

# Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*: Sounding Country/Re-Siting Place

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Noise is sound out of place as dirt is matter in the wrong place.  
(Adam Mars-Jones)

We hear white noise as one sound; however, by further processing we create new sounds. But the importance of comparing white noise to traditional musical sounds is the realisation that through white noise we reach sounds inaudible to the human ear—part of which I intuitively call the 'river of sound'.  
(Toru Takemitsu, quoted in Toop 147).

In Tim Winton's novel, *Breath* (2008), the narrator, Bruce Pike, gives voice to an idea Winton places at the centre of his earlier novel, *Dirt Music*: 'I'll talk if no one's listening. It's like blowing the didjeridu, cycling air through and through, doing little more than explaining yourself to your self while you're still sane enough to do it' (21). Having been kinked out of psychological alignment through youthful explorations of extreme states, Pike tells his story for the purpose of explanation, not exculpation—as he insists above, 'blowing the didj' is a form of recuperative self-communion equated with talking to one's self. He has perhaps discovered nothing more than the fact that playing the instrument affords a rudimentary therapeutic function. In narrative terms, the reference to 'blowing' the didjeridu appears to carry little dramatic or symbolic weight. Yet, when it is revealed that he has learnt 'to sustain the circular breathing necessary to keep up the low, growling drone you could send down the valley...'—'I liked the way it sucked energy from me and drew hard feelings up the way only a good tantrum could when I was little...I blow until it burns...and the wind goes through me in cycles, hot and droning and defiant' (152/9)—the act of 'sounding' the drone assumes a richer allusive resonance. As Luther Fox's epiphany in the forest makes clear, to give 'voice' to the drone is to both speak the body—it provides an intensely physical mode of expression that 'earths' the wounded Fox—but also literally embodies natural energies that, paradoxically, momentarily dissolve the corporeal boundary between body and world. In complementary ways, each character's body can be said to 'sing' a kind of elemental and autochthonous song: the drone sounds through the body, and the body therefore becomes sound.

This essay will argue that Winton, through the metaphor of 'found sound'—of characters discovering the 'sounding' self as vibrational, rhythmic source—seeks to 'ground' the act of making music far more firmly in the Australia's imaginative relationship with land and place. In literary terms, the effect is not to rehearse the now-conventionalised narrative of self-discovery or to strive for a mimetic or ekphrastic depiction of the act of making music. Rather, if more by implication than radical literary experiment, the idea dramatised in *Dirt Music* corresponds with the potential that artist Ros Bandt claims for 'soundsculptures'. Artistically created sonic environments, Bandt contends, introduce perceivers to a new spectrum of 'dynamic temporalities' through an encounter with the acoustics of place: 'Australia is a unique acoustic landscape, its constantly changing sounding environments reflect its buoyant cultural diversity...this vast acoustic map can be referred to as the Australian soundscape' (2001: 13-14). To 'sound' the land in this way encourages the potential for new understandings of the human relationship to the natural environment, and thus a more complete way of being in place by communing through sound.

Winton's *Breath* suggests this dynamic: the inexperienced Bruce Pike does not play to make music in any conventional performative sense, yet the resulting sound is not simply incidental (if necessary) 'noise'. As his 'blowing' achieves meditative release ('I blow until it hurts' (263)), it also carries added significance—'I blow...and the wind goes through me in cycles, hot and droning and defiant' (9). In *Dirt Music*, the drone bears more conceptual and metaphorical weight: the protagonist Luther Fox, in learning to make the elemental 'dirt music', embodies a means of attuning the self to place through 'working' the sound *in* country. By extension, his sonic discovery gestures towards the possibility of a collective 're-siting' of self and place—'a re-visioning of land and earth as dynamic 'soundscapes'', in Jane Belfrage's words, which, in opening up Australia's deep 'history of place as acoustic space' (quoted in Bandt 21), offers a more profound sense of being *in* place.

In this way, Winton dramatises in literary form the idea, even vision, of a vital connection between human beings and the natural world, and more specifically, a potential relationship between twenty-first century Australians and the land they inhabit. In evoking this connection through the galvanic medium of music, *Dirt Music* as title compels the reader to reflect on assumptions about the value and role of music in general. Put this way, Winton might be said to be voicing the recurrent dream of modern human beings—the collective memory of the enchanting powers of music to 'sing' us back to pre-lapsarian unity with nature. Yet he does not compose a parable of mystical rapture or a nationalistic paean to communal unity. Instead, Winton's self-assigned challenge is to use the medium of realist literary fiction – the language and literary form of the novel—in an effort to communicate what he proposes as both an imaginative possibility and a human need in the twenty-first century. In turn, such a possibility falls to some extent on the implicit claim that human beings urgently need to confront and question the ideological sanctification of the individualistic self so central to Western ideology at large in order to regain a deeper understanding of being in the world. Winton's negative reference to the 'triumph of individualism' in an earlier essay on landscape and place (*Strange Passion*, (xxxi)) affirms the point, as does dramatic encounter between central characters in *Dirt Music*. This said, Winton does not design an abstraction or push a political thesis. Rather, he fashions his narrative around a dramatic axis that itself carries the extrapolation of the 'argument': the limits of the individualistic self as weighted against the deeper, inchoate needs for greater human understandings of the earth's richly complex ecosystems.

Reading Winton's text in this way would in the first instance suggest an eco-critical reading of *Dirt Music*, whereby the narrative is seen to yield environmental meanings (or environmentalist messages, as the case may be). Such a reading is tenable, more so given Winton's declared environmental activism. The focus here, however, is on the manner in which Winton explores music as a fruitful literary trope. The very texture of the narrative is densely patterned with cross-references amplifying the relation between music, sound, earth and place. Music, then, becomes at once earthly force and imaginative source, a site of expressive interaction and generative space, by which accustomed perceptions and received conceptions concerning the relation between self and place can, ideally, be challenged and realigned. The interpretive valence of Winton's conceit becomes clear when the reader encounters the following passage: 'listen! Within the drone, [there are] all those sweet multiple timings...Within the drone, sound is temperature and taste and smell and memory...he finds that within that long, narcotic note there are places to go' (368-9). Sound activates a kind of synaesthetic sequence that opens into new perceptual spaces ('places to go'). The effect is emphasised when Fox is seen 'moving through home country' (369) in which the interiorised language of (imported) cultural memory conflates with geographical form:

He scrambles up through crags of *The Prelude* and *Tintern Abbey*, across hot, bright Emily [Dickinson] and into the spiky undergrowth of Bill Blake. The

lines come to him. He chants them in B-flat, in a kind of monofilament manifold monotone that feels inexhaustible, as though it's a sea of words he's swimming in, an ocean he could drink. (369)

Here, metaphor does not so much modulate as compound expansively and corporeally – always *through* the body *into* physical place.

In musical terms, the reference to the drone points most obviously to the idea in classical Indian music of the sound of 'eternity, independent and oblivious of our joys and distresses, [which] hums continuously, the music of the spheres' (Mellers 1968: 5). In more immediate literary terms, the insistent connection in the novel between the 'Ur-music' of the drone (in Andrew Ford's phrase (153)) and the powerful presence of the ocean expressed in the passage above aligns my reading with Bill Ashcroft's exploration of the symbolic value of water in Winton's work, and *Dirt Music* in particular. However, in arguing that 'it is in the water that Lu Fox feels the sacred in his own body... [it is] a passage, an escape route and a path to a different life' (2015: 28-42), Ashcroft downplays the importance of music in Fox's experience, especially the 'found sound' of his improvised instrument in the forest that marks the crucial point in what can be called the 're-siting' of himself.

The focus on the sonic in *Dirt Music* positions this essay at the intersection of various modes of scholarly and historical enquiry, each of which opens out into emerging and overlapping fields of study, and none of which have been explored in conjunction with Winton's work. While there has been considerable interest, including Bandt's work, in the acoustic properties of place, there is much to be done, particularly in an Australian context. David Hendy's book *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (2013) provides one model for how research on Australian soundscapes might be conducted. Others include pioneering studies by R. Murray Schafer, Alain Corbin, and Emily Thompson, all of whom have contributed to the wider understanding of the important role of sound in our worlds, and, *mutatis mutandis*, the existence of 'soundworlds'. But Hendy's interest in the 'noise' of his title alludes to the more specific nexus of debates and dialectics that derive from the question of authenticity: 'noise' as antithetical to 'music'; 'sound' in its culturally inferior relationship to the visual and linear; the acoustic counter-posed to the electric; 'roots' music in contrast to the artifice of 'art'. Greg Milner's story of recorded music, for example, works from a precise historical juncture—the technology of recording as marking a distinct break in the human relationship to sound and music (2010). Such debates also invoke the contemporary politics of the performance place and the idea of cyclic shifts in culture between the lure of 'unearthly' aesthetics and abstractions, and the return to the primitive—the music of the 'body and of the earth' (Ford 6-15).<sup>1</sup>

Most immediately, Winton's title invokes the dialectic between acoustic and electric music, now rehearsed as a dispute between those defending the virtues of analogue (the promise of sonic and musical authenticity) and those championing the marvels of the digital. Luther Fox ('luthier': maker of stringed instruments) underscores the point in describing to a quizzical Georgie Jutland the music the brothers Fox played: 'anything you could play on a verandah. You know, without electricity. Dirt music...Rootsy stuff. Old timey things' (95). The adjective of the novel's title also unsettles common assumptions about the noun it qualifies. Thus, 'dirt', like 'noise', exists through conceptual mis- or displacement, in the same way that E. J. Salsbury, in a rendition of the well-thumbed adage repeated in the epigraph, defines a weed: 'We can in fact only define a weed, *mutatis mutandis*, in terms of the well-known definition of dirt – as matter out of place. What we call a weed is in fact merely a plant growing where we do not want it' (24). 'Dirt music', then, generates a certain conceptual dissonance and thus provokes hermeneutic unease: can any kind of music be said to emanate from 'dirt'? In the semantic chain of associated terms 'dirt, dust, mud, soil, earth', 'dirt' does not equate neatly with the more wholesome and implicitly valuable 'soil' and connotatively richer 'earth'.

Semantically, ‘dirt’ is weighted with moral judgment: the adverb ‘dirty’ obviously connotes the unhygienic, distasteful, repugnant; the salacious and sinful (during an hallucinatory episode, Fox hears the apparition of his mother sneer, ‘That dirty music’ (418)). To be dirty is also to be sunk in poverty and destitution, thus shamed and broken, if not derelict and ‘fallen’: to be ‘down in the dirt’ is to hit rock bottom. But then to be ‘dirt poor’ also carries the notion of humble living (if through circumstantial coercion more than choice). The phrase is also replete with the ambiguous notions of unsophisticated ‘raw’ living and thus virtuous existence—uncomplicated, unpretentious, straight talking; it is evocative of being ‘on the ground’ and so, by association, authentic in the manner that ‘roots’ music is assumed to be close to the musical source of ‘the folk’ (Fox recalls that playing music made of his family ‘battlers, not losers; it was what earned you that last grudging shred of respect in the district ...’ ((378)).<sup>2</sup> To venerate the ‘dirt’ might then also be to challenge those same moral connotations—to find ‘gold’ in what is thought of as being without value—mere ‘dirt’—just as Takemitsu (in the second epigraph) intuits a vital sonic source in the seeming amusical ‘trash’ of white noise and jazz players hear the ‘dirt’ of pitch distortion as musically valuable (Mellers 6). It might well connote the transgressive menace of the ‘lawless’ artist such as innovative blues musician Chris Whitley, whose name and album *Dirt Floor* Winton refers in the liner notes to the double CD recorded as the complement to the novel, and who appears by way of quotation in the text (‘get over to the big sky country’ (327), from Whitley’s album and song of the same name). As described by one admirer and critic, Whitley ‘spent his career dragging a bootheel back and forth across the line in the dirt between traditional and modern, natural and synthetic, clatter and sigh...’ (Giles, 2013).

Importantly, the novel’s title is also suggestive of the actual and allusively charged act of making music: to ‘make music’ denotes the physical, improvisatory, and ‘hand made’ creation of music—‘anything you could play on a verandah’ as Fox insists (95). This generates an association with another common, even modest word that comes into play in *Dirt Music*: the word ‘working’ itself. Fox makes a virtue out of his freedom *from* tuition: how he and his brother *worked out* how and *worked at* playing their instruments (96); and later, how he recognises the distinction between ‘just playing’ (Darkie and Sal ‘loved performance and riffing off one another’: they were ‘careless’ with music (379)), and the experience of having the ‘real music’ in them (376). Indeed, Fox must work his way back to this first connection; in doing so, his tutor is the natural world—the crows performing their ‘monkish improv’ and the sound of the ‘creek [as it] tinkles a layered monotone’ (387) will push him on ‘until he finds a sound’ (388). To make music in this way becomes a means of working towards a felt and fertile connection with country—a working relationship (as it were) at once immediately practical, yet also always a richer, quasi-spiritual labour, less of conventional religious enlightenment than expanded (if mystically infused) awareness. It is, as Stuart Murray observes of Winton’s novel *Cloudstreet*, an act of reclaiming ‘the spiritual power of the everyday’ from the impositions of institutions and politics (2003, n.p.). It is also, by extension, to understand music *working* conductively to effect the animating interplay between individual consciousness and the living presence and force of natural world as ecology and wilderness, landscape and country, place and home.

In claiming that Winton’s fiction speaks meaningfully of the human relationship to country and place in contemporary Australia, it is important to acknowledge earlier literary explorations of similar ideas. One obvious reference point is the poet Martin Harrison’s speculative notion of ‘poem country’—the claim that poetry becomes country in its distinctive capacity for imaginative expression, but which also, if on the more conceptual plane, both challenges and realigns conventional ontological and spatial relations (Harrison 101). Importantly for this essay’s argument, Harrison qualifies his own claims concerning the power of poetry to ‘place’ self in country by identifying the semantic gradient in the word itself: “‘Country’ is a word which upsets the neat overlaps of meaning in terms like ‘land,’ ‘property,’ ‘farm,’ ‘home,’ ‘district,’ ‘landscape,’ separating these meanings out from each other and stressing

how each brings with it its own slant of non-Indigenous colonial history' (101).

A further caveat is in order. For it is contentious to propose that any literary text, however popular (and some might say populist) as Winton's work is, might in some way answer the continuing social and political effects of European appropriation and exploitation of Aboriginal land, or, on another level, resolve a more generalised anxiety of alienation borne (to differing degrees) by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike. However beleaguered and estranged from their respective (and dominant) middle-class worlds, the characters Bruce Pike and Luther Fox are white males and so, arguably, never wholly deprived of certain privileges, even as they fail to realise the opportunities these afford. In itself, Pike's relationship with the didgeridu, an instrument carrying immediate connotations of sacred Aboriginal meaning (a now-familiar presence in various forms of Western popular music), might be read as representative of the continuing dispossession and transgression of Indigenous Australians' rights, and, consequently, the denial of their political efforts to reclaim their 'place' and restore the profound sense of connection to 'country' through which Aboriginal people experience their identity, and on which their political claims are based. The writer and poet, Mark Tredinnick, communicates the problem concisely when explaining his use of the term 'country' in his 2005 study of American nature writers, fittingly entitled in this context, *The Land's Wild Music*: 'How can one claim to belong in, or to hear, a place that was for so long the site of belonging of a people you have evicted?...How can one, as a European, ever claim to be of one's particular country?' (8-9).<sup>3</sup>

These questions themselves might be seen to define non-Indigenous Australians' relationship to Australia as place—questions that draw one down below (as it were) the politicised narratives and myths of nationhood. This is precisely the ground on which Winton performs his literary narratives; and while *Breath* invites no immediate speculation on the political implications of his characters' 'blowing the didj', the act and trope point to the latent tension and uncertainty that circulates among contemporary Australians concerning their own sense of place. Tredinnick again captures the crux of the problem:

We inherit from Indigenous cultures...an understanding of and a longing for the kind of identification with place that they know and express in their art and mean when they speak of their country; but we, if we are non-Indigenous, don't feel entitled to claim the places we find ourselves in...Country when I speak it contains this anxiety and longing, this aspiration and bow of respect to the continent's first peoples ... (8-9)

Winton is no less respectful of such implications and imperatives in creating a character whose more immediate needs are found in playing the didgeridu. While he endorses in principle Tredinnick's professed commitment to the viability and validity of a 'literature of place, ecologically imagined and written in the landscape's own vernacular,' Winton conveys the latent tensions and complexities inherent in the contemporary Australian experience of finding a place in 'place.'<sup>4</sup> The prominence of 'fractured and displaced' characters in Winton's fiction underscores this point, as Lyn McCredden astutely observes (308); Luther Fox and Georgie Jutland are certainly representative.

Concerning the central role of music in *Dirt Music*, the experimental artist, musician and composer John Rose illustrates similar contradictions and tensions when recalling his encounter with the Hermannsburg Aboriginal Women's Choir in a recent essay 'the music of place':

[the choir] sings the chorales of J. S. Bach in their Arrernte language, with their own articulation, gliding portamentos, and timbre, it is an extraordinary and unique music that is being made. The choir's music is full of colonial cultural contradiction, but that music has also nurtured the Indigenous population through times of extreme physical hardship and persecution by pastoralists ...

It's a shocking frontier story, but even here the practice of music fulfilled a vital, if contradictory, role – it was part patronising Western hegemony and part genuine release and consolation for those suffering. (8)

Rose's observation highlights another understanding of 'found sound' reflected in Winton's novel. As the Indigenous choir must use what musical sources are available to them—in postcolonial terms, a political act of appropriation—so the musician Luther Fox must work with what he finds in contemporary Australian culture: a *mélange* of American blues and popular music ('Hank and Willie, Guy Clark...Doc Watson, Son House' (97)); '70s European progressive and jazz rock ('Mahavishnu Orchestra, King Crimson, Sopwith Camel ...' (326); 'Ebehard Weber' and 'Stanley Clark' (402)); and, in more dramatic and ambiguous terms, the European classical music the dying Bess wants as the 'sounding' of her imminent death—the 'big music' of Bach, Shostakovich, Mussorgsky (249-51), and, finally, the 'death music' of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt ('I want Arvo. It's death music. Arvo in the arvo' (252/373)), the intensity of which offends the psychically unprepared Fox ('This music feels like its peeling his skin. He can't afford this shit. He needs covering, not stripping' (249)).

Rose's own 'fence project' involves his sustained improvisatory effort to sound the 'music of place' by bowing the wires of the thousands of fences netting the interior of Australia. A descriptive aside in the novel hints at the connection. When Fox shows the two Aboriginal men, Axle and Menzies, how to play the guitar—tellingly, Axle carries but cannot play the 'fuckin gittar thing' (306)—he notes how 'the strings are like fencewire' (307) beneath his unpracticed fingers. More allusively, the image and act of 'playing country' corresponds to Winton's literary rendition of the drone as a primordial hum found through improvisation. Fox's single note 'song' on a string bound between trees directly echoes this same practice of playing country: '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; emphasis added).

In turn, to play music invokes the complementary act of listening. With Ros Bandt's exploration of Australia's soundscapes, the lived sense of such sonically alive spaces necessarily relies on these being heard – on reciprocal acts of deep listening, or responsiveness. Indeed, Jane Belfrage argues that Australians are deprived of a vital connection with country that is more than a personalised or communal identification with localised place; it is a deeper lack resulting from the historical rupture of European colonisation by which the 'ancient tradition of listening as the practice of knowledge' was supplanted by the 'dominant paradigm' of European knowledge – the 'visual and scribal, in contrast to the holistic oral/aural tradition' developed over 68,000 years in 'Australian soundscapes' (quoted in Bandt 21). Bandt (2001) likewise emphasises the centrality of the 'perceiver's body' as marking the point of perception—the perceiver as the means by which the artwork is 'verified' through the perceiver's listening and looking—and the fact that the perceiver's place in space and time 'defines the form of the work in many cases' (12). This is to say that it is fully 'live' in the phenomenological sense. The perceiving self is then experientially 're-sited' (if only fitfully) in relation to the sonic dynamics of land and earth: places, actively inhabited by sounds, old and new, admit the listener into Australia's deep 'history of place as acoustic space' through the daily interaction between humans and habitat, a working phenomenology available to all equally alike (14-15).

Such transformative possibilities are not givens. Rather, as noted earlier, such potential requires a certain kind of work. The kind of work involved is illustrated in the first stanza from a poem Winton places at the conclusion of his essay, 'Strange Passion: A Landscape Memoir' (1999) in which he articulates what might be called his environmentalist ethos:

I love it tree because e love me too.  
E watching me same as you

tree e working with your body, my body, e working with us.

While you sleep he working.

Daylight, when you walking around, e work too.

(xxxii; from *Story About Feeling*, Bill Neidjie, 1989)

The poem expresses what he calls Bill Neidjie's 'practical mysticism'; its understated language conveys a modest, common sense of wonder—'commonsense' as both shared ('common') and empirically immediate sense of wonder at the quietly active presence of nature. In its expressive humility, Neidjie's verse proclaims the poetic wisdom of animism: it describes the interactive presence and energy of the natural world—a form of mindfulness itself. Importantly, it is also an energy that connotes a distinctively different sense of space: in the seemingly simple notion of the tree 'working' in its awareness of the human agent, one can conjure the image of an encompassing interactivity that subverts, then converts the customary humanistic assumption of a distinguishing distance between perceiving human subject and 'non-conscious' object into an active and open reverberative field—a 'resonating multiplication', in the words used to describe the drone in the novel (388). That Fox is described as transposing his and his lover's very being into trees late in the narrative—'he sees her at the shore, sees himself there, too. They're like trees. They are trees' (404)—ties Neidjie's mysticism to Winton's literary exploration in *Dirt Music* by which the transformation of self through an immersion into the natural world is possible.<sup>5</sup>

It should be said that Winton uses the phrase 'practical mysticism' revealingly, which is to say that he does not aim to describe a defined cosmological system or ideological position in *Dirt Music*. To the extent that it can be said to articulate a philosophy, he dramatises the unfolding process and effort to realise a richer, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Neidjie's poem provides the operative verb: Australians, black and white, need to be 'working' towards such an understanding, which, in a sense, also means working back to a connection now lost, or at least perilously attenuated, just as Luther Fox must work back to his formative connection with 'making music'. 'Working' also carries the egalitarian and practical connotations Winton favours. As the tree, embodying the ecosystem, is at once 'working with us' and working with our bodies, so we must learn to reciprocate, which, as for the character Luther Fox as for contemporary Australians, begins with the work of learning to be responsive. In turn, this entails learning to 're-work' assumed and ideologically prescribed notions of selfhood. That Fox works hard to shut off his innate responsiveness itself can be taken to define the difficulty of the task Australians face. In this way, Winton's literary realism works to depict the real world psychic and ontological struggles contemporary Australians face.

Importantly, the possibility of realising such altered existential states inheres not in the mirroring extension of self—the self-centered expansion of mind expressed as will and reason—but through a kind of creative de- and re-centering of self by which one enters into the dynamic and *uncertain* interaction with the world of apparent non-self. This conception of self directly challenges powerful notions of individualistic self-centeredness – of the self as the defining and commanding centre of consciousness, agency and identity. The idea takes form when Fox experiences his own being as a 'resonating multiplication' (388), and when, in Georgie's perceptions, Fox is seen to live outside his masculinised drive for control (415). Such ideas summon associations with Buddhism as well as the pantheism of American transcendentalists such as Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the Romanticism of Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, writers to whom Winton refers throughout *Dirt Music*. Yet, the experiences Winton's characters undergo are enacted in more fundamental and ambiguous terms, involving effort and great uncertainty. As such, these experiences are always more than the up-grading of one's self-esteem, the customary (re)schooling of the ego or the pre-packaged 'journey' to discover self. When Pike talks of sending the 'drone...down the valley', sound is both cathartic and connective (152). The chthonic monotone of the drone suggests a conduit to the natural world; yet, equally, as mentioned, such a connection is never an immediate means of redemptive solace or healing. Indeed, the very word 'nature',

redolent with over-ripened romantic associations, invites scepticism. Pike, who, in his self-deprecating awareness of his own romantic susceptibilities, communicates this more tempered understanding:

There are spring days down south when all the acacias are pumping out yellow blooms and heady pollen and the honeyeaters and wattlebirds are manic with their pillaging and the wet ground steams underfoot in the sunshine and you feel fresher and stronger than you are. Yes, the restorative force of nature. I can vouch for its value—right up to the point of complete delusion. (240-1)

As this passage indicates, Winton's characters embody the half-realised desire for some deeper connection with the natural environment, or some richer realisation of the human place in nature. As such, each character's travails mark not so much a pronounced displacement of self as the more erratic breaking down of the individualistic, ego-centred self to some more fundamental level of being that, in turn, entails a sharper awareness of the natural world—of, as it were, a more 'natural' sense of self bereft of the encumbering skins of culture.

As a story, *Dirt Music* is romantic in the popular sense of the term: the basic plot pivots around a seemingly conventional love story – the attraction between the lone renegade poacher, Luther Fox, and Georgie Jutland, estranged daughter of a prosperous Perth family. The narrative laws of irresistible attraction ensure that their paths will converge and their lives intersect. Yet, Winton averts sentimental cliché and ponderous predictability: both characters exist in what might be called postmodern exile. Ostensibly privileged as white Australians, each struggles with a particular mode of displacement and insecurity. One could say that they are marginalised in certain complementary ways. Fox is literally orphaned, cast as the cursed, spurned and luckless vagrant haunting the edges of community and society as the thief, or 'shamatuer', defying the rules of the competitive commercialised game of professional fishing; and Georgie Jutland, enduring that distinctive twenty-first century form of isolation that occurs in the remote territory of a slowly dissolving relationship, her frustrated, half-drunken loitering on the internet at night a measure of her mutedly desperate emotional state. Each is, then, in a state of arrested flight, that peculiar stasis born of existential frustration and unexpressed fear. Each is also pinioned between the countervailing pressures of community expectation and morality, and the impinging claims and demands of their respective pasts.

To describe these two characters in terms of displacement and exile, however, is not to frame their experience in terms of the politics of dispossession. Such a reading runs the risk of conferring a form of 'white Indigeneity' on their relation to nature and land. Rather Winton strives to voice the broader sense of psychic dispossession and disconnection afflicting both white and black Australians. That few figures in the novel are described as experiencing any sense of secure placement, personally, communally and geographically, underlines this point. That the two Aboriginal figures, Menzies and Axle, whom Fox encounters in the wilds of the Kimberley, are both, in different ways, estranged from their cultural roots and so deprived of an identifying connection with country, also reinforces this reading.

A more general state of disinheritance and marginalisation, then, is Winton's theme. Yet, Fox, having lost all familial connections with land and exiled in self-banishment, also becomes the agent of an higher consciousness, at least as Winton dramatises it in the novel. Again, there are strong Romantic echoes here, underscored by the climactic orchestrated clash of colonial masculinity embodied by Jim Buckland and Fox. Such details must be left as an implied footnote here, as must the importance of interlacing imagery referring to maps and borders in relation to the character's trajectories. What is important to stress in this context is Georgie's registration of an important difference between the two men. Jim, she

realises late in the novel, was like most men she knew: he ‘managed’ life (415), approaching it in the manner of a practical problem to be handled and maintained through the masculine exertion of will, as if one were outside it and seeking to exercise control over it. Fox, in contrast, is ‘pure, hot feeling’, a man who, she realises, has been trying to ‘live like a man, by force of will, but it was against his nature’ (415). Tellingly, she understands both the difference between them, and her own compulsion to find Fox, in terms of music: ‘it had something to do with music...Music wants to be heard. Feeling wants to be felt. He’d always wanted to be found, even if he didn’t know it’ (415-6). Music here is equated with expressive energy and natural compulsion – a force akin to what Susan Sontag, in a complex argument concerning the agonistic nature of art in the modern age, calls the ‘ahistorical, and therefore unalienated art’ that characterises the ‘transcendent’ and the authentic (8).

As the novel progresses Georgie begins to see that the very sense of herself she has relied on throughout her adult life rests on a dubious premise: the individuality she has fashioned for herself is no more than the acting out of a role and image:

She was regarded dubiously as a ‘bit of an individual’, the kind of phrase Australians still uttered with their mouths set in an uncertain shape, as though sensing something untoward. Nowadays Georgie wondered how self-conscious her maverick attitude had been. In class and in the quad she was recognised as a type and assigned a role that, instead of resisting, she’d embraced and embellished...She didn’t see how lonely she was. (166-7)

In failing to see, until this point, that she has mistaken her ‘divergent’ attitude for some form of liberated self, Georgie is also looking beyond a mere aspect of character to the deeper conceptual roots of the individualistic self. The character Bess, whom Fox encounters on the road to her own death—a wholly natural movement she conducts (as it were) through own choice of music—signals the way for both Fox and Georgie when insisting that the world is ‘holy joined, commingling...birds and fish and ants...hear each other ...they resonate. And so do we’ (248-9). To ‘resonate’ and ‘commingle’ points to the ‘true’ state of being – one of deep and fundamental state of inter-animation (or vibration)—just as Fox comes to realise that in his formative encounter with music he himself had come to embody the ‘real music’—a ‘holy’ state of being (376) not defined by possession but experienced as a condition of openness and offering.

Both characters, in complementary ways, effect a form of self-dissolution. As they cleave in fear, confusion and desperation to the path of self-preservation, they induce their own parallel crises of identity and being over the span of the narrative. In the words attributed to Fox and his troubled relationship with music, each becomes ‘unstitched’ and ‘undone’ (225), which involves a kind of falling apart but also, paradoxically, a falling into new existential worlds of self, even as this induces a condition of psychic incoherence and even as such new states of being are dramatised as beginnings in the form of their mutual ‘rebirth’ at story’s end. It is something more than an ‘identity crisis’; rather, if more portentously, their experiences mark an ontological shift that Winton renders in dramatic terms through the recurrent imagery of swimming and submersion. In an act of antipodean irreverence, Winton inverts the customary compass of the romanticised transcendence of self: Georgie and Fox must ‘go down’ into the ocean’s depths in order to rise up in renewal.

Bill Ashcroft details the symbolic significance of this final baptismal submersion brilliantly, noting how water at once ‘draws you to the edge of death, [but also] allows you to return to the surface in joyous recognition of the vitality of life’ (38). But before this climactic moment, and in more overtly dramatic terms, Fox’s journey to the wilds enacts precisely the process of losing his assumed self as individualised substance and centre. His migration north is less allegorical than analogical: the geographical correlative to his inner state of moving outward into a new country of being. Fox’s encounter with the ‘lost’ Aborigines is revealing in a larger sense: when Axle, with violent insistence, burns Fox’s maps of the

wilderness, rendering him compassless, we learn that Fox must ‘go on the country’—he must navigate, that is, by feel and inner sense and not the rationalising construct of the map (‘says Menzies, Just trouble, maps...Like they suck everything up’ (312)). Earlier, Fox is described as looking to the wilderness as escape, thinking at one point that he wanted to be ‘truly alone’ (294). The Romantic trope of the 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>6</sup>

What Fox must confront when relieved of his maps, and thus his organising grid of direction and control, is the serious challenge of real wilderness—not necessarily hostile, but neither accommodating or supportive. That Fox has an innate responsiveness to the natural world is important. In one of the many descriptions of his instinctive alertness to the energy and life of place and country, readers learn early in the story ‘that as a boy he thought the place was alive somehow’ and that this intuitive sense is animated by an acutely felt musical sense:

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. Those days you could come down here and stand in the water on the shallow spit and clear your mind...Actually stop thinking and go blank. It was harder than holding your breath. 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...Later on only music got him there. (104)

The slide between third and second person sharpens the sense of lived experience—the heightened action of a meditative presence that is itself a state of ontological inaction in individualistic terms. And while the central idea is stated in overtly declarative terms, the stress on perspective and effort is charged with significance. Fox the boy has learnt to see differently—to look peripherally and so side-step the self-centeredness of ego and mind. But it is also a state of being that he must work at—‘it was harder than holding your breath’ (104). Like playing music, it involves discipline; or rather, a certain kind of attention beyond or outside of the exercise of the will. As the older man, estranged, alienated—an adult at war with himself and on the run—Fox must work towards this understanding from another place of being, which is also always a working back to the source of intuitive (child) knowledge and forward, or rather, outward, from his present predicament.

As already indicated, it is in the wilds that Fox ‘meets’ the very musical instincts he has been blocking out of his being; the earth has been ‘working’ toward him and, his guard drawn down, he responds. As noted, ‘dirt’ itself carries considerable metaphorical significance in the novel, cross-threading with sound and earth imagery throughout the narrative. One telling example of this kind of resonance occurs when Georgie, on receiving an envelope full of Pindar dirt from Fox (itself a symbolic gesture), eats the earth, an act that echoes her earlier ingestion of Fox’s sperm and Fox’s eating of the hot flesh of a watermelon—a ‘sacrament he cannot admit to’ (223). It also prefigures a kind of waking dream she has in which Fox places a pellet of dirt, glued together with his spittle, in her ear—the dirt, then, ‘sings’ to her (336-7). It is the sound of their communion at a deeper level of being and time, a form of call and response over geographical distance and, again, outside of the ego and will.

Fox’s responses to acoustic stimuli also resonate with an elemental call-and-response cycle. At one point, adrift in a disorientating stupor, he feels the movement and sound of the earth reaching into him—‘he feels its twist and flex and murmur and, deep down, between the rivety stones, there’s an endlessly repetitive vibration like a piston-chant foghorn drone’ (232). Later, now fully immersed in the wild, he becomes ‘acutely aware of the sound’ he makes walking alone on the beach, becoming aware of a ‘curious reverberative lag, an overlap, as though someone else is walking too, someone behind him’ (354). Finally, he

allows himself once again to respond to music, to let the music ‘undo him’, to use his phrase. And so he enters into the deeper, feeling space of the single note drone he creates from an improvised guitar string, its twin reverberative poles being two trees and he the sonic conduit:

There’s an inward glide in the drone. Like the great open spaces of apnoea, the freedom he knows within the hard, clear bubble of the diver’s held breath. After a point there’s no swimming in it, just a calm glide through thermoclines, something closer to flight. Within the drone, sound is temperature and taste and smell and memory... (368-9)

Winton works hard here to generate a profusion of evocative sonic images. The monotonous note becomes multiplicitous chord; the sonic plane of the drone becomes an open geography of sensation; metaphorical immersion becomes elevating flight and shamanic transport; and the boundaries of sound-as-energy flood synaesthetically into subjective consciousness, collapsing conventional spatial distinctions between self and object. At the same time, the imagery of both immersion and flight is always working to return Fox to his own corporeality—a paradoxical form of ‘rebirth’ marking a moment of ‘mutual salvation [that] is a sign of ultimate renewal’ (Ashcroft 44). Tellingly, this parturient ‘drama’ of the closing scene hinges on the reciprocal life-giving force of breath: where, moments before as he locates Georgie underwater, Fox gives her life through his own breath—‘[the] air against her lips...blew her open. It was like an electrical charge’ (459)—she in turn unites their beings through the breath: ‘She fell on Luther Fox, pressed her mouth to his and blew’ (461).

The ‘breath of life’ (as the phrase goes) not only signals Winton’s further exploration of this theme in the following novel *Breath*, but also emphasises the existential significance of Fox’s experience. Like Georgie, he has been ‘blown open’, and so ‘reborn’ to a new state of consciousness and thus ‘being in place’. Indeed, before rescuing his lover, Fox ‘travels’ over space and time, mobile in his newfound poetic consciousness, apprehending a ‘world alive’ in which ‘there is indeed some kind of spirit that rolls through all things, some fearsome memory in stones, in wind, in the lives of birds’ (371)—the life force as spirit working in all things, to use Bill Niedjie’s words. On the more conscious level of being, to ‘work’ the drone entails working figuratively downward into the ‘root’ of music as sonic vibration and elemental energy source—to the point where pulse and song are experienced as a form of phenomenological interplay. Indeed, in an allusive play on Yeats’ celebrated lines, ‘who can tell the dancer from the dance,’ Fox’s sense of separate selfhood fuses with those very trees Niedjie evokes: ‘He sings until he’s hoarse, until he wonders whether the tree isn’t bending him now, if he’s the singer or the sung...He knows he lives and that the world lives in him...He sings. He’s sung’ (403, 451). Again, the imagery is compounded: Fox becomes ‘a resonating multiplication’ (388), the ostensible singularity and centeredness of his individual self reverberating outwards in cadences of expanding consciousness. Winton seeks to capture here the inward flare and pulse of sheer being—the Zen-like breath of utter presence, without ‘self’ or ‘identity:’ less heightened than intensified and expanded consciousness. It is both immanence and emanation: the sung ‘voicing’ of being that is always the world’s song.

To say, by way of conclusion, that Winton’s character becomes the embodied metaphor of the harmonising between self and country—that he has, in some completed sense, found the ‘sound’ of his own being through the natural language of ‘dirt music’—is lamentably glib. Rather, the novel is better understood as an effort to find a literary language that speaks to the human capacity to ‘re-sight’ and ‘re-site’ Australians’ relation to place and country. As literary conceit, music works transpositionally in *Dirt Music*, much in the way the Western Australian composer and musician, Liza Lim, conveys the idea of changing consciousness by incorporating the Sufi concept of ‘wandering, being bewildered, being lost, but also finding something, coming into community, being entranced and finding union as well’ (Ford 143). Winton articulates the need to reach forward to a new understanding of the

possibilities of self and identity through the return to the ‘original’ bond between the human and the natural—an understanding neither derived from imported European symbolic forms nor involved simply in the imitative appropriation of sacred Aboriginal rites. In this way, ‘dirt music’ bespeaks Winton’s effort to ‘work over’ the conceptual ground on and by which contemporary Australians might begin to imagine different possibilities of being and belonging in country.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Rose argues for the 're-placing' of musical performance outside of confining concert halls and opera houses, with their 'anachronistic colonial' connotations (14).

<sup>2</sup> In the liner notes to the double CD recording subtitled 'Music for a Novel', the musician Lucky Oceans plumbs 'dirt music' for its quintessentially American and romantic connotations: it is both naturally egalitarian, because its source lies 'deep' in foundational human experience and feeling, and incorruptibly original because it resists and refuses convention: 'Play music as if it's a technical exercise and it flies away ... it's [dirt music] not against learning music, but it's against repeating what you've learned, because every moment offers a chance to do it a new way ... If you travel far enough down that dirt road, you meet yourself – the you that was playing before there was music' (Oceans 10). Always make it original, to paraphrase Emerson: make it fresh and make it yours by retelling the story through the spontaneity of improvisation. Channeling Whitman and Thoreau, Oceans invokes the figures of Huck Finn and Kerouac: to play dirt music is to be taken on the road – to travel the 'dirt road' to the point of ontological origin: self as source (not salvation); self as spiritual home; but it is also to take a new journey 'to a world unknown' (as he says of Chris Whitley's raw and urgent song 'Dirt Floor' that closes disc 1 of the recording) – it is to strike out for the untrammelled (uncharted) territory of one's own life experience.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison also uses the term 'country' with a clear understanding of different inflections the word carries for both white and black Australian; indeed, in an essay in the collection to which he refers in 'Poem Country' in his own collection entitled *Who Wants to Create Australia?* (Halstead Press: Broadway, NSW, 2007), he observes that the 'word's use oscillates all the way between how an Indigenous Australian might use it to describe where he or she comes from through to the self-consciously academic adoption of the term as a tool to shift perceptions of ownership, care and environment within the larger geopolitical terrain of national life and ideas' (ibid.).

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that Tredinnick, in his book *The Blue Plateau: A Landscape Memoir*, thanks Winton for the use of that sub-titular phrase and the idea of a 'vernacular of the land' it conveys. In his fine essay, Winton casts a stern eye over the ecological prospect in contemporary Australia, noting in particular that the struggle non-Indigenous Australians have in cultivating a richer relationship with the land hinges on what might be called a failure of sight, or a condition of poor vision. 'Learning to see has been a long, slow and sometimes bitter problem,' (xvi). The essay introduces Richard Woldendorp's impressive collection of ariel landscape photographs entitled *Down to Earth: Australian Landscapes* (1999) in which landscape becomes pictorial abstract – at great elevation, the camera's eye sees and records a transformed image of Australian country.

This keys into what Winton calls the 'other means of seeing' (xv).

<sup>5</sup> The same idea is conveyed in *Breath*: as surfer and illicit lover, the young Pike is taken to the vertiginous edge of 'breathless' thrills where he explores the intoxicating spaces between life and death *inside* breath itself.

<sup>6</sup> See Rzepka (1986, 21-22) for a discussion of the play and tension between 'visionary solipsism' and 'self-diffusion' in English Romantic poetry. Kylie Crane offers an illuminating reading of the 'wilderness myth' in her chapter on *Dirt Music* (2012).



