old diaries and novels, finding pleasure in the heroism of these tales; but Queenie, as "a little girl [...] [had] heard the voice of God calling from down in the bay [...] this thunderous splash and the whole farm shook and in the moonlight [when she] saw this glistening black [...] whale inching up towards the house" (1).

Winton weaves together, and at the same time questions, two grand narratives – of masculine, colonial heroism and imperial adventure, and feminine lyricism and empathy for otherness – through these two characters and their passionate relationship, as each seeks meaning and purpose in relation to the ocean, the land and the whaling history of Western Australia. We read that:

When she was a child Queenie climbed the windmill to see the whales surfacing in the bay, spouting vapour like gunsmoke. Up there among the winter green of the

¹ Tim Winton (1984). All quotations are from this edition.

farm, she had thought about the story of Jonah, how the whale was God's messenger, and she had hooked her limbs about the salt-stained legs of the mill and watched the big backs idling, and waited for a message from God, the one she was certain would come. She waited for the whales to belly up at the foot of the mill to attend to her queries. Each winter she climbed and waited, each year the questions were modified; one year the whales did not appear at all [...] (16-17).

Old and New Testament scriptural references ripple through Queenie's imagination, reflections of her grandfather's upbringing, personalized into an intimate but also vast god figure with a message just for her, the whales her own massive, glistening, angelic messengers. However, childhood gives way to a less enraptured fate for Queenie, with marriage to Cleve and his fixation on heroic tales of whaling and colonial versions of adventure. A startling scene occurs in *Shallows* shortly after the just-married Queenie has somewhat accidentally joined the anti-whaling activists. She is drawn in curiosity to the protests against the current-day whalers, but soon finds herself an enraged witness to bloody, visceral scenes as the whales are caught, hauled on land, disemboweled and cut into pieces. Winton depicts Queenie "settled into the pink slush" (38), lying prone and bloodied on the flenching floor of the Angelus whaling station. She has become a protester.

Going afterwards to visit her young husband at his night watchman's station, in order to explain to him what has happened, she finds him pouring over the colonial journals yet again, excited by their heroic tales of men conquering land and sea. Queenie, after her day of horrified protest, angrily knocks to the floor the hefty historical journal Cleve is reading admiringly. She is frustrated that he devours *Moby Dick* and the whaling journals with such relish, as stories of heroism, but fails to understand the present moment's political realities, the pointless, barbarous killing of whales. In the hut, perched above the deep-water pier, Queenie

[...] was suddenly on all fours with the book tight in the space between floorboards with all her weight pushing down on it and him screaming at the thought of years falling away unread, sinking into the Sound [...] and his fist came down on her back and she went flat (65).

The scene is a turning point in the novel. Queenie lies prostrate for a second time that day, "[h]er cheek rest[ing] against the upright spine of the bitter-smelling book", (65) and Cleve is immediately repentant. But Queenie departs, the word "unforgivable" echoing between them, and "the journal stuck up out of the floor, wedged between the planks, like a tombstone" (64). This is a scene reeling towards abjection. Words – writing and reading and speaking, and meaning-making – falter in the space between the two characters. The abject processes of flenching, stripping the whales of flesh and life fill Queenie's mind – "do you know how big a whale's brain cavity is?" (64) – and such practices have become increasingly horrific to her. However, for Cleve, "[t]hey're just animals you know" (64). Both characters are depicted as still in the process of formation, coming lurchingly into their adult identity, not yet knowing what that might mean. Both are confronting the anxiety of not being ful-

ly-formed, still in search of meaning and identity, starting here from the place of the abject, where meaning is unresolvable, in a place that threatens to obliterate meaning.

Abjection is also one way to describe the relationship of non-Indigenous, white Australians to the land. For colonial men and women arriving in Australia in the nineteenth century, the land and its *Indigenous peoples* were abject, divorced from any European sense of form and meaning, antipodean. However, *Shallows* explores white attitudes to the ocean and its whales which start to move beyond abjection, as it posits a dialogue between immensely violent whaling histories, and a new era which is beginning to *refuse* such savagery against the natural world. To understand this question of new relationships between the human and the other than human in Winton's imagination, we need to return to Queenie's childhood sense of the divine in nature, the whales as God's messengers; as well as to the choices – *ethical and spiritual* – of humans acting in concert with, rather than against nature. And we return also to Winton's resonant phrase, the need for "some unknown grace" to intervene in this question.

Dirt Music, Winton's 2001 novel, was reviewed in *The Guardian* by expatriate Australian poet Peter Porter in a wry mood. Porter placed the novel in the following ecological context:

For years now Australia has been the last frontier. Those who flock to its scattered wild places come from all over the planet, not least from within Australia itself. The crowds at Darwin or Broome, or scouting through the Red Heart, are as likely to start out from Macquarie Street Consulting Rooms or Collins Street Legal Chambers as from Detmold or San Diego. Only a few will be ecological pilgrims: most are attracted by the combination of rugged landscape and hi-tech convenience. Nature may still be bleaker there than anywhere on earth, but its visitors can expect the latest in aircraft, refrigeration, personal hygiene and haute cuisine (Porter 2002).

Porter's chary view of the popular modern sport of frontier tourism has some humorous justice to it, but it also forgets (or doesn't know) that many Australians who live in Australia, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are increasingly registering the material realities of the land in multiple ways, and arguably have a growing, grounded awareness of the *unsettled*, dynamic nature of living in this land. There is, of course, not *one* register of response but many. Australia is responded to in multiple ways by her peoples, with its always encroaching deserts and droughts, its volatile weathers and vast distances, its country-big city differences, and its unique mix of Indigenous/white settler/multicultural/refugee inhabitants. Not all Australians have visited Coober Pedy or Uluru or the Kimberleys, or the Great Barrier Reef, but living here, there are constant reminders in school curricula, in the media, on local television and film, in the literature, of the diverse attitudes towards place and land in Australia. There is arguably a growing recognition of the need to think about human and non-human ecological relations here.

For example, much respected Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood was a strong proponent of the need to protect the interaction between land, humans, and non-humans. She argued passionately in 2008:

A rigid division that makes us choose between human and non-human sides precludes a critical cultural focus on problems of human ecological identity and relationship [...] It assumes a fallacious choice of self/other, taking an us-versus-them approach in which concern is contaminated by self-interest unless it is purely concern for the other. Most issues and motivations are double-sided, mixed, combining self/other, human and non-human interests, and it is not only possible but essential to take account of both. Both kinds of concerns must be mobilised and related (Plumwood 2009).

Porter's ironic attitude to the global tourist who can be seen "scouting through" frontier places, expecting the provision of modern facilities, is understandable. However, a newer, fuller awareness such as Plumwood's is growing in Australia, and is related to understanding the realities of global warming and the finiteness, fragility and wildness of land and weathers, as well as concern for the fate of Indigenous inhabitants of such so-called frontier places. Plumwood's is a pragmatic stance, not speaking from absolute idealism or absolute pragmatism, but from a philosophy that understands the desires of humans to be in relationship to place, acknowledging the intimate bonds between human and non-human, the needs and processes leading hopefully to a belonging *in place*.

In a more recent Winton work, the collection of short stories entitled *The Turning* (2005), another aspect of *grace* in response to the land and the forging of relationship is explored. In the poignant ending of the opening story "Big World", (1-15) Winton draws a complex portrait of place as both humanly perceived, but also as non-human. Biggie Botson, with "a face only a mother could love" (Winton 2004: 4)² and his mate, the unnamed narrator, are drifting from boyhood to adulthood, just as Cleve and Queenie are in *Shallows*. Having just finished school, they have no jobs yet, and things seem unpromising, with work offered only at the old whaling works in town; so they decide to head north along the liminal Western Australian coast, to escape for a while. In their precarious trip, with little money and no real destination, they are momentarily caught up beyond the human, in the "big world" of nature, and a powerful experience of transience, and even transcendence. Enjoying the last freedoms of their adolescence, escaping in their "gutless old Volksie" (4), at day's end, "two mad southern boys" (5) stand watching their fizzling car, as it implodes. They are stranded on the long highway between sea and desert,

taking in the vast, shimmering pink lake that suddenly looks full of rippling water. We don't say anything. The sun flattens itself against the saltpan and disappears. The sky goes all acid blue and there's just the huge silence. It's like the world's stopped [...] Right now, standing with Biggie on the salt-lake at sunset, each of us still in our southern-boy uniform of boots, jeans and flannel shirt, 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).

² Tim Winton (2004). All quotations are from this edition.

An understated, deflationary humor pervades this lyrical moment, as the young men register their pipe dreams of escape fizzing out in the shape of the collapsing old car, and the emptiness around them. As they stand gazing, there is a realization in them that time wavers and warps around them, beyond their control. The vast, rippling, illuminated lake at sunset provides the boys with a glimpse of peace, and a fitting sense of their own smallness in relation to the big world. They are two working-class boys without much clue, but in this final image they are paradoxically embraced and transfixed, as “the world suddenly gets big around us”. The present tense narration contributes to this sense of embrace, of time pausing. However, it is also the intelligence of the narrator that enables him to register his own growing sense of selfhood and its relation to the natural world. He is in fact drawn beyond himself, to observe and measure the world outside himself with a wry perspective on the comedy of their callow human situation. The narrator’s sense of becoming entails an intuitive understanding of the immensity of life beyond human self, stirred as he is for a moment by the huge acid blue sky and the beauty of the salt-lake at sunset. In this moment Biggie and his mate do not expect or look for bourgeois comforts, or solutions, or supremacy over the situation; they cannot express in words their understanding of this quiet, transforming moment in the embrace of the “big world”, but Winton can, and offers it to his readers.

How does place – the land and its non-, or other-than, or greater-than human agency in the human struggle to become – shape moral, ethical and spiritual selves? South African critic Bridget Grogan argues, in regard to place and Winton’s male figures, that

at their most complete and tender Winton’s men embrace transience and the inevitable loss this entails; simultaneously, they acknowledge the wide beauty of the temporal world and the love of and for others that is both impermanent and yet eternal [...] (Grogan 2014: 217).

What Grogan is suggesting here about the story “Big World” and its examination of place and the processes of becoming and belonging, is that Winton is no straightforward pantheist of place and nature. Nor is he simply an escapist moving Romantically *beyond words* to an unsayable transcendence which seeks to escape the world. The interchange between nature and humanity in Winton’s novels and short stories is an often fraught, tangled and traumatic one. But nature is also imagined in the Burkean sense, where:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature [...] is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other (Burke 1958: 58).

Nature in Winton’s fiction teaches stern and trenchant lessons about temporality, about the fierce, material, non-human power of earth, its oceans and deserts and creatures, and the demand that humans bend the knee, both in awe and in labor. “Becoming”, in this framework, is an entering into the irreducibility or unfinishedness of the self and its diverse relations with others, including the non-human other.

For *Indigenous* peoples in Australia, the dialogue with the land has sustained them and speaks to them of the deep past and of the future. For non-Indigenous Australians in a largely secular Australia there is much to be learned from Indigenous peoples about bending the knee, acknowledging human humility, and continuing to enter into that passionate debate which is centered on the land, the oceans, and non-human creatures. This, Winton shows us, is a conversation needing the constant intervention of “some unknown grace”.

More recently, Winton has written a graceful essay entitled “The Corner of the Eye” which appears in his memoir *Island Home* (2015):

At last it seems we’ve begun to see past Dampier’s infernal flies, to behold in our remarkable diversity of habitats, landforms and species the riches of a continental isolation that so long troubled us. Things once seen as impossibly homely, weird or simply perverse are now understood as precious. The irreplaceable organic estate informs our aesthetics and politics, our notions of pleasure and recreation. In short, it shapes our mentality. Not only have we started to integrate and internalize all these lessons, we’re learning to appreciate the fragility of what sustains us (Winton 2015: 111)³.

The often-painful processes of learning to belong to the earth, and to this land, particularly for European Australians, are evident in this passage, and are recurrently represented in Winton’s fiction of ecology and place. *Island Home* makes broad and, for some, over-idealistic claims about the general awakening of Australians to the value of what he calls “the irreplaceable organic estate”. However, such prophetic confidence here needs to be understood as emerging, for Winton, in tension with the unsettled nature of white Australia. Winton can make these claims to a new awareness, but he is still, in his latest fiction and his memoir, radically aware of the distance still to travel.

For all those who share Winton’s optimism and postcolonial sense of history, there are many who refuse to acknowledge or value such lessons. But Winton’s work is soundly in the spirit of Christopher Hitt’s influential essay, “Toward an Ecological Sublime”, which seeks to balance human awe at nature and wilderness, and a knowing humility in the face of earth’s non-human imperatives:

In an age of exploitation, commodification, and domination we need awe, envelopment, and transcendence. We need, at least occasionally, to be confronted with the wild otherness of nature and to be astonished, enchanted, humbled by it. Perhaps it is time – while there is still wild nature left – that we discover an ecological sublime (Hitt 1999: 26).

While Winton’s work resonates with Hitt’s here, he is also constantly asking what work (disciplined thinking, imagination, policy-making, changing of discourse) is still needed in order for non-Indigenous Australians to enter into a respectful relationship with the land and the other-than-human. Winton is direct in his criticism of white Australians who, for ex-

³ Tim Winton (2015). All quotations are from this edition.

ample, make claims to protect the integrity of the land, including the rock art of Aboriginal Australia, and who

are keen to preserve what they view as artefacts of antiquity, [but who are] far less passionate about the sacred power and ongoing cultural role these [Aboriginal] sites retain for living people [...] making a trophy of another people's living culture (149-150).

Winton is here calling for an openness to the knowledges and cultures of Indigenous Australia, cultures which embrace the land, and the more or other-than human, what is lived, believed, practiced, handed on. The imposition of European culture as only museum culture, or preservation culture, seems to be what he has little time for.

In the chapter of *Island Home* entitled "The Power of Place", Winton takes a further step, focusing on the ways in which European Australians, as well as Indigenous Australians, need to share in a *living* place, with an openness towards learning relationship to the land. He invokes a sense of sacredness, of energy in the land:

There are of course, many places in Australia where this primal energy has been known since time immemorial and where it continues to be refreshed by ritual visits and ceremonial relationship. My acquaintance with these kinds of places is largely restricted to the far north Kimberley, home to the world's oldest extant tradition of icon painting. In rock shelters throughout coastal archipelagos, behind mainland beaches and out into a rugged hinterland the size of California, the conjoined pasts of people and country endure and continue in sites of rare power (147-148).

For many white Australians, Winton's invoking of the "primal energy", even the sacredness of place, is challenging. His approach here can be appreciated as both audacious and humble. It is audacious in depicting himself as having the right to be in such places of "primal energy", and as possessing the capacity, even as an outsider, to experience the "rare power" of these places. But he is, arguably, not claiming aboriginality, or special access. He humbly describes his relationship as still only an "acquaintance", as "largely restricted" (148). He is bearing witness to places of power that he has not constructed or lived with, but which speak to him, enabling him to recognize his own smallness in the face of "the world's oldest extant tradition", "the conjoined pasts of people and country" (148).

Of course, this stance cannot reflect every Australian's understanding of what is needed, in coming to a place of balance between human and non-human forces in Australia. What Winton does achieve, I would argue, is a shaking of the deepest values and beliefs of both Indigenous and white-settler Australians. He seeks to find the mutual seams of ecological value, shared by many Australians, in relations between human and land, drawing on a deeply ecological, relational imaginary.

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