

*Gendered Spaces: The Poetics of Domesticity in Tim Winton's Fiction*

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**Abstract:** How can the fictional representation of space and domestic interiority be interpreted in fictional works like *Dirt Music*, *The Riders* or Winton's latest novel *Breath*? This article argues that the house as an active living space in Winton's work functions significantly in the context of describing a mythical, commercially marketable, nostalgic image of rural Australia as a place of masculine redefinition and maturation. The analysis of spatiality in this context provides a deeper engagement with the connection between space and gender, highlighting the ambiguous nature of specifically gendered spheres in the architecture of Winton's fictional dwelling places. Deviating from the original Victorian concept of "separate spheres", which set up clear definitions of male and female domestic spaces, Winton's narratives place priority on highlighting the male influence on the originally female domains in the house. It is argued that these spaces reflect the troubling binary between male presence and female absence, highlighting the desires and troubles of the male characters but also female trauma, self-harm and displacement. These are some of the issues this paper addresses, showing how the postcolonial dialectic between place, space and gender can be applied to Winton's fictional "traumascapes" (M. Tumarkin).

**Keywords:** Tim Winton; contemporary Australian fiction; space and place; feminism; self-harm; memory; architecture

**Introduction**

As one of the most popular and successful contemporary Australian writers, Tim Winton has published a wide range of bestselling novels and short stories over the last thirty years. Venturing into another creative genre in 2011, he has written his first stage play "Rising Water", and has also adapted his commercial success *Cloudstreet* (1991) for the television screen. Winton is one of the most successful and most highly regarded authors in Australia, having received the Miles Franklin Award four times and a Man Booker Prize nomination twice in his thirty-year-career. In the light of increasing gender ambiguities, mythopoetic movements in America, Europe and Australia have received much attention in their fight for a re-strengthening of male values and social roles. Although not a self-confessed member of the men's movement, Winton has frequently expressed his sympathies with a

“re-centralisation” and redefinition of Australian masculinity in interviews and through his novels in particular (see Winton “Masculine Mystique”). This article examines a selection of Winton’s novels with respect to the living spaces of his female characters: Eva Sanderson (*Breath*), Georgie Jutland (*Dirt Music*) and Jennifer Scully (*The Riders*). It argues that Winton’s works continue the tradition of displacing the female in spatial and metaphorical respects, creating an economy of a new masculine sensitivity and nostalgia that is based upon the female as the antithesis to male maturation and healing. As a counterfoil to the emotional struggle of the male characters in Winton’s stories, female trauma in the *Gestalt* of self-harm, suicide or destructive diseases reappears in his fictional repertoire, creating a foundation from which the male subject positioning is strengthened. In order to adequately show how female trauma and male nostalgia interact in the spatiality of Winton’s novels, brief contextualisation of the study of space, place and memory is essential.

The appropriation of the woman’s body to symbolically describe male supremacy in national respects has long been established in Australian colonial thinking, which repeatedly associates the land with the feminine and considers the challenging power as masculine (Schaffer 4; Blunt and Rose 10-11). The land as a male signifier of femininity thus does not merely incorporate the metaphorical exploitation of the woman as Other, but mythologises, even demonises, femininity in the face of the masculine norm. The woman disappears behind a strictly male-regulated network that continues to silence emerging female voices behind its veil of dominant representations – a point that still finds currency in Winton’s popular fiction, in which femininity is frequently associated with lack, destruction and transience.

In the following critical readings, it is important to consider how the spaces that Winton’s characters live in reflect contemporary gender relations and how the buildings they inhabit mirror the life of both female and male inhabitants. I argue that the houses in Winton’s novels *Breath* (2008), *Dirt Music* (2001), and *The Riders* (1994) can be seen as archival sites of eroticised space, in which intense gender struggles are presented. In its mnemonic significance, the house becomes a place of ambivalence and gender performativity, in which trauma and nostalgia exist side by side, merged through the obstinate maintenance of persistent stereotypes of femininity as unpredictable, rebellious, (self-) destructive and power-craving. I will connect the symbolism and metaphors found in the materiality of the house with the claim that the domestic sphere in Winton’s fiction is the location of intense gender struggle and pain for the individual women associated with it. Rather than invoking a sense of home and comfort, the house is an ambivalent space, which operates in the area of the Freudian “uncanny,” blending unconscious desires, suppressed needs and the wish for emotional release and motherhood. It is also a place of consecutive or constant loss that defines the female characters’ lives. My central point is to show the lack of a definite representation of female history and memory in the dwelling places as such, which, despite being traditionally considered the woman’s sphere, become heavily defined by shifting male-female power relations in favour of the masculine. Recollection plays a crucial role in this specific analysis and illuminates the complexity and intertextuality that is inherent to the symbolic function of the house as a memory site. As Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft say, the

house represents a “peculiarly privileged location for the enactment of the human drama” (Smyth and Croft 16), which is vividly exemplified in the gender controversies related to Winton’s fiction.

In order to contextualise Winton’s novels theoretically, the first part of this essay introduces both classic phenomenological views about the house as a site of memory, and more recent approaches to place as a gendered sphere, in which perceived hegemonies of masculinity or femininity are performed. The article then proceeds to give detailed close-text analyses of Winton’s narratives from a feminist perspective.

### **“Buildings that speak” – The House as Memory Site**

Alain de Botton has described the aesthetic and mnemonic function of architecture as arising from the ability of buildings to speak and to reflect people’s own personal stories in their different facets: “Insofar as buildings speak to us, they also do so through quotation – that is, by referring to, and triggering memories of, the contexts in which we have previously seen them, their counterparts or their models. They communicate by prompting associations” (De Botton 93). Similarly, Gaston Bachelard says in his *Poetics of Space* (1958) that memories are “motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” and hence the deeper we can live “fixations of happiness” by reliving these memories (9, 6). The house is simultaneously a place of shelter and threat that merges elements of the deeply familiar and the uncanny in its architecture, its interior design and in its atmosphere. The various components of the house as home function as a complex network of mnemonic and associative cues that relate to the individual stories of its inhabitants and to the history of the building itself. This topography is also described by Svetlana Boym as a mnemonic tradition that “recognizes the accidental and contiguous architecture of our memory and the connection between recollection and loss” (49). She sees places as “contexts for remembrance and debates about the future, not symbols of memory or nostalgia” (49). Any place that has been constructed and is part of individual expression and personality receives a status of inviolability, which is both expressive and reflective. It becomes an active subject in itself by offering the space where individuality can be developed and visualised (King 12) – a place of solitude where we can “dream in peace” (Bachelard 6; see also Moran 29). Often accused of being trapped within a very bourgeois European construct of home and lacking the agency and representations of the female in his phenomenological constructions (Smith 179), Bachelard nevertheless contributes important ideas to the discussion of the house as a memory site, defining it as a place where intimacy is perceived with increased intensity as opposed to the lack of unity outside of its boundaries (40-41). He alludes to the view that the “exterior facade and style along with the interior decoration, furniture, style, and layout of houses compose a semiotic system that signals status, class, and public display and creates meanings that observers, visitors, and the public may interpret and read” (Mezei and Briganti 840). Still, his theory fails to account “for the complex moral experiences of home articulated by a broader range of voices invoking complexities that in turn reveal the dominant experience of the house as more complicated” (Smith 188). Relating to the construction of domestic space in Winton’s novels, the complexity of gendered voices is established in the narratives, albeit, as

indicated above, from a clearly masculine diegetic or/and extradiegetic viewpoint that renders the feminine an inherently problematic category.

In contrast to early modernist advances in the study of the self and its physical environment, which distinctively separated the self from corporeality and place, scholars currently assert that the body and its place are inextricably connected to the self. As Edward Casey highlights “there is *no place without self and no self without place*” (Casey 684) – a statement that is allied to the notion that places experience re-signification according to the idiosyncratic memories and stories associated with them (De Certeau 108). Place and the self thus stand in a close, mutually signifying relationship, forming a platform for the discussion of gender-specific or gender-transgressing fictionalisations of space. Following the idea that place can be regarded space that has been given meaning (Buell 63),<sup>1</sup> this essay agrees with Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs’s point that place can be described as “local, homely, familiar,” while space has the power to transform place into something uncanny and unfamiliar (“Uncanny Australia” 177). Gelder and Jacobs argue for a wider sphere in which the line between space and place increasingly blurs. Thus, being “out of place,” especially a familiar place that has become “unhomely,” offers new perspectives and ways of what being “in place” means (Gelder and Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia* 46).

In this context of the interrelated formation between place, space and subjectivity, the gendered body as correlating with the mnemonic function of space needs to be considered as central to the discussion of Winton’s fictional demographics as so clearly marked by female sexuality as “un-heimlich”. Gender can be regarded a construct born out of a multitude of performative acts that dramatise and formulate the body as a mode of enacting possibilities, as Judith Butler argues. Thus, it provides access to understanding how and to what extent cultural conventions are actually enacted and embodied (Butler 487). It is accordingly interesting to ask the question whether Winton as an author of gender “become[s] entranced by [his] own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler 485)? How do his male and female characters act in their assigned spaces and can the nature of their “act-ions” be aligned with a dominantly male, cultural translation of gender that stigmatises and others the feminine as the force rupturing the perception of home? Winton’s fiction, just like other visual art, film, theatre and literature, is a platform where these performative and engendering acts are visualised and become versions of cultural conventions and transgressions, as will be argued in the following analyses of his novels.

### **Reading the Female Space in Winton’s Fiction**

A useful place to begin is with the critical work that describes the postcolonial meaning of the house in Winton’s bicentenary novel *Cloudstreet* (1991), seeing it as a metaphor for Australia’s history of indigenous displacement, colonial guilt and settler Australia’s desire for reconciliation:

Home is a recurrent signifier for Australia’s cultural identity; it encapsulates political and historical events within the history of the characters. The domestic space develops as a ‘mini-Australia’ within Australia, encompassing various

versions of history and challenging the established historical truth, namely the big Australian lie that deprived the original inhabitants of their land and spoilt the natural environment (Ben-Messahel 136).

Interestingly, and as so often noted in connection with *Cloudstreet*, the domestic sphere adopts a significant role in this particular work as a metonymy of social and national controversies. David Crouch describes the “national hauntings” of the house, discussing the cultural and historical significance of the old library in particular (99-105), where both an Indigenous girl of the “Stolen Generation” and an old widow of Anglo-Irish colonial descent, in charge of the Aboriginal girls and their education, come to die. He offers a critical analysis of *Cloudstreet* as a postcolonial novel with respect to the reconciliation mode adopted by Winton. He implies that the Indigenous presence is used in Winton’s classic as a self-serving tool for healing the white settler’s lack of belonging and reduced to an instrument that actually mutes the indigenous voice. Winton’s motifs in terms of reconciliation are particularly manifest in the birth of Quick and Rose’s son Wax Harry, who is born in exactly the same room that used to host the old library and form the locale of past tragedies. This birth initiates reconciliation between both the Lamb and Pickles families, uniting them under the roof of Number One Cloudstreet and re-directing attention from the fragmentary, violent stories of the past to the hope and prospects of the future. The reconciliatory endeavours depicted in Winton’s novel are controversially articulated, as Crouch and other critics demonstrate (see Murray; Taylor). However, turning away from a purely postcolonial reading of the house as a microcosm of national concerns, this article proceeds to look at the living space as a personalised site of memory and gender, focusing on feminist concerns.

### ***Breath* (2008)**

In *Breath*, Eva and Billy Sanderson’s timbered weatherboard house is in close proximity to the sea, a few miles from the fictional village of Sawyer where the adolescent protagonist Bruce Pike lives. The couple is blessed with a trust fund, which allows them to live comfortably and pursue their hippie-culture without much consideration of financial issues. Eva’s career as a former free-style skiing champion ended abruptly when she had an accident during a tournament, leaving her physically disabled with a broken knee. Her dislocation from the snow in her home country, the United States, to the maritime seascape in Australia, the home of her husband, initiates a limited existence and illuminates Eva’s stagnation in her life, both physically and psychologically, bound to the confines of their secluded home. Sando pursues his passion for surfing, going on long trips throughout the Asia-Pacific region. One of the reasons for their settling in Western Australia may constitute the easy access to great surfing territories around the Indian Ocean, Indonesia in particular. His happiness and personal balance, which derive from living so closely to the ocean and to these surfing territories, stand in complete contrast to her apparent unhappiness and dissatisfaction. He is united with the elements of his existence and self-expression. She is completely detached from them, living away from the snow, the mountains and her home country. Eva is neither inheritor, nor creator of the Australian culture around her, which increases her level of alienation and frustration. She remains

passive in terms of achieving a more balanced, independent life style and only reaffirms her own existence through her masochistic affair with Pikelet, a fifteen-year-old boy.

If the house is seen as an allegory of the psyche, as suggested by Bachelard among others (Kerber 13, Bachelard), both the architecture of the house and the interior design in *Breath* function as symbolic entities, which, on the one hand, exhibit archival character in their selective restoration of a personalised past, and, on the other hand, work as a form of an individual *lieu de memoire* in their nostalgic and symbolic complexities (Kerber 13, Engels 120, 137). The Sanderson home also becomes an example of “eroticised topographies” or “geographies of sexuality”, reflecting the interdependency between sex and its locale and supporting the notion that sex and sexual politics can be found anywhere, in public and private spaces (Johnston and Longhurst 3; Bell 96-100). It is Eva’s affinity with erotic asphyxiation practices that heavily defines the house for the narrator Pikelet, whose own life failings are fatefully connected with Eva’s transgressive, self-threatening fetishes. Hence, the beach house and Eva’s body – both dominating Pikelet’s recollection – are equally presented as locations of strangulation and difference, stressing a symbolic connection between the body and place as mnemonic, though highly sexualised, entities.

Sando spent a lot of time along the Californian coast in his competitive surfing days – an element that could have influenced the architecture of their house back in Western Australia, whose features prominently resemble Malibu beach houses. These domiciles used to and still are a status symbol, reflecting financial affluence and social privilege. While influenced by the legacy of the Victorian concept of “separate spheres” and reflecting both the familiar notion of Western Australia’s colonial frontier history, and the early phase of the “sea-change” escape (see Pannell 51; Osbaldiston 39-41), the house embodies the unfamiliar, unconventional hippie and beach culture of California, and is built in a fashion unknown in rural Western Australia in the 1960s – the time of Pike’s adolescence:

There was a big, fenced vegetable garden and some odd-looking outbuildings and though the house was built from local timber it was like no home I’d ever seen. It stood high off the ground on log-poles, surrounded by spacious verandahs where hammocks and mobiles and shell-chains hung twisting in the breeze [...] Behind the French doors, the interior of the house seemed to be mostly one enormous room with rugs on the floor, a stone fireplace and a table as big as a lifeboat. Above this, set against the far gable, was a broad, open sleeping loft. There were no blinds or curtains anywhere, only a few sarongs that hung like flags from beams. (*Breath*, 37-39)

The openness of the building’s interior is architecturally uncommon for the time in which the novel is set. It connotes a lack of privacy that defines the traditional female sphere as obsolete, making it a shared space. Despite the fluid, open space of the main living area of the house, Winton’s portrayal of the place is inspired by the Victorian ideal of allocating tightly defined sections in the living space to either the man or the woman. As such, Sando has his private dwelling space underneath the house. This clearly defined masculine sub-

space is transgressed by the ghostly presence of the female character (*Breath* 63-65). Winton's novel sets up such controversial spaces only to emphasise the lack of a distinctly female sphere in the house itself. Eva is pushed to the margins – the veranda and the sleeping loft as attachments to the centre of the house. As shown in the following analysis, gender is performed in the given spaces: masculinity reflects survival, warmth and the present/future, while the story of the feminine is associated with death, rage and a haunting past.

A central part of Sando's story is established in the aforementioned dark sub-space beneath the weatherboard house – the “cave-like undercroft” (*Breath* 43, see 39) – which serves as both a retreat from Eva's inquisitive gaze and a physical space to keep surfboards and craft material. His past as an iconic surf champion remains concealed to Pikelet and Loonie until Eva intrudes upon this clearly male dominated sphere and reveals her husband's identity to the boys (64). We might consider Sando's space as an unconscious or subconscious domain, a dark place of secrets and shadows, which is tightly linked to his past as a competitive surfer and heralds his profession of “grace.”<sup>2</sup> Philip Drew describes the “veranda under-floor” as a “mysterious region of darkness” which can be seen as the unconscious of the house, a place where children's fantasies can be acted out (Drew 110). Drew also describes this space as a distinctively male domain as opposed to the upper veranda that is generally considered part of the woman's terrain, being an extension to the house (111). Synonymous with the masculine, the under-floor subverts the rest of the architectural structures of the building and the consciousness of the people in it (Bachelard 18-19). So the space underneath the Sanderson house also works metonymically in establishing a spatial expression of masculinity, a place of escape from the female consciousness, which is associated with the veranda – a place that in *Breath* is dominated by Eva's presence and connotes a dynamic interplay between uprootedness and uneasiness, the domestic and the “wild” or “uncanny” (*Breath*, 51, 97, 129, 134; see Drew 41; Malouf 20; Modjeska 12).

The surfing magazines, which Eva leaves in Sando's undercroft for the boys to find, function as the means of revelation and manipulation through which Eva achieves her aim of exposing Sando's history to the boys. Winton also draws an analogy to the history and the codex of Australian surfing culture in which an older surfer becomes the mentor of talented “grommets” and teaches them the art and spirituality of the sport (Evers 65-68, 79-81, 78-79, Warshaw 238).<sup>3</sup> The boards and the shaping equipment illustrate the fascination at the time with revolutionising the shape of surfboards as Nat Young points out in his *History of Surfing* with reference to Australian surfing icon Simon Anderson (Young and McGregor 166). The objects mentioned here as set characteristics of this lower part of the house become incorporations of individual and cultural memory, combining the symbolic, magical and living nature of memory, as Nora calls it, with national stories of cultural redefinition and emancipation.

Clearly associated with the veranda, Eva seems to be an uncanny, chaotic presence in the house itself and her personality hardly receives any reflection in the interior design. The female “fall from grace,” as equally reflected in Eva's fateful skiing accident and her affair

with Pikelet, is defining for the gender struggle that takes place here. Joining the long line of Wintonian masculinised female characters, she is the “fallen angel,” indifferent towards her conventional roles in the household (*Breath* 129, 132, 160). It is her husband and Pikelet who embrace these “feminine” roles and thus convert the conventional sphere of the woman into a post-modern space of masculine re-definition as domestic, nurturing and private. Eva’s erotic excesses signify death as the inevitable consequence of her symbolic fall and connect her as the seductive force with the “fall of man,” Pikelet’s own fall from “grace,” and resonate with Loonie’s early remark to his friend that “Chicks, Pikelet. They drag you down” (*Breath*, 68).

The veranda thus connotes restlessness and movement, a dynamic interplay of the sense and the mind, an in-between place of temporary dwelling. The mobiles and shell-chains decorating Eva’s and Sando’s veranda imply the principle of balance and motion, of stasis and dynamics, which is tested through their exposure to the elements of nature, the wind and the rain in particular. Eva’s predicament of being captured in physical stasis that stands in torturing tension towards the restlessness and unfulfilled desire of her inner self for movement achieves a sad finality in this comparison. The divergence between her restless mind and her physical immobility is heightened in this place where she does her physio-therapeutic exercises, lies in the hammock and tells Pikelet about America and the excessive sense of ambition that drives her people.<sup>4</sup> So the extremely perverted eroticism of asphyxiation and strangulation that Eva exercises reflects a restless, nomadic nature, driven by ambition, aspiration and mortal anxiety (*Breath* 136). This eroticism stands in connection with, what Freud calls, the invasion of the “Uncanny,” “das Unheimliche” or the “Un-homely,” into the private space (Freud 217-56), resulting in a profound redefinition of the characters’, in this case Pikelet’s, long-held values and ideals.

While Eva is remembered as the dominating, uncanny and sexual presence in the house, the material sphere of the building itself is defined by Sando’s interests, travels and affinity with the sea, and supports a memory that tells his story, not hers.

Those rare times we were invited into the house proper, I noted the masks and carvings on the walls, the woven hangings and bone artefacts from places I could only guess at. The wall opposite the fireplace was loaded with books: Jack London, Conrad, Melville, Hans Hass, Cousteau, Lao Tzu, Carlos Castaneda. Abalone shells lay polished on a coffee table, and there were brass oil lamps, his didjeridu and the vertebra of right whale like a big, pockmarked stool. (*Breath* 58)

Sando’s fascination with the sea and his new-age philosophies echo in the references to Castañeda (see also *Breath* 100), Jack London’s *The Sea Wolf* and the films and anthropological works of Hass and Cousteau (124, 58). The masks and carvings on the wall relate to the stories he tells Pikelet about his travels (57-58, 124). They mark his fascination with unknown and foreign cultures. However, they additionally function as symbolic entities, turning into trophies from his travels that he brings back to the centre of the house. This habit of collecting exotic items recalls the nineteenth-century colonial obsession with



the exotic and the “primitive” and illuminates the accompanying Western stereotypes and prejudices connected to these foreign cultures: It is the study of this so-called “primitive” that “brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other” (Torgovnick 11).

Sando expresses himself repeatedly through the selection of exhibits in the house. His spiritual elitism and pantheism paradoxically resonate in his collection, illustrating the need to define himself through both his closeness to the Other and also through his distance from it as a manifestation of control. The exotic and foreign is brought into alliance here with the woman as another reference point of difference. The masks eerily relate to a picture of Eva on the slope, disguised in a de-gendering skiing mask (125). According to Roland Barthes, “there is in every photograph: the return of the dead,” which foreshadows the death of Eva, as confirmed in the novel later on (Barthes 9). She seems to have become another one of the artefacts in her husband’s collection, her actual and moral “fall” being intricately inscribed upon their living space (*Breath* 127) and hence reflected in all the other objects the narrator presents as connected to Eva and her egotistic moments of evasion: the pink cellophane bag, a strong leather belt, a hash pipe, an exercise contraption and painkillers (134, 191): “She was blind in her foggy bag, intoxicated by the idea of what she was doing, and I hovered [...] willingly life into her, holding off the shivering darkness” (*Breath* 191). Unlike Sando, Eva’s only representation is in this one photo,<sup>5</sup> which depicts a painful but defining period in her life that is still reaching out to the present. For her, the photo constantly reminds her of her loss and the absence of purpose in life, placing her in a position that is stagnating between an intense longing for the past and the inability to accept the disillusioning reality of the present.

The house becomes a memory site, both literally and metaphorically – a place in between life and death where the traces of memory are sustaining for the male, but destructive for the female, emphasising her placelessness and deprivation. The present for Eva has lost any dynamic spontaneity and is governed by an excessive need to substitute her former skiing lifestyle of risk and adventure with her death-driven performance of auto-erotic asphyxiation – acts that mute her future prospects and fossilise her past. Being consumed by what she has lost, she focuses all the attention on her loss incorporated in the one picture that confirms and re-enacts her trauma again and again. Thus, the living space becomes, as Roxana Cazan calls it, a locus of disease and suffocation (Cazan 66). The masculine sphere of the dark undercroft as signifying unconscious desires of control finds its reflection in the “shivering darkness” of Eva’s sexuality (*Breath* 191). The physicality of the house, as defined by Sando’s life, thus correlates to the metaphysical demeanour of the female as the haunting and haunted Other – both combined in Pikelet’s memory. The beach house as a narrative allegory of personal recollection itself, being mediated through Pikelet’s subjectivity, hence describes the nostalgic story of male bonding as interrupted by female sexuality, causing an ongoing trauma for the narrator. In the process of telling their stories, both Sando and Pikelet in their own idiosyncratic ways, continue to position Eva as Other, thus centralising their own stories and ensuring their survival.

### ***Dirt Music* (2001)**

In *Dirt Music*, the living space as an archival and gendered memory site equally works to underline the linkage between trauma and nostalgia through the corrosive image of the excessive, sexually progressive and appropriating female character. The female protagonist, Georgiana Jutland, is an equally displaced character as Eva, struggling with her “uprooted” existence in a place of persisting “settler capitalism” or “neo-colonial capitalism” like the fictional Western Australian fishing town White Point where she always felt ambivalent and unsettled (*Dirt Music* 18).<sup>6</sup> Having lived with her partner Jim Buckridge in his White Point mansion for three years, she is still not a set part of the house but is stuck in between duties as girlfriend, houseguest, wife and mother, while never achieving full status in any of these roles. Having travelled extensively and lived overseas in the Middle East, Georgie is longing to settle down and have a family, creating her own dwelling place. In her spatial and personal alienation, Georgie finds relief and distraction in alcohol abuse and tranquillizers, using the virtual space to accommodate her disembodied self. Meeting shamateur Luther Fox offers her the chance of renewal, of a new beginning. Furthermore, the slightly eroded farmhouse of the Fox family, which is shaken by trauma and death, becomes the place of hope for Georgie where she can realise her dream of family and commitment. Before illuminating this point further, the character of White Point as a “personal junkyard” (*Dirt Music* 17) and Georgie’s feeling of unsettlement need to be examined further in order to understand the significance of her appropriation of Lu’s farm.

The architecture of the houses in White Point is perceived by Georgie as makeshift and ugly, merging financial affluence and a lack of taste into a grotesque dissonance with the natural beauty of the hinterland and the ocean. Judith Fetterley states that grotesqueness is created when stereotypes are imposed on reality with the implication that the real grotesque lies in the stereotype itself (43). The clashing of nature and capitalist ambition in White Point’s architecture create the grotesque in this particular framework and enforce the stereotype of male power and dominion. The name “White Pointers” (*Dirt Music* 17, 126, 136,192) which is used throughout the novel to describe the town’s inhabitants calls up the image of the Great White Shark, one of the largest and most dangerous predators in the world – a point discussed by Kylie Crane, who points out that this name evokes the idea of the inhabitants as predatory and ruthless (115):

For the bulk of the time men worked and drank in a world of their own making. How they loved to run amok. And when, in time, their women came, they did not, on the whole, bring a certain civilizing something. True, they conferred glass and lace curtains upon the windows of shacks. Geraniums appeared in old kero tins and there was an exodus of idealists who were driven north into the tropics, but, male and female, addicted to the frontier way, White Pointers remained a savage, unruly lot. Even after the boom when many families became instantly – even catastrophically – rich and the law came to town, they were, in any estimation, as rough as guts. Nowadays rich fisherman built pink brick villas and concrete slab bunkers that made their fathers’ hovels look pretty. The materials were long-haul but the spirit behind the construction was entirely makeshift, as though locals were hard-wired for an ephemeral life. Georgie, who rather liked the get-fucked Fish Deco vibe of the place, thought it

remarkable that people could produce such a relentlessly ugly town in so gorgeous a setting [...] The town was a personality junkyard – and she was honest enough to count herself onto that roll – where people still washed up to hide or to lick their wounds. (*Dirt Music* 17)

This account of the perceived and established “fugliness” of the place evokes the settlements that reappear in Winton’s other novels where “angels seemed unlikely and God barely possible” (*Breath* 137).<sup>7</sup> The paralysing feeling of being stuck in a suffocating environment that is characterised by personal degeneration, social distrust, hierarchical thinking and a lack of spirituality, is inherent to the majority of Winton’s female characters. They are torn between their wish for belonging and current lack of personal fulfilment. And this sentiment is central to their extreme mental states of self-scrutiny and silent desperation, often resulting in acts of “chronic suicide” in the forms of alcohol, tablets and drugs (Skegg 1472).<sup>8</sup>

However, Winton’s description of the influence of women in the quotation above reveals an obstinate criticism of the female – a criticism that reappears in *Breath* and is also present in his earlier novels. By depicting Georgie as a rich, attractive and ego-centric drunkard, Winton uses the image of the woman as the civilising and policing influence (“God’s Police”) and turns it into the opposite, conveying a harsh disapproval of contemporary middle-class women and their self-chosen liberties. While alcoholism, excess and violence are still initially linked in this passage to the working men in White Point who “loved to run amok,” drink in a world of their own making and formed a “savage, unruly lot,” it is Georgie who embodies the paradigm change that replaces the male by the female drinker. It is not the working-class man anymore who affirms his outlaw status through his drinking habits, but the middle-class, disillusioned woman, who has come to the town to “lick her wounds” (see *Dirt Music* 17) and create “a world of her own making.” She is typified as the unsettling force for the domesticated fisherman and the traumatised amateur, entering both their worlds – and homes – in search of her own happiness. Her need to imprint herself onto Luther Fox’s house is motivated by her lacking presence in Jim’s place, entrapping her into a space of un-belonging and “dis-embodiment”, so to speak. Her lost self can only be re-established by attaching herself to place, which reflects, in Casey’s terms mentioned earlier, that there is no place without self and no self without place.

Illuminating Georgie’s predicament and supporting the claim of this essay that Winton’s domestic terrains are gendered alongside the emergence of a new masculinity and a (self) destructive and traumatising/traumatised femininity, a detailed look at the main houses in the story seems justified. Jim’s house as one facet of the village’s appearance seems modern and functional, fully equipped with high technology but lacking warmth and personality:

She stood a while staring back at the great merging space of the livingroom. It was big enough not to seem crowded, despite the fact that it held an eight-seater dining table, the computer station and the three sofas corralled around the TV at the other end. The whole seaward wall of this top floor was glass and all

curtains were thrown back. Between the house and the lagoon a hundred metres away there was only the front lawn and a few scrubby dunes. It was all sensation and no taste, exactly how a sister once described her [...] She pulled back the sliding door and stepped out onto the terrace where 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. The outdoor furniture was beaded with dew. (*Dirt Music* 4)

The wealth of the Buckridge family is mirrored in the interior design and the vastness of space described here. Although there are only four people living in the house, there is a dining table for eight and three sofas while the room is still big enough to not seem crowded. The house reigns over the lagoon, offering full sight over the bay. It is a watchtower, governed by a more formal businesslike atmosphere that places a homely family environment into perspective. It is not a place where Georgie can feel at home as she is always pushed to the margins, being the stepmother rather than the mother to Jim's boys, and an ongoing affair rather than an equal companion and lover to Jim himself (*Dirt Music*, 396). Hence, it is not surprising that her influence on the house as such is scarce – sharing this lack with Eva in *Breath* and Jennifer in *The Riders*: “Christ, she'd barely fill a single box with her life here. Everything else was Jim's” (*Dirt Music* 133). It is this feeling of unbelonging that drives Georgie into an excessive habit of alcohol consumption, impacting both her own life and the lives of Jim and the boys. Georgie's acquaintance with Lu awakens her hopes to change her life drastically. Her expectations, however, are dashed again when she discovers that he has left for the tropical north to find a way to deal with his own trauma. Taking advantage of the situation and legitimising her trespassing on Lu's property via her role of self-appointed caretaker, Georgie slowly prepares the place for her to move in – with or without Lu. She eliminates the numbing traces of trauma from the farm by burning all the remaining possessions of Lu's relatives, who died in a fatal car accident:

One of those days Georgie rolled an old drum down to the sandspit at the river-bend and began burning junk. It took her all morning and half the afternoon to incinerate Darkie's clothes, the wedding dress, the dope and all those summer frocks. She made herself burn the children's things, every stained tee-shirt and pair of shorts, the posters from their walls, the plastic toys and even their pillows. She spared Lu's room, but she re-organized it to suit herself. She dusted the library and scrubbed the kitchen. She emptied every drawer of its snarls of guitar strings, rubber bands, masscards, allen keys, thimbles and knuckle bones. She saved the stained pair of Levi's and the double bedspread until last. She'd figured out what the stains were. They were the only things she enjoyed burning. (*Dirt Music* 329)

Remarkably, in her nearly obsessive need to rid the house of its tragic past, Georgie eradicates the traces of Lu's trauma in order to initiate a new beginning for both of them. However, the self-alleged destruction of her lover's past is also a self-serving measure to let go of her own traumatic experiences when working as a nurse in Jeddah and fulfil her

dream of family and settlement (see Arizti, "Personal Trauma" 181). It is Georgie's urge for renewal and spiritual re-birth that motivates her to claim Lu's farm after he is gone, changing it and making it agreeable to her own expectations. Her act of burning all the elements that are inextricably connected to the death and transience in Lu's family resembles a cremation ceremony that turns the memory items to dust and reunites them with the earth. Through this process of erasure, she re-creates herself and lays a foundation for her future as firmly settled within the boundaries of the Fox farm. In accommodating the house to her standards and making it her own, Georgie takes various liberties such as playing Lu's guitar, trying on his fingerpicks, reading his books, lying in the bathtub for hours and filling the house with the smell of her cooking (*Dirt Music* 333). The strong Western, colonial reflection in Lu's collection of books receives a counterfoil in Georgie's musical attempts at Black American gospel songs of America's south such as "Kumbayah" and "The House of the Rising Sun" (*Dirt Music* 333). Slowly, she transforms his memory place into a space of female rupture that undermines his own "project of forgetting" (*Dirt Music* 103) by replacing the shadows of his past by the inscription of a future with her. Furthermore, she clearly marks her right to the place by distancing herself from the life in White Point. She follows a path of spiritual liberation from the suffocating idealism and stereotypical romanticisation connected to the village's colonial power structures and its present-day, capitalist manifestations. As described above, Georgie hardly has any possessions and is literally distanced from the rest of the town's clientele. The things she does own are merely practical and do not have a large significance in triggering recollections – a point that also separates her from Lu whose whole house functions as a mnemonic device. By burning his torturing memory cues, Georgie also destroys "the face of death that many mourners need to see to endure the agony and paralysis of loss" (Tumarkin 76). Thus, trauma and death, in particular, are tackled here spatially by Georgie's literal cleansing of the domestic sphere and her appropriation/colonisation of the privacy of the house. As a site of memory – a body that incorporates death's presence to immortalise it and to stop the work of forgetting (see Nora 19), the house can be considered a "traumascape" (Tumarkin). Through the interference of Georgie, however, it has been changed and opened up a space that erodes the fossilisation of the past and emphasises the woman's desire for a new life under her own control. The living space can thus be interpreted as the signifier of female desire for belonging. In her search, however, the woman deliberately intrudes upon male spaces of home and eradicates and disrupts parts of his story to prioritise her own – a point that this article interprets as a subtle accusation inherent to a number of Winton's novels.

According to Bachelard, the house is filled with spaces, either hidden or closed, which are linked to stories and personal dramas (Bachelard 185). The house as an architectural entity and narrative structure is also argued to adopt anthropomorphic qualities, mirroring the emotions of its inhabitants, as vividly expressed in relation to *Cloudstreet* but also in the buildings described earlier:

At the moment of Dolly and Rose's reconciliation, there is one of many blurrings of the distinction between architecture and emotion: 'The sound her mother made taking breath was like a window being torn from its hinges' (357).

Conversely, the house reacts in an almost human manner to emotional events []  
At other times, the house breaths, sighs, itches, moans, bruises and laughs.  
(McGirr 65; see also Ben-Messahel 136, 219)

If we look at the house as a living cosmos that reflects human drama, then the previous analyses have drawn connections between the ambivalent state of the female characters in their respective living spaces and the centrality of male belonging in these places. The female is presented as continuously disrupting the concept of home and belonging for the male characters, turning the “Heim” into a space of the Other. Their dominant presence often culminates in self-harming habits, which not only unsettle their own mind-set but also the lives of the men around them. The house presented as the locale of female disruption can therefore be seen as a traumatic “wound” in itself that corresponds, on the one hand, with the bodily wound of female self-harm, and, on the other hand, with the “wounding” of the male characters as consecutive victims of female trauma. This uncanny picture is frequently painted in Winton’s fiction, reaching its most vivid manifestation in *That Eye the Sky* and *Breath*, where the self-mutilation of Tegwyn and the asphyxiation practiced by Eva distort the masculine subject position – a point that is further explored in the last section of this article.

#### ***The Riders* (1994)**

In *The Riders* the protagonist Fred Scully and his daughter Billie are both abandoned in Ireland by Jennifer, who has decided to continue her life without husband and daughter. The cottage that Scully renovates in the county Offaly is closely aligned in its allegoric function to Jennifer and the trauma that her sudden disappearance instils in Scully (Flynn 295-96). It is a house “older than his own nation” (*The Riders* 6), a remnant from a time past that attracted Jennifer when they first visited Ireland (51). Encouraging her family to begin anew in Europe, Jennifer takes their daughter Billie with her back to Australia to sell their old family home while Scully begins to work on the “new” place. It is only Billie, however, who returns to the green island – traumatised by the mother’s abandonment. By rejecting her family and the cottage Jennifer projects her desire onto a sphere beyond marriage and family – a direction that evokes the possibility of some satisfaction for a feminist readership. In its dilapidated state, the cottage symbolises Jennifer’s view of her marriage as fractured – a mere nostalgic relic without a future.

Initially unaware of the doubts harboured by his wife, Scully enters an imaginary sphere of future happiness and family bliss in his solitary endeavour to prepare the place for the arrival of his family. Despite Scully and Billie’s emotional turmoil and bleak journey through Europe, the building in the Irish countryside remains constant, compared to the instability and flimsiness of their lives. It becomes the expression of Scully’s love and fatherly care, a place that depicts his story of abandonment in its material and spatial architecture (see Hassall 28). The cottage – though initially marked by Jennifer’s gaze and desire – is the product of Scully’s work. The house becomes a little Australian microcosm in Europe as symbolised in the lime wash Scully uses to make the place “brighter, bigger, cleaner” and wholesome (*The Riders* 39; see Rutherford, “Irish Conceit” 200-1). It signifies a reversed masculine emancipation process from the feminine, turning from a “doll’s house” into a place of maturity, fatherly self-sufficiency and self-embrace.<sup>9</sup> Jennifer’s

absence from these spatial structures has paved the way for a now uncompromised paternal domesticity, in which Scully can adapt to the sole caregiving role (Arizti, "Fathercare" 282). The cottage adopts the position of nemesis to the old family house in Fremantle, a place of past happiness for father and daughter that evokes nostalgic longings (*The Riders* 40, 50). Scully's endeavour to make the old cottage a home reflects his innate domesticity. He is the head of the family and, quite literally, the master of the house, who controls the outset and furnishing of the place:

In two mad days Scully painted out the whole interior in lime wash, and the place suddenly seemed brighter, bigger, cleaner, and so strangely wholesome that it made him realize how foul it had been before, what scunge he'd really been dealing with day and night. Then he sealed the timber floor upstairs and buffed it by hand, and he lacquered the oak banister of the stair and the great beams that ran from lintel to lintel downstairs [...] The house smelled sweetly of turf and scrubbing. There was crockery on the pine dresser and a shelf beneath the stairs with old paperbacks on it already. There was a birch broom inside the door and a stack of larch kindling by the turfbox [...] Admit it, he told himself, you like it, you like the place now that it's full of things. Because you love things, always have. (*The Riders* 39, 59)

From scratch, Scully creates the domestic sphere, turning the dilapidated, unliveable building into a cosy and comfortable home for himself and his daughter. Sahlia Ben-Messahel sees in the house an association with the internal and the external, encompassing "a totality that relies on the organic and umbilical relation between centre and margin" (132). She sees Scully's work as the creation of familiarity within an estranging country/continent, building a little Australian niche – a home. Scully's antipodean exoticism, it appears, and hence his marginal position, is perceived in the unpretentious and feminine side that he cultivates (*The Riders* 237). Instead of merely claiming, as Ben-Messahel does, that the house functions as a reflection of an Australian cultural space, the focus needs to be shifted towards Scully's reputation as a "careful man, and thorough, able to cook and do all these womanly things" (*The Riders* 237) – qualities which are inherently interwoven with the cottage and its (wo)manly imprints (Ben-Messahel 132). Although motivated by Jennifer, Scully's work on the cottage enacts his own vision of family and place. Here the novel provides a rupture that allows an interpretation of Jennifer's motives for leaving her family. Scully's assumption of sole authority in decision-making (when it comes to the family home) suppresses the agency of his wife. It is therefore Scully who "goes into labour," giving birth to the house as a family home, which soon becomes the epitome of a failed vision. Still, it is also the locale of paternal healing where the "Law of the Father" is literally reinstated (see Arizti, "Crisis of Masculinity" 45). In terms of separate spheres the narrative therefore violates the existence of the house as an exclusionary space of female power, turning it into the primary territory and mnemonic archive of the man and father.

*The Riders* portrays the woman and mother as a threat to family unity, marital bliss and a secure home. Jennifer's absence turns her into a demonic ghost that haunts Scully. As such,

he tries to regain stability by expelling his wife beyond the symbolic coordinates of heteronormativity. For instance, Scully assumes the existence of a lesbian relationship between Jennifer and the French photographer Dominique (*The Riders* 310) despite a lack of compelling evidence. It is therefore the silencing of the female and mother that characterises Winton's novel – an issue that has divided scholars (see Rutherford, *Gauche Intruder*, Baines Alarcos 7-22, Taylor 99-112). The architectural structure of the Irish cottage re-instigates male hegemony, becoming a site of male mourning as well as a hybrid space of new beginnings that offers both closure and paternal emancipation to the protagonist.

This element of the house as a symbol of male mourning re-appears in novels like *An Open Swimmer* (the shack), *In the Winter Dark* (Minchinbury House), *Shallows* (Coupar's farm), *That Eye the Sky* (the Flack family home), as has been seen in *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* and *Breath*, motivated by the narrative othering of the female and leading towards a healing and maturing knowledge for the male protagonists that promises survival. In its symbolic significance, the Sanderson house in *Breath* in particular becomes an allegory of the narrator's re-birth into place and self. It forms the memory site and connection with the past needed for Pikelet to give voice to his story and thus establish a foundation for recovery. I refer here to Kay Schaffer who mentions that a victim of traumatic experiences "projects the trauma of the past forward through the story and assumes agency in the present through the necessary fiction of recovery" (Schaffer 129-30). All the women in *Breath* (and in other Winton novels as well) become the signifier of lack for the male protagonists, who now try to come to terms with their own tragedies by re-visiting their traumatic origins. In the context of Pikelet's confessional narrative, Roberta Culbertson argues that the act of telling and verbalising body memories can be contemplated as a final attempt to reconcile with the world and return fully to the self as a socially defined being (Culbertson 179). Telling is "a process of [...] demystifying" memory (179). Therefore, Pike uses the beach house as a memory site of mourning, re-visiting the origin of his own "fall" for the purpose of self-healing, empowerment, maturation and self-purification through confessional storytelling.

### **Conclusion**

This article has shown in a variety of ways the importance of the living space as an ambiguous place of familiarity and alienation in Winton's fiction. It places emphasis on the house as a mnemonic place of survival for the male characters while being intrinsically linked to the female characters as traumatised and traumatising Other. In opposition to male healing, the women in Winton's stories are frequently associated with a destructive sexuality and transience, entrapped by, but not incorporated into, the spaces they inhabit. The female self thus remains fragmented and is displaced from the material make-up of its present environment. The surrounding space only serves to emphasise its spiritual, physical and emotional placelessness – the "shared" space between genders being consumed by a nurturing and feminised masculinity (see Murrie).

For the fictional male the boundaries between inner and outer spheres vanish. The homely and unhomely, rather than being used exclusively, enter into a reciprocal relationship that opens up various possibilities to re-define the concept of home and belonging. Winton's



men transcend pain by turning the living space into a place of mourning and redefinition. But for Winton's female characters this option remains largely off-limits. It is obvious when reading the novels that the connection between memory and place, be it in *Breath*, *Cloudstreet*, *Dirt Music* or *The Riders*, is uncannily related to loss and pain shared by male and female characters. And yet only male characters are granted the rite of passage to recovery. Male trauma is transformed into stories of confession and redemption voiced through the recollection of the female body as displaced Other – stigmatised, threatening and demonised – and the house as the positive, masculine counterfoil to the metaphorical or physical absence of the female presence. The female in Winton's fiction is abstracted as a ghost, whose personal imprint haunts the home. It is clear that male desire initiates emancipation via the confinement associated with a strong female presence. The nostalgia of Winton's stories is hence closely related to the marginalisation and fragmentation of women in an emerging masculine economy of newly defined roles and responsibilities – a dangerous and perhaps revealing tendency when one considers the scope of Winton's popularity.

## Notes

1. See also Yi-Fu Tuan 12; Casey 683: "Both geography and phenomenology have come to focus on place as experienced by human beings, in contrast to space, whose abstractness discourages experiential explorations." Also cf. Shands 38: "Space appears to be more abstract than place. Undifferentiated space, when it becomes familiar, becomes place."
2. Pikelet describes surfing as something graceful, as if dancing on water (*Breath* 24). Equally, Sando describes the thrill of surfing as being touched by the hand of God (78), "grace" referring to a gift from God given to "man."
3. In his *The Encyclopedia of Surfing*, Matt Warshaw defines grommets as young surfers, hyper-enthusiastic, insolent and often underfoot. Grommets are frequently bullied and ritualistically "baptised" by older surfers who look down on them.
4. The hammock, according to Drew, suggests indolence (*Veranda* 113).
5. An exception, however, is her training gear on the veranda, her drugs, the pink cellophane bag and her leather belt, all of which insinuate pain and excess.
6. For a literary analysis of settler capitalism and its representation see Dalziell 60, 51-73.
7. See Mischkulnig and Winton 7. "Fugly" is a contraction of "fucking ugly." Winton uses this term to describe built ugliness in the rural and coastal parts of Western Australia and refers to an ugliness that still has the "realm of comic virtue" and elements of caring inherent in its essence. Interestingly, he also writes about the architectural dilemma of coastal fishing towns in this essay, as reflected in the quote above (see 21-23). "Fugly" is also applied in *The Riders* to describe Billie's appearance as a newborn child (285).
8. Chronic suicide describes the orientation towards death by the excessive consumption of alcohol and/or drugs.
9. The house in Ireland that Jennifer chooses is referred to as a "doll's house" (*The Riders* 218) and Billie herself is compared to a doll (232). The transgressive qualities of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* resonate through this description, albeit with a stark criticism of the woman's decision, focusing sympathy and attention on the man's experience as the victim of female emancipation.

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