BODY PAIN(T): TIM WINTON’S WOMEN

Self-Harm, Memory and Femininity in Tim Winton’s Novels

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Acknowledgments

I was first introduced to Tim Winton’s work in 2006 while preparing for my M.A. examination at Bonn University. Intrigued by his novels *Dirt Music* and *Cloudstreet* and more generally by the dynamics of Australian literature, I soon decided to write my Ph.D. dissertation on Winton’s fiction. It has been a tough journey ever since – intellectually and personally, with many hurdles to overcome. No matter how hard times have been, I nonetheless value the rite-of-passage that this project has entailed for me as a person and as an academic. It has shown me my limits and my strengths, and has also opened my eyes to the strengths and weaknesses of others. I have managed to develop my own story – a story that is not romantic and devoted but ambiguous and sincere. It is sometimes resenting, often admiring, but always questioning.

Over the last years of researching and writing this dissertation I have been blessed by the invaluable support of a number of people. Firstly, I would like to thank and express my respect to Prof. Dr. Götz Schmitz and Prof. Dr. Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, from the Rheinische-Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, for their encouragement to enter the field of Australian literature all those years ago. Secondly, I would like to thank the La Trobe University staff of the English Program and my supervisors: Dr. Susan Bradley-Smith, Assoc. Prof. Susan K. Martin, and Prof. Paul Salzman. Many thanks also to La Trobe University for funding my project through the La Trobe University Postgraduate Research Scholarship (LTUPRS). This financial assistance has been invaluable, allowing me to finish the thesis in a timely manner. Furthermore, I am honoured to have received a Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research grant, as well as conference funding from the School of Arts, Communication and Critical Enquiry. I am grateful for the assistance of Christina Houen, who showed a lot of dedication in helping me with the formal revision of my manuscript. And I especially wish to thank Anna Motz for her generosity and kindness in guiding the psychoanalytic ideas expressed in this thesis; Prof. Leigh Dale for inspiring me to look at self-harm in Australian literature; Dr. Alexis Harley for promoting my role as a teacher; and the ASAL community for years of inspirational feedback at various conferences. Finally, my deepest thanks and love go to my family, my friends and my wonderful partner, who has shown so much understanding, encouragement, support and above all, patience.
Abstract

This thesis, *Body Pain(t): Tim Winton’s Women* is the only existing monograph that provides an in-depth feminist critique of the female characters in Tim Winton’s novels from 1982-2008. Existing criticism focuses heavily on Winton’s depiction of the white Australian “man-in-crisis,” a term arising through the men’s movement and the emergence of masculinity studies in the 1990s. Masculinity in crisis evokes the image of the “wounded man” as a victim of overpowering socio-cultural structures. In Winton’s fiction the vulnerability and sensitivity – the feminisation – of his male characters goes hand in hand with the dichotomisation (and masculinisation) of his female characters. A response to Salhia Ben-Messahel’s 2006 publication on Winton, my critical approach changes the focus from the author to the reader in order to redress a major oversight in the Winton discourse: the image of the “wounded woman,” once again forced into the position of the other through self-harm, death or absence. Despite a few individual voices that criticise Winton’s problematic female portrayals (e.g. Rutherford, Goldsworthy, Arizti, Hopkins), the Winton discourse, on the whole, obstinately veers away from addressing the “woman question” in his writing, neglecting the literal stigmatisation and marginalisation of his women characters. In this study I show that Winton’s popularity as writer and literary icon seems inherently connected with the desire for an accommodating nationhood – a nostalgic though not untroubled realm that favours clearly defined structures to the exclusion or stigmatisation of that which is different. In this context the popular and critical reception of Winton largely ignores the constancy of the self-harming, sick or dead woman in his fiction.

The thesis explores the range of conventional dichotomies, perversions and stereotypes of women and mothers in Winton’s fiction – all of which manifest in the (auto-) objectification of the body and the act of self-destruction. Building on the claim that literary texts deploy the motif of female suicide as “a way of interrogating the processes of social construction” (Higonnet 2000, 241), I consider the role of the female “practical body” as a “culturally mediated form” (Bordo 1992, 25) to discuss how the female body in Winton’s novels becomes a map of cultural memory that reaffirms a very masculine form of storytelling.
Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

The thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree of diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty.

Hannah Schuerholz

Melbourne, March 1, 2012
INTRODUCTION – Tim Winton and his Women

‘If I see anything dark, do you want to know?’ she asked.
‘Dark?’
‘Yeah, dark. Like death.’ This was followed by a long drag on the cigarette.
‘I don’t know.’

Amanda Lohrey, Reading Madame Bovary


1 Amanda Lohrey, Reading Madame Bovary (Collingwood, VIC: Black Inc., 2010), 15.
2 Research on youth suicide offers interesting findings and is noteworthy in this context, as it connects to backlash or “sea-change” movements towards micro-territorial nationalism in Western contexts in relation to place and belonging – a tendency subtly suggested in Winton’s work. These research findings relate suicide among females and, particularly, young males to a persistent failure in Western nations to provide steady values of social identity and environments where this identity can be formed and developed. Instead, they tend to promote utopian expectations of individual freedom and autonomy that are unrealistic and often inappropriate. Individualism, cultural change, economic fluctuation and the ensuing lack of integration in societies play into youth depression and suicide. Hence, researchers suggest that despite living in an era of globalisation, it is the local which re-experiences increasing currency. See Richard Eckersley and Keith Dear, “Cultural Correlates of Youth Suicide,” Social Science & Medicine 55, no. 11 (2002): 1891-904; Richard Eckersley, “Values and Vision: Youth and the Failure of Modern Western Culture,” Youth Studies Australia 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 13-21; Jennifer Gidley, “Giving Hope back to our Young People: Creating a new Spiritual Mythology for Western Culture,” Journal of Future Studies 9, no. 3 (2005): 17-29.
3 See Gail L. Mortimer, “The Smooth, Suave Shape of Desire: Paradox in Faulknerian Imagery of Women,” Women’s Studies 13, no. 1-2 (1986): 149-61. The ambivalence regarding female sexuality and the fear of corruption lying underneath a woman’s idealised body shape produce archaic and stereotypical women representations in William Faulkner’s writing, which are often defined in dichotomous ways, as for instance in the characters of Narcissa and Belle in Flags in the Dust and Sanctuary. Aligning the woman with destructive reality and corruption is also frequently mirrored in Winton’s fiction, as outlined in this thesis. Also see Lisa Wrenn, “Tim Winton takes a deep Breath and dives into the surf,” review of Breath, by Tim Winton, Contra Costa Times, June 29, 2008.
the Sky (1986), Dolly in Cloudstreet (1991), Eva Sanderson’s “Hutchence-look-alike” death in Breath (2008) and, obviously, the transience of mothers in Dirt Music (2001). In all these novels, death is constantly present, either as an explicit experience, a haunting memory or an inescapable consequence of the characters’ present life circumstances. Here, Bruce Pike’s narration in Breath is mirrored in the sense that “[d]eath was everywhere – waiting, welling, undiminished. It would always be coming for me and for mine” (Breath, 201).

Representing self-harm in popular culture has become an increasingly publicised issue with social and transnational currency. During the Milan Fashion Week in 2007 an advertising campaign of a different kind made headlines all over the globe. The Italian fashion label Nolita released an image of French model Isabelle Caro to make a statement against anorexia. Posing naked for photographer Oliviero Toscani, Miss Caro displays her emaciated, anorexic body to the world – her eyes and teeth seem too big for her face, her arms, legs and torso are skeletal and stick-like, with her bones shining through the skin. Death literally receives a face in this picture turning the woman’s body into a text that tells about beauty, self-authoring, control and, above all, pain. It is the exposure that is most excruciating, showing suffering openly while confronting the onlooker (male and female) with a likeness that is complicit with their own fears and insecurities regarding social standards and displacement. Is not a bit of everyone’s story written on Isabelle’s body – a confession to a world in which illusion and distortion absorb difference, disguising it, pushing it into absence? Amanda Lohrey’s character asks above: “If I see anything dark, do you want to know?” This raises a central concern of this thesis: “What are the shadows that underlie Winton’s writing?”

In response to the consistent depiction of transience written upon the female body in Winton’s fiction, a number of other important questions arise: Can female self-harm and the representation of women’s bodies in Winton’s work be considered a symptom of a persistent

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cultural traditionalism that seeks to re-enforce conventional social structures and power relations in terms of gender? How does the public reading of Winton define the critical perception and discussion of his work? And, viewing the literary text and the writer as cultural constructions, and thus, reflections of existing value systems and standards, how do we read a popular writer like Winton, whose fiction is ingrained in deeply unsettling female portrayals? What power do we as readers have, and do we use this power to hide from confrontational readings? Given Winton’s important and iconic position as an “artifact” of Australian national literature, critical approaches to the controversial representation of femininity as destructive and transient in his narratives are scarce. This thesis fills this void in the discourse, offering the only comprehensive study of Winton’s women characters in relation to self-harm, sexuality and death in his novels from 1982 to 2008.

Tim Winton is an “Australian National Treasure” – an award-winning writer, essayist, conservationist, surfer and family man, who has won the prestigious Miles Franklin Award four times throughout his long career – more than any other Australian writer to date. He is described as the “pre-eminent Australian novelist of his generation,” “probably Australia’s greatest living writer,” an “author at the height of his powers” and the “best-known contemporary Western Australian world author.” His large repertoire of short stories and novels include An Open Swimmer (1982), Shallows (1985), That Eye, the Sky (1986), In the Winter Dark (1988), Cloudstreet (1991), The Riders (1994), Dirt Music (2001), The Turning (2004) and Breath (2008). Written in a realist tradition that occasionally includes elements

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7 The National Trust in Australia announced Winton among the one-hundred Australian National Living Treasures in 1997. See Michael McGirr, Tim Winton – The Writer and his Work (South Yarra, VIC: Macmillan, 1999), 4. Winton has been honoured with numerous other awards or award nominations throughout his career including The Australian/Vogel Award for An Open Swimmer (1982), which rewards the best unpublished manuscript of a writer under the age of thirty-five, and two Man Booker Prize nominations in 1995 and 2002 for his novels The Riders (1994) and Dirt Music (2001).
9 See Tim Winton, The Turning (Sydney: Picador, 2004); Scission (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1985); Minimum of Two (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1987); Blood and Water (combined ed. of Scission and Minimum of Two; Sydney: Picador, 1993).
of “magic realism,” Winton’s stories are ingrained in the landscape of Western Australia. His evocative, nostalgic portrayals of human drama and the land have inspired other Australian artworks such as Andrew Ford’s musical composition *A Dream of Drowning* and painter Andrew McIlroy’s exhibition *Against the Tide* at the Axia Modern Art Gallery in Melbourne. As we can see, Winton’s cultural and national presence is strong: his novels are bestsellers, *Cloudstreet* is a set component of the secondary school curriculum, and his work is regularly adapted for stage, national television and cinema. In Australia, having contributed to numerous other interdisciplinary projects including a number of prefaces for...

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photography books, Winton most recently wrote the accompanying essay to Martin Mischkulnig’s photo exhibition *Smalltown*. He also regularly publishes articles in magazines and speeches in connection with his environmental and social engagement, particularly for the Ningaloo Reef and the support of young writers. His image as a Western Australian regional writer, who loves the sea, dislikes public appearances and finds his peace of mind outside of the city, corresponds to the national founding myths of mateship, ordinariness, the egalitarian, working-class ethos and anti-metropolitan sentiments. In accordance with what Leigh Dale calls the “Australian love affair with the ordinary,” Winton speaks to the “national psyche”:

I think the ordinary things of life are worthy of celebration. They tend to be forgotten, particularly in this day and age when people seem most lured by the lifestyles of the rich and famous and people who are more talented and more this and that. In my stories I’m trying to render the commonplace worthy of attention. And then to have it looked at anew – and hopefully bring from that some kind of search for meaning.

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Arguably, this quote evokes a glimmer of complicity with the kind of post-colonial Australian nationalism that re-affirms colonial myths of cultural homogeneity, egalitarianism and white hegemony by sweeping “aside the ugly debris of difference.”17 In Winton’s stories it is the woman who tends to unsettle this nostalgic, simple existence and is marked in her destructive function as the transient and unpredictable other. Winton’s love of writers from the deep American south resonates in his celebration of “the ordinary things in life.”18 His protagonists resemble the figure of the “ordinary American,” now the “ordinary Australian,” who experiences an existential crisis: his fears and insecurities made visible through the image of the angry, aggressive and (self-) threatening white woman. Journeys of maturation permit the possibility of spiritual recovery and empowerment, re-aligning the ordinary man with the norm at the expense, or destruction, of heterogeneity and difference.19 In this context, then, it is essential to test the motives, values and relationships expressed in Winton’s writing against the controversial backdrop of gender in Australia.

In her 1988 milestone work, *Women and the Bush – Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition,*20 Kay Schaffer outlines with reference to Teresa DeLauretis

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18 See Rossiter and Jacobs, “In his own Words: The Life and Times of Tim Winton,” 5; Winton, “An Interview with Tim Winton,” by Taylor, 374. Winton’s work is heavily influenced by the literature of the United States: “I also liked the way region was always a character in the novels of the American South – the sense of landscape, the outdoors stuff, these things grabbed me.”
20 Schaffer, *Women and the Bush.* Also see Kay Schaffer, “Colonizing Gender in Colonial Australia: The Eliza Fraser Story,” in *Postcolonial Discourses – An Anthology,* ed. Gregory Castle (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 357-73. In this article Schaffer reflects upon the idea of the nation and woman, analysing how historical events are fictionalised and romanticised to maintain the status quo. For contextualisation and criticism of Schaffer’s
that women are always embedded in “the textuality of Western discourse” and are posited as “the object and foundation of representation, at once telos and origin of man’s desire and of his drive to represent it, at once object and sign of [his] culture and creativity.”\textsuperscript{21} In this sense, women cannot claim agency outside of patriarchal structures, being determined through their social, cultural and linguistic heritage as the constant other to male subjectivity.\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, as Schaffer and fellow scholars such as Miriam Dixon, Anne Summers and Beverley Kingston claim, male-dominated structures in society have a long history, clearly marking the self-definition of the Anglo-Irish settlement in Australia and its subsequent generations.\textsuperscript{23}

Looking at the existing gender imbalances in Winton’s fiction, my analysis of female representation and self-harm aims at a more detailed discussion of locality, motherhood and death than has been provided in the Winton discourse so far. In this context, it is argued that Winton’s women characters are “condemned to a stereotype”\textsuperscript{24} in terms of body image, sexual progressiveness, hysteria and motherhood – merely existing within clearly-set boundaries of binary dialectics, which in themselves reflect the strong regulation of the male authorial and narrative voices that determine the stories. Through stereotyping, culturally, socially or politically, “dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups, find the

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 102. See here Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 8.

\textsuperscript{22} See Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One,” in The Irigaray Reader, ed. Margaret Whitford, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 118-32. This point in the text above is highlighted in the work of Luce Irigaray on the linguistic pre-determination of gender and sex, which, in her view, denote absences and substances within the masculine discourse. To her the female sex simply cannot be represented in any discourses due to the phallogocentric language that constitutes these processes.


latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups’ own sense of the legitimacy of their domination.”25 Besides the many stereotypes written into the female representation, Winton’s texts also enforce stereotypical views by trying to reverse gender archetypes. Thus, his male characters often adopt what are considered largely “female” roles as the prime carer of the family as well as sharing qualities of sensitivity and emotionality, while the women are often presented as harsh, self-centred and uncompromising.26 I argue throughout my thesis that the women in Winton’s narratives are presented as egocentric and ambitious in their search for a higher knowledge, becoming increasingly de-sensitised to the beauty and grace of the ordinary. Their self-harm depicts their “fall from grace” and serves as a bodily translation of the crisis they cause for themselves and the men around them. But what other stories emerge from the interpretation of the novels that exceed the dominant readings of these women characters? Is self-harm exclusively reserved for women or is it the masculine that actually speaks through the female “wound”?

According to Schaffer, Australian men and women define themselves within and across masculine and feminine categories, which are all part of an overarching “masculine economy of sameness”.27 This economy, as Schaffer elaborates, determines dominant frameworks of thinking and marginalises groups of people that are defined by tightly-knotted systems of difference in relation to the dominant status quo:

If we are located on the margins, as women, migrants, or Aborigines, for example, we are defined in relation to the dominant norms. Meaning is made possible through reference to a system of difference (of relation between things) within an order of sameness (white, masculine, heterosexual, middle-class culture) […] Binary thinking structures this economy. That which is masculine has more value than that which is feminine. This masculine/feminine dichotomy extends to other hierarchies of meaning, such as culture/nature, self/other, subject/object, activity/passivity.28

25 Ibid., 356.
In this context, as will be subsequently shown, it is important to consider the idea of the female as a (self-) destructive force in the masculine imagination, inhabiting a form of power that springs from the phallocentric dichotomy of assigning the spiritual, emotional and non-rational – and also the hysterical – to the female. As Paul Mitchell observes in relation to *Breath*, the close relation created between women, death and sex in Winton’s work evokes the age-old Christian paradigm that women are dangerous and best approached with caution.\(^{29}\)

The strangling, patriarchal double standard of femininity is still painfully visible in Winton’s stories in which the “Madonna-Whore” dialectic finds its traces in the frequent demonisation of female emancipation and desire outside of family and marriage. Love relationships in Winton’s fiction are strikingly unbalanced, frequently characterised by deceit, adultery, perversion or violence – extremities that are strongly linked with the woman as either traumatising, seductive, dominant and selfish or weak, submissive and passive.

Still, conventional gender roles blur in Winton’s writing, particularly in relation to domesticity. Winton presents the domestic environment as connected to traditional ideals of heterosexual family structures, which are increasingly tested through fateful accidents, homosexuality, female desire and miscarriage. The women in Winton’s novels are generally associated with the house – the traditional Victorian female sphere. Feminist literary critics have noted that women writers of the Victorian/Edwardian era (playwrights in particular) have used the subversion of separate-sphered space as textual/dramatic interventions. For instance, women transgressed clearly defined domestic boundaries by entering the man’s study in the home.\(^{30}\) Winton, however, now uses this dramatic intervention by relocating the power of subverting and appropriating gendered domestic spaces and femininity itself to the man. When the home turns into an expression of suffocation, it is very often the woman who turns the home into a claustrophobic space for the male characters and their children or

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siblings. This is particularly apparent when we think of Eva in *Breath*, Jennifer in *The Riders*, Dolly in *Cloudstreet*, Tegwyn in *That Eye the Sky* or Jewel in *An Open Swimmer*. This thesis approaches the question of how physical and metaphorical spaces intermingle, combining the living space and the female body as distinctive sites of gendered memory.

With a few exceptions, the literary discourse surrounding Winton focuses on his self-image in relation to concerns about regional awareness and belonging, but as Robert Dixon asserts: “[r]eadings of his work have been less theoretical and text-based, preferring instead author-centred, thematic and regional approaches.”31 This, according to Dixon, has resulted in a rather sensational and popularised treatment of his work.32 A plethora of criticism has been published alongside a vast array of television productions, reviews and radio interviews with and about the writer.33 The existing independent publications on Winton and his work largely reflect “his popularity with the general rather than the academic reader” or are tailored to meet school curricula.34 These critical approaches include works by Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, Helen Garner, Hilary McPhee and Michael McGirr.35 Recently, further studies have emerged including Salhia Ben-Messahel’s 2006 monograph on Winton with the title *Mind the Country – Tim Winton’s Fiction* and Hannah Rachel Bell’s *Storymen*, a spiritual comparison between Indigenous storyteller David Mowaljalai and Winton.36

32 Ibid., 249-50.
33 For interview and television programs on Winton see e.g. *The Edge of the World*, directed by Geoffrey Bennett (1997; Lindfield, NSW: Film Australia, 1998); DVD; Tim Winton, interview by Martin Flanagan, *Monthly – Slow TV*, May 19, 2008.
34 Dixon, “Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet* and the Field of Australian Literature,” 251. See Elizabeth McMahon, “Homesick: *Cloudstreet* and the Death Drive,” in *Ways of Teaching – Papers from the English Association English Teachers’ Conference 2009*, ed. Richard Madeleine (Sydney: English Association Sydney, 2009), 35-46. McMahon refers to the “deafening silence from academics” relating to conventional close readings of the novel *Cloudstreet*, which are put into perspective by the attested self-evidence of the text and its author: “This (non/anti-) critical background is sketched here to foreground the particular critical task at hand, which goes against the grain of *Cloudstreet*’s claims to self-evidence and seeks to perform the kind of critique the novel itself actively discourages. The very absence of close readings of the novel and its own resistance to this process throws down the gauntlet to a conventional literary treatment” (36-37).
35 Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs, eds., *Reading Tim Winton* (Pymble: Angus and Robertson, 1993); Hilary McPhee, *Tim Winton: A Celebration* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1999); McGirr, *Tim Winton – The Writer and his Work*. I exclude here additional study guides on *Cloudstreet* as they are more specifically directed at one of Winton’s novels and therefore subordinate in this short synopsis of the main and most extensively consulted and referenced collective works on Winton.
36 Salhia Ben-Messahel, *Mind the Country – Tim Winton’s Fiction* (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2006); Hannah Rachel Bell, *Storymen* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Ben-Messahel’s study can be regarded as the most comprehensive academic monographic study on Winton to date, which, however, was not favourably reviewed and is criticised for its lack of critical reflection, innovation and heavy dependence on Winton’s own comments on his work. See Meriel Owen Griffiths, review of *Mind the Country: Tim Winton’s Fiction*, by Salhia Ben-Messahel, *Limina – A Journal of Historical and Cultural*
Interestingly, it is in countries like Spain and France where the discourse on Winton is blossoming, and where the Australian difficulty in reading Winton’s work against his popularity is, at least to some extent, transgressed in close readings of his work. Furthermore, eco-critical approaches to Winton are prominent in Germany in the works of Kylie Crane, Sissy Helff and Britta Kuhlenbeck. But where is the academic criticism that offers a feminist close textual reading of Winton’s characters, covering an analysis of all his women figures from An Open Swimmer to Breath?

Most of the criticism in the Winton discourse veers away from an in-depth feminist analysis of the female characters, focussing instead on the non-patriarchal representation of

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the male protagonists, character-land relationships and issues of belonging.\textsuperscript{40} Ben-
Messahel’s study on Winton only peripherally addresses the role of woman and mother in
Winton’s fiction, making interesting observations but failing to critically engage with the
issue.\textsuperscript{41} She occasionally gives interpretative insight into Winton’s women characters but
settles for placing them in accommodating relation to his male protagonists, who are always
in the centre.\textsuperscript{42} Barbara Arizti Martin, while concentrating on the male protagonists and
masculinity in her studies on Winton’s fiction, marginally engages with the role of women
and the issue of stereotyping in his works.\textsuperscript{43} Scholars and critics like Elizabeth Guy, Jennifer
Rutherford, Lekkie Hopkins, Pilar Baines Alarcos, Barbara White, Helen Parr and Kerryn
Goldsworthy have remarked upon and drawn attention to the women characters as central
foci of discussion, albeit mainly in relation to the novels \textit{Cloudstreet}, \textit{The Riders} and
\textit{Breath}.\textsuperscript{44} Their views criticise the portrayal of Winton’s female characters, which often mute
or restrict the female voice, presenting women as profoundly fractured and lacking, while
often sharing a corrupting and egotistic nature. Parr, and especially White, affirm feminist
claims of misogyny against Winton for his portrayals of female characters in \textit{Cloudstreet} and
\textit{The Riders}.\textsuperscript{45} In contrast, Guy’s evocative analysis of female and maternal representation in
Winton’s novels falls back into a reconciliatory reading of Winton. She considers Winton’s
stereotyping of the women in his stories a deliberate narrative technique to rupture the male
gaze and deconstruct patriarchal stereotypes.\textsuperscript{46} In her view, the fractured portrayal of
femininity in Winton’s narratives is necessary to create a space of belonging for the women,
leading to female self-empowerment and articulation. But even though her brief discussion
of the sexual and maternal presences in Winton’s fiction creates important pillars for this
thesis, I seriously question her position. And while Rutherford analyses the disabling void

\textsuperscript{40} See, for example, Ben-Messahel, \textit{Mind the Country}; Kuhlenbeck, \textit{Re-Writing Spatiality}; Lyn McCredden,
\textit{Luminous Moments: The Contemporary Sacred} (Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2010), 41-54; Arizti Martin,
“Fathercare in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” 277-86; Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 169-79; Rossiter and Jacobs,
\textit{Reading Tim Winton}.
\textsuperscript{41} Ben-Messahel, \textit{Mind the Country}, 34-39.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 25-59.
\textsuperscript{43} Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s \textit{The Riders},” 29-45.
\textsuperscript{44} Elizabeth Guy, “Tim Winton and the Feminine,” \textit{Women-Church} 19 (Spring 1996): 31-37. Also cf. Baines
Alarcos, “She Lures, She Guides, She Quits: Female Characters in Tim Winton’s \textit{The Riders},” 11, 13, 14;
Rutherford, \textit{The Gauche Intruder}; Barbara A. White, “Beyond God the Father”: The Metaphysical in a
Physical World” (MA thesis, Deakin University, 2002), 68-75; Helen Parr, \textit{A Student’s Guide to Cloudstreet by
Tim Winton} (Ballarat, VIC: Wizard Books, 1999), 38; Goldsworthy, May 3, 2008 (11:49pm), comment on
\textit{Breath}, by Tim Winton, \textit{Australian Literature Diary} (blog).
\textsuperscript{45} White, “Beyond God the Father,” 69-70.
\textsuperscript{46} Guy, “Tim Winton and the Feminine,” 32; White, “Beyond God the Father,” 69-70.
created through the absence of the main female character in *The Riders* and Baines Alarcos
illuminates the problematic relationship between female archetypes and stereotypes in the
same novel, it is Goldsworthy who pointedly sums up the difficulty many feminist critics
have with Winton’s idea of the feminine:

And that’s quite apart from the deeply weird representation of women in Winton’s work,
which goes back a long way but seems to be getting worse as he gets older. The absent
woman in *The Riders* is a wicked child-abandoner and man-upsetter, and there’s a woman in
*The Turning* who has a conversion to Christianity while she’s being raped, something I don’t
trust myself to discuss. And now someone named for the wicked apple-eater who converts an
innocent boychild to a sexual practice that no woman I’ve ever met or heard of has ever had
the remotest interest in.47

Still, the Winton discourse fails to sufficiently address a very prevalent constancy in his
work which connects the text as signifier with the overall question of cultural production and
representation of ideologies as expressed in the phenomenon of self-harm and death among
his women characters through drugs, starvation, alcohol, mutilation or strangulation, which
raises the awareness and attention towards a more elaborate and profound analysis of this
observation.

Surprisingly, there is almost no criticism dealing with self-harm as practised by
Winton’s women characters.48 Moreover, Chantal Kwast-Greff demonstrates in her article
“Mad ‘Mad’ Women – Anger, Madness, and Suffering in Recent White Australian Fiction,”
that self-harm and female “madness” has traditionally been the province of predominantly
Australian female writers operating in their homeland.49 She aligns the tendencies of females
to inscribe aggression on their own bodies (bulimia, anorexia, self-mutilation, suicide) or
those of children (seen as part of the female self) with a numbing rage that is symptomatic of
depression. This form of anger management, or lack thereof, is frequently stigmatised in the
social context as “madness”50 or hysteria, and can be observed in Winton’s fiction whereby

49 Kwast-Greff, “Mad ‘Mad’ Women,” 161-68.
50 Ibid., 161. Also see Helen Thompson, “The Madwoman in the Bush: Female Madness in Australian
Literature” (PhD diss., Monash University, 1995). Classic feminist texts on madness include Elaine Showalter,
*The Female Malady – Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985);
Jane M. Ussher, *Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts
female characters are in a literal sense ver-rueckt – displaced, alienated, marginalised and stigmatised.⁵¹

Lekkie Hopkins’s article “Writing from the Margins: Representations of Gender and Class in Winton’s Work” is the only critical piece on Winton that seriously considers self-harm among Winton’s women characters as problematic. But her account is limited to brief discussions regarding self-violation of the female body, stressing in particular Tegwyn’s mutilation in That Eye the Sky and in Minimum of Two, and Rose’s anorexia and Dolly’s alcohol addiction in Cloudstreet.⁵² The construction of gender, rather than the specific relationship between femininity, self-harm and representation, constitutes her analysis. Female sexuality, as she claims, is often constructed by the male gaze.⁵³ I agree with her that it is a prominent feature of Winton’s fiction and that it co-mingles with a patriarchal view of women as irrational, domestic and (to some extent) powerless beings. Hopkins states in relation to An Open Swimmer that “such linking of powerlessness with feminine attributes (even though they appear in male characters) does not subvert, but rather reinforces, the patriarchal ideology which insists that power properly rests with the masculine.”⁵⁴

I therefore repudiate Elizabeth Guy’s view that Winton’s depiction of the female ruptures traditional concepts of patriarchy, placing the woman in the centre of the stories to create infinite possibilities of prospect. Infinitely more preferable is Hopkins’s observation that the problematic portrayal of the female in Winton’s works is related to a “lack of clarity on issues of female sexuality” resulting from a use of inarticulate male narrators that are too immature to approach the topic.⁵⁵ Indeed, if female sexuality is instead constructed by the male gaze as Hopkins argues, I want to emphasise that this demonstrates not merely a lack of clarity but a heavy symbolic loading of patriarchal values.⁵⁶

Obviously, questions of how self-harm and death specifically materialise in the different texts and to what extent the narrative representation of the female body silently

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⁵¹ German: Ver-rueckt, meaning “mad” [my translation]. When translated literally it means “disarranged” or “displaced.” Malady is used in this context with reference to Showalter, The Female Malady.


⁵³ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Hopkins, “Writing from the Margins,” 51.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 49.
ushers the reader into a biased reading of the stories are neglected in the Winton discourse. It seems we must ask how the materiality of the women’s bodies plays into the chasm between the re-definition of man and the stereotyping of woman? And is there a way to escape the strong male perspective of the narration and instead rupture the text by introducing a feminist point of view of criticism? My thesis addresses these questions about the Winton canon and argues that Winton’s women characters are constructions of a distinctively male, cultural imaginary – an enduring fantasy of the other, defining socio-cultural circles in Australia.

Setting the basis of discussion, the first chapter “The Female Body as Lieu de Mémoire: Reading Feminism, Self-Harm and Psychoanalysis” collates the theoretical framework of the thesis, focusing attention on the complex relationships between the representation of self-harm, psychology and feminism. The postcolonial significance of white settler cultures in Australia, albeit not the primary focus of this thesis, needs to be briefly contextualised at this point to create the socio-cultural backdrop for the analyses to come. Furthermore, including postcolonial references foreshadows the conclusion of this thesis, in which a larger postcolonial reading of Winton as literary construct is suggested for prospective critical work beyond the scope of the thesis. Forming the obvious bridge between literary illustrations of self-harming behaviours and psychology, psychoanalytical approaches to female self-harm, hysteria and self-destruction supplement the overall feminist framework of discussion, evoking questions about masculinity, femininity, memory and embodiment in politicised literary landscapes. Drawing from Pierre Nora’s concept of “Lieux de Mémoire”, the theoretical framework for this thesis combines female corporeality with psychoanalysis, gender and memory. This chapter also introduces prominent terminology used in the thesis.

Drawing from psychoanalytic, feminist and cultural theories, the second chapter, “Steeling the Self: Female Violence Unbound”, focuses on the individual women characters and their idiosyncratic and shared psychological dilemmas in Breath, Dirt Music, The Riders, Cloudstreet, In the Winter Dark and That Eye the Sky. All three subchapters describe the women’s relations toward self-harming acts, while outlining their individual desires and ambitions to transgress a state of emotional paralysis, fostered by their social backgrounds and environments. They look into the issues of sex, self-mutilation, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as autoerotic strangulation and anorexia. The problems described are intimately
linked with the troubled relationship between mother and daughter, hence the strong psychoanalytic direction of this chapter.

In homage to the few feminist perspectives on Winton’s novel *The Riders*, the third chapter “‘Mother, where art Thou?’ – Absence and Motherhood (Filling the Void)” fills the fictional void created by Winton, who marks his maternal female character, Jennifer, as persistently and obstinately absent, turning her into a haunting ghost, the abject, for the main protagonist and his child. This chapter examines the role of women in Winton’s writing as housewives and mothers. At the same time it illuminates a variety of feminist views on female mothering as self-empowering, creating a counterfoil to Winton’s ambiguous representation of the maternal. Unlike some traditionalist feminist theories that position the daughter against a mother trapped in objectified passivity, I examine the roles of Winton’s women characters as both (non-) mother and daughter. Equally, I will enlarge upon the frequent absence of the maternal figure and the “daughter-centrality” in Winton’s novels, as can also be seen in his later works *Dirt Music* and *Breath*. The claim of the muted female, as brought forward in feminist criticism of Winton, as well as the common stereotyping of motherhood as either good or bad in a large range of Winton’s novels will be discussed and evaluated, looking at issues of power dialectics, sexuality and the living space. This chapter continues to reveal the ideological traces hidden within fictional stories, which, albeit including submerged or open criticism, run the danger of being trapped within the cultural

57 See Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder*, 121-43. Rutherford sees in Jennifer the evocation of all the fears that haunt the novel and that animate the identification with the traditional concept of “good Australianess” as reclaimed in the narrative (142). She associates Jennifer with an “empty frame” while “her black hair frames this emptiness, a black border around a ghostly absence,” which is then filled with the image of the “black beast”: “Out of this ghostly absence a pair of fangs looms; shark’s teeth, a black dog’s lunging bite, a snake’s fanged strike. Jennifer is cast in this metonymic chain, her black hair a displacement of the black dog that tears her child’s face to pieces” (137-38). The metonymic relations between Jennifer and the monstrous fangs are also discussed in Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity,” 41.


structures they seek to criticise. They become symptomatic of national and cultural realities, fears and desires, so often pervaded by racial bias, inequality and commerce.

The following and final chapter “Women’s “Hystories”: Body Maps, the Gaze and Death”\(^{61}\) maintains the psychoanalytic feminist theoretical thread throughout the line of argument, showing how the narrative objectification and deviation of the women’s bodies marginalises the female characters as hysterics whose physiques turn into a symbol of pain and defeat. The subject matter of the body as a cultural matrix of articulation, already introduced in the previous chapters, becomes the centre of interpretative attention, serving as a foundation to investigate gender relations and imbalances within Winton’s fiction and thus analyse the significance of the gaze, beauty myths, age and female death in the context of gendered representations, (self-) authoring and monstrosity. The woman’s body in its fictional construction is considered here as an allegory of cultural realities within Australia, reflecting prominent, contemporary ideological stigma of Western thinking.

CHAPTER 1: The Female Body as Lieu de Mémoire: Reading Feminism, Self-Harm and Psychoanalysis

1.1. Memory, Subjectivity and Representation

The issue of subjectivity and textuality in relation to the feminist stance of this thesis requires a brief introduction to justify the dialectic between text, writer and reader. Following Elizabeth’s Grosz essay “Feminist Theory and the Politics of Art,” in which she recapitulates the major influences and restrictions of French post-structuralist and feminist theory, covering the seminal concepts of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, I acknowledge the impact of French Feminism and cultural theory for the genesis of my thesis. Apart from marginal references, however, French feminism will not be the central focus of my methodology, which strongly draws from American and Australian feminist theories. In her essay, Grosz refers to common elements in the critical positions of the aforementioned theorists, in order to approach an artwork from a more inclusive angle, offering a wider scope of critical reflections. Foucault’s work on power, the body and the text is still seen to be crucial in cultural discourses by re-alerting “feminists to the investments power has in the inscription of the body, with the human body as the terrain and object of various struggles and points of resistance.” Thus, the textual female body in this thesis is considered a site of ambiguity, manifest within an uneasy relationship between control, reinscription and resistance, which not only operates materialistically within the fictional, immanent frameworks of the text as such, but also works reflexively within its contextual, genealogical structures.

With reference to French Feminism in the 1980s, Susan Bordo and Arleen B. Dillery describe the symbolic complexity of the female body in social and individual respects, underlining the dramatic significance of patriarchal gender constructions, as well as the stigmatisation of women as mysterious other, which results from the imposition of

1 Questions about the subject and its representation are fundamental to cultural studies and have inspired various discourses throughout the history of Western thought, commencing with Aristotelian and Platonian dialogues and manifesting nowadays in the works of numerous thinkers and writers. Due to the extensiveness of the field and its many demonstrations in creative, critical, ethical, historical and philosophical discourses, it is not possible at this point to elaborate upon this subject extensively.


difference on the characterisation of gender formations. Bordo looks at anorexia, hysteria and agoraphobia among women, highlighting the ideological inscriptions and effects of social standards on the individual female body:

[W]e find the body of the sufferer deeply inscribed with an ideological construction of femininity emblematic of the periods in question [...] Strikingly, in these disorders the construction of femininity is written in disturbingly concrete, hyperbolic terms: exaggerated, extremely literal, at times virtually caricatured presentations of the ruling feminine mystique. The bodies of disordered women in this way offer themselves as an aggressively graphic text for the interpreter – a text that insists, actually demands, it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender.\(^4\)

This view forms the central tenet of feminist, post-structural approaches to the topic of body culture and its fictions and limitations.\(^6\) An excessive focus on the body as a reflection of standardised beauty and social ideals contributes to the emergence of psychological illnesses in both men and women at a time when, statistically, the rate of chronic and psychological illnesses and self-harm is growing, particularly among younger people.\(^7\) Crucial in this context is Bordo’s illumination of the body as a metaphor that exposes the deficiencies of the cultural standards of the time. Despite the impact of socio-cultural structures on self-harm, it needs to be noted that psychological disorders do not necessarily derive from social circumstances only. Rather, they have various personal and even hereditary dispositions that have to be taken into account. In Bordo’s view, with reference and homage to influential French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who both considered the female body as a means of enforcing difference for the purpose of subverting and undermining “male” social constructiveness, the body functions as a text that articulates a cultural statement on gender in a post-colonial fashion. It states a truth that is mediated through the body and needs to be described and interpreted.\(^8\)


\(^6\) See in this context Jane M. Ussher, “Theorizing Female Sexuality,” 155, the subchapter “Woman as Sign” in particular.


Like Bordo, Dallery gives the female body the metaphoric quality and transience of a text, a sign, elusive, literal and transformative at the same time. She agrees that “writing the body” is simultaneously speech and praxis, and attempts to practice difference through, for example, gender-specific readings of master narratives and, thus, their deconstruction:

Writing the body is writing a new text – not with the phallic pen – new inscriptions of woman’s body that produces the censure, erasure, repression of woman’s libidinal economy, her altérité. Writing the body, then, is not access to a precultural body or precultural sexuality as some critics of écriture feminine assume.

Can the discourse of Winton’s writing be connected to the concept of writing the body as a creative act, in the sense that the response of feminist readers deconstructs the patriarchal views expressed in Winton’s texts and constitutes another story? As Jane M. Ussher points out in her article “Theorizing Female Sexuality: Social Constructionist and Post-Structuralist Accounts,” female sexuality cannot be understood outside of the discursive reality of female representation. In her view, men and women need to be examined in their relationship to desire, each other’s bodies, and social myths, in order to understand the complexities and contradictions within female representation. This argumentation supports the notion that the discourses of gender construction cannot be diminished to a reductionist interpretation. There are thousands of stories to be told, each representing individual facets, while creating their own discursive statement and unique signature underneath. The female as well as the male becomes a sign that has a particular status and meaning, dependent on the specific situation of its creation. In her post-structural feminist approach, Ussher reads femininity as a complex sign born out of discourses. Thus, she sees an unavoidable urgency in the revelation of the establishment and manifestation of these signs and their ensuing codes and meanings:

It is therefore important to expose the representations in the ‘texts’, the signifiers associated with ‘woman’ to see how the meanings that make up these codes are created and maintained, as well as to see how they function. This theorizing also suggests that the function of ‘woman’ as a sign is to maintain power balances and current social structures.

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11 Ibid., 59.
12 See in this context Rutherford, The Gauche Intruder, 127-43. Rutherford writes a fictional letter in which she adopts Jennifer’s (The Riders) point of view, writing back to Scully and Winton, and gives a voice to the muted female in this novel.
14 Ibid., 156.
The body in its material, metaphysical, metaphoric and symbolic function as subject and object, empowered and disempowered, has been in the centre of many critical discussions. In Donna Haraway’s words, “bodies as objects of knowledge are material-semiotic generative nodes,” and their “boundaries materialize in social interaction among humans and non-humans.” The body and its limits can thus be seen as signifiers of specific socio-cultural circumstances and power relations. Vickie Kirby’s concept of “corporeographies,” which treats the body as a cultural text, highlights the elusiveness of the body as a set and firmly graspable construct and reflects the problems linked to creating new imaginaries for female embodiment: “Our attempt to rethink corporeality in a way that wrests it from the role of dumb and passive container will need to grant that the body is already a field of information, a tissue of scriptural and re-representational complexity. This complexity is even further complicated in literary representations, which attempt to create the illusion of female authenticity, while being a site of interacting social and cultural power relations within and outside of the text. The corporeality of the body in literature is mediated, often in multiple ways, due to its social, cultural and fictional constructivism. The abstract body of the text incorporates the bodies of the characters, whose make up is reliant on the authorial gaze, the narrating gaze and the reading gaze. This complex framework enables corporeality to host various stories at once, including: the effects of social, cultural and political realities that surround the genesis of the text; the recollection of the individual characters themselves; the influence of the narrator; and the triggering of memories within the recipients of the text. It may also reflect regulatory norms of heterosexual subjectivity – an “I/eye” which emerges and receives legitimacy through the power of exclusion and abjection: “The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of ‘sex,’ and this identification takes place through a repudiation […] which creates the valence of ‘abjection’ and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre.”

18 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter – On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). 3. Deriving from psychoanalytic theories on subjectivity (Lacan) and taken up and developed in postcolonial theories, the term “I/eye” refers to the creation of subjectivities through the act of looking. This
body in Winton’s novels stages this emergence or “emancipation” of male subjectivity in the represented (self-) objectification. Important in this context is the connection between memory and the female body as a site of trauma, recollection and healing.

Andrea Adolph uses the term “auto-objectification” to capture the self-objectification of one’s own physicality as a result of socio-cultural norms suggested in the vast range of cultural texts about the female body. In her view, the preoccupation with and affirmation of the mind/body binary in Western discourses still encourages women to favour a disembodied sense of femininity over a transgressive female body, and this disembodied self-image continues to manifest conventional distinctions between intellect, subjectivity and corporeality: “The body has become something to manipulate, to exert one’s will upon in an effort to standardize and to normalize the self to a variety of social codes.” These codes are transmitted through mediating texts in a specific culture, which combines the fictional objectification of female characters with a female readership. As Adolph argues, through the impact of these codes and their textual embodiment, the act of reading becomes a self-conscious one, particularly for the feminist reader, whose body image turns into a complicit, “central catalyst for a comprehension of the bodies within the text.”

Reading Winton’s women characters from a feminist perspective illuminates the self-consciousness Adolph talks about. Through the active, transgressive and resistant reading practices that are encouraged by the portrayal of dismissive gender stereotypes within the text, the actual feminist reader is both drawn to and repulsed by the novels’ representations. While feeling the pain depicted on and through the characters’ bodies, the reader generally remains detached from the mindset of these characters and from the narrative position that mediates a crippling, abjecting form of objectification of the woman’s

comprises the complexity of hegemonic power structures encapsulated and initiated through the gaze. Established in postcolonial discourses on race, “I/eye” as the dominant form, stands in opposition to the use of “i/eye” as the subversive form that “writes back” to the centre. In this context the term is used in relation to gender. See Alison Ravenscroft, “Coming to Matter: The Grounds of our Embodied Difference,” Postcolonial Studies 10, no. 3 (2007): 287-300. Susan Knutson, Narrative in the Feminine – Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 88-90.

19 Andrea Adolph, Food and Femininity in Twentieth-Century British Women’s Fiction (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 21.
20 Ibid., 22. See also Mills, “Conclusion,” in Feminist Readings/Feminist Reading, 231.
21 Ibid., 126.
22 See in this context, Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence – Selected Prose 1966-1978 (New York: Norton, 1979), 35. Rich argues that the act of “re-vision,” of looking back on old texts with fresh eyes is an act of survival for women: “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves.”
body. These double standards of “othering” the female body increasingly alienate the reader from the representations and emphasise again the gendered mind/body divide manifested within the conventional ideology of the texts. Thus, the fictional body that is read, in connection with the reader’s embodied subjectivity that reads it, is turned into a matrix of multiple codes, memories, stories and knowledge that form a site of contestation, argumentation and discourse. It becomes a text which in its mnemonic and associative function can be related to Pierre Nora’s concept of lieu de mémoire by exceeding the purely personal and entering the domain of the collective and the cultural. The idea of lieu de mémoire is a creative stimulus for considering whether the body of fictional characters can be seen as a form of memory space or a “traumascape” that connects the fictional sphere with the reality of the reader – a point that is further discussed below.23

Throughout the following sections of the thesis, the different arguments seek to expose traces of subjectivities that reside in the text. They consider the ways in which authorship and authority are questioned by the reading of a text as well; what place the text adopts within “the conventions governing its field or context, within social networks that constitute art and evaluation […] in the representation of values and interests of sexes;”24 and how certain images within the text are employed to “inscribe bodies, interactions, behaviours and norms, to constitute distinct types of subject” and distinctive systems of dominant political and moral values.25

Hence, the following discussions of women in Winton’s novels combine the materiality of the text with the cultural symbolic surrounding its perception and interpretation. While exposing lacking or insubstantial female subjectivities within the texts, this thesis seeks to characterise Winton’s portrayals as indicative of persisting gender struggles, manifested within the concept of the “man-in-crisis,” the absent mother, the self-destructive, hysterical and enraged woman, the controlling matriarch and the dead mother. It needs to be pointed out, though, that the analysis of self-harm and death in regards to Winton’s female characters opens up a persistent ambivalence between the level of the text and its context of production. On the fictional basis, the literal inscription or destruction of the body can create a sense of subjectivity and an act of resistance for the woman that is otherwise not granted. This possibility, however, is compromised by another reading which

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23 See Maria Tumarkin, Traumascapes (Carlton, VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2005).
25 Ibid., 138.
sees Winton’s use of female self-harm as an appropriation of the female body and a medium to reinscribe masculine supremacy. Hence, this subjectivity and resistance is a double-edged sword: it is just as easily an objectification in disguise, affirming Schaffer’s and DeLauretis’s point that women are both “telos and origin of man’s desire and of his drive to represent it, at once object and sign of [his] culture and creativity.”

Historians of colonial Australia have argued that, while acting as inheritors of frontier feminism, women in Australia still confront the discrepancies and contradictions created through a strong masculinist cultural impact, which continues to dictate norms and differences. Although this thesis refrains from declaring firm conclusions about Australia as a society and its reflection in Winton’s work, it needs to be stressed that, as Arlyn Diamond says, literature is an embodiment of “a society’s most deeply held convictions” that is “sometimes questioning these values, sometimes disguising an artist’s ambivalence with regard to these matters, but never disengaged from the claims of time or social order.”

As a social and narrative construct, the female body in Winton’s novels is thus turned into a place of competing male and female voices. It equally becomes a site of memory and a locus of ambivalence, which this thesis does not assume to resolve but attempts to illuminate.

Although not primarily concerned with postcolonial readings of Winton’s texts, this introduction now briefly looks at the significance of postcolonial Australian settler culture for the evaluation of Winton’s writing. Thus, it creates a basis for the conclusion of this thesis, in which some reference is made towards the cultural and social perception of Winton’s work in contemporary Australia. It needs to be said, however, that this thesis does not analyse Winton’s work from postcolonial perspectives of race and whiteness but gender. Acknowledging the strong connection between white Australian settler culture and race

27 See in this context Lake, “Frontier Feminism,” 19; Lake, “The Inviolable Woman: Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship in Australia,” in *Forging Identities – Bodies, Gender and Feminist History*, ed. Jane Long et al. (Nedlands, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 1997), 232-43. Lake describes early feminist accounts of women’s violability as ironic, as it is “the faithful echoing of the masculine view of sexuality that it critiqued,” reinforcing male hegemony than deconstructing it. Also see Schaffer, *Women and the Bush*; Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police*; Barbara Brook, “Femininity and Culture – Some Notes on the Gendering of Women in Australia,” in *Contemporary Australian Feminism*, ed. Kate Prichard Hughes (South Melbourne: Longman, 1997), 111; Diana Chase, Valerie Krantz and Jan Jackson, *A Portrait of Progress – Women in Western Australia 1899-1999* (Perth: Women’s Policy Development Office/Government of Western Australia, 1999), 12-15. This publication documents the history of women in Western Australia, where the female population has only grown slowly since the mid-nineteenth century.
relations in the postcolonial context, the following paragraphs establish this significance and contextualise the topic of this thesis accordingly.

As a result of the increasing reconciliation policies between the indigenous and non-indigenous presence in the country, the emergence of memoir and testimony as ways of speaking about trauma and guilt has shaped the cultural landscape of Australia. Voicing one’s memories and witnessing the effects of white settler colonialism are considered ways towards individual healing and collective catharsis. Re-writing memory and historical identity has become central in reconciliation processes and questions of belonging within white settler Australia:

[I]ndividual healing occurs through revelation of suffering [and] is extended in reconciliation discourses to suggest that the truth of suffering can be a source of regeneration, a collective catharsis and a means of creating a moral community which has come to terms with the violence of its national history.²⁹

Opening up self-reflective spaces from which to review history and people’s position in it, the dialogue between the recollection of the subaltern and the recognition of the dominant culture is based on “ethical performances of civic virtue by witnesses who accept their own complicity in the trauma caused.”³⁰ However, the privileged position of white Australia in the process evokes controversial questions that expose its continuing supremacy. Isn’t it true that the voices of the subaltern that tell their trauma are still mediated and controlled by the non-indigenous witness? And isn’t the desire for reconciliation primarily a settler desire which will eventually lead into social closure and the separation of the past from the present? Whitlock sees the danger in a “social amnesia” that might foster the belief that race is no longer the basis of privilege.³¹ Benevolence and understanding in colonial race-relations can easily disguise discourses of power, especially when intersubjective accounts of trauma narratives are involved.

How does all this relate to Winton? Rooted in the identity politics of settler colonialism manifest in multiple relationality, negotiation, exchange and ambivalence – the desire for closure of belonging, Winton’s stories illuminate this process of reconciliation and ambivalence, albeit with the aforementioned supremacist tendencies. Refraining from

³⁰ Ibid., 38.
³¹ Ibid., 40
directly approaching the controversial issue of race relations and depicting white postcolonial settler experience and alienation *par excellence,* Winton nevertheless shows how the twofold position of benefactor/director in relation to a (gendered) subaltern presence is played out in his works.\(^{32}\) Letting his women speak through their bodies, Winton demonstrates the desire to understand and show sympathy for female suffering, while only marginally acknowledging the male force behind it. Deliberately directing and controlling gendered suffering, the balance between male and female voices in his fiction vanishes and calls the motives behind the ambivalent female portrayal into question. The active self-assertion of the self-harming woman, who uses her body as a way to voice and empowerment, turns into a passive site of gender history and memory that is a projection of male, not female, desire. The representation of female trauma is increasingly interspersed with the crisis of masculinity, which imprints itself onto female corporeality. The female body in its complexity becomes a site of memory, a *lieu de mémoire,* which not only reflects gender differences but also evokes the tensions of postcolonial controversies and power relations. Being a feminist reading of Winton’s female characters, the discussions to come, while infused by the importance of these postcolonial connections, focus foremost on feminist psychoanalytic approaches to Winton’s texts, and thus leave further speculation about Winton’s postcolonial stance to the conclusion and future projects.

But what exactly is “*lieu de mémoire*”? In Pierre Nora’s influential study *Les Lieux de Mémoire,* memory is defined as an active and living phenomenon that is affective, magical, selective and symbolic. It is subjected to “permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.”\(^{33}\) Nora has examined the problematic relationship between memory and history. He particularly criticises the present-day obsession with documented and stored memory in the form of archives, museums and other places of remembrance where, in his view, the spontaneous ability for immediate recollection, incited from within the individual and not

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\(^{33}\) Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire,*” 8. Also see, Nora, *Realms of Memory,* 1-23.
from exterior sources, is heavily affected and reduced. In contrast to history, which, he
argues, focusses indiscriminately on the recording of events and the immediacy of the image,
memory derives from objects, spaces, and gestures – the concrete, as he calls it.\(^{34}\) In this
respect, it has a highly functional and symbolic quality, connecting contemporary elements
and places with the eternal present of the past. It is the exclusion of events that defines
Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, because memory attaches itself to sites and can add
various textures and layers of meaning to these places. *Lieux de mémoire* are produced in the
simultaneously oppositional and dependent relationship between memory and history,
private and public, individual and collective, which reflects moments of history being torn
away from its subordinate historical movement and then again returned – a push and pull,
which Nora compares metaphorically to shells on the shore in times when the sea of living
memory has receded.\(^{35}\)

The woman’s body in Winton’s fiction, as is argued here, is caught within the “push
and pull” of active memory, history and representation – never being able to escape.
Schaffer argues that women are affected by discourse and representation which both repeat
and impose dominant ideas and ideals upon femininity and women’s subjective agency.\(^{36}\)
Traditionally, the representation of women within cultural and literary history in Australia
and other Western countries has been predominantly masculine, turning them into male
constructions of femininity that are closely linked to the colonial idea of the “land as a
woman’s body.”\(^{37}\) In her view, women’s subjectivities are affected by enduring cultural
myths about women and sexuality that have their roots in the colonial bush mythology and
persistent gender and culture dichotomies, as in the Anglo-Celtic imaginary of the “good
Australian” and the “uncontrollable, threatening or policing woman.”\(^{38}\) In accordance with
Schaffer, this thesis argues that Winton’s work is a crucial component of the Australian
fantasy that pervades mainstream cultural and literary discourses and seeks to re-stabilise
white and masculine values and ideals previously attacked and scrutinised by feminist
politics. Like Schaffer, who supports a deconstruction and exposure of these underlying
power structures, my idiosyncratic perception and interpretation of Winton’s texts reads

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 9.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., 12.
\(^{37}\) See ibid., 15.
\(^{38}\) See Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police*; Dixon, *The Real Matilda*. Both historians focus on
exploring the victimisation or colonisation of women in Australian history.
possibilities of female empowerment into the marginal position and problematic representation of the characters; this is an enterprise made difficult by the strong male narration of the women in the stories. Can the field of female self-harm and death in Winton’s fiction offer a space of resistance that allows a feminist reading to critique Winton and the configuration of women in his stories?

Hence, it is necessary to mention that my subjective criticism of and resistance to Winton’s novels relies on my gendered and (to some extent) socially and culturally constructed reading position that is influenced by existing patriarchal frameworks surrounding it. As a German living in Australia, I have an opportunity, in adopting the “outsider” role, to critically evaluate these frameworks from a transnational perspective – frameworks that are still pervaded by “post-colonising” tendencies. Instead of approaching the close readings of Winton’s novels from a linguistic stance, this thesis adopts a psychoanalytical, literary position, highlighting the dominant stereotypical readings in the ways the female characters are represented as self-harming and lacking. It focuses not on the language of representation but on the literal and metaphorical significance of the images that are conveyed as female or perceived as being female. As self-harming tendencies are frequently inseparable from the representation of femininity in Winton’s fiction, the following paragraphs provide both a concise overview and history of the term “self-harm” and a summary of its relevant discourses.

40 The term “postcolonising” is borrowed from Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s title “I still Call Australia Home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society,” in Uprootings/Regroundings – Questions of Home and Migration, ed. Sara Ahmed et al. (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 23-40. Despite Moreton-Robinson’s focus on racial realities in Australia, the concept is used here with regard to gender. For reader positioning, see Julie Rivkin, “Resisting Readers and Reading Effects: Some Speculations on Reading and Gender,” Narrative Poetics: Innovations, Limits, Challenges 5 (1987): 12. “An alternative way to speak of the difficulty of resistance is to point out that women do not speak from some safe place outside the social texts of patriarchy; rather, women’s identity is constructed by the same cultural codes that construct the text.”
41 The wide discourse on linguistic reader responses and the contested field of distinguishing male and female characteristics in writing is crucial within the feminist reader response theory – a fact which is hereby recognised but which cannot be elaborated any further at this stage. For more details, see Sara Mills, Feminist Stylistics (London: Routledge, 1995), 44-65; Patricia Harkin, “The Reception of Reader-Response Theory,” College Composition and Communication 56, no. 3 (February 2005): 410-25. Harkin outlines the history of reader response theory, discussing its values but also the reasons for its gradual disappearance from literary studies today.
1.2. **Female Self-Harm, Death and the “Man in Crisis”**

As Baker et al. argue in their 2008 essay “On the Borderline? Borderline Personality Disorder and Deliberate Self-Harm in Literature,” “[l]iterature reminds us of the distress behind acts that appear incomprehensible, as well as the need to untangle the complex meanings behind such acts.” They emphasise the fact that through the relatively safe medium of literature, which offers a variety of complex meanings and functions of self-harm to the public, the alienating effect of deliberate self-harm can be reduced to create a more supportive environment for patients, one that is based on understanding and respect instead of mere pity and underlying discrimination. The topic of self-harm in association with mutilation, drug-taking, alcoholism and self-destruction in everyday social milieus forms a highly sensitive taboo, which has nonetheless been fictionalised in Australian contemporary popular literature and poetry – Grunge fiction in particular. But there is a dearth of discursive criticism on this topic – a surprise, if one pauses to consider the increasing number of psycho-sociological problems among children, teenagers and adults in Western culture. Exploring self-harm in fiction creates a new level of awareness and fosters critical engagement with the topic. Furthermore, it highlights the urgency of the response to and the need for confrontation with the matter in order to understand and take preventative measures against individual signs of the self-induced manifestation of depression and alienation on the body.

The self-harm Winton presents in his fiction is rather subtle and submerged, compared to explicit and transgressive accounts by other contemporary Australian writers like Christos Tsiolkas, Helen Garner, Andrew McGahan or Penelope Rowe. Personal experience for these writers is closely aligned with the controversies they write about,

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43 Ibid., 22-23.
tackling issues from sexual orientation and gender to actual psychological disorders. Rowe, for instance, has been suffering from bipolar disorder for decades and addresses issues of mental health and self-harm in novels like *Tiger Country.*

The horror that is literally overpowering in Tsiolkas’s novel *The Jesus Man* is clearly not an element of Winton’s work, wherein the reader feels varying degrees of discomfort and sympathy in contrast to the pure spectrum of utter disgust, shock and repulsion that is evoked by Tsiolkas:

> He knew what to do. He took a long angular piece of glass, he ripped at his stomach. The pain stopped him, not the blood, not the visibility of his own meat. He stopped, grasped for air and tried again [...] His cock was thick, the head peeping from underneath the foreskin purple in its wetness and from its work. He wished it expunged. He said the Lord’s name and took up again the sliver of glass. Blood was seeping all around him. The mat of hair on his groin had coloured crimson.

Male genital self-mutilation as described here functions as an exercise in self-control over one’s own body, caught in a world that often transgresses individual forms of control, leaving people in states of ideological and emotional confusion and loss. As Leigh Dale and Janice McLane argue, self-mutilation is a form of language that works to re-enact trauma, a “form of agency that helps to confirm existence and demonstrates self-control.” Dale considers self-mutilating acts as a controllable re-enactment of damage and trauma, so that the mutilated parts of the body receive a metaphorical significance that works in alignment with the physical act itself and represents “an extreme effort to reconnect with the body after trauma.” This view corresponds to Straker’s idea that self-cutting is an act of self-identification which is a form of effective communication. This idea of self-harm as an act of creativity or performativity and autobiographical narrative will strongly influence the

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49 Ibid.
following analyses of Winton’s work – novels which, unlike Tsiolkas’s, focus their major attention on the violence of female self-mutilation and self-harm.  

Another form of excess is vividly described in Helen Garner’s novel *Monkey Grip,* a novel that is praised for its feminist objectives. Here a great tension arises from the protagonist Nora’s search for love and fulfilment, entangling herself deeper and deeper in short-lived illusions about love, sex and drugs, contrasting with Winton’s largely mediated observations on female sexuality and self-harm. Similarly, Penelope Rowe delicately but bleakly describes the self-mutilation of her main female character Margaret-Anne Milton. The girl suffers from an abusive, severe father who, by claiming he wants the best for his child, justifies his harsh, suffocating authority:

Carefully, alert and tense, she rolls up her sleeve, up, up, into her armpit. Now, dreamily, slowly, deliberately, she positions the pin-point against the soft inner arm flesh. She takes her bottom lip between her teeth and rakes the pin harshly across her skin. The burn of pain assails her and she pulls away. Angrily now, she bites her lip harder and rakes again. Through the short sear she feels a warmth on her arm. With her finger she touches the flesh. Heavy, viscous, sticky. For a moment her heart stops its terrible painful thumping. For a moment her stomach stops its nauseating churning. For a moment triumph overwhelms her. She grasps the moment. Viciously, hatefully, thrillingly, she tears her skin. Strip, Strip, Strip.  

When compared with the immediacy of the urban alienation and violence described by his contemporaries, Winton’s portrayals of women and their troubles seem detached and distant. Indeed, I argue that this narrative detachment, in combination with the dominating male voices, propagates a consistent “othering” of self-harm in women, establishing the masculine as the norm. His women characters receive validity only in relation to men; lovers, wives, mothers, seductresses or daughters contribute to the male rite of passage. Winton’s tendency to present the female as both perverse and deficient in the compassionate qualities of his male characters implies a sense of absence.

The representation of the female as psychologically frail illustrates a complex dialectic that creates a space for various narrative and critical voices to intersect and

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51 See Motz, “Self-Harm as a Sign of Hope,” 84.
54 Rowe, *Tiger Country,* 143. Also see in this context Fiona Place, *Cardboard – The Strength Thereof and Other Related Matters* (Sydney: Local Consumptions Publications, 1989); Victoria Leatham, *Bloodletting – A Memoire of Secrets, Self-Harm and Survival* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2004), 1: “I had no idea that the simple act of running a sharp blade across my wrist would change everything so completely. I couldn’t pretend anymore and I didn’t care […] The idea, while frightening, was also extremely seductive – it would mean a sort of freedom.”
compete. Can this frailty be seen as a metaphor which implies that existing social structures are not sustaining for women but rather threatening? Is Winton acknowledging and criticising this possibility? Is he merely documenting it? Or is he actually using it as a negative counterfoil to develop his male protagonists? And most importantly, what role is ascribed to readers and critics who encounter the images of the text and thus regulate to what extent and intensity these images are interpreted as problematic? Does the lack of a discursive study of Winton’s female characters signify an obstinate discomfort or unwillingness among readers to look behind the fictional portrayals of Winton’s “master” narratives with a critical eye? Or is it the result of Winton’s evocative writing that enthrals the reader and captures him within the male perspective of the narration? In this thesis, I show that readings of Winton determine the effect of his work within socio-cultural contexts in Australia and thus declare the public as the authoritative power over his texts. The reading public defines the dominant topics to be discussed in relation to his work as well as the ones to be neglected.

I also claim that Winton’s realist portrayals of women indicate a controversial space of interaction between text and reader. This space combines a homogenisation and othering of the female, in a hegemonic framework of representation, with existing realities in Australia that the reader recognises in Winton’s depictions. However, this familiarity bespeaks a fear of deconstructing one’s own position in male-female relations of society, safeguarding the established convention of their immediate reality.

Given the fundamental stance of self-harm in this analysis, there is a central question still to be asked: what exactly is self-harm, how is it defined and what discourses surround it? “Self-harm” can be considered “a term used for the actions that result in an injury of some sort to the person inflicted by her/himself. Other words commonly used to describe these actions are self-injury, self-inflicted injury, self-destructive behaviour, self-mutilation and self-defeating behaviour.” Whereas self-harm includes suicide, para-suicide and

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overdosing, self-destructive behaviours cover phenomena such as eating disorders, substance abuse and sexual risk-taking. Self-injury refers to mutilating actions like cutting, scraping, burning, and habits like smoking, danger sports and reckless driving fall under the term of other/marginal self-injurious behaviours. Here, I adopt self-harm as the cover term for the different subcategories and then differentiate between these categories on a case-by-case basis.

Fiona Gardner refers to self-harm as behaviour in which “the body is going to be deliberately, and usually habitually, harmed rather than destroyed or killed, and that is harming the self.”\textsuperscript{56} In quite a few cases, the tendency towards self-harm results in deliberate or accidental suicides among men and women. Self-harm culminates here in self-destruction. Drawing on Gardner’s distinction, this thesis nevertheless sees self-harm and self-destruction as interlinked, placing equal focus on both and connecting them to the abstract notion of transience imprinted on the female body. The tendency in Australia to self-harm is rising, particularly among young people, while the suicide rate has decreased since 1997.\textsuperscript{57} Reasons for the increasing prevalence of mental illnesses vary between relationship break-ups, the breakdown of family structures, issues of self-esteem, a shattering sense of hopelessness, helplessness and isolation, many of which can be linked to the breakdown of community support networks and employment.\textsuperscript{58} Unlike statistics that demonstrate a high number of male deaths in rural environments, more women are hospitalised due to deliberate self-harm, which, however, does not necessarily result from an intention to take their own


life.\textsuperscript{59} Since peaking in 1997, Australian suicide statistics for both men women have decreased.\textsuperscript{60} But scholars nonetheless argue that despite declining suicide rates, the psychological well-being of particularly young people is also declining. Moreover, this trend is being increasingly expressed through acts of intentional self-harm, which are on the rise in 2011 and highlighting an immediate social reality that must be addressed.\textsuperscript{61}

As Silvia Sara Canetto and David Lester point out in the introduction of their essay collection \textit{Women and Suicidal Behavior}, more women tend to exhibit aspects of suicidal behaviour and mental illness than men, although men are more likely to die as a result of a suicidal act.\textsuperscript{62} Theoretical approaches used to explain the difference between both sexes regarding suicidal behaviour and suicidal acts arose in the early nineteenth-century with alienists such as Etienne Esquirol and Jean-Pierre Falret, both of whom used socially constructed gender distinctions and metaphors. They attributed qualities of motherhood, womanhood, marital devotion, nurturing, passivity, modesty and frailty to the feminine and therefore categorised it to be immune to suicide.\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{itemize}
ascribed roles that women succumbed to suicide, usually as a result of being left by a man and thus not being able to fulfil the task of wife and mother.\textsuperscript{64} Such views constitute a sexist ideology that lasted many decades before finally being questioned by K.K. Johnson’s “Durkheim revisited: Why do women kill themselves?”\textsuperscript{65} Here, Johnson challenged what had hitherto been a well-established notion – that the lower suicide mortality numbers of women reflected their traditionally less demanding and stressful social position within the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{66}

In Winton’s fiction, female self-harm and self-destruction is presented as a private, domestic matter resulting from unbearable tensions imposed on the individual women by their respective family structures. Jewel in \textit{An Open Swimmer}, Maureen in \textit{Shallows} and Mrs. Buckridge (Jim’s mother) in \textit{Dirt Music} die as a result of oppressive and dissatisfying marriages to patriarchal husbands. Tegwyn in \textit{That Eye the Sky} aggressively mutilates herself; Rose in \textit{Cloudstreet} suffers from anorexia; Dolly, also in \textit{Cloudstreet}, Georgie in \textit{Dirt Music} and Irma in \textit{The Riders} struggle with an alcohol problem; Eva in \textit{Breath} consumes drugs and eventually dies as a result of her affinity with (auto)erotic asphyxiation. Most of these women are described as sexual, promiscuous, aggressive or self-absorbed, transgressing social taboos and inflicting pain and unrest on the people around them – behaviours that will receive close analysis in the different chapters of this thesis.

So what does female self-harm signify in psychoanalytical and cultural respects? Helen Liebling and Hazel Chipchase argue that although self-harm expresses a suicidal fantasy, it also functions for many women as a measure of survival and an assertion of control over their own bodies – something they may be lacking in interactive social respects.\textsuperscript{67} With reference to Gwen Adshead, who describes deliberate self-harm as a “symptom of internal distress” of both public and private significance, Anna Motz considers self-harming as a “typically female expression of anger,” turning it against the self as

\textsuperscript{64} Howard I. Kushner, “Women and Suicidal Behavior,” 19.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 145, quoted in Howard I. Kushner, “Women and Suicidal Behavior,” 19.
opposed to the male tendency of directing anger outwards.\textsuperscript{68} And despite Motz being seemingly trapped in patriarchal binaries of gendered forms of anger, she nonetheless makes the valid point that private pain is publicised through the physical scars of self-harm, an expression of those things that cannot be thought about: “The action of self-harm replaces and prevents thinking.”\textsuperscript{69} The markings or wounds on the skin, which, in Marianne Hirsch’s words, can be considered a “figure for the traumatic real,” symbolise the trauma and hardships that people go through, illustrating a very idiosyncratic experience.\textsuperscript{70} Roberta Culbertson has outlined with reference to trauma studies that “no experience is more one’s own than harm to one’s own skin, but none is more locked within that skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the constructions of language.”\textsuperscript{71} Although she refers to wounds inflicted upon the body through an external force (as was the case during slavery and the Holocaust) the verbal incommunicability and suffering caused by the experience signified can also be applied to self-harming acts. The key difference can be explained as follows: when objectification occurs from the outside it is a degrading act of violation, imprisonment and symbolic rape, whereas the self-inflicted marks of the self-harmer symbolise a titanic assertion of autonomy over one’s own body – trauma is self-inscribed for the purpose of articulation and healing, as Gillian Straker, Anna Motz, Armando Favazza and Janice McLane argue respectively.\textsuperscript{72} In both cases, however, markings are tied to the person’s life, identity and history, becoming signifiers of remembrance and the prospect of recovery that constitute, as Sethe in Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} says, “a mark of my own.”\textsuperscript{73} This self-empowering marking of the body is a feature of Winton’s women characters. But such representations nevertheless run the very real danger of becoming cultural stigma – a form of objectification and degradation that the writer fails to undermine through polarised gender portrayals.


\textsuperscript{69} Motz, \textit{The Psychology of Female Violence}, 151.


\textsuperscript{73} Toni Morrison, \textit{Beloved} (London: Picador, 1988), 61. See also Hirsch, “Marked by Memory,” 72.
Self-harm is a broad concept covering self-inflicted violence, either for suicidal attempts, or more dominantly, to relieve debilitating psychological trauma. In psychoanalytical respects, self-harm is simultaneously destructive and creative, aligning self-mutilation with both healing and the sacred.\textsuperscript{74} Anna Motz asserts that self-harm can be regarded as a form of protest against the emphasis placed upon the female body, as well as an attack on the mother image that is symbolised by the woman’s own body:

Women typically locate their sense of identity in their bodies, which is itself a reflection of the tremendous cultural emphasis placed on women’s bodies, and their reproductive capacities. They express anger, contempt and shame through injuring their bodies, using the concrete experience of pain to symbolise psychological anguish.\textsuperscript{75}

Hence, self-harm is frequently used as a vehicle for explosive, albeit short-lived, relief from psychological distress and depression. In this sense it parallels the strength of perversion discussed in Estela Welldon’s study \textit{Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood}.\textsuperscript{76} Welldon describes self-injury as an incident of perversion, a female act of violence and crime committed against the body, often expressed in adolescent self-mutilation. Conflating male and female perversion with self-harm, Welldon offers a condition that does not allow people to receive sexual gratification through the intimacy of bodily contact with another person. As a consequence, a person feels overpowered and controlled by a compulsive activity which is “subjectively experienced as inexplicable and ‘bizarre’ but which provides a release of unbearable and increasing sexual anxiety.”\textsuperscript{77} It can also involve an unconscious desire to harm themselves and others.\textsuperscript{78} In this context the

\textsuperscript{74} See in this context Favazza, \textit{Bodies Under Siege}, 23.
\textsuperscript{75} Motz, \textit{The Psychology of Female Violence}, 153.
\textsuperscript{76} Estela V. Welldon, \textit{Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood} (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 33-34, 40. Also see Anna Motz, \textit{The Psychology of Female Violence}, 153.
\textsuperscript{78} Sigmund Freud argues that sexual perversion actually is part of the human condition from infancy onwards, manifested in a “polymorphously perverse and innately bisexual” (Dollimore 1990, 179) disposition, which at admission into cultural and social life needs to be sublimated and repressed to ensure a successful gendering and socialisation of the individual within heterosexual difference. It is a process of restriction, which, however, shows perversion to be a foundational element of cultural life, being responsible for energies and social forces to be released. Nevertheless, Freud considers heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality as deviant, thus inciting many discursive, cross-disciplinary debates on sexuality and perversion over time. In \textit{Three Essays on Sexuality}, Freud further introduces perversion as being descriptive of sadistic and masochistic behaviour. He sees sadism as an active and aggressive component of the sexual instinct, while masochism, though rooted in sadism, covers any passive attitude towards sexual life and object, giving the person satisfaction through the mental or physical suffering at the hands of the physical object (Freud 1962, 48). Furthermore, it is outlined here that this perversion’s “active and passive forms are habitually found to occur together in the same individual” (50). In this respect, the Freudian foundation here illuminates Welldon’s points and creates further background information for the actual analysis of Winton’s representations of female self-harm. See here
actual use of the body qualifies as perversion rather than mere fantasy. Responding to Jose Yaryura-Tobias’s theory that self-harming includes the fear of harming others, thereby establishing a link between suicidal and homicidal actions, Motz raises the question that this fear might actually be a disguised wish to inflict harm upon others, driven by the desire to act out suppressed revenge. Thus self-harm, for Motz, becomes a defence against intimacy that excludes others and binds a woman to her own body.

Gloria Babiker and Lois Arnold point out that the reasons for women to self-harm are linked to social influences in Western thinking about the female body. In contrast to male heterosexuality, females are often confronted with negative overtones when it comes to their sexuality and its performance. Their body image is a cultural product dictated by the commercial viability of tabloid magazines, television advertising and pop-star constructs. Might we then not regard self-mutilation and self-destruction as the opposite of these accepted social standards of beauty and body culture? According to Babiker and Arnold, these acts of attacking the body express not merely the woman’s self-hatred and despair “but also her protest at the contradictory expectations and perceptions placed upon her, and so contains deliberately proud and angry elements.” This illustrates the clear aversion to the superficiality of a fetishised object of pleasure for the social/male gaze that Simone de Beauvoir describes by pitting the female immanence as the lesser other to male transcendence: “But when woman is given over to man as his property, he demands that she represent the flesh purely for its own sake. Her body is [...] a thing sunk in its own


81 Ibid., ix.
82 Babiker and Arnold, The Language of Injury, 38-42.
83 Ibid., 39.
84 Ibid., 40.
The woman is pushed into a pre-determined semantic framework of male pleasure, in which her flesh is appropriated and marked by a desire that is not her own.

Since Cecily Hamilton, in 1909, lamented the social construction of femininity in *Marriage as a Trade*, second and third-wave feminisms have institutionalised the concept of woman as construct and extended it to the foundation of socio-cultural critiques that also take into consideration discourses on the construction of other marginalised groups and masculinity. Hence, women’s bodies become a source of cultural ambivalence, of risk and pleasure, danger and morality in what are still male dominated environments – a factor that plays into the psychological observation that women tend to be more susceptible to mental frailty and self-harm than men.

The female body in its cultural context receives symbolic significance that reflects upon the ideals, norms, taboos and boundaries of culture itself and can be read like a text. Thus, as Skarderud and Nasser infer with reference to the philosophies of George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, it is through bodily surfaces in their metaphoric capacity that psychological messages about cultural realities are communicated and revealed. Psychological wounds and the pain that is caused need to be expressed and communicated in order to offer the victim the chance of normality and their re-integration into a “pain-free” world: “Pain refers to the disintegration of the wounded person and to her need for reintegration, and expresses the value of the person harmed, her wholeness, and her wished-for unwounded connection to the world.” Janice McLane’s article “The Voice on

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90 McLane, “The Voice on the Skin,” 108.
“The Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau-Ponty’s Theory of Language” illustrates the link between abuse, enforced silence and the need to voice pain for survival. She argues that through self-mutilation, the victims find and create a unity in their bodies and selves. Paradoxically, destruction and attack mingle with unification, life and wholeness, forming a unified voice that expresses trauma.\(^9\) Taking various forms of enactment, such voices can also be found in Winton’s characters, albeit voices of revenge than healing. The women’s bodies in his novels re-enact the history of female transience and stigmatisation within Australian culture. They are marked by motherhood, feminism, homosexuality, suicide, disease, accident and depression, thus denoting persistent fears in the dominant patriarchal economy.

Revealing consistent links with the notorious nineteenth-century condition of hysteria, the representation of Winton’s female characters as self-harming re-enforces psychoanalytic conceptions of specifically ‘female diseases’ that significantly compromise the complexity of these characters and re-produce psychoanalytic shortcomings in the evaluation and interpretation of psychological disorders. A brief introduction to the phenomenon of hysteria – a term originating from the Greek word for “uterus”, \( \text{hystera} \) – should suffice to establish the basis for the analysis of female self-harm, simultaneously revealing the dominant cultural prejudices of the ‘dis-ease’ and their deconstruction through feminism. Particularly prevalent in connection with anorexia nervosa, hysteria is given some attention in Chapter Two but is further important for the analysis of Winton’s portrayal of women’s depression and suicide in Chapter Four – in which the female body as active and passive bearer of the gendered gaze is shown as a distinctive memory site of female otherness and persisting patriarchal desires. Acts of looking, recollection and destruction merge within these clashings of competing voices in Winton’s narratives, exemplifying a multitude of cultural bias initially reflected in hysteria and carried on towards contemporary postcolonial representations of gender. If the crises of masculinity are articulated via the female body, as this thesis argues, the insinuation of the woman as hysteric seems to indicate a shift of perception: Isn’t it rather that this stigmatisation highlights a form of male hysteria behind the image of the self-harming woman?

The theory of the “speaking body” which viewed hysteria as symptomatic of repressed, prohibited or unexpressed sexual desires and fantasies was one of the first

\(^9\) Ibid., 111.
psychoanalytic milestones in the study of the unconscious. A range of Freud’s female patients suffered from heavy reactions of their bodies without obvious physiological motivations such as stomachache, nausea, coughing, and the inability to drink or stuttering. Freud regarded these somatic symptoms as expressions of hysteria in response to unconscious repression of desire. The “talking cure” formed in his view the pathway to relieve the bodily suffering, setting the foundation stone for modern psychoanalysis and treatment. In his view hysteria was “a psychical trauma, the conflict of affects and…disturbance in the sphere of sexuality” (1905b, 24), including oedipal desires. Post-Freudian psychoanalysis developed various views on hysteria, however shifting Freud’s symptomatic approach to the sphere of personality structure and traits, pre-oedipal formulations of hysteria and personality disorders. The body and sexuality were increasingly removed from scientific discussions, viewing hysteria largely as a defense against psychosis. Since the early 1990s the “cultural narratives of hysteria” — which Elaine Showalter refers to as “hystories” — became popular in feminist literary and cultural theory and paved the way for interdisciplinary crossroads between feminist criticism, psychoanalytic theory and medical history. Various views emerged that considered hysteria as an expression of feminist revolt, a construct of patriarchy or a reflection of failed feminism through the image of the silenced, hysteric woman. Fact is that feminist discourses on the subject increasingly stressed the issue of gender in psychoanalysis. Furthermore, hysteria itself seems to become synonymous with self-harm in the sense that it is often considered a form of expression for people who might not be able to articulate their feelings. Hence, “hysteria is a mimetic disorder that mimics culturally permissible expressions of distress” and produces legitimate symptoms for causes considered illegitimate.

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The new discourses on hysteria\(^{96}\) shift its nature significantly from its gendered origins to a cultural phenomenon that transgresses gender, social class and race. Despite, however, Showalter and other’s attempt to deviate hysteria away from the association of “weakness, badness, feminine deceitfulness or irresponsibility”\(^{97}\), it is still too often presented along these lines in cultural representations. Throughout its different chapters, this thesis points to the strong tendency in Winton’s novels of fostering an old-fashioned, gendered perception of hysteria as a female condition, closely related to reproductivity, sexuality, excess and perversion, while expressed through self-harm. Re-affirming this old stereotype, Winton’s portrayals of the feminine, as the following analyses show, indicate the possibility that a form of ‘male’ hysteria (“tesserical fear”\(^{98}\)) hides behind these patriarchal constructs of female embodiment and stereotypes. Closely aligned with the psychoanalytic discourses on hysteria, it is the stigmatisation of the female characters through self-harm that opens up the unmarked, mediated articulation of male trauma on the female body in Winton’s fiction.

Overall, the critical discussion of self-harm among women in Australian fiction is not well established.\(^{99}\) Chantal Kwast-Greff has written about the relationship between women, anger and self-harm in Australian literature in her works “Le corps ecrit-inscrit: anorexie, automutilation et folie dans la literature australienne,” “Poupées de cire, poupées de sang: les femmes dans la litterature australienne” and “The Body and the Text: Extra and Infra Textual Scars,” but she remains the only critic who has published extensively on the issue in regards to Australian literature.\(^{100}\) In her essay “Mad ‘Mad’ Women – Anger, Madness, and Suffering in Recent White Australian Fiction,” Kwast-Greff links female anger, which,

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\(^{96}\) Showalter refers to this new cultural interest in re-writing the history of hysteria as the “New Hysterians”, which include scholars such as Roy Porter, Mark Micale and Robert M. Woolsey. See Showalter, Hystories, 7-8. See also Micale, Approaching Hysteria, 5.

\(^{97}\) Ibid., Hystories, 9.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 94-95.


according to her, is frequently associated with “madness” in Western societies, with self-harm and suicide by presenting the mutilation of the body as a vehicle to control and transform female aggression:

As a matter of fact, female characters are more often depicted – in novels and short stories written by white Australian women over the last twenty-five years – as harming themselves and suffering in their bodies and minds than as harming others (except for the children, as mentioned previously). Many are described as violently, ‘madly’ acting out their anger on their own bodies, causing themselves physical pain, depriving themselves of food or over-eating, and maiming their bodies. Some women in fiction develop self-destructive eating disorders which seem to be related more to anger than to madness [...] Anorexia and bulimia are nowadays generally accepted as ‘mental’ disorders (as in ‘anorexia mentosa’). In both anorexia and bulimia, the spirit dominates the body. The female body is clearly the battlefield where a drama is enacted by an angry spirit.  

She argues that rage and anger stigmatise women as the other in a largely patriarchal society. However, Kwast’s study focuses exclusively on female representation in the novels of female rather than male writers.

Scholars such as Lekkie Hopkins, Barbara Arizti Martin, Jennifer Rutherford and particularly Linzi Murrie talk about gender issues in Winton’s fiction and describe the discrepancies between the masculine and feminine representations in the texts. In challenging concepts of Australian masculinity as homosocial, public, physical, and larrikin, Winton uses common stereotypes of the feminine to characterise his male protagonists. They become emotional, nurturing and domestic individuals, who are often placed on the margin, detached from established social formations. As a result of this form of narrative appropriation of the feminine and the ensuing empowerment of the male characters, the women in the novels are marginalised and disempowered, especially in terms of motherhood, as Murrie points out. This marginalisation is shown in novels such as Cloudstreet, The Riders, Shallows and Dirt Music where the mother figure is psychologically fractured, alienated and displaced in the microcosm of the family as failing in her maternal duties or being merely absent. Self-harm and death among these women is frequent and complicates the relationships between the male and the female.

Murrie’s essay “Changing Masculinities” and Katherine Bode’s introductory work on male bodies in contemporary Australian women’s fiction function as a basis from which my

102 Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 175-76.
103 See ibid., 175-76.
ideas on self-harm and femininity develop. Seeing the act of appropriation as a way to construct masculinities as less patriarchal is mingled here with the claim that it also exposes an underlying male fear and anxiety about female power:

The appropriation of the ‘feminine’ might suggest attempts to re-construct non-patriarchal masculinities, but it also reveals male anxieties bound up with the pathologising of masculinity, and the threat represented by the empowerment of women. Feminist critiques of masculinity have devalued the ‘masculine’ and tended to make men personally uneasy about their responsibility for patriarchal culture. If, in the future, the ‘feminine’ is to be regarded as a valued realm, appropriation might represent the best strategy for ensuring the maintenance of gender hierarchies and male privilege. As Modleski argues, male power is consolidated in cycles of crisis and resolution, and men have traditionally learnt to deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it.

Similarly, Bode refers to the phenomenon of “masculinity in crisis,” a recent trend in masculinity studies, feminism and cultural criticism in Australia and elsewhere. The image of the “man in crisis” and its discourses will be addressed in chapters three and four. Nevertheless, the critical controversy and contemporary currency of these ideas of the emasculated male and the aggressive, raging female need to be stressed as it is here that the causes of feminism, or feminisms, and masculinity studies intersect. Various studies and critical opinions deal with the depiction of the (non-white, gay, white) male body as

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104 Ibid, 169-79; Katherine Bode, Damaged Men/Desiring Women – Male Bodies in Contemporary Australian Women’s Fiction (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008). While I acknowledge the fundamental difference between Bode’s analysis of the representation of male bodies in women’s writing and this thesis’s analysis of the representation of female and male bodies in Winton’s writing, Bode’s introduction nevertheless offers important background information and insights on masculinity studies from a feminist perspective, which is the reason for its significance here.

105 Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 175.


107 See Bode, Damaged Men/Desiring Women, 249-50. Also see here Mary Ann Doane, Femme Fatales – Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 4. She points towards the limitation and insufficiency of the term “feminism,” in her view “a monolithic position which the sheer variety of feminisms belies” – a standpoint acknowledged and shared in this thesis. Also see Mills, Feminist Stylistics, 3.
damaged, ranging from conservative, anti-feminist voices to more reflective, critical theories on the relation between men and feminism.\(^{108}\)

By placing the male body, damaged or not, in the focus of the gaze, especially within women-authored texts, a new ground for gender definition is opened up – a foundation that allows the creation of novel linguistic boundaries and transgressions of “hegemonic masculinities.”\(^{109}\) Bode argues that the issue of female writers representing male bodies, despite undermining existing phallocentric notions of male invisibility, contributes to the present conceptions of “masculinity in crisis.”\(^{110}\) In this context Sally Robinson states that “announcements of a crisis in white masculinity, and a widely evidenced interest in wounded white men, themselves perform the cultural work of recentering white masculinity by decentering it.”\(^{111}\) She indicates that white men need to claim a “symbolic disenfranchisement, must compete with various others for cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded” in order to define their position within existing identity politics.\(^{112}\) Here, the issue of men becoming victims of female domestic violence is a recent phenomenon that goes hand in hand with the notion of masculinity crisis and is driven by the aim of re-empowerment.\(^{113}\)


\(^{110}\) Bode, *Damaged Men/Desiring Women*, 251: Bode states that one reason for the crisis might well be that in patriarchal structures the man must both be highly visible and also the invisible bearer of the gaze, whereas in female representations of men’s bodies, the emphasis is on both men’s bodies and women’s looks, making men the visible and scrutinised objects of this particular gaze.


\(^{112}\) Ibid.

However, showing the male body and psyche as fractured in men’s writing is a different and difficult enterprise and easily falls back into conventional, patriarchal norms of gender depiction – particularly when it is explicitly combined with corresponding observations of the female body. Representing the male protagonist as victim frequently re-establishes hegemonic power relations instead of deconstructing them.\textsuperscript{114} In her study “The Privilege of Crisis: Narratives of Masculinities in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, Photography and Film,” Elahe Haschemi Yekani indicates that the narrative representation of “crises of masculinity” in contemporary postcolonial fiction seems to have become a carefully designed mode of promoting and privileging hegemonic masculinity: “Accordingly, one could argue that there is no crisis of masculinity but rather a continuing narrative production of crisis tendencies with specific privileging effects.”\textsuperscript{115} In traditions of Christianity, the wounded man is a common icon, which, however, is often adopted in feminist texts to challenge that same tradition.\textsuperscript{116} In Winton’s novels, both male and female appearances, in subjective and objective terms, adopt a central position, thereby highlighting the element of (spiritual) healing in connection with the male body while placing the female increasingly in line with transience, despair and self-destruction. The woman, although both bearer and challenger of the gaze, is pushed back into the traditional position of the visible, the stigmatised, the good or the bad, literally becoming the marked instead of the unmarked presence in the novels.\textsuperscript{117}

In this context of crisis, representation and appropriation, Elisabeth Bronfen has made the link between the woman as the counter-force and other to male-inscribed environments by placing the female into close proximity to death and sexuality as symbolic markers of the mysterious and unacceptable otherness that transcend life and knowledge and,

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 331-32.
\textsuperscript{115} Haschemi Yekani, \textit{The Privilege of Crisis}, 16. Haschemi offers a vivid and well-presented approach to the complexity of masculinity in crisis, also calling into awareness that these crises are never monolithic and give grounds to renegotiate existing concepts of masculinities. In acknowledging the vast differences between masculinities, the discourse can introduce more enabling and inclusive forms and stories of the masculine (263-73).
thus, simultaneously deconstruct existing and dominating power structures. Margaret Higonnet agrees with Bronfen, associating suicides that appear to be a form of surrender rather than a choice with the feminine. She considers this female “vanishing act” in comparison to the chosen “heroic” and masculine deaths in war or other politically-charged situations. In her theory, suicide or death is an act in transit that opens up the space for multiple readings reflecting the indeterminacy, otherness and uncanny character of death. Similarly, drawing from Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Bronfen characterises the woman as symbolising the repressed and the unconscious, becoming the site of fear for male consciousness:

Like cultural constructions of death, like tombstones and portraits that simultaneously mark the deceased and their absence, Woman is man’s symptom in the sense of that site of repression where the repressed returns, where the void of existence returns as sexual void […] her function is to support the fantasy of self-realisation and wholeness to be gained in relation to an Other.

She elaborates on the idea of the woman as the reflection of ambivalence, which is created by the merging of various psychic registers, “serving as the source of the imaginary, as the body that allegorically figures ideas of Otherness in the symbolic, yet whose Otherness also positions her in the non-semiotic real, as the limit of signification, the exteriorised factor which grounds the system.” In this context, Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin argue that the cultural construction and mediation of death as a signifier functions as a stabiliser and a manifestation of the numerous ways that a culture represents itself:

Death is […] necessarily constructed by a culture; it grounds the many ways a culture stabilizes and represents itself, and yet it always does so as a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers, other means of representing what finally is just absent.

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118 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body – Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 212, 217. Also see de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 179, who famously remarked: “In most popular representations Death is a woman, and it is for women to bewail the dead because death is their work.” Also see Kathryn James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 15-16; Margaret Higonnet, “Frames of Female Suicide,” *Studies in the Novel* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 229-42. Higonnet also adds to the otherness and linkage between women and death the racial other, creating a triangle signifying the unknown and exotic (see 241).

119 Higonnet, “Frames of Female Suicide,” 232.

120 Ibid., 231.

121 Ibid., 230.


124 Bronfen and Webster Goodwin, “Introduction,” 4, see also 113.
Therefore, in her close, culturally-determined, metaphorical proximity to death, “woman” as a cultural construct can also be seen as a complex allegory that incorporates and mirrors the failures, values, ideologies and limits in culture and its discourses.\textsuperscript{125} Also, she represents the process of cultural representation itself, exposing the myriad facets of cultural constructions, created and defined through power interests. It is both death and the feminine that culture positions as “what is radically other to the norm, the living or surviving masculine subject,” so that not only death but also woman as metaphor can be seen as “site[s] of paradoxes.”\textsuperscript{126}

Therefore, as argued in this thesis, death and self-harm as representations are predominantly linked in Winton’s fiction with the female, whose body becomes a matrix on which cultural power relations and values are played out and inscribed. Woman here is clearly given the same attributes as death, excess and difference, and thus receives a form of “othering” that marks Winton’s representations as distinctly masculine.\textsuperscript{127}

\subsection*{1.3. Australian (Post-) Feminism}

In order to thoroughly pinpoint the theoretical framework of this thesis, it is important to outline some additional feminist perspectives that play into the following analysis of Winton’s novels and modify the discussion of the “man in crisis.” Terms like “gender equality,” “motherhood” and “third-wave feminism” play a central role when looking at female representations in a male-authored text in order to examine the gendered Australian power struggle within and outside of the actual text.

In her study \textit{Being Australian}, Catriona Elder emphasises the various hegemonic and subversive stories of gender in the process of forming a national and cultural identity. She claims that national stories are often constructed around a normative binary of male/ female,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{See here Brooks, \textit{Body Work}, 33, who argues along these lines saying that the body, both male and female, works as a “site on which the aspirations, anxieties, and contradictions of a whole society are played out.” Equally important here is Susan Bordo, \textit{The Male Body – A New Look at Men in Public and Private} (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 26-27, in which she refers to the fact that culture shapes the way the body is individually perceived by the onlooker – a phenomenon that is ever-changing with the passing of time and the changes within specific cultural contexts.}
\footnote{Bronfen and Webster Goodwin, “Introduction,” 4.}
\footnote{See Jacqueline Rose, \textit{Sexuality in the Field of Vision} (1986; repr., London: Verso, 2005), 219: “The system is constituted as a system or whole only as a function of what it is attempting to evade and it is within this process that the woman finds herself symbolically placed. Set up as the guarantee of the system she comes to represent two things – what the man is not, that is difference, and what he has to give up, that is excess.” See also Bronfen and Webster Goodwin, “Introduction,” 14.}
\end{footnotes}
active/passive, and thus establish male hegemony, homosociality and heterosexuality.\textsuperscript{128} She describes the valorised form of femininity in the Australian context as monogamous, heterosexual and maternal, which rests on the ideal of being a decent woman, looking good, not being too sexual, being pleasant in nature, not undermining men socially and not misbehaving.\textsuperscript{129} Influenced by the Victorian “separate spheres” ideology, this concept of the feminine connotes a public/private divide, which allocates the private sphere to the woman and situates the man in the public domain. Despite the seemingly old-fashioned ideals conveyed in these dichotomies, the values connected to them still manage, or at least influence, large areas of Western thinking as shown in contemporary research on public perceptions of gender roles, motherhood and equality in the workforce.\textsuperscript{130}

In an era that is often controversially entitled “post-feminist,” women nowadays seem to be struggling to live up to the ideals of the feminist legacy.\textsuperscript{131} Anne Summers argues in her study \textit{The End of Equality: Work, Babies and Women’s Choices in 21st Century Australia} that this is due to a clash between the ideology that women are now better off and the failure of individuals to enact second-wave feminist values.\textsuperscript{132} Indeed, her research of the actual experience of many women suggests that gaps in equality between the genders are not decreasing but in fact increasing.\textsuperscript{133} The evidence paints a grim scenario: in the past thirty years the number of women in full-time employment has not increased, more women are

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 68-69.
\textsuperscript{130} See ibid., 77-84.
\textsuperscript{131} See Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, “Introduction,” in \textit{Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory}, ed. Elizabeth Kowaleski (New York: Routledge, 2009), xxii. Gloria Steinem remarked in the 40th anniversary edition of the New York Magazine that “[t]here is no post-feminism – that’s like saying post-democracy” (quoted in Kowaleski, xxii). She thus addresses the very problematic nature of the prefix “post” in socio-cultural and political contexts of power relations. The term “post-feminism” is fairly vague, varying in its meaning according to the national and social contexts. Often it is used synonymously with Third-Wave or DIY (“Do-it-yourself”) feminism, a generation of women who embrace their femininity as a form of empowerment and celebration. In Australia the debate surrounding post- (second-wave) feminism had one of its peaks in the controversy in the wake of Helen Garner’s novel \textit{The First Stone} (1995), inciting stark criticism of Second Wave feminists against the generation of their daughters. For an extensive feminist study of Garner’s book and its representation in the Media, see Anthea Taylor, \textit{Mediating Australian Feminism – Re-reading the First Stone Media Event}, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
working part-time than in any other industrialised Western country, there is a severe lack of childcare facilities to better accommodate full-time employment for mothers, women’s weekly earnings are significantly lower than those of men, and the focus on women’s studies has gradually been superseded by a fascination with motherhood: the “breeding creed.”

Bringing the urgency of a re-instatement and re-evaluation of feminist concerns together with the observation of a social resurrection of traditionalist ideologies in Australia, Summers voices a valid concern that is also mirrored and taken up in the works of Chilla Bulbeck and Angela McRobbie.

Often accused of being too archaic and unreflective, second-wave feminist theories and activism have been marginalised and denigrated over the last two decades – a phenomenon that is famously discussed in Susan Faludi’s 1993 study *Backlash.* One of the most intense and controversial attacks on Australian feminism, which not only illustrated socio-cultural anti-feminist sentiments in Australia, but also marked severe tensions between second and third wave feminisms, was the heated media debate following the publication of Helen Garner’s *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* in 1995. This debate, which encapsulated Faludi’s harsh criticism of the role of the media in the attack on feminism, exposed deep fractures within the feminist movement itself, triggering multiple discussions about the meaning of feminism, its representation in the popular media and the generational divide between feminists and their priorities.

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137 Helen Garner, *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* (Sydney: Picador, 1995). In this non-fictional account Garner unravels the allegations made against the Master of Ormond College at the University of Melbourne by two female students in 1992, who claimed to have been sexually harassed after a College function. See Faludi, *Backlash,* 9. For more information and an elaborate analysis of the media event surrounding Garner’s book, see Taylor, *Mediating Australian Feminism.*
Referring to the vibrant controversies of the mother/daughter paradigm typified by Virginia Haussegger’s *Wonder Woman: The Myth of Having It All*, Chilla Bulbeck emphasises the necessity of reclaiming feminism and re-defining it alongside present-day requirements: we must produce “an image of feminist theory and activism which is cognisant of structured gender inequality and […] is both aware of the diversity of women and how we are connected in webs of subordination and domination.” In this process, however, the idea of a “pluralist big tent feminism” that praises any female desire as empowerment needs to be avoided and instead replaced by a decent knowledge of the barriers that bar the path of social justice and gender equity. Angela McRobbie argues that feminism needs to be understood as having already passed away in order to take it into consideration. McRobbie’s disarticulation of feminism is important in the context of anti-feminist reaction and the targeting of women as having a set role in the modernisation process. Positioning herself in relation to Rosi Braidotti’s work on post-feminism and gender mainstreaming, McRobbie comes to the conclusion that “[p]edagogy and learning have become vital spaces of encounter, and new kinds of contact zones where histories, including gender histories, which have otherwise been subject to enforced forgetting have perhaps a small chance now of being written.” McRobbie states that the “concept of subjectivity and the means by which cultural forms and interpellations (or dominant social processes) call women into being, produce them as subjects while ostensibly merely describing them as such, inevitably means that it is a problematic ‘she.’” This important point indicates that there are fissures in the dominant political and cultural systems of power.

139 Haussegger, *Wonder Woman*. Haussegger’s book was highly anticipated and popular but was criticised for its lack of research, its class bias and lack of structural analysis. Nevertheless, it initiated much needed debates about feminism and motherhood, which gave women the opportunity to voice their opinions. See here Natasha Campo, *From Superwoman to Domestic Goddesses: The Rise and Fall of Feminism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 172-73; Emily Maguire, *Princesses & Pornstars – Sex, Power, Identity* (Melbourne: Text Publishing Melbourne, 2008), 194-96.
141 Ibid. Regarding the divide between mother and daughter feminist generations and the future of feminism, see Anita Harris, “Mind the Gap,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 25, no. 66 (2010): 475-84.
145 Ibid., 13.
- disruptions, which can be taken as starting points for transformation. The “problematic she” on a diegetic level is well demonstrated in Winton’s depiction of women, whose close alliance with transience offers various connecting points for a deconstructive, feminist reading.

This thesis argues that literature provides a platform upon which the resurrection of old value-systems can be instigated through texts like Winton’s which serve to connect large numbers of people in both their conscious and unconscious complicity with white Australian belonging, nostalgia and community. Against the socio-cultural and political background of a fast-moving world of globalisation, the texts respond to a sense of social alienation, loss of direction and confusion among men and women, offering alternate worlds in which values of conventional gender relations, love, devotion, marriage and faith are celebrated. But such stories may also stigmatise progression and difference – concepts which are synonymous with the female in Winton’s fiction. It is the reader-reception, however, that determines a text’s value and effects. Therefore, it is necessary to eschew the obvious path toward meaning and to adopt a marginal position from which the darker nuances of the story become visible and expose the fiction as an instrument of broader regulating discourses.

A major component of the following analyses is the argument that Winton’s novels illustrate the contemporary trend of detachment from feminism, presenting a worldview wherein female agency is once again limited to one-dimensional stereotypes whereas the man assumes a new, multidimensional role as empowered subject, especially in the private sphere. The backlash against feminism and the deepening crisis in masculinity have spawned strong “mythopoetic” and “men’s rights” voices favouring masculine and paternal re-empowerment in Australia. Although Winton’s work is more reflective and subtle than the essentialising, anti-feminist views of, for instance, American writer Robert Bly, this thesis argues that his novels participate in building a reactionary framework against feminism by frequently presenting the man as the victim of female control and egocentricity.

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147 See Martin Mills, “Boys, Schooling and Backlash Politics,” in Manning the Next Millenium – Studies in Masculinity, ed. Sharyn Pearce and Vivienne Muller (Bentley, WA: Black Swan Press, 2002), 169-84. In this context it needs to be mentioned that women are also sometimes presented as victims of domestic violence in Winton’s fiction. This, for example, is the case in Shallows where Daniel Coupar admits his failings towards his wife (Shallows, 98). In Dirt Music, Jim’s father is presented as a violent man, whose wife kills herself (Dirt...
response to the feminist movements and the emergence of the corresponding “men’s movements,” Winton wrote an article in the fashion of Betty Friedan’s classic text *The Feminine Mystique*. This article is entitled “The Masculine Mystique” and criticises the narrow definition of masculinity in Western and particularly feminist thought, emphasising the debilitating dogmatism of Australian masculinity and the good-natured men in Winton’s family. Indeed, for Winton, conventional gender dichotomies do not match his own family experiences. Winton passionately argues against an inherent “bestial nature” of men, proclaiming a representative voice for an alternative, soft and rather submissive concept of masculinity. In doing so, however, he not only positions patriarchal against non-patriarchal men but also preserves a distinctive gender hierarchy by directly aligning the hardnosed, matriarchal women of his family with the patriarchal dominance of his society:

The women had more drive about them, they had more of a hardness. They were stronger-willed and altogether more fierce as personalities. Their children feared them into middle age and beyond. I was always more fearful (or at the very least, watchful) of my grandmothers and aunts than their men. Most of them had the tempers and the tongues; they were more vengeful than their men and they were always the final authority. My grandmothers ran their families by sheer force of character, by brilliant organisation and hard work or by mean-

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spirited sabotage and humiliation. Their husbands, by comparison, were mild and ineffectual.\footnote{Ibid.}

As such, he conveys a rather negative image of women, which, in my view, is reflected in his writing.

### 1.4. Motherhood

To illustrate the diversity of motherhood and mothering, and create a basis for the discussion on motherhood in Winton’s novels, the history of the academic discourses on mothering will be reviewed, revealing the many possible ways mothering can be understood. Sara Ruddick follows Adrianne Rich’s legacy and joins her in setting the foundation for motherhood studies; she can be considered the first scholar to investigate the experience of mothering by defining it as a practice, not a biological prerequisite.\footnote{See Sara Ruddick, Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace (1989; repr., London: Women’s Press, 1990); Andrea O’Reilly, “‘I Envision a Future in which Maternal Thinkers are Respected and Self-Respecting’: The Legacy of Sara Ruddick’s Maternal Thinking,” Women’s Studies Quarterly 37, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2009): 296.} Over the last few decades, the study of motherhood has become a serious academic discipline, institutionalised by the work of Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Andrea O’Reilly\footnote{Andrea O’Reilly, “Introduction,” in Encyclopedia of Motherhood, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), vii. See Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering, accessed August 16, 2011, http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/jarm. O’Reilly coined the term “motherhood studies” and started both the Association of Research on Motherhood and the Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering.}, Paula Caplan, Fiona Green, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Marianne Hirsch, Judith Warner, Anne Crittenden, Ayelet Waldman and Sara Ruddick, just to name a few. These scholars and others have contributed to the establishment of a counter-narrative of motherhood by introducing and developing an empowered theory and practice of mothering.\footnote{Ibid., viii.} They have helped to transcend the formerly feminist focus on the voice of the daughter and to initiate the maternal discourse that adds subjectivity and autonomy to the previously objectified and silenced mother figure.\footnote{See in this context Marianne Hirsch, The Mother/Daughter Plot – Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 163-64.} In psychoanalysis and feminism, as a reaction towards the immense impact of the Freudian Oedipus complex and the fascination with maternal desire, perversion and fetishism, the mother and her body feature heavily and are famously looked at in the works of Julia
Kristeva, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Estela Welldon, Ann E. Kaplan and Parveen Adams (“Mothering”, 1990), among others.\textsuperscript{156} Since 2000, the theme of agency in regard to motherhood has emerged, and looks upon mothering as an institution, experience and identity and thus focuses on how “motherhood is detrimental to women because of its construction as a patriarchal entity.”\textsuperscript{157} Of course, the role of the mother in personal, social and cultural respects has been of importance in Western academic discourse since the early onset of feminism, when Mary Wollstonecraft published her “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman” in 1792.\textsuperscript{158} Since then, the construction of motherhood as a patriarchal institution became the norm in the Victorian era, manifesting existing power relations and attributing the public sphere to the man, and the private, domestic domain to the woman.

Motherhood received special attention in colonial Australia, where reproduction was written large to ensure ongoing population growth in the remote frontier parts of the country. Marilyn Lake argues that the “prevailing discourse on citizenship in these years of nation building allowed the work of mothering to be defined as a ‘service to the State’.”\textsuperscript{159} The limiting effects of this worldview and the idea of “separate spheres” persisted well into the twentieth century and heavily shaped the dichotomous ideas of good and bad mothering, of the mother as the natural nurturer of the children and the pious, obedient, efficient and unassuming “angel in the house.”\textsuperscript{160} Even today, as Delys Bird outlines, the myth of women as housewives, mothers and carriers of reproduction is perpetuated in Australian culture and the masculine hegemony that defines it.\textsuperscript{161} In the context of post-feminism and backlash movements, Natasha Campo looks at the historical and political discourses surrounding motherhood and feminism in Australia, emphasising the different scholarly and journalistic antagonisms towards feminist ideals and a re-evaluation of motherhood in its ideological and


\textsuperscript{157} O’Reilly, “Introduction,” viii.

\textsuperscript{158} Mary Wollstonecraft, \textit{A Vindication of the Rights of Woman} (1792; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).


\textsuperscript{161} Delys Bird, ““Mother, I won’t never go drovin’”: Motherhood in Australian Narrative,” \textit{Westerly}, no. 4 (December 1989): 42-43.
social function. She provides illustrative examples of the resurgence of female domesticity in recent years, critically expanding the commercial notion of the “domestic goddess” and the “yummy mummy,” ideas which conflate middle-class motherhood and housewifery with sexual attractiveness, career and “post-modern” femininity. There is a revival of domesticity and sole housewifery among educated middle-class women, who see their active choice to give up a career and stay at home to support – or be supported by – their hard-working husbands, as a revelation rather than a sacrifice. This choice is termed “opting out” and highlights the act of “choosing” this particular role as mother and housewife – retreating back into a new version of Betty Friedan’s concept of the “feminine mystique,” albeit in a self-proclaimed enlightened and liberated fashion. But the issue of “opting-out” was soon exposed to be a good media story, which suited the conservative agendas of

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163 Campo, From Superwomen to Domestic Goddesses, 167-70. The term “domestic goddess” derives from Nigella Lawson’s 2001 cookbook, in which she appeals to women’s “secret desire to be a good little housewife” and need to feel good about themselves through a return to domesticity (Campo 2009, 167). Along these lines, Anne Manne argues in her 2005 book Motherhood (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin) for the importance of mothers to stay at home with their children, exclusively assuming the woman as the prime carer in a heterosexual relationship. Cf. Maquie, Princesses & Pornstars, 108-9. Maqurie critically evaluates Manne’s account, emphasizing the weaknesses in Manne’s line of argument.

164 Cf. in this context Diana Appleyard, “The High Fliers with the Ultimate Status Symbol – Wives they can afford to keep at Home. So whatever happened to Feminism?” Mail Online, January 18, 2011, accessed March 9, 2011, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1348449/High-fliers-ultimate-status-symbol--wives-afford-home.html. Despite the trivial tabloid content of the paper, this article presents a common trend in Western societies at the moment, representing educated, white middle-class women as happily retreating to their role solely identified as mother and housewife.


governments. It neither constituted an actual Australian statistical majority, nor was it inclusive of women of lower socio-economic status, who could not afford not to work. Nevertheless it did reflect the sentiment of backlash against feminism in Western societies as depicted in Susan Faludi’s study. In the light of feminism, this process of the cultural production of the maternal as good and domestic, however, is also often accompanied by representations of the mother as failing, turning her into an abstraction, as opposed to the strong paternal figures who take over motherly duties, as it is the case in Winton’s *The Riders, Dirt Music* or *Shallows*.

One of the main concerns of this thesis is to question and explain the power struggle between male authoring and female autonomy with reference to Winton’s literary output. In this context, it is vital to expose the literary creation of the fictional female body as a patriarchal construction, but it is perhaps more important to examine the process of inscribing the symbolic onto that body through writing and reading, using it as a medium to undermine its phallocentric origin. In the following chapters, Chapter Three in particular, the function and significance of the mother role in Winton’s novels is examined, both looking at her as a woman and as a marginalised, muted other. It will be argued that there is a power struggle taking place between the narrative appropriation of the female/maternal body as a fictional creation, and the feminist reader, who sees the lack of female articulation imposed upon the character of the mother and wife, and uses the act of interpretation as a way to grant this silenced woman a way of speaking.

In representation, the mother often loses her agency as a subject when looked upon in relation to her children, and daughters in particular. Quite a few examples of female and male writing over the decades illustrate the frequent silencing of the mother who, though

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168 One facet of the political inefficiencies in connection with accommodating the workforce and motherhood is that it was only in January 2011 that paid parental leave was introduced to the country. It is paid to primary carers at the minimum wage rate of $543.78 a week.

169 Faludi, *Backlash*.

170 See Andrea O’Reilly, “Mothers, Daughters and Feminism Today: Empowerment, Agency, Narrative and Motherline,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 18, no. 2-3 (Summer/Fall 1998), 16-21. Marianne Hirsch gives a detailed analysis in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, 169-70. She raises awareness of Kristeva’s theories on motherhood and its discourses, while highlighting the danger of essentialism in feminist approaches, and the necessity to see the maternal in the light of male-female relationships and the ability of both men and women to mother.
condemned to silence, is spoken for by their daughters. This act of assuming the right to appropriate the mother’s voice illustrates the dissonance of telling her story, while at the same time marginalising her. Following Marianne Hirsch’s view, the novel as a genre offers the optimal platform to analyse the interplay between hegemonic and dissenting voices. This form of polyvocality makes it possible to interrogate cultural modes of domination and subordination. This is why Winton’s novels – representing one (very loud) voice of postcolonial, postmodern male Australian writing – are used in this analysis to dismantle existing power structures and family relations in the context of his fictional view of family bonds in Australia, specifically mother-daughter relations. In the process of doing so, O’Reilly’s claim that modern motherhood still “continues to function as a patriarchal institution” will be kept in mind.

1.5. Terminology and Position

In often silencing the woman in his fiction, be it in the biased portrayal of Eva, in the elliptic persona of Jennifer or the narrated memory picture of Jewel, Winton creates a void that needs to be filled. His text invites the (feminist) reader to deconstruct the male portrayal of the female by looking behind the written word, considering the “nontext” that is born through their participation with the text. Arguing along these lines, Elizabeth Grosz has reflected upon and challenged dominant cultural representations and discourses on the body in order to expose the ways in which a universal corporeality has functioned as a projection of a masculinity “which takes itself as the unquestioned norm, the ideal representative

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171 Marianne Hirsch has addressed this occurrence in The Mother/Daughter Plot, 16. Also see Ann E. Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation – The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 45. She argues that we become subjects in the patriarchal family structure through our similarity and difference from the mother, who is thus “locked in the unconscious.”

172 Hirsch, The Mother/Daughter Plot, 9. Also see Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation, 82. Here Kaplan gives a short synopsis of the nineteenth century values connected to the female body. She asserts that Rousseau first articulated the male-female dichotomy in Emile (1762), in which he pictures a culture of division into the public (male) and the private (female) space, initiating the idea of “separate spheres” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Émile, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1955), 370-72 and 387-405.


without any idea of the violence that this representational positioning does to its others."\textsuperscript{176}

In her view the author’s corporeality as gendered “intrudes into or is productive of the text” and is “rendered through its discursive production and iteration.”\textsuperscript{177}

Adopting a feminist perspective, I make use of the common terminology used in poststructural feminist discourses by referring to masculinity, femininity, the male and female bodies, the male and female gaze, patriarchy, phallocentrism and the other.\textsuperscript{178}

Inspired by Butler’s notion of performativity, and following Katherine Bode’s example, the discussions in this thesis assume gendered bodies – male and female – masculinity and femininity, and maternity and paternity, to be cultural, social and political constructions, established by patriarchal structures and discursively constituted through performative and signifying acts.\textsuperscript{179}

However, in line with Grosz’s corporeal feminism, the materiality of the body constitutes a pre-condition for significatory and representational acts. The claim that the body and gender are naturally and innately connected is seen as obsolete and as unjustifiably reinforcing hegemonic dogmatisms and constraints. Although the use of the terminology may seem essentialising and monolithic at times, it works subversively in the sense that it increasingly reveals the inherent limitations of its own strongly stigmatised and mythologised vocabulary. It also contributes to exposing existing authoritarian structures within a text by pinpointing power dialectics and gender bias within and across fictional accounts. I am well aware of the cultural and emotional baggage attached to the semantics of these particular terms. However, because of the lack of alternatives, the complicated and ambiguous nature of language as a system, the still persisting universality and understanding

\textsuperscript{176} Elizabeth Grosz, \textit{Volatile Bodies – Toward a Corporeal Feminism} (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 188.


\textsuperscript{178} I use the concept of “the other” without capitalising it because, in my view, this reflects a reverse act of linguistic subjugation that re-settles the feminist technique back into the ideological frameworks of patriarchal structures. Further, this thesis employs the term “femininity” to refer to its complexity as a cultural construct, arguing that it expresses not only limiting, stereotypical values of what it means to be female in a male economy but also that it is a site of subversion. It thus offers a starting point for a feminist reading and erosion of dominant texts as shown in the following chapters. See Sara Mills, “Negotiating Discourses of Femininity,” \textit{Journal of Gender Studies} 1, no. 3 (1992): 271-85.

of this terminology and the confinement of this thesis in terms of expansive theoretical elaborations, I have chosen to apply this vocabulary deliberately, albeit with hindsight of its controversy and only within the framework of discussions of hegemonic constructions of gender as such.  

The direction of critical engagement described in this extensive chapter epitomises the thesis’s methodology and main focus of analysis, specifically directing attention to the female body as a memory site. Consequently, women as a fictional representation in Winton’s novels have a much wider discursive function, exceeding the limits of a one-dimensional imaginary individuality towards a multidimensional allegory of social and cultural norms, values and rules.

Concluding this theoretical chapter, the woman’s body, as Susan Bordo puts it, can be “viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form […] It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the corner.”  

The dialectics between the body as a material site as well as ideological construct and the historical and cultural realities that shape it reflect the works of Judith Butler, who points out that “as an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention.”  

Gender, for Butler, is a construct born out of a multitude of performative acts that dramatise and formulate the body as a mode of enacting possibilities. Thus, it provides access to understanding how and to what extent cultural conventions are actually enacted and embodied. Interestingly, Butler asserts that authors of gender “become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness.” These points imply that every social being is prone to act and perform their own bodies according to the cultural and social standards surrounding them. It also suggests that performing gender is not only an active act concerning one’s own body but is also

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180 In the context of the large network of discourses surrounding these terms, see Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, ed., Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory (New York: Routledge, 2009).
183 Ibid., 487.
184 Ibid., 485.
heavily influenced by a multitude of different stimuli in which one’s body is constructed from external forces, ideas and values. Visual art, film, theatre and literature are platforms where these performative and engendering acts procreate, becoming the mirror of cultural conventions and transgressions.

Margaret Higonnet’s claim that literary texts deploy the motif of female suicide as “a way of interrogating the processes of social construction” is taken up in this thesis and extended to the domain of self-harm as applied in Winton’s fiction. At the same time, the function and activities of the female’s “practical body” as a “culturally mediated form” will also be explored. This thesis applies a singular feminist reading of Winton’s texts and demonstrates that female embodiment in one popular example of the literary industry in contemporary Australia offers the potential for new forms of knowledge to emerge. In looking closely at the individual women as ambiguous subjects, it presents Winton’s texts as prime examples of the crisis of masculinity, both within and outside the narrative, exposing their nostalgic inclinations and stereotypical illuminations as vivid reflections and fearful responses to this instability.

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185 Higonnet, “Frames of Female Suicide,” 241.
CHAPTER 2: Steeling the Self: Female Violence Unbound

2.1. A Rush: Sex and Self-Mutilation in *Breath, Cloudstreet* and *That Eye the Sky*

She feels like a freak on show. She’s a woman on the loose, gone feral; alluring to some and threatening to all the rest.

Fiona Capp, *Night Surfing*¹

Women “on the loose,” as Fiona Capp describes them, feature strongly in Winton’s fiction. Characters like Eva, Dolly and Tegwyn have a striking trait in common: they are painfully angry. They not only vent their aggression against themselves but against the people around them. In such instances, aggression becomes synonymous with self-harm and sex. All three of them are marked in their femininity, becoming both threatening and sexually alluring for the male characters in the stories.

In this first chapter, I analyse the paradoxical relationship between survival and transience as expressed through the excessive sexual and self-mutilating practices of Winton’s women characters. Operating from the observation that sexuality and self-mutilation are intrinsically linked for these women, I isolate a space in Winton’s representations wherein fundamental male-female power struggles are carried out at the expense of the woman. Despite the potential for articulation and healing, self-harm remains a negative mark that confirms rather than transcends the “othering” of the female in Winton’s fiction. Furthermore, self-harm and sex in this context also stand for female egocentricity, marking the woman’s inability to appreciate the nurturing and emotional qualities of the man. Such a reading of Winton’s texts places the question of masculinity in the foreground by presenting the female characters as considerably contributing to the crisis of masculinity – an issue that, given Winton’s influence as a writer, runs the risk of defaming his female characters and thus re-centralising a newly-emerged concept of the (post)modern man. In the analyses that follow, I focus on Winton’s texts as cultural constructions and the female body as a stigmatised matrix of gendered articulation and memory. The author position is

secondary. In doing so, I frequently use Winton’s name as a metonymic substitute for the text. This device should not be confused with collapsing the author and text.

The repeated treatment of sex in the novels Breath, Cloudstreet, Dirt Music and That Eye the Sky deserves our full attention, especially with regard to the wider symbolic significance of power and gender relations in Australia. In my analysis, I look at the representation of sex as a destructive form – a reflection of female depression and perversion. I defend the view that the male protagonist in crisis privileges a new variety of “hegemonic masculinity” that persistently casts the woman as the offender, the victimiser, the “abnormal.”2 Considering the sexist or stigmatising representation of the feminine in other Australian fiction, I regard Winton’s stories as supreme in linking a troubled and troubling image of the female with the claim of authenticity. This is achieved both through the subjective first-person male narrator, who after all “only observes,” and through the evocation of emotionally charged situations that seem to respond to the mysterium of male-female relationships. Moreover, Winton’s realist narratives tend to appropriate the female point of view in order to present constructions of femininity as realistic and to affirm an extradiegetic understanding of the female psyche and sexuality.3 Such appropriation reveals a textual hypocrisy whereby the male voice speaks through the female, claiming truth in female stereotypes. An analysis of the characters Eva (Breath), Georgie (Dirt Music), Rose (Cloudstreet), Dolly (Cloudstreet), Oriel (Cloudstreet), Jennifer (The Riders), Ida (In the Winter Dark), Queenie (Breath, Shallows), Maureen (Shallows) and Jewel (An Open Swimmer) demonstrates this criticism in the following chapters. This chapter specifically explores how distinctive stereotypes of femininity are implemented within the representation of self-harm and self-threatening behaviour, ranging from sexuality and perversion to oedipal desires and hysteria. It connects close-textual literary analysis with psychoanalysis, setting the basis for the next two main chapters to come.

2 See Yekani, Privilege of Crisis, 16.
3 See in this context John Kinsella, review of The Turning, by Tim Winton, Island, no. 101 (Winter 2005): 72. Kinsella addresses Winton’s representation of the female characters in The Turning and the feeling of obligation that seems to underlie it: “Most often it works, but sometimes we get the sense of a teenage boy, for example, imagining how a girl might have thought.” It is the speculation as well as the desire to understand and represent the female that I also see conveyed in Winton’s work. However, I consider it as problematic and not convincing in terms of representation.
In following Kathryn James’s claim that literal and symbolic death in literature constitutes a way of removing the “perverse” body from the sexual economy in order to maintain the heterosexual standard, I argue that self-harm in Winton’s stories forms a symbolic act that is written upon the sexually-active female body. Thus, the woman is positioned in a claustrophobic, eroticised space between life and death, agency and stagnation. As a result she turns feral, epitomising a threat to the dominant social order.⁴

In this context, “eroticised topographies” or “geographies of sexuality” reflect the notion that sex and sexual politics can be found anywhere and are closely related to public and private space.⁵ Similarly, Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst highlight the interdependency between sex and its locale.⁶ I extend this concept to erotic writing in Australian literature, exploring the living space and the body as sites of reflection. Consider the grunge-novels of Andrew McGahan (Praise, 1992), Justine Ettler (The River Ophelia, 1995) or Christos Tsiolkas (Loaded, 1995, The Jesus Man, 1999), all of which depict sex, addiction and mutilation in graphic detail.⁷ Here the milieu of the sexual contact strongly defines both the act and the bodies partaking in it, while in return being constituted by the event. In Praise, for instance, romantic illusions associated with sex are dispelled in the setting of a public restroom. The sexual act is thus placed into immediate relation with the body’s waste products – faeces, sweat and blood – an association also described in Tsiolkas’ Dead Europe (2005).⁸

By contrast, Winton’s novels preserve a gap between the narration and the sex act wherein the idea of love alludes to the transcendental qualities of sex. They show the nature of sex as private, symbolic and gendered. It is the woman who is presented as the progressive and consummating sexual force, often seducing men through the darkness of her desire. We need only look at Eva, Jennifer, Irma, Georgie, Sally, Dolly or even Rose and Ida to see how they are all marked to differing degrees in their sexuality. And this underlying darkness of female sexuality resonates through their affinity with death.

⁴ James, Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature, 17.
⁶ Johnston and Longhurst, Space, Place, and Sex, 3.
⁸ McGahan, Praise, 68-70; Christos Tsiolkas, Dead Europe (Milsons Point, NSW: Vintage Random House Australia, 2005), 257-58.
Georges Bataille outlines the darkness of eroticism in his 1962 study *Death and Sensuality*. Bataille directly associates sex, as an erotic practice, with life in death, a paradox highlighting the fundamental meaning of eroticism as the “pathway into unknowable and incomprehensible continuity.”9 This was apparently a secret to be perceived in death and could only be revealed by eroticism alone. Therefore the inherent sensuality of eroticism is connected to socially constructed taboos, which ambivalently circulate birth and death in a constant cycle of change.10 The voicing of such taboos after both experiencing and then breaking them becomes simultaneously a quest for redemption for the individual as well as a source of knowledge and revelation for the recipient of the story. Interestingly, Sigmund Freud remarks that “anyone who does what is forbidden, that is, who violates a taboo, becomes taboo himself” because “he possesses the dangerous quality of tempting others to follow his example.”11 When Foucault considers nineteenth-century Western society in *The History of Sexuality* he concludes that those who receive sexual confessions not only hold the power of forgiveness, judgement or condemnation but the power of truth related to these confessions. They construct truth after deciphering what they have heard or read, revealing in the process a truth about themselves, a discourse of reciprocity through the “interplay of knowledge and pleasure”12:

We tell it its truth by deciphering what it tells us about that truth; it tells us our own by delivering up that part of it that escaped us. From this interplay there has evolved, over several centuries, a knowledge of the subject; a knowledge not so much of his form, but of that which divides him, determines him perhaps, but above all causes him to be ignorant of himself.13

In response to Foucault’s assertion that individual identity is constructed through culture and discourse, Judith Butler emphasises the fact that a “culturally enmired subject negotiates its constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity” and

10 Ibid., 55. For more information on the nature and genesis of the concept of the taboo, despite its deficiencies, see Sigmund Freud, “Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence,” in *Totem and Taboo – Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (1913; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 21-86. In Freud’s chapter, which draws extensively from the studies of W. Wundt (*Elemente der Völkerpsychologie*, 1912), “objectified fear” (29) is placed at the centre of the creation of the taboo. Also cf. the feminist discourse on the taboo and perversion in Julia Kristeva’s and Judith Butler’s work.
13 Ibid., 69-70.
allocates a “capacity for reflexive mediation” to the particular subject. In this sense, granting the subject reflective agency in order to negotiate its own constructedness modifies the hegemonic relations set up in Foucault. The following discussions of Winton’s women characters veer away from the purely hegemonic toward a reading of the subject as having, in Butler’s words, “some capacity for mediation.”

The link between sex, taboos and the power of death in memories, hallucinations or dreams is a trademark of Western fiction: Winton’s novels are no exception. In An Open Swimmer Jerra constantly broods over the death of Jewel, his first sexual partner and the mother of his best friend Sean. In Dirt Music Luther Fox considers himself a “living dead,” his whole life overshadowed by the death of his family. Honouring the dead, he cannot reconcile the true, egocentric nature of his brother Darkie and sister-in-law Sally with the increasing feelings of disappointment and dislike he developed towards them (Dirt Music, 379-80). In The Riders, Scully’s remembrance exposes the fiction of a happy marriage by emphasising his victimised position:

In September, the night she came back from Piraeus with the pregnancy confirmed, they made love down there on a smooth ledge where his back pressed into the rock and the water surged through her slick legs as they clamped about him and her breasts glistened in his face. He held her buttocks in his hands as she rose on him […] She pressed him hard into the rock, hard into herself, the flat of her hand across his face until she cried out like a bird, a surprised, plaintive sound that travelled across the water, across his skin as a sudden burn. (The Riders, 150)

As shown in the above passage, the male perception in Winton’s novels persistently aligns female sexuality with a sense of impending peril or trauma, presenting the woman as a seductress who dominates the sex act. Jennifer pushes Scully hard into the rock and her flat hand is across his face – a gesture of distance that also connotes a slap.

Male desire in The Riders and other novels by Winton is presented as weakening the man – a source of crisis that is abused by the woman. Thus, the sense of guilt and reproach stemming from the consequences of male desire is regularly directed towards the women in these stories. For example, Henry Warburton blames his former lover for his own lust, reducing her to a witch-like creature and presenting himself as the victim of female sexuality

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14 Butler, Gender Trouble, 182. In this study, Butler heavily criticises Foucault’s concept of seeing sexuality situated within set matrixes of power (123).
15 See Freud, Totem and Taboo, 44-45. Freud refers here to the breaker of taboos being haunted by the ghosts of their victims and being troubled by a deep fear linked to this haunting as e.g. in Shakespeare’s Richard III and Macbeth.
16 Daniel Coupar in Shallows is an exception.
(That Eye the Sky, 163). Similarly, Jewel sexually disables Jerra, impacting his ability to be physically close to a woman. Jim considers Sally Fox to be a decisive factor in committing adultery (Dirt Music, 400), although he admits his mistakes and thus matures along a path to redemption. Guilt and accommodating self-deceit play a significant role in the traumas of Winton’s individuals, resulting, especially for the women characters, in a tendency to raise their hands against their own bodies in various forms.17

Winton’s characters often play out their destructive disillusionment through the sexual act. Scully sleeps with Irma to fight the paralysing numbness overpowering him since his wife Jennifer placed their relationship on hold. “He needed her in more ways than he could make plain to anyone. He felt his desperation winding into hers, his lies into hers, his gratitude, his shame, the shocking current that surged down his spine” (The Riders, 289). Similarly, in Dirt Music, Georgie’s first sexual encounter with Lu reveals her desperate need for physical closeness with a man:

For a long time afterwards and even while he slept Georgie felt the heat of his body in hers […] Georgie felt his respiration in the pillow, in the kingsize mattress, and her breathing fell into a hypnotic synchrony with his until the whirr of the minibar and the muffled barking of car horns and the aircon hiss receded to leave her consumed by the sensation of his sperm trickling out of her like some implacable process of geology. So slow. Stately, almost. With a cooling trail in its wake, the ghost of itself. Georgie felt her skin trying to absorb it, to drink it before it rolled away for good, and when it did finally spill to the linen beneath her folded thigh, she half-expected the hear a crash, a hiss upon impact. She lay there a while feeling her skin contract and dry. A sadness descended on her, a sense of loss. She took a hand from his belly, slipped it between her legs and brought the damp tips to her mouth. It didn’t feel reckless or even gross. It left her peaceful. (Dirt Music, 83-84)

This quotation illustrates the problematic female point of view presenting Georgie in post-coital sadness. The motifs of reproduction and woman as “man-eater” resonate in Georgie’s consummation of her lover’s sperm, creating a connection between motherhood and danger.

In That Eye the Sky, sex as a reflection of adolescent rebellion and a fierce power-struggle between Tegwyn and Warburton, is naively filtered through the childish eyes of Ort, who, as the story’s narrator and observer, is unable to understand the gravity of the situation: “I look in on Tegwyn and her and him are biting each other and hitting each other, with his hairy

17 So Georgie (Dirt Music), for instance, is traumatised by the loss of a cancer patient and regrets her own absence when Mrs. Jubail, the patient, died – a trauma which Winton links to the death of Georgie’s mother years later (Dirt Music, 197). Combined with her dissatisfying and unsettled life, Georgie drifts into a state of evasion and a feeling of disembodiment through excessive alcohol and drug intake. Eva’s (Breath) accident induces her into erotic asphyxiation while Jewel’s family situation and lack of love and respect drives her into depression and suicide. Further examples are outlined throughout the thesis.
bum up and her making hate noises at him and the bed squealing” (*That Eye the Sky*, 169). In *Cloudstreet* sexual pleasure is inextricably linked to Dolly’s self-esteem and sense of survival. The sexual aggression of her extra-marital affair with Lester Lamb leaves the latter asking the question: “Was that rape, do you think?” (*Cloudstreet*, 246). Implied is an ambiguous inversion of roles regarding the traditional perpetrator-victim relationship. Moreover, it evokes associations with Australia’s violent frontier quest (rape was a frequent occurrence) and with the image of the “unchaste” woman threatening the function of morality and womanhood (a vital project of the empire).18 Hence, conservative writings that often appeared in *The Bulletin*, for instance, spread the notion that “immoral” women were prone to lie about rape – a point that helped shape the discourses of nineteenth-century Australia:

Women’s propensity to lie about rape was argued to derive from their proneness to hysteria and fantasy, while rape itself was argued to be physical impossibility […] In the damaging interpretation of female sexuality on which such a judgement rests, the word of a woman designated as ‘unchaste’ was subject to doubt.19

Dolly’s reputation as an “unchaste” woman in relation to the misogynist history of Australia adds a tragic connotation to Lester’s question, which turns from a flirtatious utterance into a cultural stigma of female discrimination. In contrast to Dolly, the love life of her daughter Rose is less excessive. It is altogether more sincere, indicating a sense of internal guilt and melancholy that is prevalent in her relationship with the intellectual snob, Toby Raven – the first man she sleeps with:

Back at his flat, Rose falls on the bed thinking: dammitall I’m twenty-four years old […] I want him. She feels the air cool on her shins and draws him down. He slides into her and it’s

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as hard as the recesses of her heart and wonderful, only unlike Rose Pickle’s heart it stops beating and lurching and loses its steel and lets her down into a sad melancholy quiet. 

(Cloudstreet, 290)

On the other hand, her first night with Quick is driven by passion and love, which cuts all boundaries and is characterised by pure pleasure, satisfaction and happiness on her part:

Then suddenly they’re going off like a bag of penny bombs, clawing at each other’s clothes, talking into skin and opening up while all about the fretting, bodyless shadows back off, mute and shaken in the face of passion, the live, good, heat of the young […] and together they make a balloon of heat inside the cold nausea of that dead room whose timbers twist and creak; a new dwellingplace. (Ibid., 313-14)

A sense of homecoming and belonging is expressed here through this intense act of lovemaking. But this passage also connotes undertones of submerged violence and Rose’s anorexia: “Rose wraps him in her legs […] Quick sprinkles her with sweat, shaking as he is, finding her just…just food for him” (314).

In Breath (2008) the excessive and masochistic nature of female sexuality achieves the most extreme articulation in Winton’s work so far: (auto)erotic asphyxiation (AEA) and paedophilia. The fifteen-year-old protagonist Bruce Pike (Pikelet) carries out a sexual affair with the twenty-five-year-old Eva Sanderson, the American wife of his mentor Sando. She introduces him to the dangerous sex games of her own desperate world of evasion and pain. Confronted by Eva’s self-mutilation in these games, the boy is trapped between his emotional conflict of guilt and responsibility on the one hand and his sexual lust and indulgence on the other. Autoerotic asphyxiation is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a state of asphyxia induced deliberately, esp. by suffocation or hanging, to heighten sexual arousal” and “induced in this manner as a cause of (usually accidental) death.”

It is openly addressed in this novel, breaking a social taboo and causing strong controversy by centring this perverse longing on a marginalised, enraged female character, who is presented

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20 See also the ambiguity here: “Across the knots of their discarded clothes they slide and clinch, he with fishblood and her blood on his fingers, she with brandy on her breath […] and together they make a balloon of heat inside the cold nausea of the dead room” (314). Quick is described with her blood on his hands, which alludes to Rose’s menstruation and reproductivity, confirming the patriarchal tendency to describe the female as leaking (will be further explained in Chapter Four). Remarkably, drinking is again related to the woman and is even more clearly expressed earlier when Rose drinks Brandy in Quick’s boat and he eventually throws the bottle overboard (312). Insinuations are made here between alcohol and the female, aligning Rose with Dolly as the main suffering and troubled females in the novel.

as both physically and psychologically fragile. Eva’s dangerous habits of erotic strangulation and hyperventilation as well as her role in Pikelet’s alleged victimisation will now serve as the matrix for the analysis of her character to illuminate the controversial and, to use Kerryn Goldsworthy’s words, “deeply weird” female portrayals in Winton’s later fiction.22

When an internationally famous Australian rock legend died in 1997, the newspaper reports described the event as follows:

Shortly before noon, a maid found Hutchence, who was 37, reportedly naked, in his suite. A leather belt was knotted to the self-closing device at the top of the door. No suicide note had been left but empty alcohol bottles and as many as five different prescription medicines were discovered in the room, including the anti-depressant Prozac.23

Michael Hutchence, front man of the Australian band INXS, hanged himself in his room at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Sydney at midday, November 22. Although the police eventually ruled out the possibility of autoerotic asphyxiation and consecutive accidental death, his passing has remained a source of speculation. When comparing this specific scene with a passage in Breath, there are distinctive parallels that seem too similar to be purely coincidental. The passage reads as follows:

Eva was found hanging naked from the back of a bathroom door in Portland, Oregon. A Salvadorean hotel employee discovered her with a belt around her neck. The deceased had been the sole occupant of her five-star room, the cause of death cardiac arrest as a result of asphyxiation. (Breath, 206)24

Pikelet learns of Eva’s death through a newspaper article years later. Upon reading the article, the narrator instantly knows that the death was not necessarily a case of intentional suicide but possibly the accidental result of masochistic tendencies. According to the British newspaper The Independent, the act of hanging one’s self as a form of eroticism has commonly been viewed as a predominantly male phenomenon. This notion is supported by various medical, criminological and psychoanalytical studies and is also reflected in Goldsworthy’s blog Still Life With Cat/Pavlov’s Cat.25 Paul Sheehan accuses Winton’s novel

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24 Note the Oedipal symbolic in Eva’s self-hanging, reflecting the suicide of Jocasta.
of exploiting erotic asphyxiation for dramatic purposes, although he emphasises that the
writer tries to “understand why people, like the extreme surfers in his novel, go to the edge
of oblivion for pleasure.”

Autoerotic asphyxiation is represented twice in Winton’s novel. The beginning of the
story is crucial in its structural and signifying function. It offers a key event that connects
the protagonist’s adult life with the life-shaping kamikaze experiences of his teenage years: the
middle-aged paramedic Bruce witnesses the death of a teenage boy from (erotic)
strangulation. This event reminds him of his adolescence in the country town Sawyer and
times spent with Eva, Sando and Loonie. The boy’s erotic death, disguised as suicide,
unravels the story of Pikelet’s own adrenaline addiction, leading back to Eva’s dark legacy
of erotic asphyxiation and the haunting image of her orgasmic “deaths” in the beach house.

Daniel D. Cowell explains in his article “Autoerotic Asphyxiation: Secret Pleasure
Lethal Outcome?” that estimates about the aetiology or dispersion of autoerotic strangulation
are often inaccurate. According to his view, accidental deaths resulting from self-
asphyxiation are frequently declared suicide as requested by families of the deceased or
simply because the evidence of autoeroticism has been removed by family members from
the scene of accident. While statistics are therefore difficult to obtain, estimates recorded in
1983 place the number of deaths resulting from AEA to be around five hundred to a
thousand deaths in the United States. This was recently challenged by a discursive study in
Canada that indicated falling numbers of autoerotic deaths and rising numbers of “atypical”
autoerotic incidents. Despite a continuing dominance of male autoerotic activity, this study
highlights the existence of AEA among women. In Australia, suicide statistics in 2009
show a range of 220 accidental deaths by hanging (out of a total of 5,322) and 2,132 deaths

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26 Paul Sheehan, “Breathless Sex Simmers at the Edge of Compulsion,” Sydney Morning Herald, July 13, 2009,
compulsion-20090712-dhc1.html.
Games: Raising and Resolving the Shortcomings in Accident-Insurance Doctrine that Autoerotic-Asphyxiation
29 Anny Sauvageau, “Autoerotic Deaths: A Seven-Year Retrospective Epidemiological Study,” The Open
toforsj/openaccess2.htm. See also Cowell, “Autoerotic Asphyxiation: Secret Pleasure Lethal Outcome?” 1320.
30 Ibid., 2.
through intentional self-harm. Males make up 76.6% per cent of the total suicide statistics.\textsuperscript{31} Although women attempt suicide more often than men, they are less likely to succeed. Hence, the ratios for intentional and accidental suicide are much lower for Australian women.

Eva’s death is ambiguous, resulting from either an accidental loss of control during self-strangulation or from intentional suicide. Despite infrequent cases proving that women can also be affected by autoerotic and erotic strangulation practices, the masculinised nature of her death is stigmatising, reflecting her “outsider” position in life. She is a marginal figure, an American in Australia, who neither lives nor partakes in the community of Sawyer but resides with Sando in a beach house near the ocean, miles away from the town. In her physical and geographical isolation, which may also be regarded to be an active retreat from society’s normative confinements, Eva runs the risk of being labelled a paedophile by sleeping with and exploiting an under-aged boy.\textsuperscript{32}

Presented as a psychologically unstable and aggressive woman, Eva stands in complete contrast to the “happy-go-lucky” attitude and New Age philosophy of her husband Sando. In his own narcissistic way, Sando seduces Loonie and Pikelet into entering the no-man’s-land between life and death where fear, excitement and surrender take control of the body and accelerate the senses: “It’s like you come pouring back into yourself, said Sando one afternoon. Like you’ve exploded and all the pieces of you are reassembling themselves. You’re new. Shimmering. Alive.” (\textit{Breath}, 111) Both the act of breathing and the awareness of this act as the prime source of life are central to the actions of the characters. Fear motivates them while heightening the perception of being alive. Confirming this point, Sando points out that “being afraid […] [p]roves you’re alive and awake” (ibid., 114). Gambling with the transience of their own existence, the characters feel empowered, a sublime state of dominion that brings the illusion of “not being ordinary” and “feeling alive” into a numbing world of suppressed emotion.


\textsuperscript{32} In this context, it may be argued that Pikelet enjoys the sexual attention and just as much exploits Eva for his own rite of passage – a point that lacks sufficient evidence both throughout the narrative structure of the novel and throughout its critical discourse.
The story’s dialectic between life and death is stressed in the sexual relationship between Pikelet and Eva – an allegoric binary depicting the destruction of innocence, the “Fall of (Wo)Man,” the deviance and destruction of female sexuality and the abuse of a teenager’s naïveté – a boy who considers himself in love. More explicitly, death and life are associated in this novel with femininity and masculinity respectively. Winton changes the perception of the woman taking the passive, nurturing role in heterosexual relationships by elevating his female character to a position of pure self-interest: she takes what she wants without much consideration of the consequences. Cowell describes one form of AEA as the outcome of the “desire for control over the anxiety of life versus death: the closer the re-enactor approximates yet cheats death, the greater the sexual excitement.”

Eva assigns control over her body and life to Pikelet, who is forced to offer both life-threatening and life-sustaining assistance. The boy is overwhelmed by this horrific responsibility and fears for Eva’s life. In order to diminish the risk of accidental death, he starts interfering with Eva’s strangulation practices (Breath, 191). Thus, he morphs from obedient servant to the man in control – an advocate of life. Thus, he cheats both Eva and death, which, with reference to Cowell’s theory, appoints him the re-enactor of the game but, in contrast to Eva, it is not his own. Hence, his delusion is exposed and he falls back into the control of the masturbating woman, who confronts the boy with the insufficiency of his partaking in her game by becoming more and more irritable “as if sex no longer satisfied her” (ibid., 191). Emphasising the boy’s insignificance, Eva points out that she does not necessarily need him and that she can watch herself (182). Slowly, Pike becomes aware of the fact that he is not “much of a partner in her game” but “mostly the audience, little more than a bit of bodyweight and a steady pair of hands” (183). Watching her places him in a seemingly superior position. But spectatorship excludes him from any active participation in the thrill of asphyxiation himself. Thus, his role as the indecisive, passive other, who surrenders to his fear and is “after all, ordinary” (147), is implicitly re-affirmed.

In this context the question needs to be asked: does Eva’s excessive intercourse with Pikelet resemble in some form the sexual practices she pursues with her husband? The information Winton gives on the relationship between husband and wife in Breath is mostly limited to indirect, subjective accounts by Sando and Eva, who both reveal details about their partner and about their marriage to Pikelet. Whenever Winton pictures them in

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immediate interaction with each other, the situation is perceived through the eyes of the narrator and is therefore distorted. Pikelet’s wishes, sexual desires and fears interfere: “Husband and wife exchanged glances I couldn’t interpret” (Breath, 115). When Eva mentions intercourse with Sando to Pikelet she informs the boy about the beginnings of her relationship with Billy Sanderson: “Sando didn’t much like the cold, and the sea made Eva uneasy but each instinctively recognized the other’s obsession […] The sex, she felt obliged to tell me, was sensational” (ibid., 175-76). But Eva refuses to give Pike an answer to his question about whether she engages in erotic asphyxiation practices with Sando (182).

Implied in the text, Eva’s “love-making” is self-gratifying and reduces Pikelet’s role to that of a toy. Pikelet, though, is aware of the fact that Eva might have planned his contribution to her games right from the start (185). But blinded by his adolescent illusion of love (185), Pikelet cannot resist the temptation to be with Eva, accepting the dark and self-serving side effects of their relationship. Despite his emphatic aversion to her asphyxiation, the boy thinks that he can understand her motives due to his own experiences:

I suppose I knew well enough what it felt like. It was intense, consuming, and it could be beautiful. That far out at the edge of things you get to a point where all that stands between you and oblivion is the roulette of body-memory, the last desperate jerks of your system trying to restart itself. You feel exalted, invincible, angelic because you’re totally fucking poisoned. Inside it’s great, feels brilliant. But on the outside it’s squalid beyond imagining. (190)

Here, he seems to describe his own situation while watching Eva’s perverse self-stimulation, a dilemma which, in his case, causes incidents with electrocution in his later life (205): “She was blind in her foggy bag, intoxicated by the idea of what she was doing, and I hovered […] willing life into her, holding off the shivering darkness” (191). Disgusted by her habit, Pikelet is yet fascinated by the “extraordinariness” of her stimulation, which incites and defines his own perverted desires from then on. Even though he empathises with Eva’s situation, he is not capable of completely understanding her. Instead, he can only faintly grasp Eva’s predicament. They share their fight against the ordinary – a revolt that leads them into a succession of near-death encounters which, for Pikelet and the other men in the story, fulfils the function of re-birth (204), while for Eva it transcends the border between life and death. By pushing her body into an extreme erotic space, she creates a sphere of female agency beyond social and physical constraints.
Relating back to the concept of “eroticised topographies” and applying it to the gendering of space in Breath, I view Eva’s erotic strangulation as a site of resistance which offers her the space to transcend the limitations of her body and her “fee-male-ness” (Breath, 133). Repeatedly remarking upon her insufficiency of being female (ibid., 115, 133), Eva laments her failure to successfully transgress the male environments she lives in, pointing out the lack of alternatives for women when it comes to language (“unmanly”), and highlighting the fact that women are paying a price, a fee, to be part of that environment (“fee-male”). Her asphyxiation, therefore, challenges the weakness of her body, which she seems to blame for letting her down at the height of her free-style skiing career. Winton’s novel, frequently applying masculine stereotypes to Eva’s character and appearance (as outlined in this thesis later on), suggests that women’s ambitious drive for self-affirmation is rooted in the illusion of “having to make it in the man’s world.” This criticism resonates strongly in Eva’s tragedy. The discrepancies between masculinity and femininity are metaphorically staged on Eva’s body, a place of memory and sexual transgression. This reading of the female body can be linked to the materiality of the lived space as a gendered site of memory; this concept is explored in the following analysis.

Eva’s body and the beach house that she shares with her husband are both sites of strangulation and disorder, highlighting a symbolic connection between the body and place as mnemonic entities. The architecture and the interior design of the Sanderson house, while influenced by the legacy of “separate spheres,” function as individual sites of memory in their nostalgic and symbolic complexities. Reflecting both the familiar notion of Western Australia’s colonial frontier history, and the early phase of the “sea-change” escape, the house embodies the unfamiliar, unconventional hippie and Malibu beach culture of

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34 Bell, “Erotic Topographies,” 96.
35 See Jean Weiss, “Rhapsody in White,” in Nike is a Goddess – The History of Women in Sports, ed. Lissa Smith (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998), 145-47. See also John Fry, The Story of Modern Skiing (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 219-34. Freestyle skiing, also “hot-dogging,” became a sport in the 1950s in America but was not officially recognised as a discipline until 1979. It combines dance, acrobatics and skiing in four areas: mogul, acroski/ballet, aerial and combined. One of the first women to make a name in this sport is Suzy Chaffee, a former alpine skier who moved on to freestyle. Interestingly, in the early years of freestyling until the mid-1970s, a women’s division did not exist. For this reason the few women in the sport were competing against men – often successfully, as Chaffee’s career demonstrates. The danger of freestyle skiing was only recently confirmed when Canadian halfpipe skier Sarah Burke died after a fall in a training session: see Andrew Keh, “Sarah Burke, Freestyle Skier, Dies From Injuries in Training.” New York Times, January 19, 2012, accessed January 22, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/20/sports/skiing/sarah-burke-canadian-freestyle-skier-dies-from-injuries.html.
California, and is built in a fashion unknown in rural Western Australia in the 1960s – the time of Pike’s adolescence.36

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. Her “trespassing” seems to question this sub-space (ibid., 63-65). Winton sets up such spaces only to emphasise the lack of a distinctly female sphere in the house itself. Eva is pushed to the margins – the verandah and the sleeping loft as attachments to the centre of the house. Gender is performed in the given spaces: masculinity reflects survival, warmth and the present/future, while the story of the feminine associates dying, rage and a haunting past.

A central part of Sando’s story is established in the dark sub-space beneath the weatherboard house – the “cave-like undercroft” (43, see 39) – which serves as both a retreat from Eva’s inquisitive gaze and a physical space to keep surfboards and craft material. Distinctively associated with Sando, this space is defined by his surfing culture. 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).37 We

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37 Winton also draws analogies to the history and the codex of the Australian surfing culture in which an older surfer becomes the mentor of talented “grommets” and teaches them the art and spirituality of the sport. 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. The boards and the shaping equipment in Sando’s undercroft illustrate the fascination at the time with revolutionising the shape of surfboards as, for example, Nat Young points out in his History of
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.”

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 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. 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. 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” (Breath, 51, 97, 129, 134).

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. She is the “fallen angel,” indifferent towards her conventional roles in the household (ibid., 129, 132,160) while her husband and Pikelet assume these roles and thus convert the sphere of the woman into a post-modern space of masculine re-definition as domestic, nurturing and private. Her 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

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38 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 (ibid., 78), “grace” referring to a gift from God given to “man.”

39 Philip Drew, Veranda – Embracing Place (Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1992), 110.

40 Ibid., 111.


resonate with Loonie’s early remark to his friend that “Chicks, Pikelet. They drag you down” (*Breath*, 68).

Instead, the sphere of the house is defined by Sando’s interests, travels and affinity with the sea, supporting 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. (Ibid., 58)

Sando’s fascination with the sea and his new-age philosophies echoes in the references to Castaneda (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: “For Euro-Americans, then, to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other.”

Sando expresses himself repeatedly through the selection of exhibits in the house. His spiritual élitism and pantheism paradoxically resonates 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. She seems to have become another one of the artefacts in her husband’s collection, her “fall” being intricately inscribed upon their living space (127) and hence reflected in all the other objects the narrator presents as connected to

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Eva: the pink cellophane bag, a strong leather belt, a hash pipe, an exercise contraption and painkillers (134, 191).

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 loss. It becomes, as Roxana Cazan calls it, a locus of disease and suffocation. The masculine sphere of the dark undercroft finds its uncanny and destructive reflection in the “shivering darkness” of Eva’s sexuality. The physicality of the house, as defined by Sando’s presence, thus correlates to the metaphysical demeanour of the female as the haunting and haunted other – both combined in Pikelet’s memory.

Merging the analysis of spatial symbolism and eroticism with the act of reading, I ask myself: how does the point of view from which the story in Breath is told limit and narrow the characterisation of Winton’s female character in the novel? The consistent focalisation through the first person narration interpellates the reader into a position of compliance with Pikelet, being strongly influenced by his descriptions of emotions, thoughts and moralities. Seeing Eva from Pikelet’s perspective automatically diminishes the space to approach her in an unbiased way, as she is to a great extent held responsible for the boy’s personal dilemma (Breath, 171). The following passage illustrates the confinement of the reader’s reception, which places the reader on the side of Pikelet while Eva remains trapped in the role of the perpetrating and destructive other:

Sex was a hungry, impatient business, more urgent for the looming possibility of Sando’s unscheduled return. The house had no curtains and few partitions so it was hard not to feel insecure. Sando’s dog was a constant and mostly silent witness; it saw me eager, clumsy, exultant, furtive, anxious. That Saturday, it followed us up to the bedroom and watched from the corner as Eva lowered herself on me. Rain drummed on the roof. I was trembling […] But I wasn’t sure what I knew except that she was silky-hot inside, and strong enough to hold me by the muscles of her pelvis and pin my arms to the bed so that I couldn’t have fought her off if I’d wanted to. (Ibid., 167)

Eva’s solipsism is indirectly alluded to in this passage, where Pikelet depicts the claustrophobic nature of their “love-making.” The youthful naivety, physical subordination and hormonal roller-coaster that characterise and redeem Pikelet’s role in the affair, are contrasted with Eva’s sexual domination, so that his position is clearly marked as that of the

sympathetic, misled victim, whose life-chances are distinctively diminished through his first love interest.

Additionally, the openness of the house heightens the boy’s fear of discovery. His guilty conscience towards Sando and thus his morality are portrayed in the dog as silent witness, always reminding him of his friend and his betrayal. Eva’s troubled conscience does not receive any expression here, partly due to the limited point of view but also apparently deriving from Pikelet’s submerged interest in revenge by negating these redeeming features for the woman. Instead, she is portrayed as being expert in sex, betrayal and seduction, and lacking in emotion, conscience and sensitivity. The rain on the roof further insinuates an apocalyptic situation, foreshadowing Pikelet’s ensuing downfall and is closely aligned to his drowning dream (120). Words like “eager, clumsy, exultant, furtive, anxious, trembling” stand in opposition to phrases associated with Eva such as “hungry, impatient, lowered, silky-hot, strong enough, hold me by the muscles of her pelvis, pin my arms to the bed,” all of which connote physical supremacy and control. The reader is drawn into the text’s moral binaries, sympathising with the narrator who, allegedly innocently, becomes entangled in a paralysing affair with a woman who uses him as a substitute sex object to take revenge on her absent husband and distract herself from her limited existence. However, accepting this reading position as a male reading of the text, it becomes possible to deviate from this “dominant reading” and find a resisting approach by looking at Eva as a specifically male construction, which inscribes male fear and paranoia on her body.46

Readings of Breath which locate sites of female resistance and reveal existing ruptures in the text are compromised by the strong textual focus on female sexuality as oppressive to the protagonist’s own life and sexuality: Pikelet is coerced into sexual activities that form a chain of taboos, including adultery, the exploitation of trust and the practice of erotic asphyxiation, which, in contrast to the childish breath-holding games in the river, exceed social norms and acceptance. Maybe even more so than Eva, Pikelet breaks this range of taboos and the sacred bonds of mateship – a violation that turns him, according to Freud, into a taboo himself.47 Having grown up in an environment of strong moral and ethical values, Pikelet knows and cares about the boundaries that he is violating. In contrast to Eva, who has been fully absorbed by a life beyond convention, Pikelet simultaneously resents and

46 See Mills, Feminist Readings, and Gendering the Reader.
47 Freud, Totem and Taboo, 38.
relies on these conventions, a paradox that he can only justify through his work as a paramedic. The time with Eva initiates a life of addiction and danger for Pikelet, which finds expression in acts of self-electrocution and captures him in a space of social isolation (205-14).

Resorting to conventional binaries of female sexuality as either dangerous and excessive or pious and prudish, Winton creates a counterfoil to Eva in Pikelet’s wife Grace. Contrasting Eva’s heightened sexuality, Grace’s sexual reservation is confirmed when she calls her husband “creepy,” in response to his obvious arousal by her pregnant belly (203). In her view lust and faith are incommensurate – a view that contrasts with Pikelet’s continuing belief that desire is a form of reverence. Grace’s reservation can also be compared with Eva’s Mormon background and nihilism, in which lust and belief are equally disparate.48

Men, she said, were supposed to be turned off by all that fluid, the gross belly, the big backside and puffy ankles. That was normal. I laughed. I really thought she was joking.
So you prefer revulsion to reverence?
A girl doesn’t mind reverence, she quipped. But reverent lust is another thing. (203-4)

By associating the women in their compromised views on the sacred and lust, the novel distances both expressions of female sexuality from the spiritual, siding them with the body alone. The meaning of Grace’s name – “God’s gift to man” – has an ironic ring in Winton’s narrative. Pikelet is constantly seeking “grace” without being able to keep it. As such, grace becomes a curse rather than a gift for the protagonist, who perceives the female presences in his life as erratic, confusing and inhibiting to male desire. In the male perception of femininity as fracturing for masculinity, both Eva and Grace symbolise a destructive and silencing force for the protagonist.

Presenting Eva as intrinsically different to the normative femininity of Pikelet’s society at the time, Winton eludes to an image of biblical seduction, aligning her with the “fall of man.”49 Contemporary theological readings of the “fall of man” argue, for example, that Eve represents knowledge, not sin. The female quest for knowledge beyond faith, however, is seen as the downfall of humanity. In contrast to these patriarchal readings of the

49 See Susan Sellers, “Introduction,” in Writing Differences – Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 2. Interesting in this context is Helene Cixous’s theory of Eve’s role in the expulsion from paradise, which she sees as a result of Eve’s decision to follow her desires and to refuse to obey and, thus, empower the law of the biblical patriarchs. Cixous classifies this response as feminine and universalises it by pointing out that we can either accept the masculine law or ignore it in our search for a means to “inscribe our defiance in the attempt to subvert its power.”
woman’s role in the creation story, feminist theologians have introduced alternative readings that see Eve as a victim of patriarchy, who herself has fallen into oppression while being, as already argued in the nineteenth century, the bearer of wisdom and progress.\(^\text{50}\) Aware of the misogynist stigma attached to the term “fall of man,” I nevertheless use it in this context to point out its ironic ambiguity: Eva is literally presented as the stereotype of a “fallen” woman who is held partly accountable for Pikelet’s downfall and is subjected to a misogynist reading. Arguing that her role cannot be simply reduced to sinner or saviour of knowledge, I regard Eva, and hence other women in Winton’s fiction, as the personification of a strong desire for knowledge, ambition, progress and change. This is expressed through their sexuality and curtailed by their own downfall.\(^\text{51}\) In this desire they are marked as destructive and unsettling forces for their families, partners and eventually for themselves – a stigmatisation that is visualised in their self-harm.

Thus, as the only fully developed female character in Breath, Eva carries a heavy symbolic load. This load degrades her to a corruptive influence for Pikelet but also connects her with his rite-of-passage – a point that can also be witnessed in the relationship between Jewel and Jerra (An Open Swimmer), Scully and Jennifer (The Riders), Georgie and Lu or Sally/Debbie and Jim (Dirt Music).\(^\text{52}\) It is the man, Pike, whose fall is inevitable after his acquaintance with Eva: “For a long and ruinous period of my later life I raged against Eva Sanderson, even as I grieved for her. In the spirit of the times I held her morally accountable for all my grown-up troubles” (Breath, 169). Despite remaining the angry, excessive and deeply unhappy femme fatale in Pike’s memory, Eva is the agent of Pike’s maturation,

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\(^{52}\) See Goldsworthy, June 20, 2009 (06:58pm), “Biblical World Legitimised.” Goldsworthy remarks under her blogger pseudonym “Pavlov’s Cat” on the difference between the female representation in Christos Tsiolkas’s novel The Slap and Winton’s Breath as follows: “My beef about the book is quite specific: not with its representation of men, but with its representation of women. That, and with the way that that traditional pre-feminist and essentially misogynist view of women as Biblically cunning and corrupting seductresses has been validated by showering the book with prizes […] what Christos is writing is domestic suburban realism, with a number of different female characters in it, and what Winton is writing is (at least partly) a Biblical allegory, with a lot of surf in it that most of its admirers can’t see past, but only one female character of any substance. And when you’ve got only one female character in a book about sexual corruption, she carries a very heavy symbolic load. That’s also an excellent point about women and auto-erotic asphyxiation. I’ve never met or heard of a woman who practised it either. Judge Morag Fraser said in praise of Breath that ‘it takes us to a place we’ve never been before’ (or something like that), to which I would answer ‘Quite.’”
functioning as a source of knowledge which precipitates his realisation that “[p]eople are fools, not monsters” (*Breath*, 171). Hence, she adopts an enlightened position that directs Pikelet’s life from beyond the grave. Despite this conclusion, which opens up the possibility of female empowerment, Pikelet’s obsession with Eva continues to situate her within the eternal position of unreadable, destructive other:

> She had no business doing what she did, but I’m through hating and blaming. People are fools, not monsters. Eva had a particular kind of rueful stare, a look she often gave at the end of an afternoon like this rainy Saturday that made me think she’d wearied of me […] They were expressions of disgust. I dreaded them. Nowadays, with the distance of the years, I wonder if I misread her. That disgust might have been reserved for herself. (Ibid., 171)

Winton therefore seems to suggest a reading of the woman as locked within her own private pain – a world that is closed off to male understanding. It is only with the distance of years that Pike can vaguely interpret Eva’s aggression and disgust as a possible form of self-loathing that is projected onto the people around her. The woman in this novel symbolises the male malaize of not being able to read the woman and her private world. Hence, she becomes the focus of an underlying criticism of the text that positions the woman as a continuous matrix of ambiguity and clues that the man tries to interpret in a never-ending process. And it is her body that is presented as the material site of man’s numerous attempts to gain access to her world. At the same time, her body signifies an unbridgeable chasm between masculinity and femininity that Winton’s novels lament. These texts confront this abyss by marking the suffering of women on their bodies, and by investigating female privacy through the repeated use of female viewpoints in narrative – a problematic enterprise as the following chapters show. Pikelet epitomises this “male malady” in his failure to read the women in his life adequately and is left stranded in speculations about their feelings, thoughts and intentions. This is particularly evident when his mother sends him the news clipping about Eva’s death (206), when Queenie escapes from the library after having been offended (19) or when Grace is repulsed by, as he thinks, the sexual reverence of pregnancy (204).

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53 For a detailed study on the concept of the femme fatale, see Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales – Feminism, Film, Theory, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge and New York: Routledge, 1991). The term is used here in a broader fashion than introduced by Doane, who characterises the classical femme fatale as the antithesis to the maternal, as being situated as evil and a threat to male subjectivity (2). This thesis focuses its definition of the femme fatale on the fact that she represents the female body as highly sexualised and that she can be seen as “a symptom of male fears about feminism” (2-3).

54 Pikelet is also unable to read the glances exchanged between Eva and Sando – a sign of his youth but also a marker of his outsider status (*Breath*, 115).
Sight plays a crucial role in Pikelet’s misreading of the female in *Breath*. The exchange of looks strongly defines Pikelet’s and Eva’s relationship – looks that are suspicious, rueful, lustful, frightened, sour or doleful.\(^{55}\) The elements of danger, control and fear that pervade the entire novel are also continuously woven into these glances, which are challenging and intimidating, rather than friendly and trusting: “It seemed wrong to stare at Eva like this, but I’d never been able to properly look at her before. I’d only ever known her in glances, from glimpses snatched in moments when I thought I was safe from her scalding glare” (*Breath*, 135, 137, 160, 169, 171, 172). This mutual voyeuristic behaviour underlines the difference between the innocent young male, who is ambivalently drawn to the mystery of the exotic and ravishing feminine, and the harsh and aggressive American woman, who has been hardened by life and takes her frustration and pain out on her immediate surroundings through the abuse of a minor.

Firmly rooted in the dialectic between the survival of grace and the fascination with death, *Breath* invokes another very old and conventional stereotype of the woman as angelic and maternal or as “fallen” and promiscuous; both are presented as paralysing for male desire and love. The characterisation of Eva’s glance contrasts with the gaze or glance of the other women in the story. So, for example, the gaze of Pikelet’s mother is described as “haunted” (ibid., 197) and “fearful” (201), matching the spirit of the locals in Sawyer as anxious and subdued (9-10). Aligned with Grace, Mrs. Pike fulfills a stereotype of conventional motherhood: devoted, tender and nurturing whilst also being sexually timid and devoid of intimacy (202). Eva, on the other hand, illuminates sexual deviance and excess, rebelling against the restricting conventions of her time and place. Winton contrasts Eva’s assertive, attacking gaze with the shy and reserved glance of Mrs. Pike, each reflecting divergent expressions of female sexuality. Both, however, are the source of confusion and misunderstanding for the protagonist.\(^{56}\)

The actual reader is easily captured within the dominant perspective and male reading of the text. This perspective exclusively re-enacts the scene of doom for the narrator,

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\(^{55}\) In the context of voyeurism in Winton’s early novels, see Hopkins, “Writing from the Margins,” 50.

who tries to come to terms with his own rage. Opting for the first-person narration, Winton creates a narrative platform for the protagonist where he can declare his trauma to be linked to a fragile and fractured idea of female sexuality that clashes considerably with his own ideals of lust and love. In this process, the female voice is filtered through the male narration, so that she appears to be dubbed by a distinctively male voice-over. Hence, the female presence can only ever be defined in relation to the masculine story of creation. Instead of giving Eva adequate room for self-expression beyond the stigma of erotic asphyxiation, the narrator uses her traumatised body as a scapegoat for his own fantasies and addictions. I refer here to Kay Schaffer who mentions in her essay on the Stolen Generation in Australia 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.” All the women in Breath (and in other Winton novels as well) become the signifier of lack for the male protagonist who now tries to come to term with his own tragedy by re-visiting its origins. In the context of Pikelet’s confessional narrative, Roberta Culbertson also 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:

To return fully to the self as socially defined, to establish a relationship again with the world, the survivor must tell what happened. This is the function of narrative. The task then is to render body memories tellable, which means to order and arrange them in the form of a story, linking emotion with event, event with event, and so on. In so doing it becomes possible to return the self to its legitimate social status as something separate, something that tells, that recounts its own biography, undoing the grasp of the perpetrator and reestablishing the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violation […] to reintegration with a community of others.

Culbertson further claims that telling is “a process of […] demystifying” memory, which also mirrors Foucault’s concept of sexuality and confession as part of a ritual, manifested in a discourse of power relations: “By virtue of the power structure immanent in it, the

58 Culbertson, “Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling,” 179. Cf. here the protagonist Lu in Dirt Music as going through a similar process of appropriation by having his story told through music: “He bangs away until he finds a sound. An E, he thinks, but it’s only a guess. Gets himself a four-four beat with a bit of shellgrit footstomp for colour and suddenly there’s a groove, a little room in there for feeling […]” (Dirt Music, 388). In this context see also Paul Ricoeur, “Sorrows and the Making of Life-Stories,” Philosophy Today 47, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 322. Ricoeur refers to the views of Aristotle whose matter of mythos, mimesis and catharsis brings forth the argument that life is seeking a narrative in order to find a sufficient pattern which helps man cope with the experience of confusion, sorrow and chaos.

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confessional discourse cannot come from above [...] but rather from below, as an obligatory act of speech which, under some imperious compulsion, breaks the bonds of discretion or forgetfulness.”

Therefore, Pike uses Eva’s memory for the purpose of self-healing, empowerment, maturation and self-purification through confessional storytelling.

In order to illuminate Eva’s character from a different perspective, it is worth taking a look at the elements of rage and death as driving forces behind her actions, which suggest a lost, disappointed and depressed human being. What is her relationship with her corporeality, which is confined to the domestic sphere, and what does the strain she deliberately places on her body signify in terms of femininity and trauma? Pike can articulate himself and approach a chance of healing, but what happens to Eva? Hopkins argues that in Cloudstreet there is a “delightful innocence about bodies,” a remark I only partly agree with, and which I consider increasingly lost in Winton’s recent fiction, where the bodies, both male and female, become territories/mappings of psychological conflicts within the self and in between the self and its immediate social and territorial environments.

Winton creates a hierarchical structure of body images that side female anatomy with a state of inferiority to its male counterpart. The body becomes a polarised map of power relations between men and women – a map that positively associates the male body with mobility and strength but presents the female body as inferior and stagnant. Both Eva and Sando share a history of extreme sports but it is Eva’s body that is shown to be considerably weaker than her husband’s. Her bad luck during the skiing tournament that shattered her knee thus connotes a physical instability caused by her ill-fated ambition. Sando’s body is described by Pikelet as a “map of where he’d been,” marked by “great bumps on his knees and feet from old-school surfing” and “his forearms were pulpy with reef-scar” (Breath, 59). This male mapping of the body is inextricably linked with physical strength and courage, indicating a rough, rebellious aesthetic of coolness imprinted on the body. Pike’s admiration for Sando is reflected in these descriptions of leisurely confrontation with the ocean.

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59 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 62.
60 Hopkins, “Writing from the Margins,” 53.
61 See Dirt Music, 156-57: Luther Fox’s wretched body after his involuntary expedition through the bush from White Point to his farm; he is marked from his journey by wounds, ticks and sunburnt skin that Georgie tenderly nurses.
In Eva’s case, her sense of controlling and violating her body is more complex than merely aspiring to an extraordinary ideal. Kwast observes that “[t]he female body is clearly the battlefield where a drama is enacted by an angry spirit”\textsuperscript{62} – an observation that applies to Eva’s (ab)use of her own and Pikelet’s body. Eva’s obsessive rehabilitation exercises, in which she seems to be completely over-straining herself (ibid., 134), correlate with her asphyxiation practices during sex. Both acts go beyond the ambition to challenge the self and actually reach a status of desperate addiction, in which the distressing thoughts and memories on the mind are too painful to bear and need to be relieved by the actual or metaphorical scarring of the body through intoxication and violence.\textsuperscript{63} The driving force for Eva’s excesses is a substantial amount of unhindered resentment that develops from her dependencies and power struggles with her father and her husband, both of whom give her a deep-seated feeling of abandonment and loneliness that she tries to cover up with enforced indifference (130). Eva’s body becomes equally a site of self-expression and of memory, embodying her trauma visually within her accident-impacted limbs. Her body maps distinct aspects of her personality but also marks the restrictions and failures of a life-style so heavily influenced by her risk and exuberance. Unlike Sando, whose body marks serve his own self-expression in positive, life-affirming respects, Eva’s body connotes a constant lack, a dooming negativity that foreshadows her death. Sando’s bumps and scars can be seen as trophies of his surfing encounters and do not remotely impact his ability to pursue his passion, while Eva’s body is so severely fractured that a return to her most desired lifestyle of adventure and recognition is impossible.

The divergence between Eva’s restless mind and her physical immobility is heightened in the locality of the veranda, the colonial “in-between” space, 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.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Kwast-Greff, “Mad ‘Mad’ Women,” 164.
\textsuperscript{63} For the intentions of self-harm see Skegg, “Self-Harm,” 1473. She differentiates different motives among young people for violating their own bodies, including relieving tension, providing distraction from painful feelings, self-punishment, decreasing dissociative symptoms, blocking upsetting memories and communicating distress to others.
\textsuperscript{64} See Drew, Veranda – Embracing Place, 113. The hammock, according to Drew, suggests indolence. Also see his work The Coast Dwellers – Australians Living on the Edge (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin Books, 1994), xi-xii, in which Drew also addresses the significance of the veranda as a place of defence that offers the balance between “looking out – a measure of openness – and shelter, or refuge” (xi), which vividly reflects Eva’s position on the veranda as a place where she suspiciously, angrily or indifferently observes visitors, exercises or rests during the day.
On TV Americans were so soft and sentimental, all happy-go-lucky and forever safely at home. But the way Eva told it, her countrymen were restless, nomadic, clogging freeways and airports in their fevered search for action. She said they were driven by ambition in a way that no Australian could possibly understand […] Ambition, she said. Aspiration and mortal anxiety. (Breath, 136)

In her characterisation, she represents the prototypical American who is stranded in a country and within a foreign culture that is not able, even vaguely, to understand her nature. She reflectively highlights the elements of aspiration and mortal anxiety in relation to her character and her nationality. Therefore, she inextricably links her own personality with her particular nationhood, somewhat derisively and cynically. Roie Thomas argues that Eva associates God and spirituality with the hypocrisy of American culture and actively performs a nihilistic and bleak candour that is “shown to be morally superior to Sando’s ‘bullshit’ lack of self-awareness and pursuit of the meaningless”. I partly disagree with this point since I consider Eva as superior to Sando in terms of knowledge and maturity but not morals. Eva comes across as a deeply unsympathetic, even to some extent masculinised character, whose nature and personal predicament is explained by Winton in an interview as follows:

At one level she’s simply entertaining herself. She’s left behind a lot and she’s bored out of her mind, getting stoned all day in this big pole house in the bush. She’s in pain a lot, she’s miserable […] Once Pikelet falls for her she has a kind of power again after having been pretty powerless for quite some time. I doubt she sets out to do it. She’s just a lonely, narcissistic, sporty woman with not much occupying her mind […] Well, I assume people will be pretty uncomfortable. Well, I mean, I hope so. What she’s doing with this kid is illegal and unequal and pretty damaging. He’s a child. Sando’s reckless with him in one way and she’s reckless with him in another. And Pikelet thinks these people are grown-ups. These are the folks he thinks are cool and sophisticated. He doesn’t yet see how flaky they are. He doesn’t understand how fickle and self-absorbed and deluded people can be. He spends the rest of his life trying to chew on that bit of gristle, to overcome his sense of aggrieved victimhood.

Reducing Eva’s problem to mere entertainment, physical pain, boredom and narcissism seems unjustified because it presents Eva as ruthless, power-craving and seductive without even mentioning her imaginary and physical displacement and its consequences. All these elements play into her character but not exclusively. She is clearly placated as the

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65 In this respect, the very negative portrait of the American woman in Winton’s novel insinuates a transnational clashing of cultures and histories, and reflects the ambiguous love-hate relationship between Australia and the United States.
perpetrator, whose destructive influence on Pikelet leaves fatal imprints on the boy’s psyche. It is necessary to be more reflective in her description, though, and to point out the fact that she herself is victimised, and victimises herself, in various ways. Thomas gives the most detailed account and interpretation of Eva in the Winton discourse so far, pointing out, with regard to nihilism and Kierkegaard, that despite her damaging nature, she has an existential honesty and sensitivity in her that the other characters in *Breath* do not share:

Eva straddles both a ‘destroyer’ as well as a nihilist facet of Kierkegaard’s Aesthetic stage as she is injurious of herself and of Bruce, having to an extent caused him psychological trauma and an inability to sustain long-term relationships. Yet her capacity to create life and the fact that she ends the relationship with Bruce when she discovers she is pregnant, saying “I can’t do this shit with a baby coming” (p. 236) is an acknowledgement of some meaning. Her nihilism is at least honest and “the form of consolation she preferred” (p. 211), no doubt indulged in the knowledge that death would eventually win, attests to this sincerity, since a nihilist’s only genuinely sincere recourse is to suicide.\(^{68}\)

Roie insinuates here the suicidal intent of Eva, highlighting the role of death in the character’s life as a form of stimulant and the final solution to a life not worth living. Her drug taking and asphyxiation practices are not simply measures to regain power and control over somebody else but also to escape the strangling effect that pain and loss of belief have on her. The highly emotional disruptions in her life need to be muted in order to survive. Thus, she is stuck within her own trauma and is not willing or able to comply with any ethics and social norms that have lost their value to her. So Eva’s perverted eroticism of asphyxiation and strangulation reflects a restless, nomadic nature, driven by ambition, aspiration and mortal anxiety, which Eva herself points out as typically American attributes (*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, which results in a profound redefinition of the narrator’s long-held values and ideals.\(^{69}\)

Being aware of her restrictions as a woman in 1970s Australia, Eva refers to her confined space of interaction and expression in a conversation with Pike about Loonie’s father and the townspeople who “have a way of looking at you […] [l]ike you’re some kind of…abomination” due to her being “fee-male” (ibid., 133). This remark emphasises the constructedness of gender and illustrates Luce Irigaray’s point that the self-articulation of women in the existing linguistically-biased systems of social and cultural structures can

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\(^{68}\) Thomas, “Inspire, Expire: Masculinity, Mortality and Meaning,” 59.

never be completely free from the influence of male judgement (due to the phallocentric
definition of the female body and female sexuality through conventional metaphors):

Our very experience of corporeality, then, is never “pure” or unmediated; rather, because we
internalize systems of language and representation in order to enter the symbolic order as
subjects, our perceptions and experiences acquire meaning and value within the terms of
those systems.  

The paralysing powerlessness that comes with her inability to fully articulate herself is a
fundamental part of Eva’s existence. I argue that, despite starting off her career in skiing as a
“moneyed dilettante” (Breath, 177), Eva’s success as a freestyle skier offered her a space
that she needed to articulate herself outside of her wealthy, privileged background and to
find a vehicle for her American sense of mobility and aspiration (ibid., 136). Fleeing
tradition, she managed to make a name in a sport that was predominantly masculine at the
time. American alpine freestyle started as a sport in the early 1960s, but did not become an
Olympic discipline until 1994. The very few women in the sport were generally competing
against men, as the women’s division did not get established until well into the 1970s.
Freestyle skiing icon and feminist activist Suzy Chaffee was the first woman to compete in
the sport in 1971. Other icons like Genia Fuller and Penelope Street soon followed.  

In the spirit of these women who were pioneers in women’s freestyle skiing, Eva,
too, had been an active agent in revolutionising the sport, until her accident (177). She was
able to use her own body to actively inscribe her femininity onto the canvas of a
predominantly male domain. The male gaze, restricting female self-expression, is deceived
in this sport, where the heavy clothing disguises gender and challenges the fallacy of the
visual through masquerade. The unreliability of the gaze is pointed out in Breath when
Pikelet sees the picture of Eva on the slope without actually realising it is her: “The image
was a figure in a red snow suit, a skier more or less upside down against the whiteness of a
mountain […] I peered closer. Between goggles and hood there was a tuft of blonde hair”
(125). Her gender is concealed, and this niche of gender ambiguity in a heavily gendered

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70 Luce Irigaray, “Women’s Exile: Interview with Luce Irigaray,” in The Feminist Critique of Language: A
Reader, ed. Deborah Cameron (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 82. See Patricia Moran, Word of
Mouth – Body Language in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf (Charlottesville: University Press of
Virginia, 1996), 27; for an opposing view on Irigaray’s concepts, cf. Deborah Orr, “Diotima, Wittgenstein, and
a Language for Liberation,” in Belief, Bodies, and Being – Feminist Reflections on Embodiment, ed. Deborah
Orr et al. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 59-80.

71 See Weiss, “Rhapsody in White,” 146; Bruce Isphording, “Acrobatic Skiing Lucrative for Genia Fuller,”
&dat=19760119&id=YnQjAAAAIBAJ&sjid=V40EAAAAIBAJ&pg=7325,3266449.
context constitutes the space for her to challenge masculinity. In this, she resembles Chaffee, who was the first woman in the discipline to win the Freestyle World Cup three times from 1971-73, competing against men and voicing feminist concerns throughout her success: “Chaffee chafed at the piggish male chauvinism inside skiing. As the earliest and sometimes solitary female freestyle competitor, she competed directly against men [...] Cash prizes for women weren’t on a par with the men’s awards.”

And yet Eva is wearing a mask that detaches her from a gendered sphere of pleasure and thus creates a new space in which she can articulate herself. Thus Eva’s mimicry subverts patriarchal stereotypes of female passivity and femininity. Nevertheless, the problem with Eva’s behaviour is that after her accident, she is violently separated from her scene of articulation, so that she resorts to a rebellious antagonism towards the people around her, most notably herself. As mentioned earlier, her accident signifies her fall from her own paradise, evicting God, as a fundamental part of American culture, from her life (136) and initiating a complete relocation to rural Western Australia where “God was barely possible” (137). In her rage, Eva finds a substitute articulation in her masturbation and sex performances, and consequently breaks a taboo by expressing her own sexual pleasures and fantasies.

In his critical portrayal of American femininity in Breath, Winton creates in Eva the transnational nemesis to femaleness in 1970s rural Australia. As Miriam Dixon explains in her monograph The Real Matilda, Australian women in the 1970s were amongst the least confident and autonomous in the Western world. Communication between the sexes was very limited, and women can be seen as inheritors rather than creators of their surrounding,

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72 Fry, The Story of Modern Skiing, 225.
73 See in this context Dixon, The Real Matilda,” 66. Also note: the term “mimicry” is widely used in feminist and postcolonial studies, Western philosophy, psychoanalysis and film studies. “Mimicry” is used here to refer to the performance of femininity and its disguise in a male economy. Also, the concept is central in, for instance, Luce Irigaray’s work, which regards the act of female mimicry as a way for the woman to access the masculine logic and discourse by submitting to it. In doing so, she can then find connecting points for subversion and resistance: see Luce Irigaray, This Second Sex Which Is Not One (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76-77. See also Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire – The Woman’s Film of the 1940s (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 176-83; Carole-Anne Tyler, Female Impersonation (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 20-31. Tyler offers a critical evaluation of feminist theories on masquerade and mimicry.
74 See here Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One,” 124. Also, I see the possibility that Eva’s erotic asphyxiation might not have necessarily been initiated by her accident but could have been part of her life before her fall as well. However, even if that is the case, the change of the situation places a stronger focus on her self-harm as the new solitary sphere of articulation.
strongly male-dominated culture.\textsuperscript{75} Eva, who differs significantly from this image, is neither inheritor nor creator of the culture she lives in. As an American in rural Australia, Eva is an expatriate who is literally displaced from her zone of comfort and belonging, being instead part of her husband’s paradise, that reminds her of her own loss. The ocean makes her feel uneasy (\textit{Breath}, 175) as its infinity stands in complete contrast to the peaks and limits of the mountains. With her sphere of autonomy taken away from her, Eva is unable to locate a space that might lead her back to her idiosyncratic understanding of grace and self-expression.

Winton depicts this confined existence by illuminating Eva’s stagnation in her life, both physically and psychologically. Her body dysfunction reflects her inability to find an existence that is less significantly defined by her husband’s role in her life. Cixous talks about a gracious exchange or \textit{coup de grace} in gender relationships, where the law of gender is placed in the background and replaced by grace, a question of dancing, of “the aerial crossing of continents,” which is inextricably connected to acrobatics.\textsuperscript{76} So it is either falling or flying, excluding the in-between:

That is why loving is never difficult except in appearance. Because the opposite of ‘easy’ is not ‘difficult’: it is only \textit{impossible}. So the secret of acrobatics is love? It is confidence, yes: it is the desire to go across into the other. The body of the acrobat is his soul […] Like every crossing. Useless to contemplate or fathom what separates: the abyss is always invented by our fear. We leap and there is grace. Acrobats know: do not look at the separation. Have eyes, have bodies, only for there, for the other.\textsuperscript{77}

Applying Cixous’s considerations to Eva’s situation, it is obvious that Eva is not able to cross into the domain of the other any more, and loses her grip on both love and confidence as a result of losing her self. To fight against the danger of separation, she obstinately attempts to continue bridging the abyss and overcoming her fear and frustration through various acts of “leaping,” ranging from drug-taking and drinking to erotic asphyxiation (see \textit{Breath}, 179). Her soul, however, is unable to catch up, is disconnected from the embodied experience and, therefore, steadily widens the abyss in the fear of never again being able to retrieve and live out the acrobat self. As a consequence, love becomes impossible – both for the self and for the other. The lack of an “in-between” state in love also defines Eva’s mental condition, in which her body sensations fly high but her feelings are muted, resulting in an

\textsuperscript{75} Dixon, \textit{The Real Matilda – Woman and Identity in Australia}, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{76} H\textsc{\` e}ne Cixous, “Trancred\textsc{\` i} Continues,” in \textit{Writing Differences – Readings from the Seminar of H\textsc{\` e}ne Cixous}, ed. Susan Sellers (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988), 38.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
impossibility to fully embrace love as a condition of mutual trust, devotion and lust. Instead, she substitutes this lack of emotional intimacy with self-consuming sexual acts of exploitation and temporary erotic satisfaction. Eventually, it is through the terrain of self-loathing that Eva transcends the idea of love. This is achieved by using the memory of love and the violence of its loss to mark her body. Her love affair with the extraordinary is over. It is the finality of acknowledging the impossible that leads to self-harm as an expression of love, one that is lost but remains central to her life. Thus self-harm implies honesty – a higher form of knowledge that distinguishes her from other characters in the novel, all of whom continue chasing the fiction of the extraordinary (see ibid., 171-72).

Ironically, it is exactly this interplay between loss and the manifestation of grace that features strongly in Winton’s novel. While Eva’s condition does not allow her the space anymore to achieve grace, Sando, Loonie and Pike, no matter how their emotional or mental states appear, are persistently following their concept of grace through surfing:

We talked about skill and courage and luck […] but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do […] Even now, nearly forty years later, every time I see a kid pop to her feet, arms flailing, all milk-teeth and shining skin, I’m there; I know her, and some spark of early promise returns to me like a moment of grace. (24)

Unlike Eva whose literal fall from grace expels her from her paradise, the male protagonists still have the privilege to temporarily inhabit that realm.

If Eva is seen as a person who has lost the chance to follow her only idea of life as worth living (skiing), her whole existence is in decay and bound to fail. She has become aware of her self-construction as an illusion that cannot be upheld. As Bronfen and Webster Goodwin argue with reference to Freud’s and Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, the “death-drive” refers “both to a desire for the inanimate state before life and to that force that produces division, that fragments, castrates, and separates unities.” Therefore, death, which signifies the ultimate opposition of life, “emerges as its [life’s] ground, its vanishing point, and its sustaining force.” Under this premise, Eva’s excessive and strangulating sex-drive

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78 Bronfen and Webster Goodwin, “Introduction”, 11.
79 Ibid. The Freudian notion of the “death instinct,” which became later known as Thanatos, the “death-drive,” stands in opposition to Eros as the life-affirming and ensuring force. In “Civilization and Its Discontents,” Freud describes the death instinct as connected to a high degree of narcissistic enjoyment that can manifest itself in combination with Eros within sadism and masochism. In Freud’s view it is the struggle between Eros and Death that all life consists of and “the evolution of civilization may therefore be simply described as the struggle for life of the human species.” Eva’s tendency for masochism, as illustrated in her aggressive treatment of her own body respectively, combines pleasure and the death drive so that, in Freudian terms, there
can be aligned to death in the paradoxical sense that dying is the only option for her in order to sustain life. In this context, it also seems valid to take up George Bataille’s description of orgasm as “a little death,” predominantly used in connection with nineteenth-century literature, but equally valid today, to illuminate Eva’s desire for death, which is first achieved metaphorically through her autoerotic act of masturbation, and later on literally through her (possibly accidental) suicide.

Interestingly, Armando Favazza draws a link between aggression, sex and self-mutilation. According to him, “the physiological state of the body in both sexual and aggressive arousal is quite similar and since the sexual and aggressive instincts share certain components […] like sex, aggression is an internal force that has to be satisfied.” Favazza concludes that this argument might also be valid for self-mutilation, which as an act leads to the dissipation of an unbearable tension and brings feelings of relief. As a “tension-relieving device” he aligns self-mutilation to masturbation. This analogy is useful in understanding the construction of this chapter, which links sex and self-mutilation, not merely as acts of self-harm, but as articulators of complex socio-psychological situations of isolation, marginalisation and depression. This raises the question of whether the origins of Eva’s self-harm and masturbation, besides the obvious dynamics outlined earlier, lie in an episode of physical or mental abuse in her childhood. The strong focus in Winton’s story on the patriarchal and jealous nature of her father in the States, while only briefly mentioning her “dead mother” (*Breath*, 136), implies an Oedipal connection between father and daughter, and opens the possibility of childhood abuse. In comparison, anorexia and drug abuse, as discussed in the following chapters, are more indirect measures of self-harm than, for example, hanging, cutting or burning, which does not mean they are any less threatening and destructive for the body and the victim’s life (see Chapter 2.2 and 2.3).

So, it may be argued that Winton’s novel contributes to raising awareness of (auto)erotic asphyxiation among women but marginalises the female protagonist in the

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80 Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, 239.
82 Ibid.
biased narration of her sexuality. As a consequence, Eva can be read as a desperate paedophile; Sando largely maintains his status of new-age coolness despite his deficiencies; and Pikelet remains the ordinary male, who is unable to overcome his past trauma. As shown above, Eva nevertheless remains one of Winton’s most tragic and doomed characters – a woman who eventually finds peace in death as the ultimate consequence of self-destructive behaviour. Considering Winton’s position as a literary icon in Australia, I view this novel’s depiction of female sexuality as deeply troubling, because it receives cultural currency through Winton’s exalted status and the popularity of his work. The fact that female sexuality is shown as flawed and self-serving, fluctuating and violent, conveys a stigmatic image of women that endorses polarising myths about the female sex. Being female is presented as different from and threatening to men, suggesting that communication between genders must fail. Femininity is represented as responsible for male fear and confusion, arising from men’s inability to read and understand women and their private worlds.

In Cloudstreet, Dolly Pickles shares with Eva the feeling of personal failure and the need to substitute the lack and deficiencies in her life with sex and alcohol. She feels increasingly threatened in her femininity by the rising beauty of her daughter Rose. In her anger and frustration at seeing the crippling effects of age on her body, Dolly seeks compensation and reassurance of her womanhood in the arms of different men and excessive episodes of binge drinking:

Now and then she’d find herself out the back lane against the fence with some sweetmouthed bloke whose name she could almost remember […] She saw him nearly every night of the week, and though she didn’t much think about him during the day, if she got stuck in the same room as Rose, that filthy-pretty skeleton, she’d bring him to mind to fight the sight of her off. (Cloudstreet, 153)

Consequently, she severely neglects her responsibility towards her family, her husband and her three children, loading the burden of the housework on to her daughter’s shoulders. Rose is incapable of carrying that premature responsibility without physical and psychological scars, manifested in her anorexia. The mother-daughter relationship suffers considerably from this motherly neglect and absence, which turns Rose into the substitute mother figure. Dolly instead becomes a child-like creature, broken and humiliated by the impact of her alcohol addiction. Her sudden and violent intercourse with Lester Lamb gives a face to her adultery, and her perverse actions keep invading the sphere of the family home. Her indifference towards the feelings of the people close to her forms the sad climax of her moral
and personal degeneration (ibid., 245-46). She is the prototypical example of the failing mother, herself being the victim of a spiteful and cold mother figure in the guise of her sister. 84

Placing Dolly’s dilemma into a social perspective and comparing her with Oriel, it is crucial to elaborate the reason for her apparent and destructive lack of confidence. She defines her sense of self entirely by her outward appearance and her ability to attract male attention. Any self-esteem that could survive without the superficial acknowledgement from men is gone and has left Dolly in a state in which she is reduced to an object of male desire. At the same time, however, Dolly herself wishes to maintain this particular object position as it provides her with a sense of control that she is otherwise lacking. She is simultaneously subject and object in a strangely perverted value system that condemns her to the “Damned Whore,” an identity she embraces. 85 Oriel, on the other hand, fulfils the role of “God’s Police,” authoritative, decisive and in control of herself and others. 86 Therefore, at first glance, the two women seem to stand in complete contrast to each other. At a closer look, however, Oriel as well is marked by a deep emotional frailty, expressed in her physical distance from her family and her relocation to a tent in the garden. 87

This comparison is representative of a long line of equivalent female binaries in Winton’s fiction. The women in his stories struggle with the role imposed on them, as shown, for example, in the dichotomy between “Damned Whore” and “God’s Police,” which are “two sides to a masculine projection of female sexuality as it mirrors the dilemma of self-definition,” – women’s self-definition. 88 Or is it the dilemma of men’s self-definition? As frequently pointed out, the male protagonists in Winton’s novels are defined by their

84 Dolly’s sister was actually her mother: “My mother was my grandmother. My father was my grandfather […] The second oldest sister, the one who made me feel like rubbish all my life, that one was my mother” (Cloudstreet, 357).
85 See Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999), 217: “Desiring to follow men into the public bar, these young, educated, married women seemed ready to throw off the old constraints of dignity and decency. Worst of all, they seemed to be shrugging off the duties of motherhood.” Lake discusses the beginnings of the feminist quest for equality in Australia, outlining the confinement that the socially defined role of wife and mother imposed on many women. Instead of epitomising female liberation, however, Dolly is shown as being imprisoned by this supposedly liberated lifestyle. Winton thus contrasts the bar/pub as a place of degeneration, evasion and failed female existence, with the home as a place of possibility and reconciliation, despite the tragedies and conflicts that keep unfolding within its domestic boundaries.
86 See here Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 175. Murrie looks at the dualism between Dolly and Oriel, referring to them as Madonna and whore respectively; Summers, Damned Whores and God’s Police.
87 Oriel, too, is suffering from a childhood trauma when she witnessed the death of her mother and sisters in a deadly bush fire that destroyed the family farm (Cloudstreet, 268).
88 Schaffer, Women and the Bush, 69.
weaknesses, sensuality and emotions. Thus, they show conventional feminine attributes in contrast to the often matriarchal or masculinised female characters that enjoy sex, alcohol and drugs, and either severely neglect their families or dominate them. A prime example of this male femininity, which Linzi Murrie regards as an act of appropriation, is Luther Fox in *Dirt Music*, who displays various characteristics of the maternal father, the nurturing and caring family member who is submissive and easy to exploit (*Dirt Music*, 268). This possibility for men to identify with qualities both male and female suggests a vast array of self-definitions available to them. But it also affirms male power through the selective and self-defining criteria in Winton’s representations.

Winton’s novels, despite their attempt at deconstructing existing gender edifices through the open feminisation of their male protagonists, are still caught within the conventional dichotomies and binaries of gender constructions. The portrayal of Sally Fox in *Dirt Music* supports this point well. Sally, Lu’s sister-in-law, is the sensuous, self-complacent and egocentric femme fatale in White Point: “It was just a shape he was responding to, the outline of a woman, not Sal, not someone with her voice, her blank pauses and her strange domineering needs. She was one-dimensional, like an adolescent’s idea of a woman” (ibid., 380). She openly enjoys sex with different men – Darkie, Jim and possibly Lu among them. Although her character is mediated through the memories of other characters, she fulfils a central function in the novel by embodying sin and the forbidden through her sensual physique, her attractive, lascivious looks and her adultery. She causes the men in the story to lose control and give in to female temptation. As a consequence, a feeling of guilt haunts these men’s lives. Jim Buckridge, for instance, considers his wife’s death as a punishment from God as a result of his infidelity (400-1). Similar to Dolly, Sally is one of Winton’s negative mother figures, who place priority on their own comfort and well-being, rather than on the caretaking of their children. She eerily mirrors both Dolly and Eva, bringing together the play-doll image for masculine fantasies and the biblical seductress, whose sexual lure, even beyond death, captures and strangles the happiness and

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89 See in this context Dolly (*Cloudstreet*), Sally (*Dirt Music*), Jennifer (*The Riders*) and Eva (*Breath*).
90 Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 174-76. Murrie refers here to the appropriation of female qualities in Winton’s male characters to re-ensure the empowerment of men; she draws from the studies of Modleski (176), who argues that traditionally men have learned to deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it. See also Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 7.
conscience of her partners. Winton presents her as the primordial object of male desire, which is mystified through its premature, violent death.

Another example of the deviant, destructive and sexual feminine in Winton’s fiction can be found in the short novel *That Eye the Sky* (1986). The adolescent female character Tegwyn Flack commences a relationship with the much older Henry Warburton, one which is characterised by verbal and physical abuse and rough, hard sex: “I look in on Tegwyn and her and him are biting each other and hitting each other, with his hairy bum up and her making hate noises at him and the bed squealing” (*That Eye the Sky*, 169). The nature of their lovemaking as witnessed by Ort, the child narrator of the story, stands in close proximity to Tegwyn’s other acts of self-mutilation and can also be considered an act of violence. According to Ort’s observations, she regularly burns her breasts with cigarette butts or violently rubs and slaps herself in the shower (see ibid., 117, 16). The hate noises she makes at Warburton during sex reflect another vehicle for her to use her body in order to release the unbearable tension of frustration and unhappiness. Although these noises can also be read as a naïve misinterpretation of the narrator and might actually be interpreted as utterances of passion and pleasure, it is the aggressive sadism of this passage that vividly portrays Warburton and Tegwyn’s relationship. Anger dominates her whole life and drives her desire to hurt both herself and others – a psychological phenomenon studied by Welldon, Yaryura-Tobias and Motz respectively, who form parallels between self-harming, perversion, fear and suicide as well as homicidal actions. Viewing Tegwyn’s self-harm as an act of love, as Ben-Messahel argues, is illuminating in the sense that it intrinsically aligns love and hate as composites rather than opposites.

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91 Also see *That Eye the Sky*, 132 and 164-65.
92 See, for example, Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions – The Temptations of Emma Bovary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 389. Kaplan describes the tendency of female self-cutters to have sexual intercourse with men who “will focus their terrifyingly diffuse inner genital sensations by raping them or otherwise brutally introducing them to sexual intercourse.” Also see here Hopkins, “Writing from the Margins,” 51. She calls the copulation between Tegwyn and Warburton “hate-making.”
93 Winton describes Tegwyn as a character defined by adolescent frustration. See McGirr, *Tim Winton – The Writer and his Work*, 58: “She’s just frustrated, I guess. People do things to themselves out of frustration. She feels terrible about the family’s situation but can’t express it. Adolescents seem to veer wildly between self-love and self-hatred. Poor old Tegwyn’s just stuck.”
expression of the things she cannot say. Ort secretly observes Tegwyn’s violent washing-sessions (*That Eye the Sky*, 16) under the shower and is clearly irritated by her behaviour, as he is unable to understand her temper and hate. Genevieve Laigle aligns Tegwyn’s aggression with a deep dissatisfaction in being female, which increases the tension between her and Ort, the boy in the family (*That Eye the Sky*, 61). One decisive moment in the novel mentioned earlier is when Tegwyn burns her naked skin with cigarettes, an action that reflects her enrage:

Through a hole I see her on the bed [...] She has no clothes on, sitting there smoking. On her tits there’s red marks – all over – like she’s got chicken pox or something [...] Real careful she takes the smoke out of her mouth and looks at the hot end and puts it on one tit and shivers. Burning! Oh, geez. Oh, geez. I go down the hall and out the back and a bit of sick comes up. I don’t get it. I don’t. Why does she do things like that? Why is she unhappy all the time? (Ibid., 117)

The narrator longs to understand his sister’s motivation and rage, but is unable to do so. His spying confronts him with a knowledge that he is too young to grasp and process. Nevertheless, he sees his sister suffering, which considerably upsets him, and he is able to draw a connection between her pain and her self-injury: “I don’t think she feels it until she goes to sleep. That’s why she groans and calls out in her sleep. Those noises make me cry for no reason, sometimes” (16). Ort’s feelings illustrate the heavy impact that self-harming behaviour can have on the mutilator’s family members and friends. Tegwyn’s violent outbursts against herself and others go deeper than mere anger and frustration and are the expression of a more complex situation that nevertheless is governed by love.

As already noted, different psychoanalytic views on self-mutilation have explored it as an erotic pleasure and a form of autoerotic masturbation. It has been argued that the act illustrates both an expression of sexual gratification and a punishment for the impulse to self-stimulation. Favazza argues that the act is a method to relieve emotional dysphoria,

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96 Laigle, “‘You Can’t Be Immature Forever,’” 25. Laigle also refers to Ort’s perception of sex and self-injury. She regards Ort as too young to understand that physical harm is often used to release emotional distress but she describes his own experience in the woods as a form of self-harm that corresponds with Tegwyn’s (24-25).


often precipitated by separation, loss and failure. Pain is redirected away from disturbing feelings and thoughts while the act of mutilation such as burning and cutting simultaneously functions as a counter-stimulus, an arousal and an amplification of distantly perceived conflicts that become less confusing and frightening. Tegwyn’s masochistic acts against herself seem to be giving her pleasure and are directly linked to her sexual relationship with Warburton in the aggressiveness and force that she applies to both. The argument for an eroticised component in Tegwyn’s self-harm has relevance to this scenario.

As suggested earlier, the literal scarring of Tegwyn’s body through cigarette burns can be considered an attempt to create an autobiographical narrative and establish a sense of self that cannot be manifested through social interactions or language. Her self-injury also reflects a symbolic significance that accompanies the (sexual) pleasure she obviously feels when burning herself. Anna Motz describes these phenomena as ways towards healing. The body turns into a place of creation, a place of love, where self-harm “creates a self-referential world, perhaps like a private language, and one in which physical marks have unique signification and meaning.” Similarly, McLane characterises self-mutilation as the “creation of a voice on the skin,” turning the wound into a “mouth,” and further supports the notion of self-harm as a source of prospective healing through articulation. In modification Armando Favazza reasons that these self-mutilating attempts are the adolescent’s way of escaping situations of loneliness and abandonment. These acts, he argues, heighten the teenager’s self-awareness and this frequently leads to maturity and change. Tegwyn’s body marks correspond to a deep-seated need to tell her story, which cannot be voiced in the verbal language available to her, but is shown through a very intimate and violent relationship with her body.

Distancing herself from any intimate proximity with her mother, Tegwyn exemplifies the alienation of adolescent children from their parents. Thus, her self-harm is a “defence

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100 Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, 278.
101 See Motz, “Self-Harm as a Sign of Hope,” 84.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid. Also see in this context Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 36. Here Grosz parallels the surface of the body with a semantic landscape of a dialectic between inside and outside: “The surface of the body, the skin, moreover provides the ground for the articulation of orifices, erotogenic rims, cuts on the body’s surface, loci of exchange between the inside and the outside, points of conversation of the outside into the body, and of the inside out of the body […] These cuts on the body’s surface create a kind of “landscape,” of that surface, that is, they provide it with “regions,” “zones,” capable of erotic significance; they serve as a kind of gridding, an uneven distribution of intensities, of erotic investments in the body.”
104 McLane, “The Voice on the Skin,” 115.
105 Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, 281-82.
against intimacy with another” as is vividly presented in a conversation between Alice and her on Christmas Day.106

‘I hate your guts,’ Tegwyn says. ‘You’re weak in the head, pathetic. You’re a hick, burnt-out hippy from the olden days. And now you’re born-again, bashing the Bible and Holy Jesus. I think you’re crap.’

Mum’s face is moving in the dark. You can see it jumping around […] Suddenly, Mum grabs her and her arms go round her hard so you can hear the air coming out of Tegwyn […] ‘I love you,’ Mum says. ‘I love you. Love you. Love you.’ And then Tegwyn is bawling and all saggy and small-looking, and they stay like that for a long time.

(That Eye the Sky, 120-21)

The girl’s aggression is overarching in this mother-daughter encounter but is broken through by the insistence of maternal love and physical, loving contact. Despite her sexual affair with Warburton, this scene depicts the only incident where Tegwyn, if only temporarily, gives in to intimacy with another person. All other relationships and her treatment of the world around her are defined by violence and aggression, illustrated when she “bashes that piano”/“beats it up” (ibid., 16, 116), slams doors (103) or slaps Warburton (165). This antagonism is also reflected in her use of rough language, swear words and affirmative phrases in particular: “Slimy little bit of cockroach snot” (37), “More crap from you” (119), “Shut your face, Small Thing” (129). By attacking her own body and the people close to her, Tegwyn seeks self-authorisation and control, expressing her wish to be autonomous and to reconnect with her sense of self.107 The difficulties the girl faces are closely intertwined, not only with the difficult mother-daughter relationship, but also with the image of her changing body into an object of desire and reproduction. The interplay between the adolescent’s estrangement from the mother and her growing sexual awareness contributes to feelings of loss in the young woman, who is confronted with the necessity to redefine herself and her relationship with her social surroundings. The trauma that comes with puberty is increased by Sam Flack’s fatal accident that leaves him in a coma. This event ties the family together and confronts each family member with new challenges and tasks in the household. The strong maternal presence, instated as the sole head of the family, clashes with Tegwyn’s objectives and exemplifies a woman’s existence that the girl does not wish for herself. Tegwyn’s open resentment towards her mother and the fact that she starts an affair with Henry – a father-like figure – can be interpreted as an expression of Oedipal desires and revenge against Alice, who herself seems to have taken an interest in Warburton:

106 Motz, “Self-Harm as a Sign of Hope,” 84.
‘Mum?’
‘Hm?’
‘Do you still love Dad?’
‘Of course.’
‘I thought maybe you loved Henry. You started to dress up.’ She puts a hand to her throat and there’s tears coming in her eyes.
‘Oh, Ort. I’m so lonely. A woman needs a man.’ (That Eye the Sky, 163)

Tegwyn’s body turns into a memory map for herself and Ort respectively. The wounds and rashes that mark her body are forms of stigmas that literally and symbolically incorporate and manifest memory traces and self-narratives of difference and alienation on her skin: “Stigmatisation thus begins catachrestically on the surface of the body: the material marks on the skin remember, literalising on the body and signifying in the symbolic, the subject’s social difference.”108 The skin turns the body into a story, merging the symbolic with the material, and creates “skin autobiographies,” as Jay Prosser calls it, in which the boundaries of the sexual and the ancestral, of “belonging and departure, self and other, memory and the present, fantasy and reality” are transgressed and located within the other in a revelation of traumatising family secrets.109 Prosser speaks predominantly of skin disorders and diseases, but self-stigmatisation and cutting of the skin equally function as a marker in a psychoanalytic context. His argument that skin disorders reflect repressed sexual and familial memory and transgress that distinction by locating the former in the latter, finds expression in That Eye the Sky. It is Tegwyn’s body that functions as a memory map and exposes both the traumatic dysfunctional structures in the Flack family and the disparate ways of coping with them: Alice and Ort turn to God, whereas Tegwyn resorts to the rituals of mutilation and hard sex. In contrast to her mother, who escapes her burden by becoming a “child of God,” Tegwyn denounces and aggressively responds to her role as a child, craving for self-sufficiency and trying to escape parental control.

As mentioned earlier, her body and skin form the vehicle, the medium, through which she expresses herself, using a language that exceeds external domination and places her in a position of power. Borrowing Didier Anzieu’s term here, she tries to create a “skin ego,” a self gained from bodily sensations and projected like a map on the surface of the

body. Despite being heavily influenced by Freudian theory, Anzieu offers a useful connection between psychology and the skin as complex biological and psychological sites of interaction. He inextricably connects the skin as an enveloping organ with the psyche’s development of an ego from childhood onwards. He argues against the claims made by cognitive psychology that the senses of taste, smell and hearing are the first to develop, holding rather that the sense of touch is central to embryonic existence and the birth of the infant. The skin can thus be seen as a channel par excellence for preverbal/non-verbal communication “where non-verbalized affects may be somatically experienced and observed.” Tegwyn eroticises her pain and thus, according to Anzieu, keeps the balance of her Skin Ego intact. Consequently, she highlights the sensation of touch through a rough sexual relationship with a much older man in order to transgress childhood and to mark her as a grown-up woman.

Apart from being defined as sexually aggressive, Warburton’s and Tegwyn’s relationship is repeatedly described by Ort as violent and even displays characteristics of exorcism in one scene: “Tegwyn and Henry Warburton are arguing again. They fight all the time in her room; he uses all the big words on her like salvation and sanctification and she yells at him and tells him to go stuff his head up Margaret’s bum” (That Eye the Sky, 164). The old stereotypes of the woman possessed by the devil, the deviant and demonising witch, are invoked here. Hence, Tegwyn’s fights with Warburton are not merely power struggles for supremacy – atheism against religion, female against male, child against adult – but they also expel the girl in her difference from the perceived norm of religious faith. She turns into the “un-faithful,” irrational, unpredictable nemesis in the novel, whose trajectory deviates from the compassionate morality of the remaining family members.

The limited point of view of the first-person narration, however, does not address the possibility that Tegwyn’s aggression is also the reflection of an inner struggle between opposing views, feelings and perceptions – the insecurity, confusion and anxiety of “teenage

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111 See here Didier, *The Skin Ego*, 61, 15-18: “[T]he skin is the touchstone (literally) to which the various sensory data are referred back.” Also cf. in this context the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage and the body, described in Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 39-40.
113 Didier, *The Skin Ego*, 201.
114 Tegwyn also compensates for the lack of a father with her affair with Henry Warburton – a father-like figure.
angst.” Winton’s portrayal of Tegwyn in most passages of the book presents her as an angry, raging teenager who “can’t love” her family (169), while her more peaceful moments are an exception to the norm and only highlight her fragmentation as a character and person. She appears to be obsessed in various ways, which deeply affects her family and reveals the peace and harmony in the house as a fiction, that culminates in the disillusioning death of Ort’s grandmother and the possible death of his father at the end of the novel (171-72).

Furthermore, Christian rituals of self-mutilation and stigmatisation of the skin – acts that originally symbolised the battle against evil and demonic obsession – play into the interpretation of That Eye the Sky. Many of Tegwyn’s actions against her own body and against her close environment include slapping and bashing, either the piano, Warburton or herself. This form of violence can not only be seen as a voice that speaks through the skin but is of course also a facet of perversion which can be paralleled with the religious act of self-flagellation, originally considered a male ritual, and also a measure of religiously inspired and justified performance of self-harm. Self-flagellation, in its drive to inflict punishment on the sinful self, indicates the desire to master and educate one’s body. It is turned into the “quest for the absolute.” With it comes the view expressed by Jean-Pierre Albert that women’s bodies open up to the flow of blood when they flagellate themselves, whereas for men the skin becomes harder and “turns into a monstrous leather.” This religious perception illustrates female self-cutting as a way to transcend the painful ordinariness of reality in order to feel, to strive towards a higher experience that reduces the numbness of the senses and the mind. The active flow of blood stands in contrast here to the passivity of the male skin that does not break but hardens.

The map of scars that Winton uses to describe his male characters, such as Jim (Dirt Music) and Sando (Breath), displays this tough but unresponsive maleness as opposed to the self-harming and both literally and metaphorically bleeding women. It needs to be said at

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116 Élisabeth Roudinesco, Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 17. The excessive ritual of fasting, nowadays an expression of anorexia, was also part of religious devotion and the hope for deeper spiritual insights. A famous example was Catherine de Siena (1347-1380), who refrained from food for her spiritual convictions (anorexia mirabilis): see Joan Brumberg, “‘Fasting Girls’: Reflections on Writing the History of Anorexia Nervosa,” Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development 50, no. 4-5 (1985): 96.
117 Ibid.
119 See Chapter Four, “Marking/Mapping of the Gendered Body.”

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this point, though, that Winton’s male characters do not flagellate themselves directly, but educate and challenge themselves through exposure and confrontation with the land and unpredictable natural environment. Gender stereotypes are thus perverted, allowing an active role to the woman, who, however, unlike her male partner, is confined in her existence and mobility and therefore sees the only chance to manifest this activity in the direct control of and attack on her own body. This threatening ambiguity between activity and passivity, control and loss of control, speaking and silence, mobility and paralysis, heavily defines Winton’s characters and his women in particular. In the end, however, the Wintonian perversion of these stereotypes confirms rather than deconstructs traditional conceptions of gender relations, in the sense that despite their activity against their own bodies, his women characters are the ones who break apart, both literally and metaphorically. They cannot live independently from their male counterparts without being unhappy or shunned. Thus, they either resettle back into conventional structures of partnership and family, or they escape these structures, only to face social stigmatisation and death.\textsuperscript{120}

Apart from being closely related to violence, aggression and guilt, the rather promiscuous sexuality and femininity discussed in this chapter reflect a very persistent colonial idea of the sexually-promiscuous other which manifests in various colonial texts and has obviously survived over time.\textsuperscript{121} Here, this idea of sexuality is not used in racial terms to refer to the indigenous other, but describes white femininity, using the Victorian epitome of the moral and vulnerable woman and its counter-example of the gendered, sexually-active other. Winton draws from the Victorian dichotomy by opposing female virtue and motherly devotion with a morally ambiguous counterfoil in women like Eva, Dolly or Tegwyn, who seem to strategically use sex as a measure of intended self-liberation, affirmation and empowerment. Especially in \textit{Dirt Music}, as will be shown later, the cliché of, as Tanya Dalziell calls it, the middle-class white “Australian girl,” who experiences her identity crises and sexual desires within a heavily male-dominated, working-class

\textsuperscript{120} Compare in this context, for example, Eva, who, separated from her husband and child, dies alone in a hotel room as a consequence of her autoerotic masturbation. Jennifer’s (\textit{The Riders}) decision to leave husband and daughter turns her into the deviant, mysterious and two-faced woman who is simultaneously absent and present but never really there to explain herself. Ida (\textit{In the Winter Dark}) is captured in a largely unhappy marriage but dies the moment she decides to leave. Georgie’s (\textit{Dirt Music}) trauma and feeling of loss is only put into perspective once the chance of a serious, loving relationship, nurturing and motherhood becomes graspable when meeting Lu. Caught within a disillusioning reality, Jewel (\textit{An Open Swimmer}) is not given the space to live out her creative potential and develop her own voice. Death, to her, offers the only alternative.

\textsuperscript{121} See here Tanya Dalziell, \textit{Settler Romances and the Australian Girl} (Crawley, WA: University of Western Australia Press, 2004), 45.
environment, is re-enacted within a postmodern coastal outpost, a context of technology, mobility and capitalism. This sexualised portrayal of the “Australian woman” is closely aligned to the binary opposition of the virgin/Madonna and whore dyad – a concept that Winton still applies in his stories.

Through the act of interpretation and disruptive reading of the text, sex and self-mutilation as both harming and self-affirming practices can, therefore, be understood as variants of communication that may transgress and subvert existing power relations and initiate a discourse which aims at a drastic revision and redefinition of social values, traditions and pre-conceptions. The skin becomes the matrix of an autobiographical narrative, which is articulated through attacks on the body in extreme attempts to gain control, autonomy and relief in a world of increasing alienation. These self-harming acts, however, may also expose a still very vibrant patriarchal culture, which, through appropriation and discursive strategy, restricts the possibility of female autonomy and diminishes the development of an independent concept of female self-perception in the Australian, or, actually, Western context. In frequently representing his women characters as deviant, immoral and sexual, aligned with a strong self-harming drive, Winton marks their bodies with the signature of a society that still defines its women alongside old colonial dichotomies as inherently different and threatening to the male norm. This stigmatisation is reflected in the dominant mode of masculine reading practices as installed through a carefully composed narration. Fiona Capp’s illumination that her character Marie feels “like a freak on show – alluring to some and threatening to all the rest” achieves a sad finality in Winton’s stories where the women literally embody the form of othering that Capp addresses. The next chapter on alcoholism and drug abuse further develops this argument.

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2.2. A Ghost: Alcoholism and Drug Abuse in *Dirt Music*,
*In the Winter Dark*, *The Riders* and *Cloudstreet*

“What’s this?” Leena asked impatiently.
“Fucken Freedom from Alcohol Week is it?”

Melissa Lucashenko, *Hard Yards*¹

When Germaine Greer pointed out in *Whitefella Jump Up* that in “prissy white-collar 21st century Australia, a culture of macho hard-drinking still prevails” and that not to drink is regarded as unsocial and even un-Australian, she criticises Australia’s reputation as a “drinking nation.”² The national myth of the down-to-earth, quirky and entertaining Australian drunkard has occupied the cultural imagination over the centuries, leading to frequent caricatures of alcohol addiction and its effects. Although drinking habits in Australia are not unique in the developed world, the history of the country is closely linked to alcohol as a good for trade and consumption.³ A closer look at these habits reveals ethical issues and a gender bias in the way drinking is practised and viewed individually and collectively. In response to the strong presence of alcohol in Australia in the past and today, cultural and literary representations address the issue in a variety of ways, as strikingly depicted for instance in David Ireland’s *The Glass Canoe* (1976), Peter Carey’s *Bliss* (1981), or Christos Tsiolkas’s *The Slap* (2008). In these different portrayals, the drinking culture in

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¹ Melissa Lucashenko, *Hard Yards* (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1999), 199.
Australia is characterised as predominantly, though not exclusively, male, and simultaneously satirised and celebrated. So Ireland’s *The Glass Canoe*, for instance, shockingly describes Sydney’s inner city pub culture – a place of male bonding, dreaming and escape.⁴ Carey’s novel features the stereotypical, Scotch-loving Australian larrikin, who is seen as the “Good Bloke,” and is loved by everyone, but always on the verge of death.⁵ Although women are also shown to resort to the occasional drink, it is the men in these novels who drive it into excess.

Interestingly, in Tim Winton’s work, this common association between alcohol excess and masculinity frequently receives a different emphasis.⁶ In his recent play *Rising Water* we make the acquaintance of two women, Jackie and Dee, who could not be more different in background and age. Still, both have one thing in common: they share a history of excessive drinking – middle-aged Jackie is a recovering alcoholic, and Dee, in her twenties, is an emerging one who needs to be rescued after a night of vulgar drunkenness. Turning to Winton’s novels, there is a striking consistency that marks the female characters as more obviously related to alcohol or drug abuse than men: Jewel (*An Open Swimmer*, 54, 176) drinks regularly and heavily, Ida gets drunk with her pregnant neighbour Ronnie (*In the Winter Dark*, 66-67, 72), Dolly (*Cloudstreet*, 124) suffers from a serious alcohol addiction, Irma (*The Riders*) always seems to carry a bottle of spirits or beer with her, Georgie drinks herself into oblivion (*Dirt Music*, 148) and Eva intoxicates herself with drugs (*Breath*, 188). This tendency does not mean that Winton’s male characters do not drink. They do, some of them excessively; however, their portrayal lacks the deeply damaging and destructive undertones that define the escapades for the women.⁷ Male drinking remains on the margin, is linked to past mistakes the character has learned from, or is represented as a moral counterfoil to female drinking.⁸ What is it about women and alcohol that seems so attractive for Winton, considering that other Australian male writers avoid the issue, and instead write about the drinking culture of men? Why is the image of the harmless, funny, male drunkard converted into the depiction of a ravenous, rebellious and often harmful woman?

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⁶ Women writers have written about the issue of alcoholism among women: see for example Mandy Sayer, *Blind Luck* (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1993).
⁷ See among others Jim (*An Open Swimmer*, 175-76), Jacob (*In the Winter Dark*, 110), Jim (*Dirt Music*, 399-400).
⁸ See Sam and Lester in *Cloudstreet*, Jim in *Dirt Music* and Scully in *The Riders*. 
In this chapter, I present a close textual analysis of the connection between femininity and substance abuse in Winton’s fiction, arguing that his novels, *Cloudstreet, Dirt Music, The Riders* and *In the Winter Dark*, use female addiction as a matrix to play out the conventional stereotype of the “fallen” woman in opposition to her “angelic” counterpart. Apart from repeatedly presenting the woman as physically and psychologically fragile, I will argue that Winton’s texts associate femininity with moral ambiguity, an excessive need for control, sexual assertiveness, and chronic dissatisfaction with life. These women inflict pain and suffering not only on themselves, but also on the men and children in their lives, and use their sexuality to advance their own goals. The men in these novels are thus driven into a status of dependency, characterised by confusion and even desperation. Though I acknowledge the realist component in Winton’s fiction that describes female drinking as part of the social demography in rural Western Australia, and in Europe for that matter, I criticise the exclusivity and imbalance in his portrayals of substance abuse. Alcohol and drugs as instruments of self-harm in Winton’s novels are clearly located on the side of the female and are presented in close association with female perversion. Further, I propose that the self-harm reflected in the women’s substance abuse can be read as a feature that attracts both sympathy and criticism from the men in the stories. No matter whether husband, boyfriend, father or friend, these men turn into the victims of their partners’ excesses, or function as a moral counterfoil that judges and condemns female dissipation.

When it comes to alcohol and drug abuse, scholarly opinions about whether these abuses can be counted as self-harming habits differ quite considerably. Generally, alcohol and drug abuse are a part of normal social behaviour that is taken to excess, and constitute a marginal space of indirect self-harm, which is not seen as serious or as abnormal as self-mutilation. Substance abuse, however, is often an accompanying factor in more direct acts or behaviours of self-mutilation and self-threatening habits, as Marya Hornbacher outlines in her memoir on bulimia and anorexia:

> So many means of self-destruction, so little time. I branched out. I expanded my horizon. Why be just bulimic when you can be fucked up every day in school without anyone ever

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9 Rare exceptions can be found in Winton’s short stories where male drinking is depicted as a source of domestic violence. See e.g. Tim Winton, “The Turning,” in *The Turning* (Sydney: Picador, 2004), 133-61; “Cockleshell,” in *The Turning* (Sydney: Picador, 2003), 113-32.


noticing? Why not carry vodka in a mineral water bottle into choir and drink it between songs? […] Why not sleep with strangers who deal drugs, or have a friend of a friend who deals drugs, and ask, pouting sexily (you’ve been practicing ‘sexy’ in the mirror), if you can have some? 12

Often aligned with rebellion in adolescence, substance abuse can result in serious addiction with devastating health consequences. It becomes part of an overall defence mechanism against the social and emotional strains attached to the individual’s life. In the process of relieving the unbearable tension on their minds and bodies, people can start “acting out” their frustration and pain by resorting to measures of direct and indirect self-harm:

Acting out is a defence used to express unconscious feelings or conflicts through actions rather than words. It is a maladaptive coping mechanism, which includes using alcohol, drugs and self-harm to express painful, angry or confusing feelings that a person cannot verbalise. 13

This view aligns alcoholism and drug abuse with other forms of self-harm and draws attention to the gravity of these habits of self-threatening behaviour. 14 Often depression and anxiety disorders are the cause of increased substance abuse, as outlined by Ruth Ohlsen, Lyn Pilowsky and Gail Gilchrist, who respectively claim that “[g]eneralised anxiety disorder in women is significantly associated with alcohol abuse” and that “[h]azardous drinking and alcohol disorders are associated with depression” and can be seen as ways of “self-medication” against negative experiences in their personal surroundings and relationships. 15

Not only a reaction against private problems, alcohol addiction and depression can also result from pressures of social expectations and standards. In following critics like Bordo, Dallery and Ussher, reading the female body as a socially-defined and determined, symbolic text invites the reader to look at the social surroundings of Winton’s women characters in a bit more detail – especially at a time when more women drink excessively

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14 Intravenous drug abuse is seen as direct self-harm due to the damage done to the body tissue by the needle. See in this context: Babiker and Arnold, The Language of Injury, 5.

and with more drastic consequences than ever before. As frequently pointed out in the scholarly discourse on Winton and by Winton himself, his stories are set within largely rural or suburban environments, often in regional isolation enclosed between the desert and the ocean: “In Western Australia you really do feel the desert in your back and the sea in front of you and we literally inhabit a very thin margin and that marginality and austerity of the landscape really does impinge on psychology.” In *Dirt Music* Winton offers a vivid description of the story’s setting, which can be seen as exemplary of most of his novels’ fictional surroundings. It is a world of social isolation – difficult to bear for his sensitive protagonists. The women in his stories, especially, struggle to survive within these places where society is structured by the male norm. Winton briefly but effectively unravels the history of White Point in the wake of colonialism and the Gold Rush and manifests its origins as inextricably connected with male frontier endeavours:

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)

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This account of the perceived and established “fugliness” of the place evokes the settlements that reappear in his other novels where “angels seemed unlikely and God barely possible” (Breath, 137). 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 women, who are lost in the discrepancy between their wish for belonging and their current lack of personal fulfilment. This central sentiment plays an important role in driving these women to extreme mental states of self-scrutiny and silent desperation, often resulting in acts of “chronic suicide” in the forms of alcohol, tablets and drugs.

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 reflected in his earlier novels. By depicting the protagonist Georgiana Jutland 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 is 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 shamateur, entering both their worlds in search for her own happiness. Self-harm is thus inextricably connected to gender and class as also exemplified in An Open Swimmer and Breath.

Arguing that Georgie’s representation highlights prominent derogatory structures within the text and thus accommodates a sympathetic perspective on male victimisation

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18 Mischkulnig and Winton, Smalltown, 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).

19 Skegg, “Self-Harm,” 1472. Chronic suicide describes the orientation towards death by the excessive consumption of alcohol and/or drugs.
through the female, I consider it important to look closely at Georgie’s addictions and introduce a reading that elucidates the relationship between female existence in remote places like White Point and intoxication. Forty-year-old Georgie is an equally displaced character as is Eva in Breath, struggling with her “uprooted” existence in a place of persisting “settler capitalism” or “neo-colonial capitalism” like White Point where she always felt ambivalent and unsettled (Dirt Music, 18). Georgie comes from a wealthy family settled in Perth, being the eldest of four sisters. Her parents divorced after she had left home to pursue a nursing career in Saudi Arabia. Despite the knowledge that she would never come up to her mother’s expectations, Georgie loves her dutifully. She is alienated from her father, whom she has not been able to believe in since he divorced her mother and married a younger look-alike (Dirt Music, 168). Having lived with her partner Jim Buckridge in his White Point mansion for three years, Georgie is still not a set part of the house but is stuck between duties as girlfriend, houseguest, aunt, 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 a living space on her own, rather than appropriating somebody else’s, in this case Debbie’s – Jim’s wife who passed away from cancer. In her spatial and personal alienation, Georgie finds relief and distraction in alcohol abuse and tranquillisers, using the virtual space of the Internet to accommodate her disembodied self. Meeting shamateur Luther Fox offers her the chance of renewal, of a new beginning, which may culminate in marriage and children. 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.

In contrast to the Fox farm, the town of White Point is presented as threatening and hostile to both Georgie and Lu. Georgie perceives the architecture of the houses in this town as makeshift and ugly, merging financial affluence and a lack of taste into a grotesque demography against the natural beauty of the hinterland and the ocean. Judith Fetterley states that grotesqueness is created when stereotypes are imposed on reality with the

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20 For a literary analysis of settler capitalism and its representation see Dalziell, Settler Romances and the Australian Girl, 60, 51-73.

21 Autobiographical links can be drawn to Winton’s wife Denise, a former nurse.
implication that the real grotesque lies in the stereotype itself.\textsuperscript{22} The clashing of the picturesque landscape and the capitalist ambition reflected in White Point’s architecture creates the grotesque in this particular framework and enforces the stereotype of male power and dominion. The name “White Pointers” (\textit{Dirt Music}, 17, 126, 136, 192) which is used throughout the novel to describe the town’s inhabitants associates 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.\textsuperscript{23} The name of the town thus generates a violent contrast to Luther Fox, whose farm outside the town becomes a refuge for Georgie.

The social reality in remote Western Australia today seems twisted in the image conveyed in Winton’s novels. In 2010 a national government survey on substance abuse identified Western Australia among those states that had the highest proportion of males who drank daily, confirming the general tendency that males are twice as likely to consume alcohol in endangering quantities than females.\textsuperscript{24} Not denying that women can also consume alcohol in dangerous amounts, I view the portrayal of female drinking in \textit{Dirt Music} as a distortion of fact that again marks the female negatively while presenting the men as abstinent or mild drinkers. Georgie is more restrained than Eva in \textit{Breath}, in the sense that her entrapment in an unhappy and unfulfilling relationship does not drive her into excessive self-mutilation and the abuse of a child or teenager, but stirs a form of rage inside her which finds release in alcohol and personal excess. She fights this numbing rage by resorting to vodka, wine and beer, taking her mind off troubling past experiences, her present dissatisfaction and her lack of promising future outlooks – all of which relate to a defining incident in Jeddah, when Georgie was working in a cancer ward.\textsuperscript{25} The illness and

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\item[23] Crane, “Where Wilderness Lies,” 115. Also see Roie Thomas, “Theistic Existentialism in the Fiction of Tim Winton” (PhD diss., University of Tasmania, May 2007), 91. It is interesting in this context to analyse the animal tropes in \textit{Dirt Music}, which symbolise varying expressions of masculinity, simultaneously exposing and enforcing old and new stereotypes. So, for example, Lu plays with two sharks in the warm, tropical waters of Coronation Gulf, placing them in opposition to the threatening White Pointer. Anouk Lang’s article “Troping the Masculine: Australian Animals, the Nation, and the Popular Imagination” gives insight to the linkage between Australian masculinity and animals in popular and cultural texts. She argues that a re-enforcement of traditional masculinity is occurring through the depiction of mastery over animals and the satirising of the male’s feminisation in contemporary culture. See \textit{Antipodes} 24, no. 1 (June 2010): 5-10.
\item[25] Her behaviour is not exceptional. The alcohol abuse in rural areas is significantly higher than in urban areas, while 54% of men are reported drinking in worrying amounts as compared to 22% of women. See “Alcohol
\end{thebibliography}
subsequent death of a woman patient called Mrs. Jubail inflicted a deep trauma on Georgie, pushing her into an existential crisis, which has been taking its toll ever since:

Georgie was away when Mrs Jubail died [...] She didn’t even feel the smile on her face, but she saw it in the reaction of her friend, who wheeled in confusion towards the pool, and she heard about it later that week around the compound, about what a callous bitch she was. It was there that she lost the magic, the belief she had in herself and her chosen path. (Dirt Music, 197)

The loss of belief in herself and the excruciating sense of guilt that are mentioned here undermine her confidence in her assigned social role as nurturer and caretaker – both, however, reflecting the desired role of motherhood. Also, her disappointment triggers some criticism of her own sexuality, which is connected to an ambivalent relationship with her body:

Now she stared at her body in a manner she hadn’t employed for a long time. Okay, she was small. Compact, that used to be the word. Petite handed you an Alice band and a cardigan, for Chrissake. So, short. Small [...] She was pretty enough, she’d always known it [...] The eyes? She had the stare of a cattle dog. No wonder she’d scared people at school and on the wards. (Ibid., 56)

In between the harsh judgements of her body, the remark that she has always known she is pretty enough appears to enhance the imperfect and imbalanced body image conveyed. The positive connotations here are put into perspective, inverting their meaning to a derogatory, ridiculing, even shallow conviction based on habit and commodity, whose truth value is explored and assessed with a less reassuring result. She knows about her prettiness that has served her over the years to attract men, Jim being one of them (56), but Georgie herself is not attracted by her outward appearance, looking at it severely and critically. She is not in harmony with her bodily self that shows the first signs of ageing in the “tanned skin with crow’s feet from the sun and shadows from everything else” (56). Winton plays here with the established stereotype of, as I would call it, “female angst” that describes the tendency of women’s self-scrutiny when it comes to their own bodies and the effects of time on their outward appearance. Georgie’s body, though, is characterised as deficient, weirdly detached from herself, and she objectifies her body to a high degree:

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26 Her role as stepmother for Jim’s boys is crushed by the younger son’s refusal to accept Georgie as a maternal substitute. See below.
On her shoulders the straplines in her tan ran into the silly whiteness of her breasts. For goodness sake. Even without them your clothes shaped you. She had an inverted navel and an unmarked belly, though veins showed in her legs from years of trudging the wards. Unruly pubic hair. (*Dirt Music*, 56)

Winton highlights the particularities of the naked female body here, which become the centre of the text that exercises a voyeuristic act of anatomic dissection. The body as an entity is taken apart by directing the reader’s focus to individual body parts, which in itself strengthens the boundary between self and body.

These descriptions illuminate sexist undertones and expose Winton’s writing as a text that re-enforces the stereotypical signifiers of male desire hidden behind the fictional, female self-scrutinising gaze. Presenting Georgie’s imperfect attractiveness from her point of view positions the female in the sexualised sphere, hiding the male gaze behind the eyes of the female character. It is the indirectness of implication in this context that reveals the dominant male voice behind the female façade.\(^\text{27}\) The sentence “For goodness sake. Even without them your clothes shaped you,” (ibid., 56) offers a change in perspective, giving a more immediate insight to Georgie’s thoughts and addressing the reader more directly. There is, however, an ambiguity created where the dominant male point of view interferes by emphasising Georgie’s breasts as the dominant feature of the female body shape. Apart from the fact that Georgie’s physique in the entire passage above is presented as sexually marked, rather than unmarked, it is primarily the suggestive character of the words used here that expose her as an androcentric construction. Phrases like “unmarked belly,” “silly whiteness of her breasts,” “veins in her legs,” “inverted navel” and “unruly pubic hair” (*Dirt Music*, 56) imply contemporary, dominant beauty standards, which Georgie does not entirely fulfil.

Again, the female body is associated with a lack, a deviation from perfection, while the vocabulary used illuminates female clichés from a male viewpoint. The logocentrism of the text manifests itself in these markers that seem to address and create a common ground with a female readership under the premise of “No woman is perfect.” In doing so, however, it heavily stereotypes women’s fear of ageing and being unappealing to men.\(^\text{28}\) Thus, it reveals the dominant reading of an implied male readership, where the middle-aged woman

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\(^\text{28}\) Additionally, the fact that she has not experienced motherhood is emphasised in the phrase “unmarked belly,” which is free of stretchmarks or caesarean scars.
narcissistically spots and evaluates her remaining attractiveness as object of desire in the mirror. Iris Marion Young outlines this notion of sexual difference in cultural representations when she argues that the “metaphysics of self-identical objects has clear ties to the domination of nature in which the domination of women has been implicated because culture has projected onto us identification with the abject body.”

Young suggests here that women’s ways of looking at their bodies are shaped by the dominant cultural codes of representation. When breasts become an object of the male gaze, women undergo a process of alienation through the objectification and even self-objectification of their bodies. Their bodies turn into coded surfaces of culture and difference – always imprinted by prevailing exigencies of power and therefore losing its autonomy as a “natural” body. Similarly, Schaffer remarks that the Australian woman sees a redoubled illusion when she looks into the mirror. It is not only her image that she sees but also the male image of her.

The visible marks on Georgie’s body, the strap lines, the inconsistent tan in relation to the paleness of her breasts, the first signs of varicose veins, the disorderly pubic hair, show her corporeal abjection, directing explicit attention to the woman as sexualised other.

The male bodies in Dirt Music, in contrast, hardly receive this particular kind of detailed attention, unless they are described as the object of Georgie’s desire (Dirt Music, 57, 84) or Georgie’s harsh observation: “In the moonlight his chest looked flaccid. He [Jim] was aging – his breasts had begun to slip on him” (ibid., 399). Leaving aside that men’s breasts do not have the ambiguous connotation imposed on the female bosom, this is one of the few, vaguely critical remarks about a male body that can be found in Winton’s novels. Images of their pubic hair, unruly chest-hairs, short genitalia or first signs of beer bellies (considering the possibility), however, remain private, unseen, invisible and unmarked:

[T]he specificities of the masculine have always been hidden under the generality of the

29 Iris Marion Young, Throwing like a Girl and other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 192. See Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 204.
30 Ibid.
31 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 141-44, 190. Grosz emphasises that both men and women are trapped within the modes of self-production and self-observation and that both categories are equally subjected to the systems of corporeal productions. Hence women are “no more cultural, no more natural, than men” (144) but they are produced and represented differently.
universal, the human. Men have functioned as if they represented masculinity only incidentally or only in moments of passion and sexual encounter, while the rest of the time they are representatives of the human, the generic ‘person.’

It is exactly in these nuances of gender differences and representation where the male point of view shines through and marks Winton’s narrative as problematic when viewed from a feminist perspective.

To return to the issue of alcohol abuse in Winton’s narratives, it is important to point out that Georgie is troubled by a deep alienation from the people around her. Even the contact with her close family is rather sporadic and her relationship with Jim, her companion of three years, lacks depth and communication and is defined by pity and need instead of love and trust. Having lost his wife to cancer, Jim himself is deeply traumatised and suffers from his loss, seeing it as a divine punishment in response to a one-night-stand he had with Sally Fox, Lu’s dead sister-in-law, the night Debbie gave birth to their youngest child Josh. Filling the role of mother for the two boys, Georgie grows attached to the children and is crushed by one of Josh’s remarks uttered in childish anger when he called her his stepmother. At a later point, he symbolically marks her with a photo of his dead mother in a ritual-like gesture of reprimand:

Josh ripped back the adhesive of the album page and scraped off a photo of his mother. He held it at her face a moment and then raised it over her head in some awful priestly gesture she didn’t understand. His arm trembled with fury. The image felt like a jug of something he might tip over her at any moment. Stranger danger, he said through his milk teeth. Stranger. Danger. Georgie compelled herself to meet his gaze and he began to swat her with the photograph. It wasn’t forceful, just a casual batting about the ears and mouth and nose, a contemptuous motion that brought tears to her eyes. (Dirt Music, 49)

This affront shows her that despite adopting an important child-rearing position in the family, her status is clearly distanced from being considered an equal and fundamental part of the close-knit family triangle of Jim and the boys. Merged with a faint desire for motherhood, which she is so explicitly denied, Georgie’s alienation and frustration with her life and the guilt connected to her past grow steadily. Alcohol offers her the longed-for temporary relief she seeks, to exist outside of her body, detached from it, in a haze of liberating intoxication.

Alternative means of escape are also provided by cyberspace, which creates the illusion of complete freedom from social and cultural constraints and determination.

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34 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 198.
35 See Phelan, Unmarked, 167-80.
can leave her body behind and can live out a subjectivity that is equally disembodied and unsexed:  

Still, you had to admit that it was nice to be without a body for a while; there was an addictive thrill in being of no age, no gender, with no past. It was an infinite sequence of opening portals, of menus and corridors that let you into brief, painless encounters, where what passed for life was a listless kind of browsing. World without consequence, amen. And she felt light as an angel. Besides, it kept her off the sauce. (Ibid., 4)  

This desire to escape her body and the gendered qualities and confines it incorporates mirrors Georgie’s awareness of the narrow spaces given to women in the society of White Point. Her wish for transcendence correlates with the knowledge that her corporeality is shaped, measured and even produced by the social and cultural exigencies and expectations around her. Elizabeth Grosz argues in *Volatile Bodies* that bodies are the “products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself” and that historical, social and cultural factors “actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type.” Georgie’s body, therefore, not only functions as a symbolic text denoting her troubled state of mind, but can also be considered a direct product of the patriarcal structures, values, standards and heritage that accompany her character. Interestingly, it is Winton who literally writes the female body in this context, subjecting it to a fictional world that is inspired by still dominant dogmatisms of rural Western Australia. Winton enforces the link between the female body and lack, rather than with the rugged potency that accompanies the male body image. Take for example the physique of Jim, Scully and Sando (*Breath*, 56; *The Riders*, 236-37; *Dirt Music*, 36).  

Georgie’s body image, then, is split and fragile. Her insecurities have been fostered all her life by expectations about how she “should” be and her own recognition of being different from the perceived standard that she experiences around her in her sisters, her

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36 See Deutscher, “The Body,” 17. Cathryn Vasseleu, Elizabeth Grosz and Vickie Kirby argue that there can be no navigation in the virtual world without embodiment and that disembodiment in cyberspace is a fantasy (even predominantly a masculine fantasy). One can disavow but never dispense with the body.  
38 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, x.  
39 I refer here to the norm of the white, Protestant, rural, heterosexual Anglo-Saxon/Irish male. For another perception of ethics and aesthetics in rural Western Australia (WA), see Mischkulnig and Winton, *Smalltown*, 6. Also cf. Lynne Hillier, Lyn Harrison and Kate Bowditch, “Neverending Love’ and ‘Blowing your Load’: The Meanings of Sex to Rural Youth,” *Sexualities* 2, no. 1 (February 1999): 69-88. Their study illuminates the heterosexual norm and sexual behavior among youth cultures in rural Australia. Also see Lia Bryant and Barbara Pini, *Gender and Rurality* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 80-82.
mother or Sally. Her sisters always matched their mother’s traditional, upper middle-class expectations of femininity, being interested in clothes, shopping and make-up, which Georgie always discarded as superficialities:

She was the odd one out [...] She has felt loved in her way but it puzzled her to see the immense satisfaction her sisters gave her mother as they grew from infancy into girlhood [...] The enthusiasm with which they wore their frocks and pinnies and their hunger to wear her clothes and paste on her cosmetics made her queasy. They were ladies in the making. Gels. (*Dirt Music*, 167)

Furthermore, the extravagance and openness of Sally’s sexuality that is expressed through her body, is uneasily witnessed by Georgie, who finds a photograph and Sally’s old clothes when she tidies up Lu’s farmhouse:

Lu’s sister-in-law was, in Warwick Jutland’s sweet words, too much woman for her. She felt like a girl trying on her mother’s gear. You could make fists where that woman’s breasts had been and Georgie had neither belly nor hips enough to give those frocks shape [...] The woman was all hair and boobs and mouth. The mouth was sensuous, nearly ugly, always open. (Ibid., 327-28)

These stereotypes of femininity and female sexuality impose themselves on Georgie’s brittle self-image. Her status as an outsider in relation to these standards of the feminine is repeatedly stressed and exposes her deep sense of unsettlement and alienation. Also, her tomboyish beauty and ambivalent self-perception is set against Jim’s masculine, imposing but still charming and strangely vulnerable figure. His handsomeness is only enhanced by the marking of time and an air of hesitation and mystery:

He had crow’s feet like knifecuts. Handsome in a blocky way, of the sort she usually avoided, he was forty-five and looked it. Georgie gravitated towards lounge lizards, men with pointy sideburns and a cocked eyebrow. Whereas this bloke was a citizen. Although he was an imposing physical presence he looked hesitant, even fearful, as if he’d just woken to a different, a harder world. He shouldn’t have rated a second glance, but that charming desolation so intrigued her that Georgie decided to find a way of bumping into him. (*Dirt Music*, 57)

Georgie’s initial fascination with Jim is closely linked to her own suffering of loss and failure, which she sees reflected in the mourning widower. Compassion becomes entangled with self-pity, a symbiosis that forms the foundation of this functional but dissatisfying relationship (ibid., 397). Georgie’s personal dilemma, in which she becomes “disembodied” and “abstract” (260) as a result of substance abuse, starts when she realises that this present

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40 One of the few times that male ageing is described in relation to individual body parts is when Georgie spots Jim’s age in the sagging of his breasts: “He was aging – his breasts had begun to slip on him” (*Dirt Music*, 399).
life does not give her the prospect of a fulfilling future as part of her own family. Her strong desire for escape and the inability to transform this feeling into a constructive plan drives her into a heavy phase of alcoholism. Drinking Vodka Martini (Stoli), Chardonnay, Margaret River Semillon and beer as her favourites (4, 9, 69, 83), Georgie fights her ensuing hangover headaches with strong tablets that are gulped down with another ration of alcohol:

Georgie knew within the first half-hour that neither the vodkas nor the ten milligrams of Temazepam would get her over the edge tonight. She felt mind and body holding sleep at bay. The anxiety reminded her of those nights in Jeddah when she was afraid to sleep lest she dream once more of Mrs Jubail stalking her down the hospital corridors. The nightmare pursued her from Saudi Arabia and on the States, to Indonesia and home to Australia. (123)

As a consequence, Georgie’s perception of reality is diminished as she aimlessly lives through the day with continuous headaches and the self-delusional attitude of an addict who has reached a level of indifference. It is the utter disappointment of not being acknowledged by either Jim or his sons that motivates her behaviour. Her encounter with Lu slowly helps her to see an alternative way of existence. Still, Winton creates the impression that Georgie deliberately chooses partners who are deeply traumatised, so that she can inhabit the role of nurturing caretaker and thus exercise a certain amount of power over the men in her life (see Dirt Music, 108, 156, 190-91, 210).

Being marked as “stepmother” by Josh destroys Georgie’s illusion of motherhood in the context of her relationship with Jim and encourages her to seek the fulfilment of her dream in somebody else, in this case Luther Fox (ibid., 10). Subconsciously desiring the role of mother and wife, Georgie wishes to end her wandering existence. A reflection of this desire is illustrated when Lu returns to his farmhouse after his failed fishing attempt that triggered a struggle for survival and left him completely exhausted, sun-burned and tortured by ticks (154-58). Georgie takes care of him as if he was a child and in this moment she aligns the concept of domestic wifedom and motherhood with her previous sexual craving for Lu, which, in her attempt to keep his sperm inside her, also manifests the wish to be a mother.41 Seeing in Lu the potential love of her life evokes her hopes to change her life drastically – expectations that again are crushed when she discovers that he has left his farm for his self-healing expedition to the northern tropics. Taking advantage of the situation and legitimising her trespassing on Lu’s property with her role of self-appointed caretaker, Georgie slowly prepares the place for her to move in, with or without Lu. She eliminates the

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41 See in this context the earlier subchapter “A Rush: Sex and Self-Mutilation.”
numbing traces of trauma from the farm by burning Darkie’s, Sally’s and the children’s clothes, toys and other possessions in an excessive cleansing operation:

One of those days Georgie rolled an old drum down to the sandspit at the riverbend 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. (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 destruction of her lover’s past is also a self-serving measure to let go of her own traumatic experiences in Jeddah and fulfil her dream of family and settlement. Instead of leaving Lu’s personal room untouched in a gesture of respect, Georgie re-organises it to suit herself, placing her own comfort and interest first, trying to find and strengthen her own sense of self. It is her urge for renewal and spiritual re-birth that motivates her to claim the farm, changing it and making it agreeable to her own expectations. Her act of burning all the elements that are inextricably connected to 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. Georgie appears selfish and ruthless in her endeavour to move to the farm. She is clearly waiting for Lu to come back and live with her but, it seems, on her conditions, in a place that she has already made her own during his absence. She takes the liberty to play his guitar, she tries on his fingerpicks, reads his books, lies for hours in the bathtub and fills the house with the smell of her cooking (Dirt Music, 333).

The strong Western, imperial 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” (333). Slowly, she transforms his memory space into a place of female rupture that materialises his “project of forgetting” (103) by replacing the shadows of his past with the inscription of a possible

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future with her. Furthermore, she clearly marks her sense of belonging to the farm by rejecting the fragments of the past, choosing to spiritually liberate herself from the affluence of her class and the suffocating manifestation of colonial-capitalism in White Point. In this context it is important to draw a parallel between the presentation of Georgie’s persona as intrinsically lost, and her desired fulfilment in the conventional female role of nurturer, mother and wife. In this respect, she can be compared to Rose in *Cloudstreet* and Eva in *Breath*, whose pregnancies have more or less successfully opened up alternatives to a lifestyle of excess and paralysis.

Georgie’s role as being outside of conventional ideals of femininity and her constant feeling of un-belonging might be connected to her having been sexually abused as a young girl:

> She despised her sisters’ girly meekness, the cunning, desperate way they strove for cuteness out of fear of losing favour. They were strategically pliable. And Georgie was not. Yet she was the loner in the family. An uncle once said she had more balls than her father. He was the one who felt her up when she was fifteen […] She learned to steel herself. (*Dirt Music*, 41)

She has learned to protect herself from the vulnerability that comes with the feeling of being different from the people around her. However, with the passing of time, this façade of rebellion and defiance slowly cracks and reveals the deep insecurity underneath. It is only after her mother’s death that Georgie’s alcohol dependency decreases and is replaced by another mania, which symbolises a deep hunger within her that can neither be muted through alcohol, nor overshadowed by other forms of excess: “That summer Georgie’s nervous cooking jag became a feverish binge, as though she was trying to cook her way out of uncertainty. Even Jim, who loved the food, began to wonder aloud whether she wasn’t a little touched by the heat” (ibid., 257). This hunger, which is not only intrinsic to habits like anorexia, but works metaphorically on various levels in the context of female self-harm and

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43 See here Barbara Arizti, “Personal Trauma/Historical Trauma in Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music*,” in *The Splintered Glass. Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond*, ed. Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allu (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 181. Arizti has recently referred to Georgie’s cleaning and possessing of Lu’s farm as a necessary step for her to return to normalcy by returning to a more stereotypical female role in the domestic environment. She also highlights Winton’s difficulty of portraying independent female roles – which is an important point to make and also argued in this thesis: “This last stage in her return to normality is very significant indeed, as it involves a series of tasks traditionally associated with women. This seems to confirm Winton’s difficulties in portraying independent females: on the one hand, they are often strong, unorthodox, and outspoken characters, like Georgie; on the other, they find it difficult to cast off their traditional roles, or are punished in subtle ways for doing so.” (181)
perversion, is aligned here to food, and to Georgie’s last attempt to fulfil her housewifely 
duties in a family environment that is tense and cool rather than loving and warm. In the 
light of her complicated and dysfunctional family situation, Georgie’s compulsive cooking 
sessions metaphorically align a deep hunger for a functioning family with the desire to still 
it, to reach a level where personal fulfilment is finally happening. Furthermore, her wish to 
nurture is part of this desire, which merges self-fulfilment with the act of feeding and is 
represented by the role of motherhood.

Winton inextricably links three of the Jutland women, Georgie, Judith and Vera, with 
each other, using death and transience in both spiritual and physical terms as the sustaining 
and characterising signifiers for this connection. Georgie’s own unhappiness is eerily 
reflected in the breakdown of her sister Judith, who, in contrast to Georgie, has always been 
the ideal daughter for their mother Vera and strongly resembles her (170). Vera Jutland’s 
sudden death and her own unfulfilling, unhappy marriage (171, 205) have driven Jude into 
the abuse of Valium, which eventually escalates into a suicide attempt (273-74). Despite the 
obvious differences between the sisters, they both cannot cope with the realities of life 
without muting their individual pain with tranquilisers, either booze or pills: “The pills were 
Valium, she was certain, and Jude was blasted. She was totally stuck; they both were. 
They’d gone in opposite directions to the same end, to become their poor hopeless mother” 
(207). Georgie is refraining from life, enclosing herself in the protection of the familiar 
domestic surroundings and numbing herself through vodka and wine, while her sister 
alienates herself from reality and the people around her through an increasing intake of 
tablets. The focalising point, their mother, dies from a cerebral haemorrhage that 
simultaneously liberates her daughters from a suffocating presence and deprives them of a 
constant relationship in their lives.

44 They both wear the same lavender-scented perfume and share the same taste in men, as Jude indicates when 
she says “I married my father” (Dirt Music, 274).
45 The emphasis on the use of Valium in Dirt Music points towards the history of anti-depressant, tranquilising 
and anti-anxiety drugs among women in Australia, Valium being the most common one. See Summers, 
Damned Whores and God’s Police, 156-57.
Strategy+Household+Survey0x3a+Detailed. Also see “2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey 
Report.” Interestingly, research conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows that in 2007 
the preferred drinks for women were bottled wine and spirits. Also, people living in remote to very remote 
areas were more likely to drink at high-risk levels than in the other (metropolitan) areas.
Another similarity between the women in the family is bad luck with men, as is proven in the divorce between Vera and Warwick Jutland and the disappointing relationships between Georgie and Jim, Ann and Derek, Judith and Bob and Margaret and her ex-boyfriend (171). For Jude the role model in her life disappears with the death of Vera, whereas for Georgie the loss of her mother brings relief from social standards that she had not been able to live up to all her life: “[T]heir mother laughed with that special trill of disappointment she reserved exclusively for Georgie” (58).

In *Dirt Music*, Winton gives a central role to female depression and the hypocrisies within families, between mothers and daughters and fathers and sons. He enacts the fragility of present-day family structures in this novel, highlighting the paralysing effect of pretence in high society circles and the elusiveness of meaning when it comes to family. Both male and female protagonists struggle emotionally in this narrative. However, the element of morbidity is expressed through the death of the central maternal figures, and transience is reflected in the self-harming addictions of the female characters. The men of the story are heavily affected by loss, which enables them to go on a journey of recovery, but it is the death of beloved women which initiates this rite-of-passage, exemplified in Mrs. Fox’s, Bird’s and Sally’s death for Lu, and Debbie’s death for Jim.

Looking at the links between death, depression, self-harm and maternity in *Dirt Music*, I see that the novel not only criticises the continuing mother-centrality in Australian family structures, but also promotes a worldview that associates the woman and mother with an insistent negativity and romanticised nostalgic longing. How can we read and evaluate this textual bias and its neglect in the public reception of Winton’s work? Most of the women that Winton describes have suffered in their relationships: Georgie’s liaison with Jim is pragmatic, Judith’s marriage has cooled down, Vera is a divorcee, Mrs. Buckridge’s husband is abusive and Deborah’s and Jim’s marriage is marked by his unfaithfulness. By

47 See Tim Winton, “The Water was Dark and It Went Forever Down,” in *Minimum of Two* (Ringwood, VIC: McPhee Gribble and Penguin, 1987), 35-39: Here Winton depicts another example of troubled mother-daughter relationship that is strained by the mother’s alcoholism, “She just wished her mother would put the bottles away, raise the blinds, and come outside into the world again, but the girl knew she had a better chance of making the Olympics than changing her mother […] Depressed and drunk, she passed out while smoking in bed and woke in flames. Her nylon nightie crackled and hissed […] Years later, she told the girl she hadn’t wanted to alarm her by shrieking and waking her in the middle of the night looking the way she did, like a charred side of beef. From that moment the girl was convinced that her mother was either stupid or sick.” (35)

defining these relationships as dysfunctional and lacking honesty, Winton’s work seems to suggest that the transience of the women characters is related to the fragility of love. In this context, Winton’s realism creates a cathartic ground for contemporary male and female suffering through the unifying symbol of deep affection. It therefore centres attention on love as the source of all suffering, the loss of maternal love in particular. As Terry Eagleton points out:

> Realism is essentially representationalism. Such representationalism effaces the heterogeneity of textual production, insidiously naturalizes the sign, produces discursive closure, homogenizes narrative space and so voids it of contradiction, ranks its codes in a stabilizing hierarchy rather than permitting them to interrogate each other. And the effect of all this is a fixing of the specular reading or viewing subject in an ‘imaginary’ plenitude of his or her ideological position.\(^{49}\)

It is this naturalisation of woman as the sign of lost love that defines the reception and reproduction of Winton’s fiction in the cultural imagination, linking individual experiences of losing a mother, a sister, a friend and a partner with the soothing fiction that love is restored and restores the characters in the end. The story’s depiction of the social demography and the characters’ personal problems mimic reality, considering that one in three women nowadays is on antidepressants, alcoholism in remote parts of Australia is higher than in the city and cancer in women is one of the most deadly diseases in Australia and the world.\(^{50}\) Is the reading public captured within Winton’s imaginary plenitude, intrigued by the recognition of striking elements from their own lives in his fiction? Or can they step outside of his fictional framework, reflect upon his descriptions and engage in a critical reading in response to the novel’s dominant foci? Keeping in mind that Australia’s misogynist history still pervades social and cultural thinking today, I consider it crucial to closely investigate a text’s explicit or hidden ideological traces in order to create a discursive space that deconstructs, rather than silently accepts, existing hierarchical and homogenising tenets.

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The representation of female self-harm in Winton’s work thus incorporates traces of a predominantly masculine culture. These traces need to be addressed and are often found in relation to the concept of perversion. Unlike Georgie’s addictions, which are temporary compulsions, both Eva in *Breath* and Dolly in *Cloudstreet* behave in ways that can best be described as perverse. The clinical definition of perversion merely refers to any non-procreative sexual or heterosexual act, which imitates the procreative act. Patricia MacCormack’s essay “Perversion: Transgressive Sexuality and Becoming-Monster” elaborates in detail on the discursive history of perversion and monstrosity as cultural constructs. Influenced by psychoanalytic, feminist perspectives, MacCormack defines perversion as connected to the “open circuit of the flows of desire,” which can be found in the most outrageous acts or objects as well as in the quietest moments of masturbation. Acts or objects of perversion are part of existing social power structures, in which deviations from the norm are described in terms of perversity. In the re-negotiation of power relations and subjectivities, perversion plays a decisive role as it offers ways of submerging and transgressing the social and cultural systems that define it. Being generally positioned in opposition to normative hetero-sexuality, perversion is in constant flux, resisting the dominant discourses of power that denigrate it.

Furthermore, viewing perversion as the abject also evokes the association with monstrosity – an element that receives deeper consideration in the analysis of Dolly and Jewel in Chapter Four. MacCormack outlines the traditionally-established link between “woman” and “monster,” thus highlighting the ambiguous status of the deviant female body that wavers between enigma and disgust:

From hysterical women to homosexuals, perversion has a strong relationship with the naming of social-sexual monsters. Perversion can be described as monstrous sexuality, hence those becoming-perverse clearly risk being named monsters […] At the primary level of monstrosity, the very first departure from the white integrated subject is the woman. In this way, any woman is a monster to begin with, and has been for as long as can be historically traced. A body of difference, while being (especially in a compulsory hetero normative culture) an object of fascination, is simultaneously that of disgust. Inherent in fascination for something is distance from it, so that if the monster is object of fascination or even desire, the fascinated must oppose rather than align himself or herself to the monster.

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
In more technical terms, “perversion” is currently used to describe a personality disorder, a state of delinquency or a deviation, but leaves a lot of room for a broad range of facets that covers phenomena like zoophilia, paedophilia, terrorism or transsexuality. From the Middle Ages onwards, perversion was often seen as a way of upsetting the natural order of the world and seducing men to vice, turning them into corrupt beings with dubious morals and stirring them away from any form of confrontation between goodness and truth. Even today, the perception of perversion is closely aligned with a negative image of freedom, as Élisabeth Roudinesco points out in her historical overview of perversion *Our Dark Side*. She parallels the ambiguous fascination of perversity, or perversion, with the deep repulsion it induces:

> And whatever form it takes and whatever metamorphoses it has undergone, it still relates, as it always has done, to a sort of negative image of freedom: annihilation, dehumanization, hatred, destruction, domination, cruelty and *jouissance*. Yet perversion also means creativity, self-transcendence and greatness. In that sense, it can also be understood as giving access to the highest form of freedom, as it allows the person who embodies it to be both executioner and victim, master and slave, barbarian and civilized man. Perversion fascinates us precisely because it can sometimes be sublime and sometimes abject.

In her extensive discourse on female perversion and masquerade, Julia Kristeva aligns the concept of perversion with the sense of abjection, which is located in the superego. In her view this connection is manifested in the fact that neither the abject nor perversion gives up or assumes a prohibition, a rule or a law. Instead they use and corrupt them in misleading acts and take advantage of them. Both are situated close to death, sharing a rather destructive, ambiguous attitude towards life:

> It kills in the name of life – a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death – an operator in genetic experimentation; it curbs the other’s suffering for its own profit – a cynic (and a psychoanalyst); it establishes narcissistic power while pretending to reveal the abyss – an artist who practices his art as ‘business.’ Corruption is its most common, most obvious appearance.

Perversion, therefore, exceeds the commonly established norms, values and stereotypes of a particular society by transgression and violation of these boundaries. In this context, Louise Kaplan sees the pre-determined, socially normalised gender stereotypes as the “major hiding

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55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 4.
57 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 15-16.
places”\textsuperscript{59} for perversion. In her view, perversion can be regarded as a “quest for ecstasy,”\textsuperscript{60} which offers a way to articulate a large variety of unconventional, forbidden and shameful desires in order to relieve the self.\textsuperscript{61} The person who performs acts or behaviours of perversion without being conscious of perversion’s strategy uses these acts as a measure of survival from and triumph over childhood trauma.\textsuperscript{62}

With Eva and her self-destructing and self-exhilarating nature in mind, this short discourse on the characteristics of perversion provides a framework for re-considering Eva’s erotic asphyxiation in retrospect as well as one for the analysis of Dolly’s behaviour. As Eva’s predicament is extensively outlined in the previous chapter on sexuality and self-mutilation, the following discussion focuses analytic attention on Dolly and her excesses, which are also inextricably linked to alcohol consumption and failure as a mother.

Being described as a “damn goodlooking woman” (\textit{Cloudstreet}, 15), Dolly Pickles knows how to use her sex to get what she wants. She has numerous affairs with random men despite her marriage to Sam Pickles and their three children. Fear of ageing and the acknowledgement that the passage of time does leave marks on the body are decisive factors in her personal and physical degeneration. Early on she turns to alcoholic drinks to push away the awareness of her ageing physique and vanishing beauty. Being desired by men has been her capital all her life, simultaneously boosting her self-confidence and creating the illusion that she is in control. Sex for her is a mere commodity that is not primarily related to emotion but stands in close relation to the compulsive need for control and recognition, something she shares with her daughter Rose. Dolly is intensely jealous of Rose’s youth and good looks, and this even culminates in a feeling of hate towards her daughter (ibid., 154). Her frequent lapses into drunkenness become the norm, so that she is increasingly unable to care adequately for her family. Towards the end of the novel after Dolly’s suicide attempt,\textsuperscript{63} the truth about Dolly’s difficult childhood and her ambiguous relationship with her mother, whom she had always known as her sister, is revealed in a conversation between her and Rose:

My mother was my grandmother. My father was my grandfather.

\textsuperscript{59} Kaplan, \textit{Female Perversions}, 15.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 482.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 481. See Welldon, “Perversions in Men and Women,” 480-86. Welldon further elaborates the term “perversion” in a psychoanalytical sense.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{63} Although already hinted at earlier in the novel (\textit{Cloudstreet}, 123).
What?
The second oldest sister, the one who made me feel like rubbish all my life, that one was my mother. There we were. There we were.
Rose felt things falling within her, a terrible shifting of weights.
My God. My God. Mum! (357)\textsuperscript{65}

Having carried this knowledge all her life, Dolly now finally breaks the silence – a silence that has deeply affected her relationship with her own daughter. She shows no emotion while telling the story: “There were no tears in the old girl’s eyes; it was as though she’d been dried out forever in there” (357). The childhood mystery of her parentage discloses a history of disgrace, turning her as the product of her mother’s/sister’s underage teenage pregnancy into the focalising point and the human stigma of this personal and family memory of shame and embarrassment.

The text repeatedly presents Dolly in compromising situations, reducing her to the epitome of immorality and sexuality. While initially being characterised as the “play-doll” of male fantasies, she gradually becomes her own nemesis – her downfall initiated by her own self-centred obsessions with beauty and youth. Winton closely interlinks sex with attractive appearance in this novel, thus commodifying the beautiful female body as desirable and sexual. Dolly is thereby described as the primary agent in the commodification of her own body – a role intended to sustain the idea of herself as young, admirable and pretty \textit{(Cloudstreet}, 42).

\textit{Cloudstreet} suggests strong parallels between Dolly’s sexuality and her lack of mobility, insinuating that sex for her is the consequence of boredom: “Dolly never did get to try those rails. She just got to be goodlooking and cheeky and by sixteen she found herself out on her back under the night sky with a long procession of big hatted men […] No, she never did find out about those rails” (ibid., 79). Alcohol-fuelled promiscuity, outlined above as associated with perversion, characterises Dolly’s search for ecstasy as she drinks herself into unconsciousness and sleeps with men other than her husband; she defies conventional and social standards of right and wrong, merely thinking of herself and her own survival. This egocentricity, however, can also be seen as the consequence of her family history – being the object of shame and deceit. Dolly’s sexual and alcoholic conduct reflect a deep trauma that was never laid to rest:

\textsuperscript{65} The structural ambiguity in the first line of the quote can be interpreted as the possibility of an incestuous relationship trauma.
Remember those hot buckling rails up there, up north where childhood lived? [...] Can you see your big-boned sister watching you pass, her eyes narrowed in the dust, the diamond engagement ring plain obvious on her hand? How far it was from the rails, that blanched stretch of dirt where you got down off the horse, and with your fingers in the wire, climbed up on that gate, to look her straight in the face and say absolutely bugger all. Remember the groaning of cows? [...] oh, God, there was poison in you, Dolly. Right then, if you’d spat in her face you’d have blinded her, killed her. So why didn’t you? Well, that’s the question, old darling, that’s the wonder. (123-24)

Dolly never spoke to her mother about her feelings of anger and disappointment or about the reasons for the secrecy. The poison that Dolly refers to in this quotation is the result of the repressed desire to know her story and find closure that is never satisfied. Thus the past continues to haunt her and causes emotional suffering that Dolly attempts to control through her alcohol consumption. This act of evasion, however, also initiates the breakdown of Rose, whose response to her mother’s growing insensitivity, dislike and detachment is manifested in her anorexia nervosa (347). Tragically, Dolly mimics her own mother’s rejection and seeks consolation and distraction in unpaid self-prostitution and heavy, high-risk drinking. 66

This dilemma of emotional suppression is outlined by Estela Welldon in a 1996 article for the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*:

At other times, women keep all negative feelings silenced and turned inwards, with the result that they feel deep depression, low self-esteem, self-hatred, and the withdrawal from all social and intimate interactions. It is in this context that self-abuse, prostitution and abuse of children are available targets for otherwise unexpressed rage and frustration. 67

Dolly objectifies her own body, reducing herself to a mere tool for men’s pleasure to cover up her depression and receive some form of superficial approbation, which, however, is increasingly threatened by her age. As she becomes older, her alcohol consumption increases, which illuminates the fear of her body being less admired than before (*Cloudstreet*, 333). A dream that she has in the hospital reveals in grotesque and perverse manner the objectification of her body and its inextricable connection with alcohol:

Dolly saw the girl swimming through the crowd. It was hard to see because she herself was lying on the bar with men leaning on her and their drinks on coasters balanced on her belly, between her breasts, along her thighs. They were squeezing her for it, those men, milking her tits for beer, foaming up their glasses, reaching inside her camisole, forcing her legs apart to get at things and dragging out coins, furniture, dead babies and old bottles. (Ibid., 351)

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67 Welldon, “Perversions in Men and Women,” 486.
This dream correlates with Rose’s revelatory dream of her mother’s adultery – which Rose witnessed as a child (349) – and exposes the submerged trauma underlying Dolly’s whole existence. Ideas and memories of bodily, sexualised exposure to the male gaze and touch dominate the scene, evoking associations of lust, greed and violence. The female body as a commodity, which serves as an object of abuse and sensation, becomes the source of inebriation. Dolly is reduced to a mere toy that is used and then thrown away. Body memory is graphically visualised in this surreal scene where the trauma of Dolly’s life is dragged out of her in the form of coins, furniture, dead babies and bottles, emphasising how Sam’s gambling, Ted’s death, sex and her alcoholism are linked in her memory. This scene highlights what Iris Young refers to as the threat of objectification that women are at risk of experiencing. This includes the risk and threat involved in being seen and the invasion of her body space, which may culminate in rape. This dream illustrates Dolly’s self-deceit by making her believe that using her body as an instrument of attraction would give her the self-confidence and fulfilment that she needs. She has lost the autonomy over her body and becomes a mere passive observer that witnesses her own denigration. This dream, however, also illustrates a change that induces the death of her as an object and brings about a form of re-birth, which offers Dolly the chance to settle with her past and improve the relationship with Rose. The fact that she tells her story to her daughter signifies this desire for recovery. The act of telling is crucial in this respect because it gives this particular aspect of her identity the voice that had previously been muted.

Rose features significantly in Dolly’s life – both as nemesis and saviour. In Dolly’s dream, a dark-haired girl with a clock comes towards her. With every step the girl takes the male hands around Dolly die away (*Cloudstreet*, 351-52). Clear analogies can be drawn here between the girl that Dolly sees “between her knees” (ibid., 351) and her daughter, who shows her mother that time is running out for both of them, physically and metaphorically. Both women’s bodies are deteriorating, displaying excessive desires for control and evasion. By fixing their relationship and confronting each other’s maternal trauma, they both can ensure a future for themselves and reconnect with their bodies, transforming them from an

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*Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 155. It needs to be mentioned here that Young’s essay is not primarily directed at female sexuality but engages more with women’s body spaces and performances generally. Young argues in this essay that the more inhibited use of female body space derives from the threat of being looked at. Opening her body “in free, active, open extension and bold-outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification” (155).
object of control and denial to an integrated, innate constituent of their own selves as active agents. As Welldon states with reference to Freud, perversion is connected to depression. The loss of the ego and part of one’s identity causes an immeasurable emptiness inside a person.69 This loss links to motherhood and the abject loss that comes with it.70 Dolly realises that she does not wish for Rose to share her fate and equally comes to the conclusion that she cannot cope with her past without re-establishing a firm emotional bond with her own daughter. In perversion the death drive for the pervert is connected to life,71 but Dolly eventually manages to abandon this self-numbing, deadly behaviour and chooses life itself when she opts for a symbolic reunification with her own mother by re-establishing her maternal instincts towards Rose.

The representation of Dolly as the binge-drinking, openly sexual, unfaithful, attractive and egocentric “bad” mother heavily stigmatises her character in the novel. Her whole existence is based on patriarchal stereotypes of the fascinating but devious femme fatale whose addictive personality and tragic, Oedipal history eventually breaks her and degrades her to a degenerated, ageing and grotesque shadow of a woman. Her narcissistic obsession with beauty, her neglect of husband and family and the very obvious Freudian analogies within the story, epitomised in her relationships with her lovers, her daughter Rose and her son Ted, align the woman with male fantasy and nightmare respectively. Dolly’s sexual opportunism and alcoholic indulgence, despite being symptoms of childhood trauma, do not leave much room for character development beyond the defining stereotypes of Winton’s representation. The reader sympathises with her but is still repulsed by her superficiality and selfishness.

The connection between Dolly as the “Damned Whore” and Oriel/Rose as “God’s Police” significantly overshadows the nuances of the female representation in Cloudstreet – a fact that also defines the recent television adaptation of the novel.72 Stressing the problematic representation of the maternal figures in Cloudstreet, Lyn McCredden sees

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71 Verhaeghe, “Perversion: ‘Your Balls or your Life,’” 188.
72 Tim Winton’s Cloudstreet, directed by Matthew Saville (2011; Australia: Austar/Foxtel, 2011), DVD.
Winton’s writing as “venomous” and debilitating in the portrayal of motherhood. The characterisation of Dolly as the failing, impotent mother, she also sees Oriel as significantly weakened in the narrative’s unsympathetic depiction: “So the role of mother, and the very space of the maternal, is registered as burden, impossible contradiction, the place of death.” Additionally, projecting the common stereotype of the drunken man onto the woman and mother further increases the alienation of the female from social acceptance. In this respect, Dolly’s fate resembles that of Eva, whose masturbation practices are proven to be used more frequently by men. This discussion of representation in Cloudstreet and other Winton novels is developed in further chapters of this thesis, devoted to the constructions of motherhood and the body.

Intoxication as a subject and theme is also very prevalent in The Riders and In the Winter Dark, where the female characters drink heavily and are looked down on by the male characters. Ida, Ronny and Irma resort to alcohol but we are not explicitly told if these acts derive from deep-seated trauma or are merely temporary ways of seeking relief. Ida’s motivation seemingly lies buried in an unhappy, monotonous marriage and a limited existence in the small farming “community.” Her dissatisfaction is reflected in her thoughts the morning after drinking with Ronny: “Ida felt the bed churning through space. She held the edge of the mattress and kept her eyes closed […] With her lids squeezed shut until moons burst into view behind her eyes, Ida Stubbs prayed that this spinning would take her away, out of this place for ever” (In the Winter Dark, 76). Her death at the end of the novel, accidentally shot by her own husband, fulfils her wish for release as expressed in this quote, but also re-affirms Winton’s tendency to place his women characters in direct relation to death and morbidity. Excessive female drinking in his novels is linked with perversion and childhood trauma – symptomatic of a history of abuse – and is presented as being closely related to mother-daughter relationships. Irma in The Riders attempts, if only temporarily, to replace Jennifer as mother and wife, but is rejected by Scully, who is repulsed by her drinking and seedy flirtation: “She flushed and emptied the glass of bourbon with a grimace.

73 Lyn McCredden, “Mapping the Maternal: A Reading of Contemporary Australian Fiction and Society,” Kunapipi 15, no. 2 (1993), 31
74 Ibid., 32-33.
75 The myth is that autoerotic fatalities occur only in men. Women, however, do occasionally engage in autoerotic activities as well. See Cowell, “Autoerotic Asphyxiation: Secret Pleasure Lethal Outcome?” 1322; Ronald F. Becker, Criminal Investigations (Mississauga, ON: Jones and Bartlett, 2009), 232-33.
which became a smile. He wanted to grab that neck in both hands and wring it like a towel” (The Riders, 209).

The men in Winton’s stories are primarily described as abstinent and detached from the women’s addiction, which they harshly criticise or silently abhor. Despite sharing an occasional drink, they are in control of their drinking and prefer to stay away from alcohol excesses. So Georgie tries to convince Lu to join her for a beer in her Perth hotel room (“I’ll buy you a beer, she says.” Dirt Music, 77), Jim refrains from drinking any alcohol since the night of drunken escapade when he cheated on his wife Debbie with Sally Fox (Dirt Music, 400), and Scully critically regards Irma’s drinking habits (“‘You should stay off the piss for a while,’ he said as kindly as he could.” The Riders, 209); he shares this attitude with Maurice Stubbs, who shouts at his drunken wife (In the Winter Dark, 72). These examples show that common stereotypes, which describe the male as rational and considerate and the female as emotional and excessive, are again reaffirmed.

In concluding this chapter, I return to the question: why is it that Winton risks trivialising the sensitive topics of substance abuse and addiction among women by so continuously combining female self-harm and stereotype, as in Cloudstreet and Dirt Music? Why does he create a new economy of stereotypes by not only revisiting conventional dichotomies of femininity but also converting male stereotypes into female ones? Could this representation be motivated by the fact that more women nowadays adopt social roles that were traditionally perceived as male? But why focus on women as heavy drinkers, sexual perpetrators, adulterers and failing mothers? Women who, in a state of discontent, use their power over their own bodies to stabilise the myth that they are in control? Or maybe they actually are in control after all, and Winton criticises the destructive effect that he sees to be part of this inequality? I believe that the women in all of Winton’s novels can be seen as metaphors that visualise and centre male fears in the female body. The representation of women as marked in various ways imaginable contributes to making the abstract concept of gender identity (and the fear connected to it) visible, and thus opens up the illusion of controlling this concept. By appropriating self-harm and femininity as a medium to visualise the anxieties of masculinity, in and outside of fictional representation, masculinity hopes to understand its own crisis and therefore transform it into a stable identity. Fear and hope manifest within this approach, as demonstrated by the popularity of Winton’s novels. Who
does not prefer the anonymous space of a novel than their own life to confront what they are scared of?

Peggy Phelan remarks that “representation functions to make gender, and sexual difference more generally, secure and securely singular – which is to say, masculine.” In her view it is the hope to have one’s own reality confirmed which motivates the desire to look to representation, capturing the reader/viewer in a state of suspension between “the depressing loop of disappointment and the aspiring arc of hope.” I see this desire and its attendant hope to see oneself reflected in Winton’s realism as the main pillars of his popularity – a dangerous hope that accepts the masculine as its foundation.

In the next chapter, Dolly’s bloated, poisoned body receives its counterfoil in her daughter Rose’s emaciated body shape – combining two extremes in their hunger for self-empowerment and revenge. Again, death is visibly inscribed upon the female body – turning her into a “filthy pretty skeleton” and a “scarecrow” (Cloudstreet, 153, 161, 350), a masculine performance disguised in the visibility of the female body mark.

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76 Phelan, Unmarked, 172
77 Ibid., 172-73.
2.3. A Scarecrow: Anorexia and Hunger in *Cloudstreet*

The world had changed.
I was ecstatic.
Some vital part had found its way back to me.
My arms joined my body as though they
really belonged to me, almost as though *I*
belonged to me.

Fiona Place, *Cardboard*¹

Rose Pickles, one of the main female characters in Winton’s most successful novel *Cloudstreet*, is a beautiful, quiet girl who, like so many young women, suffers from an eating disorder, which has become one of the most prevalent and destructive diseases in Western society alongside bulimia: anorexia nervosa. Anorexia, which literally means “loss of appetite,” is a disorder that entails the literal starvation of the body by denying it the nutrients it requires through highly controlled and steadily decreasing food-intake.² Isabelle Caro, the French anorexic model who participated in the Nolita billboard campaign against anorexia in the fashion world, stages the horror of the disorder on her naked body.³ One in one hundred Australian adolescent girls develops anorexia nervosa, which is the third most common chronic illness in that age group in Australia after obesity and asthma. Anorexia has the highest mortality rate among females aged between fifteen and twenty-five. Its average duration is seven years but the disorder can last well into adulthood.⁴ Even when women recover, they are unlikely to enjoy an entirely healthy relationship with food. Lisa Appignanesie discusses this frequent tendency in women, but also, as more recently covered

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¹ Place, *Cardboard*, 186.
in scientific research, in men, as a form of self-starvation that can be considered “the most passive and conventionally feminine form of dissent.” There is a diversity of approaches to the explanation of this phenomenon in medical, psychoanalytical and psychiatric discourse.

In this chapter I argue that Cloudstreet reduces anorexia to a primarily private problem deriving from the fractured mother-daughter dialectic and the motif of revenge. Winton simplifies the psychological and sociological complexity of the disorder, creating the illusion that a successful pregnancy and childbirth can re-settle Rose back into a healthy and happy lifestyle. The addictive nature of anorexia and the ways in which socially promoted beauty standards contribute to the disease are neglected in the novel. Although Rose’s portrayal provides strong cues for a psychoanalytic interpretation, it too easily resolves the effects and symptoms of the disorder in a wider socio-cultural context. Reconciliation with her mother eventually seems to be the starting point for a full recovery, topped by a successful pregnancy and childbirth. Not denying that these factors may positively affect the healing process of an anorexic person, I nevertheless see this development as romanticised and dismissive of the long-term struggle that the disease causes for many women. To create the basis for my close textual analysis, it is important to first refer to essential facts about anorexia and its history and then introduce fundamental psychoanalytic and cultural views about the disorder. The female body as a site of memory – the inscription of trauma – is illuminated in the upcoming analysis. This discussion further manifests the thesis’s claim

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that female self-harm is instrumentalised by the narrative in creating a platform for masculinity to voice its loss of stability through women’s “hystories”.  

Drawing from the occurrence and documentation of eating disorders as early as the thirteenth century through to the eighteenth century, which aligned anorexia with the supernatural and the demonic, William Withey Gull was one of the first scholars to clinically define the disorder as “anorexia nervosa” in England in the late nineteenth century (1874). At the same time (1873) Charles Laségue identified it as “Anorexia Hystérique” in France, stating the connection between the disorder and the nineteenth century female diagnosis of hysteria. Many cases of anorexia at the time used to go hand in hand with a diagnosis of hysteria. At the turn of the twentieth century Freud already referred to the existence of a neurosis in girls that, once puberty is reached, illustrates their aversion to sexuality by means of anorexic behaviour. He also links the neurosis to depression, melancholia and hysteria, while aligning young women’s aversion to food to their rejection and fear of the male phallus as a symbol for sexual intercourse and pregnancy. In this respect, eating disorders in the Freudian psychoanalytical view are interrelated with a rejection of the mother, who is the epitome of sexuality, fertility and nurturing. Freud’s argument in his essay “Female Sexuality” (1931) evokes the controversial question of whether femininity is itself structured upon an insatiable need for consumption – a question that has been taken up by later theorists. In this thesis, this early psychoanalytic theory is evaluated by referring to feminist approaches and responses to Freud in this particular matter. In more recent theories

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7 The term “hystories” has been taken from Elaine Showalter’s Hystories – Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). It draws the bond between women’s (hi)stories and the construct of hysteria – a condition strongly associated with anorexia nervosa.


on anorexia, the disorder is often described as a form of “hunger strike,” in which control over the body exemplifies the confrontation with and rejection of the social expectations and restraints that this body is exposed to. It is a form of protest that responds to the woman’s “indictment of a culture that disdains and suppresses female hunger, makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs, and demands women’s constant work on the transformation of their bodies.” The interest in anorexia in scientific discourse was revived in the 1960s with the theoretical reflections of Hilda Bruch, a Jewish-German expatriate, who worked in the United States as a doctor and psychoanalyst. She regards the reasons for eating disorders as embedded within the developmental context of the family. An eating disorder, in her view, is the child’s response to a mother figure that is “unnaturally rejecting or over-nurturing.” This point will play some significance in the textual analysis of Cloudstreet, in which the family network is the central acting ground for Rose’s problems.

Interestingly, Appignanesi refers to the fact that women have interiorised the male gaze – a prominent issue of analysis discussed in Chapter Four – and treat their bodies as an object of that gaze themselves: “[I]nevitable distortions between how the body is imagined from within and how it appears to others are common enough. But the gulf between inner and outer perceptions can be so deep as to produce wild distortions, which is when anorexia or dysmorphia can occur.” Anorexia is related to a body image that is socially and culturally defined. In most Western societies this image is closely linked to thinness and immaculate fatless body shapes, which attribute to the woman a “strange state of grace.”

13 See Orbach, Hunger Strike.
15 Appignanesi, Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind, 387-88. See Paula Saukko, The Anorexic Self – A Personal, Political Analysis of a Diagnostic Discourse (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 37-55, where she discusses Bruch’s ideas. She points out that in her view Bruch’s post world war interpretations of obesity and anorexia are made in relation to contemporary American agonies about democracy and its threats: “What the chapter on Bruch demonstrates is that our current understanding of obesity and anorexia are made in relation to contemporary American agonies about democracy and its threats: “What the chapter on Bruch demonstrates is that our current understanding of obesity and anorexia as having to do with lack of autonomous self-will does not indicate a psychological universal but is deeply lodged in a specific historical place and time and its political agenda.” (10)
17 Ibid., 389. Dysmorphia or body-dysmorphic disorder describes the distorted, obsessive sense that some women have of their own bodies or body parts, which often has nothing in common with the reality. The consequential feelings of ugliness and the necessity to reach an ideal often initiate plastic surgery or other form of beauty corrections.
18 Hornbacher, Wasted, 6-7. Also see Helen Greemillion, Feeding Anorexia. Gender and Power at a Treatment Center (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 26-36. Greemillion argues that “anorexia embodies contemporary ideals of femininity” (30), and draws a connection to sociological and cultural views of the disorder as a “culture-bound syndrome” (26). Still, she emphasises the fact that she reads the female body as both a resource and a “natural” limit in lived articulations and experiences of identity discourses manifested in
This grace encapsulates everything that a girl is missing in her life – a projection of longings, dreams, and imaginings, a way to escape the problems, insecurities and trauma she is facing in her real-life situation. Loss of weight and a thin figure correspond with gaining and losing control, as Cross points out when she talks about the relationship between body and self:

[The metaphorical destruction between body and self collapses: thinness is self-sufficiency, bleeding emotional catharsis, bingeing is the assuaging of loneliness, and purging is the moral purification of the self [...] the body comes to resent its task master...escapes control and inflicts its own persecution...as body and self constantly shift roles of victim and victimizer, master and slave.]^{19}

This shifting relationship between desperation and control in anorexia entails a lot of self-discipline and manipulation of others and oneself. As Appignanesi observes, the feeling of being out of control (through personal experiences of loss, change or the sense of imprisonment) leads to a desire for control.^{20} Re-gaining control is manifested in the authority over one’s own body and weight, which becomes an obsession and eventually turns into a disgusted rejection of food. Psychoanalysis has made attempts to equate this disgust with food with a clear and rebellious distancing of the young woman from the mother, who incorporates the role of nurturer and can, therefore, be paralleled metaphorically to food intake.^{21} Interestingly, in this context, Marya Hornbacher, who published a memoir on her own anorexia and bulimia, describes her relationship with food as an intense, all-consuming love:

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21 See the work of Anna Motz, Estela V. Welldon, Lisa Appignanesi.
Never believe an eating-disordered person who says she hates food. It’s a lie. Denied food, your body and brain will obsess about it […] Food is the sun and the moon and the stars, the center of gravity, the love of your life. Being forced to eat is the most welcome punishment there is.  

This obsession also relates to Elizabeth Grosz’s view, which considers anorexia an intense, stark and striking sexualisation of biological instincts, expressed in the way an anorexic woman risks her life in the attainment of an ideal body image. In her opinion anorexia is a form of mourning, protest and control:  

[A]norexia can, like the phantom limb, be a kind of mourning for a pre-Oedipal (i.e., precastrated) body and a corporeal connection to the mother that women in patriarchy are required to abandon. Anorexia is a form of protest at the social meaning of the female body. Rather than seeing it simply as an out-of-control compliance with the current patriarchal ideals of slenderness, it is precisely a renunciation of these ‘ideals.’  

The woman in her aspirations to come close to a personal ideal finds affirmation in seeing her body growing skinnier and increasingly fragile, differing so drastically from the figure associated with the time of emotional suffering and loss of control:  

An eating disorder appears to be a perfect response to a lack of autonomy. By controlling the amount of food that goes into and out of you, you imagine that you are controlling the extent to which other people can access your brain, your heart […] Your intention was to become superhuman, skin thick as steel, unflinching in the face of adversity, out of the grasping reach of others.  

Criticising the frequent tendency in scholarly discourses to look at anorexia in dichotomous and exclusive ways and arguing that these discourses reflect rather than deconstruct contemporary ideals of femininity, Paula Saukko, herself anorexic, reflects on her illness

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23 I use the term “anorexic” to refer to people suffering from anorexia, but acknowledge the alternative expression “anoretic” as used, for example, in Orbach’s *Hunger Strike*.  


from a personal, social and political perspective by highlighting the urgent need for research to acknowledge the fact that discourses on anorexia are full of contradictions and ideals, which have both empowering and disempowering elements to them. Not to recognise the many faces of the disorder might be considered to degrade anorexic women to “victims of sexist discourses” and oversimplifies “the personal and political agendas embedded in the ideals.” Following the Russian philosopher and linguist Valentin Voloshinov, she does not refer to the consciousness of anorexics as false or true, but as dialogical and polyvocal – discussions between multiple voices that echo the idiosyncratic social sensibilities and agendas of their time. Saukko approaches the topic academically from the position of an insider and therefore presents a crucial modification to the previously established research on eating disorders. Her position helps to evaluate Winton’s portrayal of anorexia as monovocal, lacking the refinement and complexity considered essential by Saukko, by exclusively placing the disorder in the domain of the family and the repudiation of the mother. In Cloudstreet, anorexia is highly stigmatised, reduced to a form of revenge and rebellion within the mother-daughter conflict and a symptom of trauma in childbirth, as shown later on in this chapter. It is this reduction of the disorder, however, which insinuates the narrative appropriation of the anorexic body as a medium for underlying criticism – a criticism that signposts female excess and desire for control as the destructive norm.

The act of separating the self from the mother is often part of the anorexic process. In feminist approaches that deal with the reasons for girls to develop an eating disorder, the concept of the “false self” plays a significant role. Susie Orbach argues in Hunger Strike that if the mother fails to convey a good, healthy physicality and body image to her child, the girl or boy is deprived of the chance to develop an “authentically experienced body.” This “false body” covers the insecurities inside, and the people who develop an eating disorder shape their bodies alongside their views of socially accepted and respected lines. This means, according to Orbach, that the disorder eventually becomes the whole identity of the person who is anorexic and who presents her body to the world:

27 Ibid., 2.
28 Ibid., 6. Also see Valentin N. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (New York: Seminar Press, 1973).
29 Appignanesie, Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind, 392.
30 Orbach, Hunger Strike, 71-72.
31 Appignanesie, Mad, Bad and Sad: A History of Women and the Mind, 395.
This plastic body, which can represent the negative, hated aspect of the unfulfilling mother, the bad object, can be shrunk into non-existence. But at the same time, it is her body and it is all that she has: her real self is just a tiny, confused infant.\[^{32}\]

Also relating anorexia directly to the relationship between mother and daughter, Kim Chernin discusses her own anorexia and the anxiety of becoming her over-ambitious, authoritative mother – a fear that is manifested in the woman’s relation with food. Distancing herself from the mother’s body and femininity – the epitome of reproduction, the young woman starves her body to erase any similarity with the maternal: “Is it a wonder, then, that so many women are tempted to take on lean, male bodies in the hope that they might escape from the mother’s destiny without enduring all that remorse of leaving the mother behind?”\[^{33}\] In this context, Anna Motz and Estela Welldon have noted that food refusal is also often related to other self-harming methods like cutting or burning. In their views, starvation can be linked to the unconscious wish to stop menstruating and to violently reject their sexuality and the image of the mother incorporated in them.\[^{34}\] This view relates to Jane M. Ussher’s opinion that adolescent girls often struggle to develop a positive sexual identity because of the social stigma attached to the female body, the breasts and menstruation in particular, as unclean, sexual and split from the female mind. The Madonna/whore binary comes into play again, often making it difficult for teenage girls to come to terms with their emerging sexuality and the changes in their bodies. Consequently, they start to separate these bodily changes entirely from themselves.\[^{35}\] Anorexia can be seen as one of the most extreme forms of this mind-body split in the search for a perpetuation of identity. It turns into what Orbach calls the quintessential expression of a discomfort with oneself and “an extreme manifestation of the denial of selfhood.”\[^{36}\]

One of the leading cultural critics on anorexia and femininity is Susan Bordo, who defines anorexia and obesity as two sides of the same coin – the “double-bind” of consumer capitalism. Anorexia to her reflects the need for control, self-monitoring and restraint of

\[^{32}\] Ibid. Orbach’s standpoint of viewing female embodiment as an interpellation of media representations, thus ignoring other important factors in the consideration of anorexia, is criticised in Bray, “The Anorexic Body,” 419-20. Bray’s essay gives a detailed discursive overview of feminist readings of anorexia in the media age and critiques the views of feminists like Orbach, Kim Chernin, Susan Bordo and Laura Brown, who, in her view, tend to present “culture as a monolithic patriarchal system while romanticizing the pre-cultural as the space of a non-alienated female embodiment” (418).


\[^{34}\] Ibid., 396. Also see Motz, *The Psychology of Female Violence*, 153-59.


\[^{36}\] Orbach: *Hunger Strike*, 48.
desire in contemporary Western society. It is the “extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression of desire,” while obesity mirrors the tendency to give in to desire as manifested in consumerism and commodities. Additionally, Germaine Greer argues that anorexia is not so much “disorderly eating as a protest against disorderly eating, a desperate attempt to get an uncontrollable situation under control.”

In *Cloudstreet*, Rose uses her body as a means of expression, illustrating Appignanesi’s description of anorexia as a recreation of form, so that “[t]he body that she has created is after all not really hers” but a matrix on which various voices are imprinted. She creates a corporeal self that enacts her trauma visually, a body that reflects her personal longing for routine and security, which she is denied in her family. Simultaneously, her body tells the story of her personal suffering but instigates a wider narrative of restrictions, expectations and indoctrination through representation. Rose’s “steely determination, economic ability and command of language” which, in Fiona Morrison’s view, mediates her (and Oriel’s) experience of the world, is seen in this context as an expression of loss, rather than, as Morrison argues, a reflection of matriarchal power and masculinised rite of passage. In contrast to Morrison, who regards Quick’s experiences and inarticulateness as more self-destructive than Rose’s, this thesis argues that despite Rose’s ability to small-talk, it is the failure to communicate her inner self through language that centres expression on her body in equally self-liberating and (self-)destructive manners. In Winton’s story, Rose’s anorexia serves to emphasise her desperate need for power and supremacy over the

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37 Susan Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body,” in *Body/Politics – Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 99, see also 83-109. Also see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight – Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99-212. Widely acknowledged, Bordo, however, also receives criticism from other feminists. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, gives Bordo credit for her psychoanalytic approach but points out that the dimension of the ontological and socio-political status of the body as product remains unexplored. See Grosz, *Volatile Body*, 143.


40 See Day, “1. Pro-anorexia and “‘Binge-drinking,’” 242-48. In this article, Day raises awareness concerning the notion that heavy drinking and anorexia among women can be considered a site of resistance against feminine ideals manifested in society, and she emphasises that a rejection of these values can also easily fall back on traditional masculine values instead: “As argued, what may be considered as instances of resistant femininity might also be understood as instances of an investment in culturally validated masculine ideals” (246). Furthermore, she argues in agreement with Saukko (2007) that merely reducing these disorders to symptoms of social and cultural pressures obscures notions of agency and oversimplifies processes of power. The victimisation of both Dolly and Rose in Winton’s representation as intrinsically linked to mother-daughter relationships can thus be regarded as reductionist and simplistic – following a very Freudian objective, as it is often the case in Winton’s fiction.

41 Morrison, “Figures of the Many and the One,” 8-10.

42 Ibid., 10.
other people in her life, while also expressing the disgust and shame that Dolly evokes in her. Rose steels herself against the world through an excessive desire for (matriarchal) control. This connotes a persistent fear of deprivation, reflecting the loss of power rather than its gain.

Winton gives high narrative priority to the depiction of the relationship between Dolly and Rose Pickles – mother and daughter – both of whom are troubled by personal tragedies of self-inflicted harm. Rose’s rebellion is not against Dolly’s “maternal, domestic femininity” and her “lack of position and authority outside of the domestic arena,” but against her mother’s lack of the domestic and maternal values that she, Rose, so ardently longs for. By positioning the anorexia of daughter in opposition to the excess of mother, Winton reduces the “tyranny of slenderness” to the stereotypes of revenge on the one hand and maternal envy on the other. Increasingly unsettled by her ageing body and fading attractiveness, Dolly jealously begins to see her daughter as a rival. The teenager’s anorexia is a form of personal response to the undisciplined, egocentric and careless behaviour of a mother whose constant bouts of drunkenness force the girl to mature rapidly: assuming control of the household, learning to cook and taking care of her two brothers, fragile father and Dolly herself. Consequently, the resentment and rejection Rose develops toward her mother mirror a silent reproach against neglect.

While the novel highlights the constant imperfections of the women characters, the failings of the men are downplayed by presenting them as the naïve and unlucky but nevertheless loving and caring father figures. For example, the weak resolve of larrikin figure Sam Pickles (Rose’s father) is evident through his frequent lapses of horse betting, jeopardising the family’s financial security in the process (e.g. Cloudstreet, 123). Still, Rose is able to love him, considering him as much a victim of her mother’s destructive eccentricities as the children (ibid., 16). By exemplifying both Sam’s and Rose’s victimisation, the young girl recollects overhearing her mother having sexual intercourse with a stranger at the time her father was admitted to hospital after an accident, which cost him four fingers from his right hand:

43 See Probyn, Carnal Appetites, 144.
44 See here Hopkins, “Writing from the Margins,” 51-53. Hopkins refers here to Rose’s anorexia and Dolly’s alcoholism as deriving from traumatic mother-daughter relationships that are cross-generational.
45 Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body,” 104.
She calls out to her mother but there is no reply, though she detects an intake of breath from behind the door. Now that it’s all in the past, anyone can see the woman astride the bed with her dress up. The sweat on her skin. The Catalina pilot with his belt undone and his hat on the table. You can smell the beer on their breaths, you get so close. So close, you hear the blood in their fattened hearts. And out in the corridor you witness the terrible boiling dark in the schoolgirl’s head, the confusion, the feeling, the colour she can’t put a name to. (14)

This experience influences Rose’s further development and self-image, prompting a hunger for control, regularity and a world that is the antithesis of her own. Wavering between the naiveté of a young girl and the dawning unsavoury realisation of what might be happening behind the closed door of her parents’ bedroom, Rose understands that the breathing she hears is symbolic of secrecy and deceit – her mother eschewing family bonds in favour of promiscuous extra-marital relationships. The breath reference reflects Winton’s obvious fascination with the act of breathing as a multilayered, constitutive and symbolic entity – a preoccupation culminating in his novel *Breath*. This sound stays with Rose subconsciously until much later in her life when the full awareness of this day’s significance is revealed to her in a daydream, which will be discussed presently.

This confusing event is linked to another central moment in Rose’s life, which underlines the girl’s inner perception of and reflection on her situation as an individual and as part of a family. This moment occurs when she is going to the pub of the Railway Hotel to pick up her mother from one of her usual drinking sessions in the Ladies Lounge. Rose cannot bear the stinking surroundings of the establishment and the jabbering old men with their sexist remarks. She realises that her mother drives her as an under-aged child to enter these establishments for her own, Dolly’s, sake:

Rose walked into the raw bush and found a place in the shade and just sat thinking nothing […] Sometimes she hated being alive. But right now, out in the cooling street with no one coming past, she just felt all hard inside. She’d get the old girl out, even if she had to wait till closing time. She was hungry and angry, her heart felt like a fist, and she know that if she took her time she was strong enough to do anything at all. (*Cloudstreet*, 106)

A longing for escape takes precedence, creating within Rose a sense of self in complete opposition to the lustrous and sexual aggression of her mother. This is manifested in the starvation of Rose’s body, which noticeably adopts the shape of death, a skeleton – frail and delicate. Combined with the natural process of physical maturation, Rose’s appearance evokes the envy of Dolly, who laments time’s decaying hands on her own saggy flesh. In
Dolly’s view, Rose is turning from “a clever little miss” (ibid., 16)\(^{47}\) into a “filthy-pretty skeleton” (153), epitomising all the female qualities she is slowly losing and, thus, constituting her quintessential nemesis. Rose’s body also, however, illustrates both women’s infatuation with death, again associating the female with transience – life-negating instead of life-embracing:

Rose looked frightening now, like a ghost, with those big eyes. Her wrists looked like twigs and she did nothing but stare. Dolly knew what it meant, that stare. You’re old and clapped out, it said, and you’re getting fat and your teeth are bad and you don’t do a bloody thing, and here I am, young and clean and sweet and I’m doing your jobs, old girl, and I’ll die from it and you’ll suffer. Dolly tried not to think about how she hated Rose these days. It was a wonder that it could happen, that a mother could turn like that from loving to hating […] Rose was the enemy. It wasn’t the sort of thing you let yourself think about, but you knew. (153)

The deep insecurity and emotional trauma that underlie Dolly’s actions have been outlined earlier and will be elaborated upon further in Chapter Four. Here, her harsh feelings towards her daughter evoke a psychoanalytic reading of Rose’s anorexia and explain some of the motivations for Rose’s excessive need of control.

Refraining from connecting Rose’s dilemma with socially induced beauty stereotypes and their ensuing pressures on adolescent girls, Winton presents her disorder along Freudian lines, indicating that her actions are a direct response to her family situation, her domestic and financial constraints and, above all, the tense relationship with her mother. The Electra complex fuels Winton’s portrayal of both women: Rose’s disorder and Dolly’s alcohol and sex addiction are reduced to narrative instruments that emphasise the failings of the maternal.\(^{48}\) Rose does enjoy the reaction of her mother to her own skinny body. It is Rose’s

\(^{47}\) It needs to be noted here that even at an earlier stage, when Rose was still a child and Dolly described her as “a clever little miss” (16), Dolly’s attitude towards her daughter was of weary nature, as reflected in Dolly’s additional thought “You had to watch this kid,” which foreshadows her fear of Rose outgrowing her intellectually, but most of all in physical respects.

\(^{48}\) The Electra complex is a controversial concept, first introduced by Carl G. Jung as a response to Freud’s Oedipus complex, and further developed by Freud as the Oedipus complex in the female (Freud himself rejected the term “Electra complex”). It describes the “penis envy” of the girl, who blames her mother for her “castration” or “mutilation,” and the sexual desire the girl develops towards the father. The focal point of blame, jealousy, anger and revenge is the mother. This reductionist concept has been heavily contested by feminism. Interestingly, in Winton’s novels the self-mutilation/self-harm of the women still remains directly related to the mother-daughter dialectic and female sexuality. Self-harm, therefore, establishes the ground to uphold the stigma of troubled female relationships by re-enforcing Freudian/Jungian patriarchal perspectives. This is particularly prevalent in *Cloudstreet*, *That Eye the Sky* and *The Riders*. See, for example, Carl Gustav Jung, *The Collected Works, Vol. IV – Freud and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C. Hull (1961; repr., London: Routledge, 1993), 152-55; Sigmund Freud, “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XVIII: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, ed. and
masochistic act against her body that illustrates a considerable degree of self-satisfaction and revenge, which form a silent but drastic reproach, stating unambiguously the nature and effect of her mother’s egocentricity. The girl’s starvation in this context can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Rose does not allow herself to eat, or to be nurtured. Despite this denial of food for herself, she still adopts a nurturing role and replaces her mother in her function as caretaker. Her body not only reflects the physical effects of malnutrition but also mirrors the emotional starvation she has been enduring, which can be regarded as the precondition for Rose’s anorexia. The girl has been feeling the distance from her mother from an early age, which has been steadily increasing with Dolly’s destructive alcoholism. Rose indeed is cultivating a self and a body that compensate for and symbolically re-enact her traumatic predicament. She deliberately sets herself apart from her mother, excessively developing and celebrating habits and a body image that stand in complete opposition to Dolly’s. Rose’s self-discipline and extreme need for control over herself and her surroundings show the validity of this argument:

School ended for the year, but even so, Rose sharpened all her pencils and kept her writing desk in good order. Each drawer was neat as a diagram inside: paper, nibs, clips, crayons, blunt scissors closed like a body in repose. It was the way she’d have her whole kitchen, if she ever had one to herself; her whole house. Maybe it wasn’t such a fantasy. She was learning to cook these days because the old girl was always too drunk and the old man was always late home. (Cloudstreet, 121)

The girl fulfils the role of sister, daughter and mother, prematurely reaching a level of maturity that she is not fit enough yet to bear without consequence. In these respects, she develops a self that functions as a shield of defence and works against the confusion, insecurity and alienation that destabilise the family structures. Despite working as a mask of confidence, the careful manufacturing of this self-image is actually a reflection of a more vulnerable side within Rose.

I argue against Orbach’s terminology of a “false self” or a “false body” and instead see the corporeal and psychological reality of the self as a vivid reflection of the complexity of human suffering, which is real, never false. Rose’s fantasies of escape, as insinuated in the quotation above, and in other passages throughout the novel, are constituents of an alternative world that transcends her helplessness within her current situation and gives her a

constancy to cling to in order to gain the support that she is so frequently denied in her family. The strength and discipline that Rose inhabits are irrevocably merged with feelings of loss, confusion and the thought of death as the ultimate escape:

She loved school […] She didn’t do too badly, either. Her marks were good, though they’d been slipping all year as she missed more and more days as the weakness came over her. It would have been easier if she had friends but she frightened kids off with her intensity, the hardness of her that no one would understand. A friend had to be true to death […] Boys thought she didn’t laugh enough and her prettiness was turning to caricature the more she lost weight. Sometimes she thought she was dying and the thought strengthened her, cheering her up. It gave shape to things. (Cloudstreet, 162)

Giving shape to her life and its different elements of social and emotional attachments is crucial in Rose’s world, where conceptions of clear-cut roles and functions blur and degenerate. Both her parents lack the healthy authority and parental sense of responsibility of their neighbours, Oriel and Lester Lamb. Values of marital commitment and faithfulness are discarded and become obsolete. For Rose the world has turned upside down and putting shape back to things is her deepest wish, which she tries to fulfil by the immediate control over her body and its surroundings. Seeing Oriel cleaning the Pickles’ rooms out of sympathy deeply unsettles and enrages Rose as her pattern of control is broken:

Rose walks in and it smells different. Windows are open and curtains thrust aside […] Their beds are made; their dirty clothes are gone, the window is up […] In one movement she rips the bed clothes back and tosses them across the floor. Her eyes fatten up with tears, fury, shame […] Rose kicks the door shut and destroys her room. (Cloudstreet, 125)

A deep fear of having the disastrous family situation exposed to the outside world and having to face the social embarrassment plays into Rose’s anger and motivates her to symbolically destroy her room again in order to re-establish a feeling of autonomy.

Furthermore, the girl’s body becomes a matrix of articulation, inscribing Rose’s inner wishes for another life, her needs for control and closeness, her mourning for the loss of her mother and her childhood. She makes visible her discord with Dolly by radically performing signs of severe neglect on the surface of her body. Menacingly, Rose takes revenge by playing with Dolly’s envy. Her body literally states what cannot be said: Rose challenges her mother’s gaze and enjoys the destructive potential this form of power contains. Her own attack on her body is a mediated attack on her mother, confronting Dolly not only with her daughter’s proximity to death but also with everything that she has lost:
her good looks, a slim body shape, self-control, the dominance in the house and her rights as a mother:

One Sunday noon in the new year and the fresh decade when the summer days were cooling off toward autumn, the old girl surprised her in the bathroom and she had to grab for a towel to cover herself. Her mother was bleary and sore headed.

Yer getting skinny. Look like a bloody skeleton. I hate it. People think we starve yer.

Rose said nothing. It pleased her somehow to know that it annoyed the old girl. She watched her smear on all the makeup she needed these days to look halfway decent. Dolly was getting old and puffy. Smoke was curing her brow and cheeks and she had to try very hard to look her best. Their eyes met and Rose smiled menacingly before leaving the room. From then on, Rose got thinner every day. The old woman went into rages and the old man bit his lip. She was sixteen and scaring herself. (Ibid., 143)

Apart from the negative depiction of the revenging, unsympathetic and condescending daughter and the ageing, “cured” and grotesque-looking mother in this passage, Winton plays with the word “scaring” in the last sentence, suggesting the act of scarring behind the action of scaring.  

Rose scares both herself and others by virtue of her alarming weight loss, but she also scars herself in more than one way. In exercising control over her body, she attempts to heal the wounds left upon her psyche by a damaging family situation. Thus, she hopes to turn these wounds into scars, which are still there but easier to control than open wounds, which require nursing and are likely to break open again – it is a measure of self-sustenance and survival. Moreover, the visible change of her body, which gets thinner with every passing day, can be considered a scar in itself. It articulates the effects of the girl’s trauma, making it visible to the people around her. Similarly, this scar functions as a reproach directed at her family, whose irresponsible behaviour has severely compromised her well-being. This applies to any form of mental disease and disorder, being a constant reminder of the causes of these illnesses manifesting in the first place. Unfortunately, most originate from concealed family and social histories.

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49 See here Cloudstreet, 154: “Dolly knew what it meant that stare […] Dolly tried not to think about how she hated Rose these days.” See also in this context Ussher, The Psychology of the Female Body, 34 and 38-39. Here she elaborates upon the arising jealousy in mothers when facing their daughters’ awakening sexuality, and upon the role of anorexia nervosa within adolescent girls who feel that their bodies are out of control.

50 Rose’s venomous and cold representation can be linked to earlier passages, as McCredden argues in reference to Rose’s judgment of Dolly’s visits to the pub (Cloudstreet, 105). See McCredden, “Mapping the Maternal,” 31: “There’s a breathless venom in the writing here, in the long first sentence, in the male author’s placing of such hatred into the mouth of the daughter, in the moral high ground worked over as the motherless child voices injustice – ‘someone should be home.’”

Although Winton addresses a contemporary problem of female health and femininity (but not the possibility of male anorexia), he nevertheless presents the disorder as a stereotypical, one-dimensional expression of revenge and control, which in *Cloudstreet* and his other novels, is reserved for the women characters. Instead of playing with the insufficiencies of stereotypes about anorexia and femininity by, for example, giving further insight into Rose’s desperation and subjective perceptions of her condition, her outward appearance and her relationship with food, Winton’s elliptic portrayal merely sets the background for the fractured mother-daughter relationship and its sentiments of jealousy, envy, revenge and rage.\(^52\) The images of the scarecrow and the skeleton are most striking in Rose’s description. They correlate with Winton’s narrative stigmatisation of the female body as outlined in Chapter Four, and represent a rather stereotypical character whose internal and reflective development is largely ignored in favour of a psychoanalytic cliché.

Exemplifying this reductionist representation, sexual intercourse and an overtly sexual appearance for Rose are linked with Dolly’s presence. Positioning herself against the mother, Rose’s thinness obviously reduces her own female body shape and, therefore, distances her from a traditionally configured feminine sexual appearance. Rose does not lose her virginity until she is twenty-four, which again signifies the deep divide between her and Dolly, who started sleeping with “big hatted men” at the age of sixteen (*Cloudstreet*, 79). Furthermore, Rose’s aversion against the female sexuality incorporated in her mother is illustrated in the very infrequent occurrences and periodical lack of Rose’s menstruation as a result of her anorexia. Ussher argues that menstruation is symbolic of womanhood and motherhood, implying both sexual and reproductive activity.\(^53\) Rose’s menstrual irregularity symbolises the chasm between mother and daughter; when Rose is confronted with Dolly’s aggressive sexuality and alcohol excesses, which she associates with woman and motherhood, she vehemently rejects these roles for herself.

Difficult mother-daughter relationships form a central tenet in novels like *Cloudstreet*, *That Eye the Sky*, *The Riders* and *Dirt Music*, in which Winton explores the female psyche and sexuality. Driven by jealousy, reproach, body image and sex, the

\(^{52}\) Winton only marginally addresses the topic of food by mentioning Rose’s inability to eat without going into the torture and paranoia that this disorder entails for young women (*Cloudstreet*, 159-60). Cf. Marya Hornbacher’s illustrative account of the addictive and debilitating nature of anorexia in *Wasted*. She illuminates the different facets of the disorder, which controls the anorexic’s life.

competition between Rose and Dolly in their excesses reveals again the reductionist representation of femininity in Winton’s writing. The mother becomes the cause of her daughter’s adolescent and adult troubles. She fosters an image of femininity that combines fragility with destructive, egocentric energies. Winton does not allow any of his female characters to be viewed outside the domain of perversion or deviance, whether “Damned Whores,” “God’s Police” or both – and self-harm is his technique of affirmation of femininity, such as it is.\(^{54}\) So do we all subside into self-destructive spheres because of the effect our mothers have on our lives? Why is there not one central and truly functioning relationship between mothers and teenage/adult daughters depicted in his novels?\(^{55}\) And also, why is his work so heavily defined by negative, fragile images of femininity and motherhood? I claim that while Winton’s narratives address issues of immense value to women, their portrayals of the feminine still exploit and distort the realities that women face daily. They thus compromise a potentially sophisticated and diverse expression of femininity and imprison the female in fragmented stories of sympathetic but damning representations of failed and dysfunctional subjectivity.

Another look at Dolly’s sex life illustrates how Winton’s fiction fuses perversion, control and psychological instability in the representation of its female characters. While Winton’s description of Dolly’s desperation, clearly inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis, is plausible when looked at separately from the context, it turns into a biased and stigmatised reflection once it is placed into relation with the other female characters in the story and with Dolly’s representation in its entirety. Dolly’s excessive sexual adventures with men other than her husband come close to a form of prostitution, one that is not aimed at socio-economic advantages but is an emotional reaction to early experiences with her own mother.\(^{56}\) Estela Welldon sees female prostitution as a female perversion. In her opinion, women often fantasise and pursue prostitution as a response to an extreme emptiness inside them. Once this emptiness turns into feelings of depression, they find a short-lived sense of elation and a renewal of self-esteem in prostituting their bodies. However, these feelings are quickly replaced by futility and abandonment since, in Welldon’s terms, these women are

\(^{54}\) See Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police*.

\(^{55}\) I exclude here relationships that adopt a marginal role and are not sufficiently developed to pass judgement e.g. Ida and her daughters, Oriel and her daughters, Grace and her daughters.

\(^{56}\) See Welldon, *Mother, Madonna, Whore*, 107-8. Welldon brings forward the thesis that prostitution in men and women can be related to their early experiences with their mothers.
feeding a “false self.” Although I am critical of the concept of a false self or false bodies generally, Winton’s representation that Dolly’s alcoholism and sexual behaviour results from a deep alienation and emptiness within her – which deflates her self-esteem and makes her cling to the only thing she can be sure of: the beauty and attractiveness of her body – makes sense. In order to re-establish a sense of self, Dolly seeks short-lived affirmation from men, only to be confronted with the insubstantiality of this kind of externally-induced self-confidence. Her lack of assurance and troubled self-image derives from Dolly’s childhood, when she believed her grandmother to be her mother and her grandfather her father, and this was exposed to be an illusion (Cloudstreet, 357). Dolly’s problems in her later life, stemming from her family’s deceit, impact upon her relationship with her own daughter. Following Welldon here, I read her perverted sex drive, just like Rose’s anorexia, as a tool of revenge against her mother:

Her desire for revenge is at the same time a desire to be in charge, to have conscious control, and an unconscious denigration of herself and her gender […] This is an unconscious process in which she uses denial, splitting, depersonalization and derealization to avoid the experience of psychic pain.

While acknowledging that this psychoanalytic interpretation explains some facets of Dolly’s character, I criticise Winton’s exclusivity in applying this frame not only to Dolly, but also to Rose and Oriel. Dolly’s situation is not fundamentally different from Rose’s. Both of them desire control and escape from their own respective worlds of unhappiness. In contrast to Rose, who gains control through starvation, Dolly seeks the re-establishment of control in her sexual relationships with men. She wants confirmation that her sexuality is still intact, while defying age, and fostering a cryptic and fragile self-image that is exclusively defined by external forces.

Illustrating the transmission of abusive mothering across generations, Dolly adopts the same feelings of distrust, inadequacy and hate that her sister/mother gave her and projects them on to Rose. The revelation of Dolly’s fate later on in the story creates a form of sympathy and understanding between the two women, which initiates a slight change in the mother-daughter relationship. This change enables them to let go of their past and focus

57 Ibid., 128. Welldon draws here from Winnicott’s theory, which famously established the term, and from Susie Orbach’s studies on anorexia: see Donald W. Winnicott, The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 140-52; Orbach, Hunger Strike, 70.
58 Ibid.
59 In this context the idea of intergenerational trauma is interesting to consider. See, for example, Michelle Balaev, “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” Mosaic 41, no. 2 (June 2008): 149-66.
on their future instead – a central component of Rose’s recovery. Michael McGirr describes this reconciliation between the two women as resulting from Dolly’s grief, which reminds Rose of the ugliness, the “huge wordless grief of babies” – a grief she has already witnessed in Quick’s brother Fish (Cloudstreet, 357). The loss of a child turns the grieving mother into an inarticulate, helpless infant. Rose and Dolly are united in their grief, having both lost and bemoaned their “babies” (345-60).

Despite Rose’s difficult family situation and her obvious moments of suffering, she is not presented in a sympathetic light but receives the most negative attributes in the entire novel. Rose’s revenge against her mother, as manifest in her anorexia, is triggered by strong feelings of repulsion and hate towards Dolly, but also by a deep-seated sense of “murderousness” and emptiness that overshadows her life: “A strange kind of murderousness lifted in Rose Pickles and she just didn’t know what it meant” (44). This intense reaction implies the deep wish to kill and in so doing take retribution for the harm inflicted upon her. This desire in itself is also a facet of perversion, which is often not only expressed through but also towards women’s bodies in self-destructive ways. Power, control and self-esteem constitute the prime aims to be achieved through self-inflicted pain and abstinence, in order to re-establish order and a renewed, more confident sense of self:

These women experience a feeling of elation from the manipulation of their bodies when they are starving, and which disappears when they start to eat again. They experience a sense of power through being in control of the shapes and forms their bodies assume as a result of the physical injuries and abuse they inflict on themselves.

With reference to Luce Irigaray, Welldon draws a connection between the “multi-pleasure-sources” of the female body and self-harm. In her view, women focus their self-harming acts on these stimulating zones to inflict pain on themselves and derive from it “perverse libidinal gratification.” Whether Rose herself, like Eva in Breath, receives this form of masochistic, erotic pleasure from her self-starvation is debateable. In fact she feels elated and enjoys the effects her revenge has on her mother: “It pleased her somehow to know that it annoyed the old girl” (Cloudstreet, 143). The use of the phrase “old girl” here, in itself a very patriarchal expression to refer to a mature woman, not only encompasses a linguistic battle between

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61 Welldon, Mother, Madonna, Whore, 33.
62 Ibid., 34.
63 Ibid.
male and female voices but also reflects a perverse dyad between different female corporealities: on the one hand, the old girl is represented by Dolly, the unnatural play-thing, but, on the other hand, is embodied in her young female offspring Rose, the fragile flower, who seems much older than she is. Ironically, both women see their traumatic history and fears staged on each other’s bodies and are thus inextricably bound together in the process of their individual healing.

When Rose finally leaves the house to work as a switchboard operator and distances herself spatially from the house and her family, her condition improves. She becomes part of another world, which takes the pressure off the young woman and introduces her to social and economic independence. Her relationship with Toby Raven increases the level of emancipation from the destabilising, working-class environment of her upbringing by bringing her closer to a milieu of intellectualism, art and politics. However, Rose eventually discovers that the hypocrisy and pretence that rules this new world cannot give her the stability she is looking for. She leaves Toby and marries Quick in order to create a living environment of her own, which exists in its own right, away from the chaos and confusion associated with the house on Cloud Street:

I want to live in a new house, said Rose. In a new suburb in a new street. I want a car out the front and some mowed lawn. I want a small, neat house that only we live in, Quick. I don’t ever want to live anywhere old, where people have been before. Clean and new, that’s what I want. (Cloudstreet, 326)

It is only after a miscarriage that Rose falls back into her old habit of starvation. The loss of her baby is mingled with a rejection of sex, severe self-punishment and, once again, with desired but denied motherhood. It has been clinically proven that anorexia nervosa and bulimia during pregnancy can impact the health and life of an infant in disastrous ways.

Considering the complex issues of motherhood and family, the question arises why Rose marries Quick in the first place. When she walks down the aisle to meet him before the altar, Winton describes her as “triumphant” and knowing exactly what she is doing (ibid., 319): “Rose had never felt so much iron in her. There was this feeling of striding, of invincibility

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64 In “Writing from the Margins” Lekkie Hopkins refers to Dolly’s name, pointing out that she is never passive “like a doll” (52).
65 Winton’s mother used to be in the same profession. Jobs as switchboard operators were highly reputed positions and only the “better” girls usually won jobs with the GPO.
that she’d only ever had in dreams before [...] There was nothing they could say, that anyone could say, to take this from her” (317). This newfound strength in her relationship with Quick opens up for Rose a more steady form of escape than a job can offer her. For her, love and marriage not only entail independence and redemption but also the chance of a family of her own and a domestic space that is officially hers. Knowing that she has had this dream of her own place all her life, we may ask the question whether she might merely be using Quick to realise her inner desire to distance herself from her family and start one of her own. Early on, Winton reveals Rose’s wish to have a house, her own private space, where she can find fulfilment as housewife and mother (121). The neatness and tidiness of her place is important to her and again distinguishes her future distinctively from her dependent existence in the house on Cloud Street. Quick fulfils the role of the rescuer and lover but he is also the focus of Rose’s nurturing, motherly attentions, which she initially juggles with her job in the city.

Losing her unborn child cuts the newly established relationship between Rose and her body. Not being able to sustain her child inside her confirms the excruciating fear of not being able to bear children. This fear mirrors Rose’s experience of Dolly’s failure as a mother. Her new, perfect life has suffered a backlash and she is immediately transported back to the suffering of her childhood and young adult life. The refusal of food marks Rose’s body significantly at this stage of her life. The obvious signs of starvation illustrate a form of self-punishment, an act of mourning. Hunger turns into an “emotional anaesthetic” which protects the anorexic from any pain and disappointment associated with close relationships.

To unravel Rose’s trauma and support the claim that Cloudstreet reduces the girl’s anorexia to an expression of female ambition, competition, revenge and control, it is necessary to further consider sex and its troubling connotations for this character. As Motz, Malan and Williams have argued, the rejection of food is parallel to the denial of sexual hunger in the emancipatory process of distancing the self from the sexualised and

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67 See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 5. This obvious resurfacing of Rose’s past trauma is reminiscent of Catherine Clément’s portrayal of the hysteric, which is manifested in Rose’s anorexia: “The hysteric, who lives with her body in the past, who transforms it into a theatre for forgotten scenes, bears witness to a lost childhood that survives in suffering.”

reproductive nature of the mother figure. Also, interestingly, Helena Michie argues, in her chapter on Victorian standards of eating and eating disorders in *The Flesh Made Word*, that eating is typed as a bedroom activity, something too personal to survive the public scrutiny of the dinner table. The shame associated with eating is also, remarkably enough, typical of the modern anorexic who will hide food in her own room and perform elaborate rituals to disguise the fact that she is eating.

The bedroom (of her parents) becomes the origin of Rose’s childhood trauma, symbolical and representative of sex, deceit and shame. Rose’s own room turns into her realm of solitude where she allows herself to secretly nibble a carrot, resisting all other foods (*Cloudstreet*, 141). When she is still a teenager, the girl’s initial affection for and fascination with Fish (ibid., 159, 173) have sexual undertones, despite their platonic relationship. This awakening of sexual desire reminds Rose of her mother – an excruciating realisation for the girl and presumably another factor triggering her anorexia. Sex and eating, both indicative of reproduction and nurturing, are illustrated here in the convergence of their lack and their submerged significance, which are both mirrored in Rose’s intimate physical space, her denial of food and her platonic love for the mentally disabled boy. Anna Motz has pointed out that even after long periods of a relatively normal lifestyle, the anorexic habits and behaviours can “re-surface at times of crisis, as ways of re-establishing control and release from tension.”

When Rose is at her lowest point, at which she is considered a scarecrow (*Cloudstreet*, 350, 161), she has an epiphany that reconnects her with her mother’s infidelity, which she witnessed as a girl:

She listens to her own breathing. It fascinates her, reminds her of things, so mesmeric. Girls. It’s a girl’s breath, that’s what she hears. And these two rooms don’t exist. Something bad is going to happen. All this breathing here in the hallway in front of 36. The Eurythmic Hotel when you’re eleven and a half years old. This isn’t a memory – she doesn’t recall this. The door of 36. Those sounds behind, Jesus Christ, she knows what that is. They’re fucking in there behind the door […] Mum? There’s been an accident, an accident. Dad’s lost his fingers. And she’s in there huffing and puffing with someone else. Your mother’s on the bed under some stranger and you’re turning to steel right there. (Ibid., 349)

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71 See Bartlett, *Jamming the Machinery*, 83-84. Bartlett argues that sexuality and eating in many cultures are linked through mechanisms of desire. Also see Adolph, *Food and Femininity*, 127. Adolph discusses in this and earlier chapters the connection between consumption and the female body, arguing that this connection invokes a “general cultural anxiety of woman as licentious, sexual, and transgressive.”
72 Anna Motz, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2010; Anna Motz, interview by Hannah Schürholz, Oxford, April 23, 2011.
Rose is finally able to understand the moment in her childhood that was experienced with utter confusion at the time and broke a great part of her spirit as a child, making her turn into steel – an emotional state that she has maintained consistently, but which is finally penetrated by the birth of her son Wax Harry. She can at last recognise her trauma by linking it to a specific episode in her past. Here again, it becomes clear that sex generally has a destructive function in all of Winton’s novels. Its impact creates a chasm and deep self-alienation within Winton’s young characters, which is part of the demonisation of sex (and the female) in many of his stories (see *Breath, The Riders, That Eye the Sky, An Open Swimmer*). In contrast, female writers such as Mandy Sayer, who, like Winton, received the Australian’s/Vogel Literary Award (*Mood Indigo*, 1989) describe the sex act and female masturbation as enriching, rewarding, surprising and wholesome – not exploitative, selfish and traumatising. In her memoir *Dreamtime Alice*, Sayer writes about the experience of sexual lust and satisfaction while witnessing her parents’ engage in passionate intercourse:

I had my first orgasm when I was nine years old, four days before Christmas, 1972. My parents were recently reunited after a two-year separation […] I could not close my eyes completely. Every muscle of my body feigned sleep as I spied on them from the opposite corner […] When I opened my eyes again and saw him dropping into her over and over again and the way she raised her mound of yellow curly hair to receive him, and the strong, hard thing which seemed to give them both so much pleasure, I cupped my hand around my pubic bone to contain the tender tingle I did not comprehend.

Comparing Sayer’s portrayal with *Cloudstreet* and other Winton novels highlights Winton’s interpretation of sex as fracturing and destructive – a stance that differs significantly from Sayer’s understanding of sexuality.

Rose’s newfound awareness of her traumatic situation is tested when she is called to assist her mother, who herself is experiencing one of the darkest, most suicidal days of her life. This encounter marks the start of both Rose’s and Dolly’s recoveries. However, the moment she first confronts her mother and wishes Dolly would “go to hell” (*Cloudstreet*, 351), all her strength is gone and she feels like “all the steel [has] gone out of her” (ibid., 351). The wall of resistance she has erected within her all these years has disappeared, offering the possibility of a new foundation, on which open interaction and conversation with Dolly can take place. The confrontation with Dolly is necessary for Rose to realise that

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73 In *Cloudstreet* Winton frequently uses the word “steel” in various word formations in relation to Rose.
75 See also *Cloudstreet*, 185: “She [Oriel] grew steel in her. Or. Either, Or. She could never find the choices.”
it actually is this particular relationship that rules and defines her whole existence. Only by sorting out the dissonances in her relationship with her mother can Rose build a functional base for her own role as mother and woman. The death of her child, while still in her womb, symbolically reflects the dysfunctional body and mother image that Rose holds. It is only after her conversation with Dolly that Rose realises that she cannot ignore and suppress her personal trauma but must face it in order to free herself from ties that condition her mental and physical states of frailty.

In this process of healing, Rose realises that she belongs to her family and the house on Cloud Street. In the “unstained” domesticity of her and Quick’s suburban house, she does not find the independence and self-fulfilment she longs for – she remains “inside a domesticated outside” as Hélène Cixous puts it.\(^76\) In contrast to Cixous’ idea of the woman being pushed into this role by male forces, Rose chooses this option herself; she pushes herself into a confined space without a past in order to escape her own trauma and family heritage. Once she starts her recovery process of reconciliation, Rose moves back into the house on Cloud Street, now knowing her rightful place. Through the birth of her and Quick’s son Harry, the balance between family members and also within herself is restored, overcoming the traumatic barriers and her eating disorder.\(^77\)

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\(^76\) Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 68. Rose initially desires a house without a history, later realising that she cannot escape the different stories that are part of both the house and herself (see footnote below).

\(^77\) Another analytical approach, which, however, exceeds the scope of this thesis, is from the post-colonial angle by looking at the death of the old widow and the suicide of the young indigenous girl in relation to Rose’s suffering. See in this context David Crouch, “National Hauntings: The Architecture of Australian Ghost Stories,” in “Spectres, Screens, Shadows, Mirrors,” special issue, *JASAL – Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 104 (2007), 99. Crouch offers a critical evaluation and analysis of *Cloudstreet* as a post-colonial novel in regard to the reconciliation mode adopted by Winton. He insinuates here that Winton uses the indigenous presence as a self-serving tool for healing the white settler’s lack of belonging, thereby muting the voice of the original inhabitants. Winton’s motifs in terms of reconciliation are controversial and often criticised in the discussion of this novel. He argues that Winton aims at settling peace, mutual respect and acknowledgment between the settlers (here the families) and the native inhabitants, which results in the harmonious sharing of the land and the house. Other of the few critical approaches to *Cloudstreet* include Henningsgaard, “Regional Literature as a Mirror”; Stuart Murray, “Tim Winton’s ‘New Tribalism’: *Cloudstreet* and Community,” *Kunapipi* 25, no. 1 (2003): 83-91; Andrew Taylor, “What can be Read and what can only be Seen in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” *Australian Literary Studies* 17, no. 4 (October 1996): 323-31. All these views predominantly centre their critical attention on the aspect of belonging and community for the atypical masculine characters, but neglect a precise evaluation of the female characters outside their allegedly uniting function as matriarchs. Taylor is the only one who briefly refers to the self-destructiveness of the ageing female characters in *Cloudstreet*, as well as the dichotomisation between Oriel and Dolly. He also briefly addresses the complicated gender constructions in Winton’s fiction with reference to *The Riders*, pointing out the weakness and misunderstandings of the male protagonists as opposed to the physical, material and practical women in the stories (330-31). Also see McMahon, “Homesick: *Cloudstreet* and the Death Drive,” 35-46. McMahon also offers a literary reading of the ambiguous concept of home and homecoming in
Rose’s and Dolly’s portrayals again demonstrate the close relation between death, perversion, sex, control and the female in Winton’s fiction – an interesting consistency that supports this thesis’s claim that Winton uses the feminine as a highly visual category in his writing in an attempt to cope with the fear and confusion that comes along with the male perception of women. He presents his female characters in troubled emotional and psychological states, simultaneously making them vulnerable and then using this vulnerability to make them more explicable and even threatening. In comparison, the men in Cloudstreet easily receive sanctuary by being presented as caring but inconsequential personae whose simplicity does not correspond to the complexity of female relations and the enhanced guilt complexes in the story. Sam Pickles, for example, is presented as a victim of female egocentricity, both of his wife and also of Rose: “She [Rose, after her father’s failed attempt to cut his throat] felt pity and misery and hatred and she knew this was how it would always be […] My oath, she said, kissing his head, steeling herself against tears, against weakness, against the great blackness behind her eyes” (Cloudstreet, 169). Here the vulnerability of the father is contrasted with Rose’s struggle for control – her inability to allow weakness to dominate her emotions.

Women here do not only create a dominant, controlling counterfoil to the male characters, but they also threaten these characters’ well-being in their search for a more fulfilling, pain-free existence. Winton connects death and womanhood to point out the destructiveness of the female psyche, which is embedded in the structures of family (but predominantly female) relations. Winton’s portrayal of the female characters as other does not enable them or offer them transgressive possibilities. Rather, his women are written as restricted by their own destructiveness, highlighting a desperate state of personal dilemma that needs to be overcome by re-integrating and re-settling into the Christian, conventional formations of society, and embracing the self-empowerment that comes with it. This often entails a successful implementation of motherhood, which personal degeneration had hitherto prohibited.

All of Winton’s women seem to speak through their flesh, conveying meaning through their bodies, revealing a form of sad truth in their carnal practices. Winton misses the opportunity to elaborate on these voices, to give them room to develop beyond the

Cloudstreet, focussing on the role of Fish’s death/suicide and the doubled imposition of death on the storytelling and the narrative mode respectively.

78 Cixous and Clément, The Newly Born Woman, 92.
patriarchal imagining of Oedipal structures and motherhood. Thus, the question needs to be asked: is it really the women who speak through their bodies in these representations? Rather than being a call for help, the destructive regime of their bodies is a cry of pain. However, as the following chapters show, it is not primarily the women but the men who speak through the female body, projecting their own existential crisis of masculinity, their desire for a time of reconciliation and conventional ordered family structures onto the women’s flesh. In the stories analysed here, women are pushed into a framework of polarisation – being either too dominant or too weak, threatening and confusing in their extremity. Equally, Winton, while observing the significance of mother-daughter bonds in the fostering of self-harming tendencies, plays down the responsibility of the men in these situations. In this context, it might be valid to ask the question if it is not maybe the disappointment in their fathers which encourages women like Rose, Georgie, Dolly, Tegwyn and Eva to resort to voicing their pain through their bodies. Father figures adopt a set part in Winton’s fiction but are often, especially in relations with their daughters, sympathetic figures that are pitied, loved unconditionally, or not taken seriously.

It is exactly within the gap between male nostalgia and the misrepresentation of female desire that Winton’s male gaze functions. This attempt to understand femininity eventually fails, appropriating the marked female body as a canvas of male projection and its own shortcomings. This lack of sensitivity and elaboration of female suffering, often filtered through the focalising view of male narrators, can be contrasted against the depiction of female self-mutilation in Australian women writers like Penelope Rowe. In her novel *Tiger Country*, she describes the patriarchal sadism of parenting and its devastating effects on a young girl who aspires to win the love of her father and breaks apart in the confrontation with his stern, oppressive and suffocating views and her mother’s submissiveness and indifference towards her only daughter:

> By the time that final school year came, I was sick. Sick. But there was no one I could explain my sickness to. It drew me into a dimension I did not even know existed. I was alone and terrified. I was going mad. And when they knew, it was too late to stop it. She glanced over at the bed. When he knew, even he, the all-powerful, was powerless […] I hated you after, Daddy. I hated you through that year in the hospital when they fed me and cleaned me […] I hated you when I had to pick up the pieces of my life that lay scattered before me like a shattered tower of matchsticks […] I hated you when I found that the only reason I had for living was to feed off my hatred towards you. I hated you for all the things you were not.\(^79\)

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\(^79\) Rowe, *Tiger Country*, 144.
Rowe’s account of the girl’s pain eerily conjures up Winton’s own remark on Tegwyn’s self-mutilation, in which he refers to the reason for the girl’s behaviour as the frustration and anger of adolescence, neglecting other possible explanations of her condition.\textsuperscript{80} Rowe delicately but openly describes her heroine Matti’s predicament, harshly criticising the principles of old-fashioned, patriarchal parenting and allowing her female character a rounded, convincing interiority and emotional reflectivity – something that I find lacking in Winton’s female portrayals. She exposes the limitation and destructiveness of traditional structures, bleakly commenting on the failure of conventional family patterns to allow space for the liberation and self-expression of women. It is noteable in Winton’s fiction that women are placed in the role of the inexplicable other, but we need to consider carefully who is speaking. Elisabeth Bronfen has critically linked the woman as the counter-force and other to male-inscribed environments. She closely associates the female with death in a symbolic relationship that marks the mysterious otherness of both femininity and transience, which is able to transcend knowledge and life while, at the same time, deconstructing existing power structures.\textsuperscript{81} Unlike Winton, Bronfen and Rowe create alternative spaces for women to transgress a male-dominated domain that has been disabling for the female sex.

Bordo has argued in her article “The Body and the Reconstruction of Femininity” that disorders and their effects on the body like anorexia are a text that reveals various facets of symbolic and political meanings:

The symptomatology of these disorders reveals itself as textuality. Loss of mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving oneself, taking up space, and whittling down the space one’s body takes up – all have symbolic meaning, all have political meaning under the varying rules governing the historical construction of gender.\textsuperscript{82}

Thus, self-harm can be seen as a form of articulation, carrying a political and rebellious subtext, which, however, is highly controlled and distorted in Cloudstreet. Winton presents female suffering in this novel as a form of female perversion and revenge, which, however, is judged from a conservative standpoint. A more insightful, empowering perspective is lacking – at least for the female characters, trapped as they are within Winton’s

\textsuperscript{80} McGirr, The Writer and His Work, 58.
\textsuperscript{81} See Bronfen, Over her Dead Body, 212, 217. Also see James, Death, Gender and Sexuality, 15-16; Higonnet, “Frames of Female Suicide,” 229-42. Higonnet, too, adds to the otherness and linkage between women and death as other, creating a triangle signifying the unknown and exotic (see 241).
representation.\textsuperscript{83} Self-harm in Winton’s novel, rather than being deconstructive of gender, fosters stigma in its one-dimensional portrayal of it as a female disorder in response to an Oedipal trauma. Therefore, it is crucial to break this dominant representation through a close feminist evaluation of the text as illustrated above and further exemplified in the following chapters of this thesis.

Arguing that Winton’s novels make use of post-feminist sentiments in favour of a re-centralisation and re-empowerment of the masculine presence in gender and family relations, the next chapter analyses the absent wife and mother in Winton’s 1994 novel \textit{The Riders}, presenting the maternal as a site of contestation and condemnation. The underlying male fear and confusion that defines the representation of the female characters discussed in this chapter receives full legitimisation in this novel, where the woman Jennifer becomes a mute, ungraspable shadow that haunts the protagonist Scully and his daughter Billie. The female is not marked in her self-harming visibility here, but in her silent absence. Not offering any explanation or justification for her self-serving behaviour, she appears to be the stereotypical “bad mother” and enigmatic femme fatale. But is she really a mystery that cannot be solved, or is she merely a symptom of Scully’s self-deceiving fiction of family and love? Might self-harm, death and absence among Winton’s women in the end be a vessel of men’s search for redemption and grace – a medium that communicates male instead of female troubles?

\textsuperscript{83} See in this context Motz, \textit{The Psychology of Female Violence}, 243: “I must stress that the notion of perversion is not a moral one, nor a condemnation, but is descriptive of a mode of functioning which essentially precludes the possibility of intimacy with another person. The body is used as a means to an end, and treated with a degree of sadism; in this sense it is a vehicle for perversion. The powerful functions of anorexia and its communicative value are evident.”
CHAPTER 3: “Mother, where art Thou?” Absence and Motherhood
(Filling the Void)

Do not weaken for their grief; do not give in or pardon.
Only through this pain, this black desire, this anger,
shall you at last return to your lost garden.

Judith Wright, “The World and the Child”

When Adrienne Rich published her influential study *Of Woman Born* in 1976, the foundation for the scholarship of motherhood from a feminist perspective was laid. Motherhood scholarship was emancipated from the patriarchal concept of the mother as an institution that ensures reproduction and the authenticity of the nation. Rich distinguishes between two meanings of motherhood, one being the “potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” and the other the institution that “aims at ensuring that potential – and all women shall remain under male control.” In her view, motherhood, or mothering, is one facet of a woman’s experience but not a singular identity for all time.

Jennifer Scully, Winton’s ghostly female character in *The Riders* (1994), obviously joins Rich in her view that there is more to life than being wife, mother or breadwinner exclusively. She, however, relinquishes her active role as mother and lays the foundation for a feminist mothering that is not yet addressed in the novel. She decides to leave husband and child for a new life in Europe, causing distress and pain for her partner Scully and daughter Billie. In this chapter, I continue my analysis of Winton’s female characters, arguing that gendered hierarchies and traditional ideologies of femininity are restored through new subtle practices of resurgent patriarchal influence in literary representations. Does Winton open up a respectful space that encourages women to follow their own ambitions beyond their duties within the family? Is Jennifer’s silence a form of suppression or female empowerment? This

3 Ibid., 37. “Mothering” refers to the personal experience of women as mothers and is used as an alternative to the socially stigmatised term “motherhood.”
chapter looks at silence as the defining element for Jennifer – a narrative technique of suppression that only mediates Jennifer’s character through the biased recollection of the other agents in the story. I argue that her lack of physical presence and voice in the novel confirms Winton’s problematic female portrayal, which paints the women according to the male wish to understand them and their objectives, while presenting them as the reflector and cause of men’s pain. However, it may be argued that Jennifer is empowered by her silence and that Scully’s final realisation that he can only survive by giving up his search for answers constitutes an independent, separate space of agency for Jennifer. Not denying that this may be the case, I still see a profound imbalance between allowing an unmarked, respectful space of existence for Jennifer, and, as Winton’s novel does, stigmatising the woman as deviant and cruel in her mannerisms. In Jennifer, Winton creates a chimera of lost love and stability – a presentation that conveys a worldview in which women’s desire for self-expression and alternative feminist ways of mothering outside of the traditional family sphere is seen as corrosive.

Winton once implied that feminism instilled a deep sense of guilt and confusion in him about his gender. Defensively, he justifies men’s mistakes as arising from social pressures in Australia that coerce a man to act rather than feel – squeezing him into a very narrow concept of hegemonic masculinity. These flaws, he states, can also be found in women but in moderate forms because women in his view lack the social pressure, “the training” that men go through: “Men’s flaws are human flaws. Women have them too, only the training does not match.”

Hence, Winton places himself clearly on the side of the man as the victim of socio-cultural movements and conventions in contrast to a media that primarily focuses on the woman as victim. In his writing, Winton gives expression to his confusion by making his men “feel” and his women “act,” thus transforming gender roles in emasculating his male protagonists and “masculinising” his female characters. In doing so, he “educates” his women, giving them the “training” that, according to him, account for so many of men’s mistakes. Now he renders the woman the one whose flaws are “finally” exposed, thus expressing a reactionary response to feminism. Consequently, self-harm, as the ultimate form of “act-ion,” visualises Winton’s objectives of gender reversal, education and re-definition, as previously shown. Jennifer literally represents the masculinised,

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5 Winton, “The Masculine Mystique.”
“flawed” presence/absence, whose lack of mothering creates the counterfoil to the feeling, sensitive protagonist.

3.1. The Dichotomy of Mothering
The mother can be seen to play a central role in Winton’s fiction and thus correlates with the difficult and contested status of motherhood as a personal experience and as an institution in the history of white Australian settlement and in the process of Western feminism. The Victorian ideal of the good mother, the “angel in the house,” and the disgrace of the “fallen woman” have considerably shaped the history of women in Europe and the colonies. These values also had their effect in colonial Australia, especially in the rural, frontier parts of the country, where men outnumbered the women and often took advantage of the lack of institutional protection of women’s rights. Winton once remarked that the typical, patriarchal, Australian culture was reversed in his own upbringing, where strong and threatening matriarchs ruled the house and often dominated their rather weak, domesticated husbands: “She [his grandmother] was a great matriarch and it was a matriarchal family. All the women were strong and all the men were feckless at best […] In my family you got a flogging from the women, and the weak link would always be the man.” This reversal, though, only superficially resonates in the traditional Victorian and Christian ideals that seem to be still affecting the characterisation of motherhood and the female in his novels.

Professing his belief in Christian values, Winton applies strong religious imagery, creating a symbolism that often extends the borders of conventional realism. Stories in That Eye the Sky, In the Winter Dark, Cloudstreet, Dirt Music, The Turning and Breath are heavily defined by this particular credence in the magic of spirituality and the revelatory power of simplicity. Viewing the extraordinary in the ordinary things in life has always been a

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7 See Bird, “Mother, I won’t never go drovin’,” 41. Also cf. Rich, Of Woman Born. In From Here to Maternity – Becoming a Mother (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1986), Ann Oakley introduces and explains the role of the mother as a cultural, historical and social concept in Western societies. Also important to mention here is the significance of the history of women in Western Australia – women who were initially sent over to the frontier to ensure reproduction and contribute to the continuation and manifestation of the “nation” building through child bearing. See in this context e.g. Lake, “Frontier Feminism”; Rebecca Wickes et al., “Gender and National Identity: Lessons from the Australian Case,” Journal of Political Science 41, no. 3 (September 2006): 292; Chase, Krantz and Jan Jackson, A Portrait of Progress.
decisive characteristic of Winton’s philosophy as a writer, but is frequently mingled with an occasional dystopia, which reflects the dark shadows in a person’s life.10

Despite the generally nuanced portrayals of Winton’s fiction, his representation of women characters can be criticised for often being one-dimensional and stereotypical. A fitting example is the dichotomisation of the female in the characters of Dolly and Oriel, who both bear the stigma of the uncaring and the perfect mother, or, as Ann E. Kaplan has it, the “ideal ‘angel’ Mother” versus the “evil ‘witch’ opposite.”11 In contrast to Dolly, who matches the category of a “fallen woman,” Oriel’s maternal dissonance lies in her inability to reconnect with her son, Fish, after his accident, which leaves him disabled. Fish blames his mother indirectly for her resuscitation efforts, which have deprived him of the spiritual bliss of the afterlife and leave him dangling in between life and death, mentally fractured. Although Oriel’s behaviour may be perceived as a deviation from maternal perfection, it nevertheless conforms to the ideal of motherly love and the instinctive tendency to protect a child’s life. Oriel can be seen as the 1960s forerunner to the present day “alpha mom,” whose target is excellence and perfection in motherhood but who also, at the same time, juggles a successful family business and, thus, predicts the controversial post-feminist myth of “having it all.”12 In contrast to Oriel’s efficient diligence, Dolly’s alcohol addiction increasingly alienates her from her family and debilitates her caring and nurturing function as a mother. She, therefore, receives the stigmatisation of the “bad mother,” as Andrea O’Reilly argues: “When mothers with alcohol addiction exhibit socially unacceptable or

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11 Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation, 9. This dichotomy is also addressed in Suzanna Danuta Walters, Lives Together/Worlds Apart: Mothers and Daughters in Popular Culture (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 7. Of course, this discourse reaches back to the second wave feminism of the 1970s with, for example, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Melanie Klein, based on the Victorian dichotomy of the nineteenth century.

12 See Randall Patterson, “Empire of the Alpha Mom,” New York Times Magazine, June 20, 2005, accessed January 2008, 2011, http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/12026/: “The latest model of mother is not different from Betty but better, stronger, faster. If she seems frightening, perhaps it’s because she’s so unlike our own mothers and operates so counter to both instinct and emerging wisdom. To all the best-selling scolds who say that Mother should slow down, that we expect too much of her, the new, improved Mama says, if anything, the goalposts have been set too low. With the right planning, resources, and work ethic, you can, too, be a perfect and fulfilled woman, raising a perfect and happy child.” Also see Maria Tumarkin, “Mining the Mother Lode,” Age, April 18, 2009, 20. Regarding the mommy wars, the myth of having it all and its controversies and responses, see e.g. Haussegger, Wonder Woman; Maguire, Princesses & Pornstars, 194-95.
stigmatized behaviors that challenge the ideal image, they are criticized and labelled ‘bad mothers.’”

So, while Fish’s mother tries to conceal maternal ambivalence and the emotional hardship it involves behind “the mask of motherhood,” Rose’s mother breaks this mask repeatedly, not caring about convention or respect from others (Cloudstreet, 152-53). Eva and Grace in Breath reflect a similar dichotomy that is already implied in the symbolic naming of the two characters and the inherently different outlooks on life. Eva is living the hippie culture passionately, defining herself outside of social norms and expectations, whereas Grace is the epitome of convention: “Men, she said, were supposed to be turned off by all that fluid, the gross belly, the big backside and puffy ankles. That was normal” (Breath, 203). Ida and Ronny in In the Winter Dark, as well as Sally and Debbie in Dirt Music, further exemplify the matter. Iris Young states that in Western thought the woman is the seat of this oppositional categorisation, as it is patriarchy that places a strict border between motherhood and sexuality: “The virgin or the whore, the pure or the impure, the nurturer or the seducer is either asexual mother or sexualized beauty, but one precludes the other.” Interestingly, this tendency to categorise the female characters and attribute oppositional qualities to them is expanded to the level of mother-daughter relationships, which adopt a much more complex and controversial role in Winton’s fiction than do the corresponding relations between fathers and sons.

Numerous examples come to mind:

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13 O’Reilly, “Introduction,” 44. Also see Podnieks and O’Reilly, “Introduction: Maternal Literatures in Text and Tradition,” 4; Lake, “Frontier Feminism,” 14: “The imposition of ‘purity’ could be seen as especially important in the Australian colonies, given the possibilities of contamination from the convict legacy and the existence, and in some parts of Australia, the close proximity of indigenous societies. This meant that white women had a special responsibility as exemplars of civilized standards: drinking and sexual promiscuity were regarded as especially heinous offences in women.” Regarding the maternal binary in Cloudstreet, see in this context Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 175. Murrie refers to the binary relationship between Oriel and Dolly by introducing the patriarchal opposition “Madonna” and “whore,” also briefly outlining the marginalisation of the maternal in Cloudstreet and The Riders. Here also cf. Ben-Messahel, Mind the Country, 36, who refers to Dolly as an example of the “apparently horrible mother” but sees in Winton’s use of the undutiful or bad mother a strategy to reverse common stereotypes associated with the feminine and motherhood and, thus, to deconstruct patriarchy.


15 See Goldsworthy, May 4, 2008 (12:46pm), comment on Breath, Australian Literature Diary (blog). Also cf. Ley, “Whether They Like It Or Not,” 22-23. Both of these critics refer to the Judeo-Christian, metaphysic descriptions and symbolisms in Winton’s latest novel Breath.

16 Iris Marion Young, “Breasted Experience – The Look and the Feeling.” in Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory, ed. Irish Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 196-97. It needs to be said here that Winton’s promiscuous women characters are also mothers, though neglecting this role considerably.

17 See Ben-Messahel, Mind the Country, 39: Ben-Messahel enlarges here upon the father-child relations and the impact of the father within the family. Motherhood is only marginally addressed (Mind the Country, 34-39).
Rose and Dolly, Tegwyn and Alice, Georgie and Vera Jutland, Queenie Coupar/Cookson and Eileen Coupar, Billie and Jennifer. In addition, there is also the significance of the pre-pubescent female child, whose strong attachment to the male protagonist of the story marginalises or excludes the mother, who either willingly relinquishes her mother right or dies as a result of an accident, suicide or illness, as it is the case with Jennifer in *The Riders*, Eileen and Maureen in *Shallows* or Sally, Mrs. Fox, Mrs. Jutland and Mrs. Buckridge in *Dirt Music.*

### 3.2. Male Mothering

The innocence, purity, sincerity and spiritual insight associated with girls like Billie (*The Riders*) and Bird (*Dirt Music*) stand in deep contrast to the grown-up women in Winton’s novels, who have lost their connection with this romantic ideal of innocence and grace through their awakening and developing sexuality and lust. It is the men that then assume the spiritual, caring qualities, which connects them with the children. Rachel Nilsam’s memory of Lu caretaking his niece Bird highlights this particular point in adult-child relations:

> I remember him leaning in, singing to them [his niece and nephew]. Later I saw him with the little girl. She adored him, I think. He was rocking her to sleep with this look on his face, that look you see on breast-feeding women. You know, that dreamy, satisfied, slightly defiant look. (*Dirt Music*, 268)

Lu becomes the surrogate parent, the nurturing feminine that the children lack, as Sally and Darkie, immersed in their relationship, place priority on their passion for each other and the music, not on their daughter and son (ibid., 379). This open feminisation and maternalisation of the male character resonate with Graeme Russell’s call for the re-orientation of fathers as child carers and also illustrates the recent trend within Australian culture to deconstruct the image of the egalitarian, tough and outdoor “Aussie bloke” by presenting men as vulnerable and domestic. As pointed out earlier, Bode outlines this popular discourse on “the man in crisis,” which shows men as the disempowered victims within an increasingly alienating, 

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Interestingly, as shown in studies on motherhood, not a lot of social-scientific, anthropological research has been conducted on mother-son relations in adolescence: see O’Reilly, *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, 18.

18 See Jennifer in *The Riders* or Sally in *Dirt Music* as examples of the former category, and Jewel, Maureen Coupar, Vera Jutland, Mrs. Buckridge, Mrs. Fox or Debbie as illustrating the latter one.

19 Ben-Messahel sees the relationship between son, father and daughter revolving around the Oedipus complex – an interesting idea, which, however, will not be further investigated at this point: see Ben-Messahel *Mind the Country*, 38.

disenfranchising society.\textsuperscript{21} The wounded and damaged male body is often mentioned in this context in order to point out the representative transgression of the patriarchal stigma of white male’s invisibility and universality.\textsuperscript{22}

In the case of Winton’s fiction, the presentation of the sensitive, motherly and psychologically wounded “bloke,” despite being often considered as deconstructing dominant masculine stereotypes, is seen here as a re-enforcement of patriarchal values and power relations that push the woman and mother to the margin, marking her as the abject, absent or excessive other to “male mothering.”\textsuperscript{23} Winton assigns the act of mothering to the men in his stories by employing and reversing Sara Ruddick’s concept of mothering, which refers to motherhood as practice and not as biological determinant.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, he proves Ruddick’s point that “men can and do mother,”\textsuperscript{25} albeit in an exclusive rather than inclusive parental sharing of “response-ability.”\textsuperscript{26} To further illustrate this point, Daniel Coupar in \textit{Shallows} becomes the guardian for his granddaughter Queenie after his own unloved daughter leaves the family and his wife Maureen dies (\textit{Shallows}, 82). Similarly, Scully is passionately and devotedly mothering his daughter Billie, excluding his wife through the natural bond that he and Billie share, alluded to in their similar appearance (\textit{The Riders}, 18): “Jennifer’s black hair falling from beneath a beret. His and Billie’s like matching treetops, just mad foliage from the same forest” (ibid., 21).\textsuperscript{27} The girl, therefore, is part of the “masculine mystique” that Winton illuminates in a stance that is critical of the independent, active and slightly threatening “goddess” of a mother.\textsuperscript{28} According to Scully, he and Billie

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 19. Also cf. Robinson, \textit{Marked Men}, 1-5; Dyer, \textit{White}, 146-80.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} See for example Ben-Messahel, \textit{Mind the Country}, 36-42. Ben-Messahel acknowledges the “bad mother versus good mother” category but fails to critically evaluate this representation and rather sees it as an affirmation of Winton’s deconstruction of traditional, patriarchal family structures. The term “male mothering” is borrowed from the introduction of Rich’s \textit{Of Woman Born}, 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} See Ruddick, \textit{Maternal Thinking}, xi-xii, 41. Also see O’Reilly, “I Envision a Future,” 296.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 173.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Also cf. \textit{The Riders}, 182-83: Scully baths Billie and compares this situation with his own as a child when he was given a bath by his mother after a rough day on the road. This open comparison equals motherly and fatherly duties and sensitivities, deconstructing the notion of the woman in the nurturing, caring mother role and passing the same role and qualities on to the male.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} See Ariziti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s \textit{The Riders},” 29-45. Ariziti Martin elaborates the symbol of the goddess in relation to Jennifer and Billie (43-44), pointing out the ambivalent qualities associated with it. The fact that Billie only refers to her mother by using the pronoun “Her” (\textit{The Riders}, 193), and calls her a statue (\textit{The Riders}, 248), connotes the threatening but still fascinating superiority of Jennifer, however devoid of basic human qualities. Also see in this context Tim Winton, “A Conversation with Tim
always used to be a family unit, completely at ease with each other, of which Jennifer was not a part. The marginalisation of the maternal in this respect opens up strict dichotomies of good and bad, perpetrator and victim, but it also hints at the limitations and insufficiencies of these binaries.\(^{29}\) Winton’s reputed attempts to deconstruct existing gender stereotypes reflect his own upbringing when his father often did the housework before he headed off to work: “I guess I’m writing about it from an orthodox female point of view. My father cooked and cleaned and did the washing and put on his copper’s uniform and went to work. I just thought that was normal.”\(^{30}\) Graeme Russell’s call for recognition of the changing role of the father as caregiver and for a deviation from traditional notions of parental roles shines through in *The Riders*.\(^{31}\) The soothing and protective quality of the father is lacking in the representation of the woman in this particular novel, who is the cause of distress and pain for both Scully and their daughter.

Highlighting the protective and nurturing quality of the father figure as opposed to the “bad” mother, it happens frequently in Winton’s stories that the mother contributes to the trauma of her daughter, who suffers from the largely deficient family situation. Dolly and Rose respectively become the victims of irresponsible and weak parentage. While Dolly’s promiscuous and spiteful behaviour results from her own abusive and deceitful family history, Rose’s anorexia and depression are inextricably linked with her mother’s open adultery and, though only in minor ways, with her father’s gambling. She deliberately distances herself from her mother, stops eating and cultivates a body image that annihilates all obviously feminine and sexual traces of womanhood. In *That Eye the Sky*, Tegwyn’s adolescent wish to be considered an adult and to be taken seriously clashes with the strong personality of Alice, the epitome of the devoted, caring and sacrificing mother, who has to

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\(^{30}\) Winton, “A Conversation with Tim Winton,” 129. See also Winton, “Eleanor Wachtel with Tim Winton,” 70: “[I]t was a matriarchal family. All the women were strong and all the men were feckless at best […] in my family you got a flogging from the women, and the weak link would always be the man.”

witness her daughter’s sexual affair with a man of her own, Alice’s, age. Alice adopts a rather condescending attitude towards the men around her and in this resembles both Oriel and the women that Winton grew up with:

‘No,’ she says, ‘all men are weak. A woman’s got no time to be weak. It’s not that I don’t like weak men. I just get sick of them […] Mum sniffs. ‘Sam is a child in a man’s body. He trusts people. He thinks the best of them. He sees the way things should be, not always the way things are.’ (That Eye the Sky, 105)

Furthermore, Georgie, the female protagonist in Dirt Music, feels trapped by her mother Vera Jutland’s superficial upper-class attitudes, manifested in status symbols and outward appearances (Dirt Music, 167-68). Mrs. Jutland’s death triggers a long line of childhood memories, which contribute further to Georgie’s social displacement and restlessness, fitting neither into her family, nor into the world of White Point. Vera Jutland, as Georgie says herself, is a person that did not leave big traces in the world around her: “What can we say? […] A compliant if distracted wife. A competent and distant mother. Feminine. Good skin, nice manners. Yet how did she distinguish herself? What stories could you tell?” (Ibid., 171)

Nevertheless, her mother’s passing leaves Georgie with the feeling of loss and incompleteness, having been deprived of the chance to reconcile with her mother and offer her the last service of daughterly duty:

None of them would understand but she really would have cherished just half an hour alone with her mother before the undertakers arrived. To undress her, yes, and wash her, to sponge away the cosmetic crust that had disguised her in life, all that lippy, the foundation and rouge, the pencil and eyeshadow. Gently. With reverence. Not in anger or triumph, but as a daughterly offering. To relieve each of them of their burden. All you ever wanted was to show her what you did best, to have her understand something about you. And to prove that you could love her. (Dirt Music, 175-76)

As argued elsewhere, the good, efficient housewife stands in contrast with the “fallen woman” and “bad mother,” who cannot provide their children with the care and love they need. Gustafson enlarges upon the binary opposition between good and bad mothers, pointing out the lack of nuances and complexities that motherhood, both as a personal decision and as an institutional role, actually entails. In this context, the commonly-established norm of the “good mother” is contrasted with its corresponding antithesis:32

The bad mother is imagined to ignore, trivialize, or reject her child’s need for love, caring, and nurturance both as an intellectual understanding and as a lived experience. She is

regarded as unloving and uncaring […] A woman who is unwilling or unable to perform her motherly duties is thought to be motivated by selfishness, self-absorption, and self-indulgence – all individual defects. Finally and germane to this discussion, the bad mother is the absent mother – absent emotionally or absent physically from her children.33

Thus, in alignment with the notoriously “bad” or failing mother, absent mothers are also a constant factor in Winton’s fiction, highlighting the central position and function of the mother figure in all his novels. In this thesis, the trope of absence is used in various ways. It is referred to in its literal meaning, indicating the physical lack of presence. Then, it appears in its metaphorical meaning, describing the absence of motherly care despite her being physically present. Eventually, absence is configured in the actual or metaphorical death of the mother, which heavily impacts on the lives of the different characters.

3.3. “Unbecoming Woman”: Maternal Absence and Paternal Trauma

In his novel *The Riders*, nominated for the Booker Prize in 1995, Winton inscribes this phenomenon of absence literally in the image of the deserting mother, who leaves her family without explanation.34 As argued earlier, Winton responds to feminist discourses, expressing his disappointment in feminism, which, in his view, failed to change the social expectations that allow men only to act, not feel.35 Presenting male violence as the consequence of the “social training” that men, unlike women, go through, Winton reveals his main motif for writing *The Riders*: he wishes to emphasise the fact that women can also be violent by leaving their husbands and children and that men, too, can feel and suffer. In an interview Winton said that he wanted to show the suffering of a man left by his wife to create a counter-foil to the many literary and cultural representations of the woman being left by the man.36 If Winton can be believed, he seems to be turning his writing into self-declared weaponry against social confinement; his realist fiction becomes a form of social realism that intends to educate and train his readership towards a more inclusive concept of masculinity. The desire to understand the female is aligned with men’s need to express their emotion and claim legitimacy for it.

33 Ibid., 28.
34 Winton’s novel follows the literary tradition of D’Arcy Niland’s 1955 novel *The Shiralee* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1955): both focus their narration on the relationship between father and daughter, albeit with decisive differences. For example, Winton’s novel is set in Europe, not in Australia, and Billie is seven years old, not five like Buster. Scully’s shiralee (“swag,” “burden”) is the loss of his wife, not Billie. Written forty years apart from each other, Scully and Jim Macauley are the fictional embodiment of the “man in crisis” and the “Aussie battler” respectively – two sides of the same coin of Australian masculinity.
35 Winton, “The Masculine Mystique.”
The problem is that Winton’s stories create equally constricting stereotypes for women, while trying to deconstruct the ones for men. In the process women’s self-harm is exploited as a negative counterfoil for the feminisation of the male characters. Confronted with frequent accusations regarding the problematic portrayal of men and women in *The Riders*, Winton disclaims the social component of his writing by stating that the novel is not about gender politics but about love.\(^{37}\) However, by paying particular attention to male suffering, the writer enters the gender debate:

> I was taking the risk of this odd gender reversal. I’ve read all those books about what happens when a man leaves a woman, and the woman’s stuck […] But few people will actually tell the story of the person left behind unless that’s a woman. There’s no body of work about blokes being left without it also entailing acute explanation about why they’ve been left.\(^{38}\)

Consequently, in the wake of Winton’s “odd gender reversal,” the Australian “man-in-crisis” receives a face in the protagonist Fred Scully. In the elusive character of Jennifer, Winton creates a subtle nemesis in the novel, a persistently “absent presence,” haunting the protagonist and depriving him of his home literally and metaphorically.\(^{39}\)

Scully, who has been hoping to start a new life in Europe and create a home in Ireland, is left stranded on a foreign continent with his daughter Billie after his wife has suddenly left him to pursue her own idea of freedom and artistic fulfilment. The reader cannot avoid becoming witness to the immense suffering of the apparently good-natured and caring protagonist, whose whole existence falls apart with the loss of his wife. Subsequently, the absent partner, Jennifer, becomes the mystified, mysterious other, whose motives for leaving her family are never fully explained in the accounts of her husband and child and thus remain open to interpretation and speculation. Scully and his daughter are the objects of much readerly compassion, while the shadow of Jennifer’s ghost, who keeps controlling their lives, commands less sympathy. Winton’s portrayal of the situation quickly creates a

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\(^{37}\) Danielle Wood, “A Weaver of Our Time Dodges Gender Trap,” *Saturday Mercury* Weekend, September 24, 1994, quoted in Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder*, 127. For a critical response to Winton’s stereotypical portrayal of the feminine, see Baines Alarcos, “She Lures, She Guides, She Quits,” 20-21: “Therefore, it can be said that *The Riders* contributes to spreading deep-rooted conceptions of women that go against the pluralism of contemporary female roles.” Also see White, “Beyond God the Father,” 60-62, 68-73.


\(^{39}\) The term “absent presence” is mentioned in the introduction of Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 3.
sense of dislike against a mother who abandons her child and her parental duties. Questions about the possible reasons why she made this decision – reasons that might dispel our suspicion of her egocentricity and explain her departure as necessary to her intellectual and emotional survival – are easily discarded. As recipients, we are trapped again by the old stereotype of the nurturing, eternally and unconditionally loving mother as, in Adrienne Rich’s words, a “single-minded identity” – a creation of patriarchy. Jennifer’s absence stigmatises her as the “bad” mother who places her own well-being over the happiness of her family.

Gustafson uses the phrase “unbecoming mothers” to explore the complexity of maternal absences in the historical and social context of parenting, offering a fitting foundation for the analysis of Jennifer and the role of the mother in Winton’s fiction:

‘Unbecoming’ captures the socially constructed process of moving from an authentic state of mother to a delegitimated category of ‘bad mother’ or ‘nonmother’. Unbecoming is also a descriptor – one that implies that the process is inappropriate and unseemly. Moreover, unbecoming is a social descriptor that attaches to the woman who is regarded as unfit or unnatural because her behaviour deviates from dominant Western social and moral expectations of the responsible (female) parent.

This discrepancy between new and old family values, feminism and patriarchy, and issues of self-fulfilment and neglect is particularly resonant in this novel, which has been considered “your wildest nightmare, the worst part of you, the world you wished you’d never constructed within you – provided, of course, that you are male.” The Riders has been widely discussed because it is the only of Winton’s novels that is set outside of Australia and reflects the difficulties of postcolonial progression and emancipation in an increasingly globalised, transnational context. The inevitable deviation from known family structures and the difficulty of re-orientation produce a sense of fragmentation and alienation that overthrows conventional concepts and ideals. The Riders depicts this central digression from traditional gender roles, as Salhia Ben-Messahel points out, when she says that the microcosm of the family in Winton’s novels departs from “the old and very common

40 Rich, Of Woman Born, 23.
41 Gustafson, “Framing the Discussion,” 32.
conviction that the woman is the only central element of the household” and that “the image of the woman as a spouse, caring mother, and housewife no longer corresponds to the realities of the second half of the twentieth century.” However, Winton’s male characters visibly struggle with a sense of lacking the protection and stability that comes with the changing gender roles:

You see, this stuff used to be automatic, you know, natural. Women are not so keen to have them anymore, not where I come from anyway. They’ve got other fish to fry, which is fair enough. But they don’t realize, sometimes, what they’re missing, or what they’re withholding, you know? The power they have. (*The Riders*, 34)

It seems as if an air of condemnation lingers over the characters in *The Riders*, where the mother has abandoned her “natural” power of child-bearing for possibly an artistic career and, as the novel indicates, a homosexual relationship. The protagonist in the story, Scully, is described as the prototypical down-to-earth Australian working-class male in his unassuming conduct, his interest in mateship, his love for simplicity and his unpolished, honest behaviour. It is merely his unconditional devotion to his family that distinguishes him from earlier, traditional figures of the “Aussie bloke,” as Andrew Taylor points out in his article “Tim Winton’s *The Riders*: A Construction of Difference.”

Losing his wife without any justification triggers Scully’s desperate search through Europe, resulting in the final conviction that Jennifer will not come back to her child and husband. As the novel persistently centres on Scully, his perceptions, feelings, concerns and fears stand in the foreground, automatically establishing a contrasting worldview, which portrays him as the victim of his wife’s actions. Jennifer becomes clearly marked as the mysterious, inexplicable and perpetrating other, who appears cruel and devious, unwilling or unable to speak and to ease her husband’s and daughter’s suffering. In his painful obsession, Scully adopts a victimised position, which, on the one hand, invokes the controversial debate over the man as the victim of domestic disputes and, on the other hand, shows him as an example of the broken “man-in-crisis.” The maternal is closely associated in this novel with

45 In recent discourses on motherhood the idea is fostered that mothers should continue to develop their individual aims, not just in relation to their role as mother, and overcome their mother-guilt. See, for example, Andrea O’Reilly, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Mothering*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 1-22. Also see George Stades’s review of *The Riders*, “The Bad Mother,” in *New York Times Book Review*, November 19, 1995, 14.
47 With the exception of Billie’s point of view occasionally taking over, see for example *The Riders*, 75-77, 217, 248, 268, 298-300, 305-9, 323-24.
Dionysian Europe as the alienating, seducing and threatening counterforce, a place that stinks of ghosts and shadows,\(^48\) whereas Australia is nostalgically idealised as the Apollonian paternal antithesis – the romanticised home, which stands in alliance with Ireland – a mediator between Europe and Australia.\(^49\) The Irish share the rough and honest working-class values that define the male protagonist, who is openly placed in opposition to the secrecy, deceit and deviousness of Europe and also of the feminine.\(^50\) Europe is presented as a rather strange, often cold and hostile place, in which Scully’s search for love turns into an Odyssey to find himself.\(^51\)

Further, Jennifer’s absence is aligned to the postcolonial, expatriate fascination with the home country (mainly based on nostalgic sentiments) as Lyn Jacobs argues in her article “Tim Winton and West Australian Writing,” stating that “[h]is [Scully’s] missing wife, like Australia, features in absentia but still holds him in thrall.”\(^52\) Scully’s memories and convictions of his happy and harmonious family life correspond with his idyllic view of Australia, which both are prone to idealisation and subjective constructiveness: “The family is described as ‘representatively’ Australian, but Scully learns that personal images, realities, and histories, like those of a nation, may be contingent on what is recorded and what is left unsaid.”\(^53\) The cottage in county Offaly that Scully renovates is closely aligned in its allegoric function to Jennifer and the trauma that her disappearance instils in the protagonist.\(^54\) It is a house “older than his own nation” (The Riders, 6), a remnant from a time past that attracted Jennifer’s attention when they first visited Ireland (ibid., 51). Jennifer

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\(^{48}\) See Tsiolkas, Dead Europe, 358. In this novel Tsiolkas paints Europe as a place of the underworld, a shattering postmodern dystopia that is mingled with the chaos of beliefs, accusations, social and personal destruction and devilish possession. It becomes the metaphor of death and decay, dragging the protagonist into a world of corruption and demoralisation, while highlighting the cultural and ideological chasms and prejudices between old and new world, the “mother-country” and Australia.

\(^{49}\) See Chesler, Women and Madness, 79. Chesler aligns the maternal forces with Dionysus (chaos) and the paternal with Apollo (order), raising awareness of culturally impregnated gender stereotypes in the history of Western society and the idea of the family.

\(^{50}\) Taylor, “Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 107.


\(^{52}\) Jacobs, “Tim Winton and West Australian Writing,” 315.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 316.

\(^{54}\) See here Warren Flynn, “Fragments of the Moon & Body, Space, Ideas of Home: Cross-Cultural Perspectives” (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2007), 295-96. Flynn looks into the characters and relationships in Winton’s fiction: “Scully’s unmitigated love for his absent wife and daughter is made obvious not through poetic epistles, expensive presents or artistic outpourings, but through house renovation, including the construction of a basic flushing toilet.”
scars the place with her female gaze. However by rejecting it she projects her desire onto a sphere beyond marriage and family – a direction that allows 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.

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’s 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.\(^55\) 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).\(^56\) It signifies a reversed masculine de-colonising process from the feminine, turning from a “doll’s house” into a place of maturity, fatherly self-sufficiency and self-embrace.\(^57\) 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.\(^58\) The cottage adopts the position of nemesis to the old family house in Fremantle, a past place of 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

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\(^56\) See Rutherford, “The Irish Conceit,” 200-1.

\(^57\) 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.

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. (Ibid., 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. 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.”59 She sees Scully’s work as the creation of familiarity within an estranging country/continent, building a little Australian niche – a home. However, she misses the opportunity to develop this further. For instance, the specific material elements within the house that signify this claim and distinguish the place as a marginal reflection of postcolonial Australia are also notable.60 Scully’s 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 interweaved with the cottage and its (wo)manly imprints.61 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.62 In terms of separate spheres, therefore, the narrative violates the existence of the house as an exclusionary space of female power, turning it into the primary territory of the man and father.63

59 Ben-Messahel, Mind the Country, 132.
60 In consideration of the limited scope of this study, the critical analysis of the living spaces in Winton’s novels (among others) will be discussed in a post-PhD project that is already in the planning stage.
61 Ben-Messahel, Mind the Country, 132.
62 See Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 45. She argues that Scully reconciles with the feminine in the end, granting Jennifer her own life – a point I am ambivalent about, instead viewing reconciliation as romanticised in this context.
63 As often noted, Jennifer adopts a traditional masculine role. For example, she is the breadwinner of the family, working in the public sphere and she took the first step in her and Scully’s relationship (The Riders, 34-6). See Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 35.
Insinuating a form of de-colonisation from the female, *The Riders* portrays the woman and mother as a threat to family unity and marital bliss, significantly contributing to the ‘man in crisis’. Without any proper evidence, for instance, Scully assumes a lesbian relationship between his wife and the French photographer Dominique (*The Riders*, 310). This idea troubles him but it ultimately functions as a fiction to maintain the heterosexual norm by abjecting the female to a domain outside of Scully’s worldview. Jennifer is regarded as losing her rights as a woman in her husband’s self-consolation. Thus, the central binaries of male/female, motherhood/fatherdom, good mothering/bad mothering are maintained by declaring Jennifer as “non-woman” or “not-woman,” whose body is expelled from the dominant hegemonic power systems of heterosexuality to the outer abstraction of the unknown. Europe, being the place of the alien, is consequently associated with Lesbianism as another proof of its estranging, violent difference, which does not embrace or welcome Scully. “Australia,” however, conjures up the notion of the heterosexual couple and family, both still considered a core unit of the state in the regulation and surveillance of sexuality. Having given up her heterosexual subject position as wife and mother, Jennifer’s body remains invisible in most parts of the novel and her voice is mute. Her absence and his absolute loss eventually form the only prospect for Scully to fundamentally redefine his life and to start all over again, but still within the set regulations of his own cultural and social background that does not allow him in his defeat to accept Jennifer as being alive:

> Across Europe and back to obligingly identify a body. With dignity. Yes, it meant, in the warm light of this bar, feeling no pain, that he had nothing. Not a hole in the ground, not even the dying echo of an idea of his life. (*The Riders*, 311).

Absence and death merge here in Scully’s imagination.

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64 Cf. Monique Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 105. See also Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143: Wittig uses the concept of “not-woman” as a form of female and lesbian empowerment in the context of the women movement that sets itself apart from the notion of woman as myth. To her a “lesbian is not a woman,” as Butler observes.


Jennifer as enigma exercises a form of power over her husband, which, however, is essential in his search for meaning and re-empowerment. Therefore, the absence of his wife initiates a rite of passage (separation, initiation, return) for the man in a picaresque fashion, chasing him across Europe and confronting him with occasional fragments of his wife’s presence in the people he encounters. So the English expatriate on Hydra, Arthur Lipp, remembers Jennifer as the woman “with the legs and the fierce hunger” (The Riders, 108) – an impression that incites further speculation about Jennifer’s motives for abandoning her child. Equally praising her “delectable pair of legs” (ibid., 143), artist Alex Moore’s idea of Jennifer further complicates her mystery and adds an air of egocentricity to her personality: “I think Jennifer missed something she wants to get back, that’s all,’ said Alex with grease down his chin. ‘She’s something of a snob, a dilettante. She wants recognition. She wants to be more interesting” (143). She is the overtly sexualised mystery that stands in utter contrast to Winton’s portrayal of the innocent, yet overly mature seven-year-old child, and the lost, victimised and sympathetic character of Fred Scully.

Pilar Baines Alarcos discusses the female stereotypes in The Riders and argues that Jennifer can be considered the transgressor of patriarchy, in that she matches the characteristics of the modern independent woman and displays the male fear of the woman as the castrating other. In her view the novel “reflects women’s powerlessness in a phallocentric society where female voices are silenced or conveniently distorted by men.” This is a valuable, though not novel insight, which, however, does not properly pinpoint the effect and controversy of Winton’s novel in contemporary Australia. Baines Alarcos merely observes the patriarchal stereotypes without sufficiently explaining how these archetypes can be deconstructed, and how this phenomenon can be criticised across the

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68 Ibid., 106.
69 See in this context Brian Matthews, “Childhood in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” in Reading Tim Winton, ed. Richard Rossiter and Lyn Jacobs (Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1993), 69: “His conception of childhood, however, as distinct from his actual evocations of it, is reminiscent of those eighteenth-century paintings in which children appear as small adults […] Born of adults into a puzzling, intrusive and overshadowing adult world, Winton’s children and adolescents seem doomed by paradox: they will only successfully negotiate childhood by having an old head on their young shoulders.” Also see Krauth, “Riding to Hell on Tim Winton’s Back,” 15.
70 Baines Alarcos, “She Lures, She Guides, She Quits,” 11, 13, 14.
71 Ibid., 16.
72 Jennifer Rutherford and Kerryn Goldsworthy, for instance, have written about the powerlessness and stereotypical representation of Winton’s characters in his fictional social backdrops and the significance of them being muted.
range of Winton’s fictional work, and in comparison with other Australian writers. In this context, it is crucial to consider the importance of the largely positive perception and admiration of these portrayals among Australians – a sign that the novel’s stereotypes may be widespread, though not necessarily collectively accepted. Thus, the novel, as Baines Alarcos rightly observes, “contributes to spreading deep-rooted conceptions of women,” which do not merely “go against the pluralism of contemporary female roles” in Australia but in their traditional and static nature stand in downright polarity to these roles, which are stigmatised as the abject in Winton’s representation.\footnote{Baines Alarcos, “She Lures, She Guides, She Quits,” 21.}

[T]he story Winton is telling takes up, recasts, and repeats the narratives, the figures and the classifications of self and Other that have defined Australianness throughout white Australian history. Winton draws a continuity between love relations and national relations […] For a novel so contemporaneous in its concerns, what is striking is the repetitiveness of this fantasy of a good Australia, and the way in which the incumbent aggressions of this fantasy take such a familiar – albeit displaced – form.\footnote{Rutherford, The Gauche Intruder, 127-28.}

Arizti Martin agrees that the depiction of women in this and other novels is problematic, stating that Winton’s anti-sexist man “coexists with some negative images of women in general and mothers in particular […] Besides, his depiction of the new woman is weighed down by some typically male constructions of women as enigma and femme castratrice.”\footnote{Arizti Martin, “Fathercare in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” 282: “The emancipated career woman, who privileges her self-realisation over and above the well-being of her husband and child, is presented as a threat to the family.”}

### 3.4. The Silence of the Mother and the “Wound” of Masculinity

*The Riders* is often regarded as a novel wherein the woman is rendered speechless – a matter that prompted Jennifer Rutherford to formulate a ficto-critical response letter from the character Jennifer to Winton, in which she claims the right to tell her story.\footnote{Rutherford, The Gauche Intruder, 129-30.} The view that Jennifer is not granted the right to speak and is, therefore, disempowered, contrasts with, for instance, Taylor’s idea that her silence may be a form of power.\footnote{Taylor, “Tim Winton’s *The Riders*,” 110.} In this context it is necessary to ask whether silence can be empowering when it reduces the woman to a chimerical figure who is idealised through her husband’s nostalgia and demonised in the image of a cruel femme fatale.\footnote{This technique of “writing back” to the dominant voices of imperialism (and the masculine) is well reflected in postcolonial literatures and their corresponding discourses, most notably in this context Jean Rhys, *Wide
contrasting positions of Rutherford and Taylor, who either see in Jennifer the disempowered woman, who is not granted the freedom to tell her story by the author, or the decisive woman, who uses her silence as a means to gain autonomy and a sense of self-empowerment. Drusilla Modjeska once referred to the notion that finding a voice means to give life to a story and story to a life: “To find a voice. What does it mean? What does it mean when a woman finds her voice? And when she finds it, what then? […] I mean she found a voice that narrates, orders, considers, reconsiders, backtracks, and gives life to a story, and a story to her life.” Jennifer neither finds an immediate voice of her own nor enters the space that is so strikingly dominated by the male gaze and perspective. Her silence opens up a realm of possibility that actually invites us to tell her stories – stories that cross the boundaries of the narrative and shift attention towards what is left unsaid. By filling the gaps between the text and the (feminist) reader, we bring the abject into focus, as Rutherford demonstrates. Still, the explicit language of the mother in this novel is suppressed, a vague shadow within the foggy haze of biased perception and memory. Billie’s voice, in comparison, increasingly manifests itself within the text. But it is the voice of a child – a voice that is strangely sex-less and often achieves an air of redemptive power and absolution. She is associated with the ideals of Christian belief, and the Virgin Mary as the ultimate, pure mother figure (The Riders, 265, 215, 193, 181).

Winton creates a strong parallel between Billie’s infant innocence as angelic and fundamentally good, and her sense of religious faith and motherly protection, which adds more strength and maturity to her appearance – something that Scully increasingly loses touch with in the progression of the novel. Opposing Billie’s life-affirming role, Jennifer

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81 Rutherford, The Gauche Intruder, 129-30. See in this context the feminist reader’s response theory of Mills, Feminist Stylistics; Rivkin, “Resisting Readers,” 11-23; and Fetterley, The Resisting Reader, xi. All three scholars contribute important deconstructive approaches to literary and social texts, investigating a feminist reading and interpretation of these texts.

82 Rutherford, The Gauche Intruder, 128.

83 See here Baines Alarcos, “She Lures, She Guides, She Quits,” 20. She characterises the child as an “androgy nous being.”

84 For more information on the connection between the “nursing Madonna” and motherhood, see O’Reilly, Encyclopedia, 217-18. Also, in accordance with Arizti Martin, Baines Alarcos sees in Billie the goddess that the hero meets in his quest: Baines Alarcos, “She Lures, She Guides, She Quits,” 10-20; Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 43-44.
adopts the position of the death angel, as Arizti Martin argues, being detached from life and cold as stone.\textsuperscript{85} Again, as already pointed out earlier, the woman is metaphorically positioned in close connection with death, merging with continental Europe as the underworld. Jennifer’s image is manifested in the recollection of her daughter and is inextricably connected to a “cloud of silence” that separates her from her mother and conceals the other side of abjection, where Jennifer is placed and transformed into a cold-hearted, classical icon of supernatural beauty, but without a trace of human kindness or compassion:

\begin{quote}
The marbled veins in that white, white face. Billie reaching out, scared to touch, scared not to. Her fingers outstretched to feel the white skin before it sets and goes hard. The smile tight as cement. The skin cold. Right before her, Billie sees it, as the cloud of silence comes down in the air of the plane. Bit by bit, her mother is turning into a statue. (\textit{The Riders}, 248)\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

A strangling silence accompanies this picture, creating the leitmotif for the entire novel and reduces Jennifer to a mute fragment from a time past. Instead, Irma, the woman Scully and Billie meet on their journey, is perceived by Billie in direct opposition to the statuesque-like, heartless image of her mother and placed in close connection to Scully: “She was just like Scully […] All anyone needed was a good heart” (\textit{The Riders}, 298). Furthermore, the absence of the mother, also visualised here in the image of the cloud, is insinuated in the metaphoric significance of the stick-on tattoos Irma gives to Billie, who chooses a shark instead of a tattoo saying “MOTHER” (ibid., 279). Billie rather opts for the comfort of her Australian self-perception than for the source of ambivalence and pain, which has called the term “mother” into question for the girl. Arizti-Martin’s view, that the juxtaposition of “mother” and “shark” signifies the danger associated with female emancipation and the threat posed to family, is convincing and highlights the fact that motherhood has lost its appeal and protecting status for the girl.\textsuperscript{87} “Mother” is just a word without any deeper

\textsuperscript{85} Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s \textit{The Riders},” 40.
\textsuperscript{86} Also see in this context \textit{The Riders}, 217, 235, 298: “[L]ike the stone Billie felt in her heart now, trying to think of something good, something she could remember that wouldn’t make her afraid to remember. Past the cloud. The white neck, she saw. So suddenly white as if the tan had been scrubbed out in the aeroplane toilet. Beautiful skin. The veins as she sits down. Skin blue with veins. Like marble. And talking now, mouth moving tightly. Cheeks stretched. Hair perfect. But the words lost in the roar, the huge stadium sound in Billie’s ears as the cloud comes down, like smoke down the aisle, rolling across them, blotting the war memorial look of her mother in blinding quiet.” Billie contrasts her mother with Irma, who is present in her life and is associated by the girl with understanding and warmth: “Irmawasn’t a real grown up. She was little inside, but her heart was big. One day Scully would see that. Irma wasn’t a statue. And she would come looking again, she’d find them.” (298)
\textsuperscript{87} Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s \textit{The Riders},” 40.
positive connotations – a term that has lost its meaning and only marks a void. It also, though, implies the novel’s claim that motherhood excludes female emancipation and wandering, which is seen as fundamentally destructive for family values and love. The tattoo also alludes to a possible convergence of Billie and Irma as mother and daughter, which is further established by Billie’s trust that Irma will eventually find them, and by Scully’s fleeting impression after their night together in Paris: “In sleep they could have been mother and child” (291). Irma as a woman thus receives a status of similarity with both Scully and Billie as she represents the same uprooted, displaced, lost and searching nature, chasing a phantom of lost love. Unlike Scully, who is weary and suspicious about her motifs, Billie warms to her immediately, appointing her the ideal presence to fill her mother’s absence.

In its binary structure, and by associating Jennifer with the European macrocosm of cultural artistry and society, Winton’s novel conjures up the idea of Europe as a place of social fractures, of broken relationships and of single men and women without children. Mothers seem a general absence in Europe, unlike in Australia, which the novel repeatedly connects to family life and dutiful parentage. Jennifer’s assumed pregnancy, therefore, is bound to fail with her aspirations in Europe. She thus avows her daughter’s image of her mother as lifeless stone – a “war memorial” that is neither life itself, nor being capable of bearing life. Despite the reader’s inclination to criticise the irresponsible, “bad” behaviour of the mother figure in The Riders, Jennifer’s ambiguous appearance in the novel shows that her sense of being a mother is still strong, affirming the view that when a woman becomes a mother, she is a mother for the rest of her life.

She slips back into the bleak doorway to let them pass blindly by without feeling the heat of her love […] and she watches her life limp by in the weird light of the afternoon while she decides how far to follow, wondering when enough is enough, asking herself why it hurts to need so badly. (The Riders, 252)

Nevertheless, her sense of personal survival and ambitions are stronger. Therefore, she claims her autonomy within her marginalised state of self-chosen exile, not taking the last step needed to reunite her family. In her article “Sandy’s Story: Re-storying the Self,” Lekkie Hopkins looks at the life of a mature-age student whose story could be reflecting Jennifer’s doubts and agonies as a mother, wife and her own self:

I experienced both deep joy and indescribable agony as I tried to fulfil my mothering destiny. At every step I fell short of the “ideal mother” that existed inside my head. Guilt became the mother of my existence. My sense of isolation, both from myself and the experience I came to view as the real life that lay somewhere out there in the real world, created a spiral of confusion and anger […] I have been trying to find a space for myself which allows me to express my individuality but which displays the level of commitment to my daughters that I feel.90

The deep alienation and pain Sandy feels before and after the separation from her husband and children is enhanced by social condemnation and prejudice in response to her decision. She is marked as the perpetrator, even by her own family, which, however, excludes her view and her motifs for acting the way she did. As Kate Cantrell argues, women’s decision to leave the house and wander is often perceived as punishing for them, who, unlike men, are often denounced for taking this liberty.91 This strain is also very much reflected in both Sandy’s and Jennifer’s search for individuality and independence.

Jennifer plays with Scully’s trust but also untangles herself from her husband’s own form of oppression. Scully loves too much and does not realise his own mistake of creating an illusionary family that is merely based on his own feelings and ideals. He is desensitised towards the obvious deficiencies in his marriage – elements that only slowly drip into his consciousness. Billie, in contrast, is aware of her mother’s ambitions and priorities, which is reflected in her memories and contemplations: “All for one and one for all. It wasn’t something they said for fun, it was to stop one of them crying, usually Billie. The three of us in it together. It wasn’t such a great idea, it just meant they were all lonely” (The Riders, 192).92 It needs to be highlighted, too, that Jennifer in her own way is a victim of social convention, caught in the web of a life that suffocates her – a life that she needs to redefine in order to “re-story” and restore her own self.93

In Arizti Martin’s view it is exactly his existential predicament of losing his wife that leads Scully back to more militant, patriarchal forms of masculinity, treating the

90 Hopkins, “Sandy’s Story: Re-Storying the Self”, 103-6.
92 The house in Ireland that Jennifer chose is referred to as a doll’s house (The Riders, 218) and Billie herself is compared to a doll (232).
emancipated woman as the embodiment of egocentricity and threat. 94 It is the image of the wounded man that is not only used here to implicate and re-affirm Scully’s rights and autonomy as a man, but also to reinstate his Australianness as good, honest, innocent and white. 95 In the light of existing uncertainties of gender dislocation and male disempowerment, a powerful woman, the “third woman,” can appear threatening to men, which is often responded to in representative contexts by turning her into an abstraction, “something disembodied and somehow out of this world.” 96 The novel describes the clashing of conventional and feminist concepts of gender roles and illuminates significant patriarchal structures, where post-feminist sentiments are adopted to mute and mark feminism in favour of the dominant narrative of the “male in crisis.” Although Arizti Martin argues for the final reconciliation between the main protagonist and the new concept of womanhood, this positive resolution does not convince – especially when compared to Winton’s other works, as argued in detail in previous chapters.

In the context of the power struggle between male narration and female emancipation, the French translation of the novel’s title La Femme Égarée is more indicative of Jennifer’s story than The Riders. La Femme Égarée means “The Lost (or Wandering) Woman” and recalls Max Whelp’s association of Jennifer with the attribute “[l]ost-looking” (The Riders, 118). The ambiguity of the title opens up two interpretations. On the one hand, it represents Scully’s dilemma, reducing Jennifer to his property and focussing the story again on the main protagonist. However, on the other hand, it also alludes to Jennifer’s story, to a possible rite of passage for the silenced woman, who feels lost in her set, Australian way of life and needs to wander around Europe as well to find out whether her dreams of Europe and her position in it might require, or not require, re-definition.

3.5. Death, Sexuality and Motherhood
When reading Winton’s novels, female sexuality with regard to motherhood appears to be devious and dirty, and is used to either demarcate the female character in her role as mother

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96 Veronica Brady, “Remembering that One was Born,” in Motherlode, ed. Stephanie Holt and Maryanne Lynch (Melbourne: Sybylla Co-operative Press, 1996), 19. See Murrie, “Changing Masculinities,” 176; Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 31-32, 45: “The crisis Scully undergoes in the middle of the novel unleashes, however, a completely different set of discourses which present the man and the girl as victims of the new roles of women, masculinity as both vulnerable and threatening and Scully as a violent creature that abuses women and neglects his own child.”
or reinforce the woman’s wish to be a mother. Female sexuality is often combined with self-harm and torturing self-scrutiny, as can be seen in the characters of, for instance, Dolly, Eva, Jewel and Jennifer, who are presented as threatening, both to themselves and to the male characters. They are contrasted with the quintessential mother figures of, for example, Oriel, Alice, Mrs. Pike, Debbie, or Mrs. Jackson, all of whom are shown as unrelated to sexual activity. Depression governs the lives of most of Winton’s women characters, as mirrored in Georgie, her sister Judith, Eva, Jewel, Ida, Maureen and others and also particularly stressed in the frail mental state of Joy, Lockie Leonard’s mother. The absence of the mother is also frequently conveyed in Winton’s novels through death and disease, which becomes a prominent force in the different stories. A close textual analysis of female death is offered in Chapter 4.3, which combines the question of female autonomy with the act of self-destruction and dominant processes of objectification. At this point it only needs to be pointed out that transience as such pervades the characters’ lives and confronts them with the irretrievable loss of relatives, partners or their own selves. The line of dead mothers in Winton is long and ranges from Jewel in *An Open Swimmer*, Mrs. Coupar (Maureen) in *Shallows*, Ida in *In the Winter Dark*, Sally, Debbie, Mrs. Fox, Mrs. Buckridge and Vera Jutland in *Dirt Music* to Eva’s (and Eva’s mother’s) death in *Breath*. Equally, Bess in *Dirt Music* suffers from cancer of the bowel and tries to cherish life (and death) on a last excessive road trip with her partner Horrie – a journey that she knows will end with her death (*Dirt Music*, 247-52). Debbie, Jim’s wife and mother of his sons, also died prematurely of cancer – joining the long line of dead mothers in this novel: Mrs. Fox, who was hit by a falling tree in front of Lu’s eyes, Sally, who died in the car accident that eradicated all of Lu’s remaining family, Jim’s mother who killed herself and Mrs. Jutland, who passed away as the result of a brain haemorrhage. Equally devastating: Ida Stubbs is accidentally killed by her own husband, Jewel and Maureen (most likely) commit suicide, Eva dies as the result of her autoerotic asphyxiation (with the claim of suicide also lingering) and Eva’s mother has long been dead. Coincidentally, Jim and Lu both lost their mothers when they were young, an observation that Georgie makes when she travels up north with Jim in search of Lu (ibid., 395). Absence and death coincide in most of Winton’s novels, reducing the mother role to a fractured myth, refocusing on male parenting and

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97 See *Dirt Music*, 84.
98 Joy Leonard’s name is sadly ironic here but indicates her final recovery.
responsibility. The female body, though absent, is again represented as a transient foil that depicts male irritation regarding the insufficiencies of male and female roles. As noted above, Winton’s representation again allows the man to speak through female abjection and to develop a steady voice that re-enforces colonising structures upon the woman and her body.

The threat associated with the dead or absent woman, as prevalent in The Riders, is also vividly described in That Eye the Sky when Henry Warburton confesses to Sam the torture of his desire and his disgust for a woman called Bobo Sax:

I’m unclean. I wake up at night with her smell on me, it’s thick in the room […] The reason I’m tainted, Sam, is because she died while we…were…while we. She died on me. Over me. I wonder if the bitch didn’t do it on purpose, to mark me for life. She marked me with death, Sam. The same part of a woman that brings forth life. In the act that makes life. She died on me. (That Eye the Sky, 163)

Warburton blames the woman here for his spiritual predicament. Sex and death are closely connected as implications of seduction and damnation, imposed upon the innocent male by the treacherous and evil “witch” (ibid., 152). The woman is turned into a scapegoat for the fractured male ego, which is not in control of its sexual desires. Reading American classic novels from a feminist perspective, Judith Fetterley examines the tendency of writers like Sherwood Anderson, Norman Mailer, William Faulkner, Nathaniel Hawthorne and F. Scott Fitzgerald to use the female characters as the focal point that receives victimisation, blame and reproach from the corresponding male characters, incorporating deep male alienation and fears that need to be suppressed, even annihilated. These representations are cultural reflections of a strongly patriarchal American society, which is both affirmed and criticised in the novels she discusses. Here, in his suffering, Warburton too directs his anger at the woman selfishly, alluding to the necessity of him being re-born in order to be liberated from this woman’s deadly spell. Strangely, Tegwyn seems to resemble Bobo Sax in the way that aggression, anger and sexuality guide her and captivate Warburton. Altogether, this and other novels exemplify the fear of the unknown that is related to women in Winton’s fiction.

99 See, for example, Queenie’s granddad Daniel Coupar, Scully as mothering Billie, Lu as father and mother substitute, Jim as father to his two boys, Bill Sanderson as fathering his son Joseph, Maurice as the remaining parent to his adult children, Sam as the parental ally of Rose.

100 See in this context That Eye the Sky, 87-88, 152. Also cf. Laigle, “You Can’t be Immature Forever,” 26; Andrew Taylor, “What can be Read and what can only be Seen in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” 323-24.

101 Fetterley, The Resisting Reader.

102 The transience of the female in this novel is also reflected in the death of Errol, the “rooster,” also a female (That Eye the Sky, 52).
as well as the intense domestic power struggles between male and female. Granting women maternal and domestic powers, as Winton does, for instance, in *Cloudstreet* (Oriel) and *That Eye the Sky* (Alice), can appear threatening, or castrating, to men, as Veronica Brady asserts:

[H]aving given him children and organised his home she is now able to weld her own power, maternal and domestic. This can be a dangerous tactic, however, because it can lead to an idealisation which becomes mystification. Giving a woman a place in the game of power can make her threatening to men. One way of dealing with this threat is to turn her into an abstraction, something disembodied and somehow out of this world.

And this abstraction of the female and motherly body through self-chosen exile, death and self-harm is increasingly manifest in Winton’s fiction, as shown above.

The nature of modern parenthood and family enjoys different treatment in other examples of contemporary Australian fiction as, for example, in Christos Tsiolkas’s novel *The Slap* or Davida Allen’s fictional autobiography *Close to the Bone*, in which the mother is presented as “mother qua woman” detached from phallocentric notions of the exclusively good or bad mother, who, according to Luce Irigaray, often “unbecomes” a woman in her patriarchy defined and socially expected role. This view corresponds with Gustafson’s concept of “unbecoming” mothers, as outlined earlier, and also investigates dogmatic ideas and constructions imposed upon the female and the maternal body. In Winton’s work, however, the woman is hardly ever allowed the symbiosis between emancipation and fulfilling motherhood. Instead, motherhood always seems to diminish the woman’s desire for acting out her sexual self. There are plenty of examples for this argument. Rose’s sexual intercourse with Quick seems to function as a self-serving induction for the girl into the much-desired world of mothering and control (*Cloudstreet*, 317-20). Dolly is a traumatised, self-absorbed mother, who fails to take care of her children as a result of her alcohol abuse and excessive adultery. Oriel is the epitome of a matriarch, who regulates the whole family but apparently without any indication of sexual desires. Similarly, Alice’s sexuality in

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104 Brady, “Remembering that One was Born,” 19.
106 There is no indication of a sexual relationship between Oriel and her husband Lester, who, however, sleeps with Dolly. Lester later wonders: “Was that rape, do you think?” (*Cloudstreet*, 246), which alludes to the
That Eye the Sky increasingly becomes a faint memory of the past that is insinuated by Ort’s narration. With the accident of her husband and her religious awakening, her role as mother and head of the family does not leave room for her sexuality. Sally in Dirt Music is a mother of two, and similar to Dolly, embraces a passionate, sexual lifestyle, while passing the nurturing mother role on to her brother-in-law. Eva gives birth to a boy after her desperate affair with Pikelet, and hopes that motherhood will change her life – a wish that is not to come true. Instead, she dies alone as the result of cardiac arrest in a hotel room without her child and husband. Jennifer leaves her family to live out her own ideals of freedom and femininity and, thus, by “unbecoming” a mother becomes a woman again.

Winton clearly writes from a mainstream position of masculinity (in crisis), appearing to disempower the female through abstraction and categorisation. He places his women in the detached space between absence and presence, still under control, and imprints them with close-knit categories of either/or. All his female characters are not granted the space to assume a place of their own that transcends set gender definitions and allows a distinct feminine subjectivity. Being a mother and muting the mother plays a substantial part in this masculine form of authorship. The tendency to dichotomise the maternal and the female enforces the argument that the novel is “demonstrative of the persistence in white Western culture of the exclusivity of the myth of the good mother, despite the variety of mothering discourses that now proliferate.”

The fear of femininity and women’s power is voiced in the frailties and limitations of Winton’s women characters and their ascribed roles.

To conclude, it is important to look at motherhood in two ways: one is the patriarchal institution of motherhood as represented in Winton’s fiction and the other is the individual performance of mothering as exercised by the different characters. This, to some extent, can form a submerged act of emancipation and criticism, directed against the dominant mode of fictional representation. Some of Winton’s women characters see salvation, healing and hope in the prospect of being a mother, which offers them the chance to re-settle into a well-

common Australian binary of “Damned Whores” and “God’s Police” (Summers, 1994) and thus evokes the image of Oriel as “policing” and Dolly as “whoring.”

Muller, “Good and Bad Mothering,” 39. Regarding the myth of the “good” mother, also see Anne Else, “Good Mother and Other Mothers: Representation, Division and Resistance,” in Theorising and Representing Maternal Realities, ed. Marie Porter and Julie Kelso (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 55: “Currently, dominant discourses rarely engage in overt value-laden representations of maternal subjectivities; but they continue implicitly to divide ‘good’ mothers from ‘other’ mothers.”
structured, traditional family situation. On the other hand, a number of women in his work place priority on their own development and fulfilment – even if it means to be exposed to harsh criticism and condemnation by their fellow characters and by the implied reader. The paternal spirit often substitutes for the lack of maternal devotion here, pushing the female to the margin and highlighting the deep bond between male protagonist and child. “Feminist mothering,” in O’Reilly’s and Sara Ruddick’s view of the term, which describes the resistance of white, predominantly middle-class mothers against set values of selflessness, sacrifice and martyrdom and their activism against sexist child-rearing, is mostly absent in Winton’s fiction, only vaguely insinuated in Georgie’s criticism of her own mother and in the character of Jennifer. Thus, motherhood in his writing is a contested site of social meanings and discrepant roles. The maternal in the novels discussed above receives what Delys Bird describes a position “at the interface between nature and culture, between real and ideal, between self and other,” while still being firmly rooted in the myth of good versus bad. As Patricia Waugh mentions, women not only carry affiliate and domestic human ties as a consequence of their position within the family, but they also bear deep human ambivalence about the flesh and mortality. This human ambivalence is also connected to a cultural ambivalence in gender relations and anxiety around female control in Australian social and cultural discourses. Placing the woman, in her role of mother, either explicitly or implicitly into the spot of the other – as is frequently the case in Winton – reflects man’s “pain, his black desire and his anger” that he now uses to find a way back to his “lost garden” and a redeemed state of grace.

The next chapter “Women’s ‘Hystories’: Body Maps, the Gaze and Death” illuminates more specifically how the female body becomes the physical and metaphorical matrix of the male gaze and dominant narrating voices. These voices again reduce femininity to common, simplistic stereotypes and align it with the inexplicable, the deviant, the other through the denominators of beauty, sexuality, death and hysteria/madness. This chapter draws together the ties of the previous chapters by showing how self-harm itself is not simply the

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109 Bird, “Mother, I won’t never go drovin’,” 41.

110 Waugh, *Feminine Fictions*, 75. See Bird, “Mother, I won’t never go drovin’,” 41.

expression of private pain but instead may function as the mediating force for politicised processes of gender battles. The dichotomisation of femininity and motherhood hence receives a sad finality in the polarisation of gender – a prominent characteristic of Winton’s representations, as the following discussions will show.
CHAPTER 4: Women’s “Hystories”: Body Maps, the Gaze and Death

4.1. Marking/Mapping the Gendered Body

And there is also this: anyone who looks at Felicity for long thinks ‘otherness’ or ‘untouched’, or ‘essence’ depending on verbal and metaphysical capability […] Men want to put their mark on her.

Janette Turner Hospital, *Borderline*

Like Felicity in Janette Turner Hospital’s *Borderline* the women in Winton’s fiction become the epitome of difference, of an “otherness” that repeatedly places them in the object position, attracting the gaze of the male protagonists. Fascination, desire, curiosity, hate and fear accompany these glances and melt together on the woman’s body, where the material and the metaphysical intersect. However, unlike the virginal beauty of romantic depictions of femininity, Winton’s women respond to the male gaze, often with a ferocious force, evoking a feeling of unsettlement in the male onlooker:

As I stumbled into the light-shafted bathroom, I came upon Ida before the mirror with the make-up box on the basin and her face half-painted. She had on her dark woollen suit, her pearls, and a pair of stockings. Her hair had that hard sprayed look I hated. Before I could even open my mouth, I saw her eyes in the mirror and I knew to shut up.

(*In the Winter Dark*, 35)

In response to the gaze directed at them, the female characters develop a suspicious, challenging and often reproachful agency, using their own sight as a weapon to “shoot” back. Often, as indicated in the quotation above, they also direct their gaze at themselves, evaluating their own bodies and appearance. Instead of the men, it is the women themselves who literally put a mark on their bodies, whether through make-up or acts of self-threatening behaviour – or at least so it seems. These markings become a network of memory tracks that not only map the individual trauma behind the characters’ lives but also connote the oppression that underpins Winton’s representation, in which the female body is the matrix for masculine affirmation. The men in Winton’s stories see their own painful insecurities and difficulties in self-definition enacted upon the women’s bodies. Stereotypes of the drunken, sexually exploitative, dominant male, who is only allowed to act and not feel, and of

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femininity as a measure of threat and imperfection, are written upon the female and her body, thus serving as a medium through which the male protagonists are able to reflect upon themselves and become susceptible to new roles and challenges in their lives.

In this chapter, I continue to discuss the role of the female body as *a lieu de mémoire*, to use Pierre Nora’s term, highlighting the double standard behind the represented female gaze and a form of narration that stages and benefits from the drama of women’s self-scrutiny and self-harm. Arguing that Winton’s texts transform the history of women’s pain into a story of male rite-of-passage, I show how myths of femininity, as employed in the narratives, confirm a distinctively male narrative perspective and implied reading of the feminine in the stories. The female body, as both agent and construct, performs and is performed in Winton’s representations, illuminating the divergent expressions of the body as text, intertext and context, channelled through the gendered gaze and the act of reading.\(^3\) Understanding male and female corporealities as symbolic intertextualities and metonyms, this chapter further explores dominant concepts of female stereotypes as applied in Winton’s novels, with reference to the body as a multifocal site of personal and social struggle. In this context, the representation of beauty, menstruation, breasts, ageing and pregnancy will be examined in Winton’s novels to demonstrate its stigmatising nature and explore the use of voyeurism through acts of looking, staring, glancing, peeking and spying.

The marking of the female body maps prevalent social dissonances and norms, turning the woman’s body into a site of both recollection and confrontation. Alongside the analysis of Winton’s female characters and the markings and mappings of their bodies, the fictional representations of the male body are also explored – constructions of masculinity that demonstrate a “positive” counterfoil to the description of female self-harm and self-threatening behaviour. This chapter critically examines the “empowered” situation of the women in Winton’s fictions. The male fear that is connected to the image of the strong, dominating woman, as Winton points out himself in “The Masculine Mystique,” is illuminated in the deep fractures that undermine the women’s lives in his fictional accounts.\(^4\)

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4 See Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 70. Adrienne Rich has written about the male fear of the female in her milestone, feminist work *Of Woman Born*, in which she points out that “women have also felt man’s powerlessness in the root sense of the word […] expressed in the creations of his mind […] What we did see, for centuries, was the
These fractures are caused by fundamental insecurities and weaknesses expressed in their tendencies to excess. Has this fear of the empowerment of the feminine shaped Winton’s presentation of both men and women, and can the feminine qualities of his male protagonists be considered a reflection of the need for a changing masculine Australian ideal, while still aiming to maintain patriarchal hegemony? Silent gender battles are clearly woven throughout Winton’s stories, despite his claim that he wishes the future of the sexes to exist outside of impositions of difference.5

In any form of representation, the female body, marked as signifier and signified, is linked to the male gaze and plays a crucial role in contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality. According to the self-objectification theory, as Stirling Moorey argues, the objectification of women in social and cultural contexts has led to Western women growing up with a heightened perspective of self-observation that is based on how they appear to the male gaze.6 This helps to explain why women tend to feel more shame and negative affect in states of self-observation, displaying disrupted cognition.7 Women’s self-image, so decisively influenced by the media, accounts for a growing number of psychological disorders, anorexia nervosa among them. In Forging Identities, Marilyn Lake argues, with reference to Elizabeth Grosz’s Volatile Bodies, that the female conception of reality and its attendant ideas of knowledge, truth, politics, aesthetics and ethics are “effects of sexually specific, usually male, bodies.”8 Bodies are not pre-given natural objects in the first place, but are the product of cultural representations and inscriptions, which turn the body into object and subject simultaneously.9 Consequently, women’s autonomy as active subjects always incorporates the “lived experience of objectification.”10 It is their bodies that mirror

5 Guy, “Tim Winton Writing the Feminine,” 36: “Winton has expressed desire in having some sort of future between the sexes […] and therefore wants the emphasis taken off difference. He is opposed to remaining in separate camps with little discursive practice between.”
9 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 18.
10 Young, Throwing like a Girl, 150. See here Lake, “The Inviolable Woman,” 242-43.
the social order in their representations and that are often considered, particularly in Freudian psychoanalysis, to be simultaneously the site of male fear and fascination.\textsuperscript{11}

Winton’s fictional portrayals of women all have one thing in common: they are male creations, filtered through Winton’s authorial eye, often mediated by his male narrators – a doubled imposition of the masculine perspective, through which female frailties and strengths are dictated.\textsuperscript{12} Women like Eva, Rose, Dolly, Tegwyn, Ida, Ronnie, Maureen, Queenie, Jennifer, Jewel and Georgie are muted and encouraged to speak at the same time – pressed into an articulation that is granted to them through the excessive and often destructive (ab)use of their bodies. Literally, women’s self-objectification is used in Winton’s narratives to invoke the idea that the different acts of treating the body as object by the woman herself are motivated by her desire for attention. This not only shows in Georgie’s continuous drunken escapades or her mother’s beauty standards, but also, in particular, in the symbiosis of Dolly’s alcoholism, beauty craze, bad mothering and sexuality. All these elements depict a negative, clichéd Western perspective on femininity, which documents and plays with the history of silence and restriction for women in Australia, without, however, offering any transgressive alternatives for the negative image of the woman in this context.\textsuperscript{13}

It is not only the female bodies, though, that are presented as harmed in Australian fiction. Recent trends in feminist and cultural studies investigate the representation of the male body within women’s writing, thus creating a needed supplement to the wide and

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\textsuperscript{13} In relation to female self-harm and suicide attempts as attention seeking, see Summers, \textit{Damned Whores and God’s Police}, 155-60.
controversial discourse on the female body and upsetting “the patriarchal association of man with mind and woman with body.”¹⁴ Both male and female corporeality in Winton’s work are linked to cartographical constructions that tell a story. As previously explored, Sando’s body is described by Pikelet as a “map of where he’d been,” as being marked by “great bumps on his knees and feet from old-school surfing” (Breath, 59).¹⁵ In Dirt Music, Georgie observes the rough attractiveness of her partner Jim: “At forty-eight he was weatherbeaten but still attractive in a blunt, conventional antipodean way. His eyes were grey and his gaze steely. There were scars on his forehead and sunlesions on his hands and arms […] There was something resolutely sober about him, a ponderous aspect.” (Dirt Music, 36) This male mapping of the body highlights the external and stresses the importance of physicality. Interestingly, Winton uses the adjective “steely” here to characterise Jim’s gaze. It is one of his preferred metaphors to describe his female characters in their aspirations to harden and protect themselves emotionally from hostile social and territorial surroundings, as exemplified in Cloudstreet: “Your mother’s on the bed under some stranger and you’re turning to steel right there” (Cloudstreet, 349), she feels like “all the steel [has] gone out of her” (351). The steely, male gaze corresponds here to the female “steeling” against social and personal scrutiny and judgement, that is closely related to the exchange of looks and voyeurism among both males and females, directed towards each other’s bodies but also towards one’s own appearance.

In order to show the significance of the male gaze for the construction of the female in Winton’s work, let us now take a closer look at the male body. Protagonists such as Jerra, Clive, Scully, Lu or Pikelet are frequently said to adopt feminine qualities by cultivating and living out their emotions, thus seemingly deconstructing the traditional idea of Australian


¹⁵ See in this context Dirt Music, 156-57: This passage gives a detailed description of Luther Fox’s wretched body after his involuntary expedition through the bush from White Point to his farm. He is marked from his journey by wounds, ticks and sunburnt skin that Georgie tenderly nurses.
masculinity as rough, outward, emotionally-reserved and brutal: “All around the walls were wanted posters of men with mean, cold features and glowering stares. They looked identical to the men in uniform; they had the same unfathomable hardness, the same look of hatred.” Robert W. Connell has coined the term “hegemonic masculinity,” which describes the stereotypical “twentieth-century male-chauvinist outlook and activities resulting from the kinds of gender socialisation conventionally seen as appropriate to males in Western industrial societies since at least late Victorian times.” Correlating with this concept, the Bulletin School of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some of whose prominent representatives were, for example, Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson and Joseph Furphy, celebrated particular forms of masculinity that defined what it meant to be an Australian man. However, this notion came with the anxiety for many male writers of not fulfilling the ideal they were representing in their writings:

The exemplary masculinity of the bushman […] operated] at a more profound level: it functioned as a response to the fears of late nineteenth century manhood, that society was inherently ‘feminising’, and that the opportunities for expressing masculinity were becoming increasingly limited.

Emerging from the effects of feminism and women’s empowerment, this form of masculinity as a traditional concept, which inscribes dominant structures of sexist binaries and power-relations, has been increasingly questioned and has reached a state of crisis. The scrutiny of conventional notions of the masculine exposes them as cultural constructs and

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16 Winton, “The Masculine Mystique,” 61. Tim Winton refers in this quote to the difference he experienced with gender roles in his own family and in the public arena of his father’s workplace, a police station. Winton realises as a child that the men outside of his own home could adopt a position of power, authority, oppression and threat, something normally assigned to the women in Winton’s family. The reversal of these values influences Winton’s character portrayals considerably and encourages heightened critical attention, particularly with regards to feminist concerns. Also see Winton, “Eleanor Wachtel with Tim Winton,” 70; Winton, “An Interview with Tim Winton,” by Taylor, 376; Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 29-45.


deconstructs patriarchal ideals of long-held gender roles and the structure of the family.\textsuperscript{20} Men are forced to confront their own insecurities and vulnerabilities, discovering new “visions and definitions of manhood.”\textsuperscript{21} The “gender crisis” at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe and the colonies is thus mirrored by the crisis of masculinity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{22}

To further illuminate the concept of masculinity crisis for the overall line of argument, the following paragraphs outline how male trauma in Winton’s stories intersects with the literal and metaphorical stigmatisation and scarring of the female characters. Katherine Bode describes the tension between the iconic Australian figure of the “Aussie battler” and the arising concept of the “man in crisis” in the Australian context.\textsuperscript{23} In the public discourse on masculinity in crisis, the victimisation of males and their inability to fulfil a masculine role stand in the foreground.\textsuperscript{24} In Bode’s view, the man in crisis is feminised by the challenges he faces and is, thus, contrasted to the Aussie battler whose masculinity is affirmed through the hardships and struggles he goes through.\textsuperscript{25} Interestingly, it is exactly this concept of masculinity in crisis which is needed to re-affirm the dominance of white Australian masculinity, as Bode points out when she says that “challenges to white men’s cultural and economic priority are therefore constructed as part of the struggle that supports, constitutes and proves white Australian masculinity.”\textsuperscript{26} In recent times, the traditional ideas and affirmation of masculinity, expressed by the Australian bush mythology, have become increasingly challenged, due to political and social threats to white male hegemony through Native Title movements and feminist activism, so that a re-centring from the relationship with the land is necessary: “[W]hite male struggle is more effectively

\textsuperscript{21} Sam Keen, Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man (London: Piatkus, 1996), 6, quoted in Arizti Martin, “The Crisis of Masculinity in Tim Winton’s The Riders,” 33. In my view the question whether Winton can be considered the postmodern representative of the Bulletin School is worth asking in this context – a point to be discussed elsewhere.
\textsuperscript{22} See Haschemi Yekani, The Privilege of Crisis, 18-25.
\textsuperscript{24} Bode refers here to an article by Janet Albrechtsen entitled “Mothers must tell the Truth” where the author attacks women who commit “paternity fraud” and takes the side of the cheated men (3). She also mentions an article by John Hirst published in the Australian March in 2005, where the perfect, white father is also treated unfairly (3).
\textsuperscript{25} Bode, “Aussie Battler in Crisis?” 4.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
individualised in the current Australian political and public climate by association with bodily pain rather than with the land.” The image of the wounded man, therefore, offers the ground for men to justify their cultural priority and remain the centre of attention.

Combined with presenting the male as weak and inconsequential, the fictional account of the man as deeply wounded (metaphorically rather than physically) in Winton’s fiction corresponds to power imbalances that often reduce men to being entrapped by the female hunger for control and attention. Merely looking at the character binaries exemplifies this point well. Jerra in *An Open Swimmer* is traumatised by his tragic love affair with Jewel. Pike’s well-being is overshadowed by Eva’s presence, which is eternally manifested in his addiction to danger and risk. Sando leaves Eva repeatedly, which can be regarded as a self-saving escape from a heavily strained relationship, an egocentric neglect for the purpose of self-fulfilment or simply the calling for a surfer to follow the waves. Lu has desired his sister-in-law to the point of complete self-denial and self-sacrifice for the sake of Sally, Darkie and the children, one of whom (Bird), as the possible affair between him and Sally seems to insinuate, could be his own (*Dirt Music*, 53, 104-5, 112). Georgie seduces Lu in order to fulfil her own need for closeness and to create a potential situation for a family in which she adopts the role of mother and not stepmother (78). Scully is abandoned by his wife Jennifer, who disappears in the depths of European bohemia without any explanation. In *That Eye the Sky*, the physically disabled body of Ort’s father is subjected to the care and love (and control) of his wife Alice, and Henry Warburton becomes the “victim” of Tegwyn’s angry attacks, which he responds to with equal violence. The dominance of the women in *Cloudstreet*, loosely based on Winton’s own family members, is most striking.

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27 Ibid., 6.
28 Ibid., 7. Also see Yekani, *The Privileges of Crisis*, 9-32.
29 See in this context Morrison, “Figures of the Many and the One,” 8: “The otherwise problematic fit between domesticity and masculinity is accommodated through the heroic-romantic role of the visionary […] Quick’s visionary masculinity, and his maternal nurturing of his brother, is sharply contrasted with the steely determination, economic ability and command of language of both his competitive mother and his wife.”
30 Guy, “Tim Winton Writing the Feminine,” 36.
work and the tendency, especially in his later novels, to present the men in a weaker and victimised position.

Supporting the controversial concept of troubled masculinity, Winton simultaneously tries to present contrasting ideas of Australian masculinity, while deconstructing existing gender stereotypes – a process that instead often results in the re-affirmation of these stereotypes. Thus, some of Winton’s marginal characters show stereotypical traits of the “Aussie battler,” as is the case with, for instance, Sando, Jim, Darkie, Ted, Lester and Sean, who seem to be, overall, in tune with their masculinity. It is often the central male protagonist that struggles greatly with the challenge of how to define himself, as is obvious in the characters of Lu, Pike, Jerra, Quick, Sam and Scully. The tension that is connected to the image of the damaged “man in crisis” is thus very prevalent in Winton’s fiction, and strongly characterises Winton’s male characters, who seem to be encapsulated in various forms of identity crises, feeling displaced in the social role commonly assigned to them and being both directly and indirectly harmed by the women in their lives. Their emotional pain is frequently linked to the dangers and tragedies happening in the domestic sphere, whereas their body marks, as explained earlier, derive from a frontier quest with the land and the ocean. The psychic insight and sensitivity of Winton’s male characters illustrate their feminisation, which is a constant matter of critical attention.\(^{31}\) It has been criticised both as a measure of female exploitation, a re-enforcement of a newly established masculine dominance, and as a rupturing of stigmatised femininity from the perspective of a highly masculine Australian gaze.\(^{32}\) As already outlined in the discussion of *The Riders* and *Dirt Music*, Winton often places the male in the domestic sphere and assigns him nurturing, caring and sensitive qualities, which, in his emasculated position, contrasts with the clear-cut power position and dominance of the traditional, public Australian male settler icon:

> The locating of the domestic as a place of male belonging and discovery disrupts dominant constructions of the public sphere as the site of male proving and of the ‘home’ as emasculating. Secondly, in a move which rejects much of the theory of male subject formation, Winton’s masculinities are consistently formed through inter-connectedness rather than through separation. Since he also places considerable emphasis on male relationships as emotional and nurturing, the competitive and surveillant aspects of dominant male homosociality are brought into question. Thirdly, Winton valorises the non-rational: the emotional, the intuitive, the spiritual and the psychic are constantly privileged in Winton’s

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\(^{31}\) See Morrison, “Figures of the Many and the One,” 8.

male characters, who often ‘see’ things and ‘know’ things, outside of the acknowledged possibilities for masculine ‘knowing’ in mainstream culture.33

The male psyche in all of Winton’s stories is deeply wounded by destructive traumata and loss, whereas it is the female body that literally shows psychic pain inscribed onto the flesh, which becomes a haunting, controlling and troubling denominator of male consciousness. Winton’s stories soothe the reader by presenting a worldview in which men become the emotional, sensitive counterpart to the epitome of traditional masculinity, presenting this new effeminate masculinity as the future alternative and possible norm. This characterisation, however, raises one feminist question: What is lost in this depiction and can it be trusted? Is it not the case, as this thesis suggests, that this proclaimed masculine ideal might just be another expression of hegemony, subverting old structures but creating new ones with similar objectives of supremacy? It is the woman’s body in Winton’s representation that serves as the medium for these objectives, as the following analyses will show.

Having so far mainly focussed on the female body, let us briefly turn towards an evaluation of the male body in Winton’s work for contextualisation. Compared to the description of Winton’s women, in which the focus is clearly on the sexualised body, the account of the men’s outward appearance generally centres on the face and the eyes:

There he was again, Frederick Michael Scully. The same square dial and strong teeth. The broad nose with its pulpy scar down the left side from a fight on a lobster boat, the same stupid blue that caused his wonky eye. The eye worked well enough, unless he was tired, but it wandered a little, giving him a mad look that sometimes unnerved strangers who saw the Brillopad hair and the severely used face beneath it as ominous signs. Long ago he’d confronted the fact that he looked like an axe-murderer, a sniffer of bicycle seats. He stuck out like a dunny in a desert. He frightened the French and caused the English to perspire. Among Greeks he was no great shakes, but he’d yet to find out about the Irish. What a face. Still, when you looked at it directly it was warm and handsome enough in its way. It was the face of an optimist, of a man eager to please and happy to give ground. (The Riders, 8)

Scully perceives himself as different from the looks in Europe (with the exception of the Greek and possibly the Irish) with his heavy and rough facial contours, which give him the appearance of a working-class colonial outcast, who is fundamentally displaced among the colonial elite forces in Europe.34 Still, it is a general underlying satisfaction that dominates

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his self-perception, so that the difference and threat implied is eased and balanced through
the modifying warmth and handsome traits visible in his face and in his work as a craftsman –
traits that are enviously but admiringly observed by Peter Keneally (ibid., 236-37).

In *Breath* Sando is described as a muscular man with wide shoulders, grey eyes and a
steely glare (*Breath*, 34, 56). The idolising effect of Pikelet’s perspective heavily impacts the
positive nature of the perception here. Sando’s steely glare once again corresponds with
Jim’s gaze and reflects a counter ideal of the troubled masculinity that stands in opposition
to the fragility of characters like Lu, Pike or Scully, who do not share the determination and
recklessness implied in that gaze. The extend to which the observational gaze is directed at
their own, or other male bodies, though, is less elaborate than the observation and
description of the female body, be it as a result of self-analysis or the look of the opposite
sex. As mentioned earlier, the male body, despite being domesticated, becomes the stage of
confrontation between protagonist and land. This is graphically expressed in Lu’s personal
demonic quest in the White Point hinterland and the Coronation gulf, where he confronts the
trauma of losing his family (*Dirt Music*, 377-78). Similarly, Pike’s awareness of his body is
heightened by the danger of his solitary surfing trip at Old Smoky (*Breath*, 150), and it is the
harmonious love affair with the ocean that re-introduces grace and purpose back to his
middle-aged life (ibid., 215-16). As a fisherman and entrepreneur Jim is regularly exposed to
the unpredictability of the ocean, and Sando shares Pikelet’s and Loonie’s love for extreme
surfing environments. Equally, Jerra prefers solitary diving and camping trips to other
people’s company, his body confronting the natural habitat around him, which becomes an
anthropomorphic reflection of his own inner life but eventually promises relief (*An Open
Swimmer*, 172, 182-86). Interestingly, the male characters are inextricably connected with
the land that defines them. The environment imprints itself upon the male’s physique,
uniting mind and body in a process of confrontation and attendant healing. The women,
however, attempt to express themselves through their bodies but lack stabilising external
points of reference, whose response could add sustaining meaning to their lives. The
masculine positive is thus polarised to the feminine negative – again a very conventional
dichotomy that overshadows Winton’s fiction. Despite the empowering effect self-harm can
induce, Winton’s depiction of self-harming and overtly sexual women against the
background of his very stereotypical gender portrayals functions as a metaphor of corruption
and destruction of male innocence. Still, the majority of Winton’s male characters receive redemption through their respective relationships with the land and the ocean and/or acts of guilt and suffering. On the other hand, this representation is a confirmation of female difference and loss of innocence in contrast to the masculine norm. Hence, the feminist reading of the female body as empowering and creative needs to be gauged in the context of gendered illustrations from a largely explicit, sometimes more subtle masculine viewpoint.

So far the analyses in this thesis have exposed Winton’s representation of male and female bodies as notoriously biased in its “corruptly innocent” nature. Winton’s anxious portrayal of the female as other reflects the dominant male desire for representation (and control) in a manner that feminist scholars have noted. Winton’s portrayals of women reflect the dialectic and dissonances of the female body-male gaze dialectic, while addressing complex issues of authorial creation, subjectivity and the colonisation of the body on various levels. Despite Winton’s attempt at raising awareness of psychological illnesses and related addictions, he re-enforces historical stereotypical values of the masculine, Anglo-Celtic tradition he comes from, by not allowing his female characters a fulfilling, unmarked existence outside of the overt and covert patriarchal structures he presents. The desire of

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35 This point is exemplified in, for instance, Eva Sanderson’s impact on Pikelet, Jewel’s influence on Jerra, Tegwyn’s self-mutilation for Ort, Oriel’s exile for Lester, who sleeps with Dolly, and also in Sally Fox, the unredeemed Magdalene figure, whose sex appeal seduces both Lu and Jim. Her affair with Jim triggers a long line of misfortunes for the man, who loses his wife and blames himself as the sinner.

36 See in this context Dixon and Kelly, “Brave Myth-takes: Re-Writing Romance,” 54. Dixon and Kelly explain the problem of the masculine viewpoint in The Riders but this point, in my view, reflects the complicated gender portrayals in most of Winton’s other narratives as well: “It seems, then, that the strongly ‘masculine’ point of view in Winton’s novel really only allows it to perform a crisis of masculinity, and not to see ways out of that crisis. This may well be why so many readers have found it disturbing. While alienating women readers by refusing them any point of identification except as objects of romance discourse, it still seduces male readers as subjects in the same old discourse, though now this discourse is in crisis.”

37 The phrase is taken from Dorothy Hewett, “The Garden and the City,” Westerly 27, no. 4 (December 1982): 102, in which she describes Australia as a “corruptly innocent land.”

38 Schaffer, Women and the Bush, 102-3. See also Marilyn Lake, “Nationalist Historiography, Feminist Scholarship, and the Promise and Problems of New Transnational Histories: The Australian Case,” Journal of Women’s History 19, no. 1 (2007): 180-82; Summers, Damned Whores and God’s Police, 510-11. It is a fact that Australian history presented from a female point of view was severely neglected until the 1960s when increased interest was focussed on establishing and retrieving documentation of historical narratives from women. Autobiographical accounts were gathered in forms of diary entries and letters from female perspectives from colonisation until today – accounts that had previously been obstinately ignored in history writing. Here a possible connection can be made between documenting the story of women in historical respects through autobiographical data that recaptures the muted colonial voice, and the desire of representation in Winton’s narratives to provide the women’s stories, albeit, again, from a male perspective.

39 See ibid., 63. Schaffer discusses and criticises the significance of bad mothering and the stereotype of the “damned whore” in discursive representations of Australian femininity.
Winton’s representation to “put a mark on her,” which goes along with a replication of colonisation in respect of gender, is further explored in the next chapter, which extends and illuminates the discussion of the dialectic between the female body, self-harm and the gaze, while outlining the significance of beauty, outward appearance and ageing. In this context the deliberate representation of the women’s bodies as shocking and even monstrous stresses the deep unsettlement that underlies the fictional perception of female sexuality and corporeality.
4.2. Beauty Marks: Displacing the Feminine

‘Jill’
I challenge the mirror
‘how much guts have you got?’

I like my courage
physical
I like my courage
with a dash of danger.

Dorothy Porter, “Trouble”

In Dorothy Porter’s first stanza of her poem “Trouble” the woman speaker challenges the mirror, flirting with courage and danger in a moment of confession that reveals irony to be the source of her criticism and creativity. It is not her reflection that receives her critical scrutiny but the way a woman is turned into a construct of social expectations and standards, once she looks at her reflection. Courage and trouble often accompany this moment when the self sees its other reduced to a body of social cues – a fragmented mirage on a shiny surface that reflects norm and deviation. In Winton’s novels the mirror becomes a defining characteristic of the female characters, confirming the clichéd stereotype that aligns femininity with the mirror. Albeit also referring to the element of illusion, it is the women themselves who are presented as the agents of their own fantasies, either losing themselves in disguise and masquerade, or evaluating their bodies in terms of attractiveness and loss thereof. Some characters, like Georgie in *Dirt Music*, voice their dislike of mirrors, without, however, deconstructing the stereotypical representation of femininity as reliant on existing norms of beauty and attractiveness, while craving the male gaze.

She hated mirrors but she felt enough self-loathing to reef back the robe door to expose the full-length glass behind it. Georgie grew up in a house blighted with mirrors, amongst females who simply couldn’t pass one without turning. Jutland women went to mirrors the way prisoners sought windows. They tottered, it seemed to her, from one to the next, sidling up, confronting, storming them to hold their frames and scowl or beckon, to simper and leer. Her sisters took the lead from their mother who hitched her eyebrows and bared her teeth, drawing them somehow into comparison, even competition with her beauty. (*Dirt Music*, 55)

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This chapter demonstrates how phallocentric norms define Winton’s narration in relation to the representation of the female body. I argue that Winton employs common stereotypes in the gendering of his female characters, who are doubly marked by representational bias and open or disguised objectification through the male gaze. Seeing the image of the female body as actively produced by historical, sociological and cultural discourses on gender, I argue that the way women’s corporeality is constructed in Winton’s fiction reflects existing social dissonances within Australia and constitutes an allegory of male anxiety and fantasy in times of increasing gender ambivalence.

Schaffer’s evocative idea of the mirror as the vehicle of illusion demonstrates that women as cultural constructs are not only inscribed in representation but also expose the limits of these representations. Operations of power in discourse, as Schaffer asserts, need to be concealed in order to preserve the cultural illusion of an original, authentic Australian presence that affirms national stability. The image of this masculine presence, as represented in the “cultural mirror,” as Schaffer calls it, is a misrecognition, a simple illusion, whereas the image of the Australian woman in the same mirror is a “redoubled illusion” that both refers to her own image as other but also to his image of her as his eternal opposite.² This doubled alienation from the female self in the process of cultural representation supports Schaffer’s point that the female in Australia is always caught in the web of dominant illustrations and discourses that are still largely masculine.³ Despite continuing transformations of traditional cultural codes that define the woman as inherently different from the phallocentric norm, these codes are still persistently repeated within the Anglo-Celtic cultural traditions in Australia today. Although illustrating the postmodern insecurities of masculinity, Winton’s work, if considered in any way representative of that tradition, nevertheless enforces a conventional stigmatisation and othering of the female. Her body is turned into a map of socio-cultural codes, signed by phallocentric tradition. In Winton’s novels the woman tends to be mirrored through the memories and observations of the male character, so that her embodiment is filtered and mediated – even exposed – through his regulating memorial gaze – a relationship between body and gaze that this chapter focuses on.

³ Ibid., 173.
While indirectly dealing with Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage and masquerade, I refrain from taking an explicit psychoanalytic Lacanian viewpoint here, due to the fact that, as in Freud’s theorisation of femininity, the woman in Lacan is associated with a lack, a void that is presented as characteristic to her.\(^4\) The strong patriarchal structures underlying Lacan’s theories and their significance need more elaboration and contextualisation than this thesis can offer.\(^5\) Exposed to a lot of criticism in feminist circles, the essence of his psychoanalysis, however influential it is for feminism, assumes heteronormative and masculinist positions – a point Butler develops and discusses in connection with female homosexuality, which in Lacan is presented as a refusal of sexuality: “But we can understand this conclusion to be the necessary result of a heterosexualized and masculine observational point of view.”\(^6\) To reflect more critically upon these patriarchal ideas, particularly in relation to Winton, this chapter uses significant feminist theories in literary and film studies to illuminate the complexities of the gendered body and the gaze, both directed towards the self and the other. However, the Lacanian idea of the mirror as a metaphor for the representation of the body and its boundaries is important because it indicates the problems and limitations of gender portrayals and subjectivities in creative and non-creative texts. In this matter, I will draw from Elizabeth Grosz’s study *Volatile Bodies*, which combines an Australian feminist approach with psychoanalysis and ideological representations of self-harm, and thus speaks to the methodology of this thesis. Butler’s critical reading of masquerade in *Gender Trouble* will also be of significance later on in this chapter. As mentioned in the introduction, the discourse of representation and mediation of the body as a fictional, social and cultural creation plays into the deep structure of this chapter’s argument.

The “male gaze” is a prominent element in feminist discourses and stands in dialectic with the female glance. Laura Mulvey’s fundamental essay on visual pleasures in film offers insightful perspectives in this matter and also contributes to illuminate purely textual representations of gender in fictional narratives. Despite being originally written in the upheaval of second-wave feminism and being heavily shaped by its ideas (and criticism of


\(^5\) A large number of feminist and cultural philosophical theories are based on Lacanian critique and offer extensive insight into his views, for example, the works of Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz, Jennifer Rutherford, to name a few.

\(^6\) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 63.
essentialism), this essay is equally valid today, as it outlines still existing hegemonic structures within cultural manifestations that turn women into signifiers and mark them as other to their male counterparts. Feminist authors, commentators and critics, such as Peggy Phelan, Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers, Camille Paglia, Naomi Segal and Naomi Wolf, have engaged with the male gaze critique that Mulvey’s article initiates, inciting diverse discussions on issues of female self-victimisation, a “female gaze,” the objectification of men and even-handed heterosexuality. Mulvey argues that women in a large range of cinematic portrayals are “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman – still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”

Acknowledging the fact that Mulvey neglects the aspect of an empowering female gaze as the male gaze’s counterpart and argues within a rather reductionist framework of theory, her work helps to indicate the still existing ideological traces interwoven within narrative texts – literary, artistic and cinematic – and contributes significantly to building a foundation for emerging concepts of femininity and masculinity studies. As shown by Fetterley and others, novels as a mediated reflection of social standards and value systems form an acting ground for subjugation in terms of gender, race, class and sexuality through the process of reading. Although the years have seen a revolutionary rise in Australian literature written

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11 In “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Inspired by King Vidor’s Duel in the Sun,” in Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 29-38, Mulvey does eventually admit the possibility of a female gaze but only under the condition that women take up a masculine subject position.
by and for women, the sensitivity needed for female portrayals in male writing – especially when it concerns Winton – is yet still frequently absent.

In Winton’s case, I argue alongside Mulvey that women are not granted enough space to produce a coherent and fulfilling symbolic and imaginary order on their own. Thus, they are limited in their agency to create meaning outside the private sphere of their own bodies, which, being the focal point of attention, not only become the semantic matrix of female articulation, but also the playground of male self-definition. Unlike Winton’s male characters, his women hardly ever find peace of mind by venturing out of their assigned communal spheres alone. Instead, they are tied to the domestic or interact in response to a male presence in their lives. When they do travel, their journeys are not serving spiritual restoration but either increase their level of alienation (as for instance with Georgie, Eva and Ronnie), and condemn them to the fate of social outcast (as it is the case with Jennifer, Tegwyn and Dolly), or lead them back into the traditional frameworks of marriage and motherhood (as exemplified in Rose and Queenie). The only obvious exception to the mentally fractured and transient women characters in his novels is Dora, Abel’s mother in *Blueback*, whose environmental commitment transports her successfully into the public sphere with the positive result of saving her home and the country around it from commercial property development. Nevertheless, the power of naming in this case places this success into perspective, disempowering her through the association of her name with Freud’s most famous patient (Ida Bauer) and the ensuing connotation of psychological fragility and hysteria. The dominant voice has spoken and simultaneously deprived his woman character again of the freedom to escape the fate of the other. Besides the limitations imposed by the authorial voice, Winton’s stories are filtered through the adopted narrative viewpoints, which are predominantly male. Thus, the female voices in the texts are frequently overshadowed, remaining unconvincing in their representation.

Landy discusses the issue of sexual difference in the reading process and writing process, outlining the restrictions placed upon women writers and critics in their reactions to dominant portrayals of women in literature: “They have been constricted in the social fabric, their dreams articulated by men, their roles defined by men, and their scope of pleasure described through male desire or aversion. And the male fears about woman’s power are also deeply embedded in the myths. Why has there been but little reaction against this state of affairs? […] [B]ut even more fundamentally one must conclude that for the most part women have concurred, have accepted the male images as their own or have created accommodations satisfactory to them within the given power structure” (26-27). In this context also see Nancy K. Miller, “Rereading as a Woman: The Body in Practice,” in *The Female Body in Western Culture – Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985/1986), 354-62.
Sight plays a crucial role in the representation of gender relations. John Berger’s observation that “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at […] the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of woman is designed to flatter him,” illuminates the position of the viewer as a masculine one within a patriarchal framework but neglects the power of the female gaze for women. His term of the “surveyed woman,” which connotes the female and corresponds with the “surveyor of woman in herself” as male, describes how the woman turns herself into an object of vision through the spectacle of looking at herself (in a mirror). The “I/eye” that women employ to look at themselves is, therefore, firmly rooted within masculine ideas of femininity. This theory contributes to initiating the discussion on sight as a minefield of gender relations and as a strategic narrative tool in Winton’s novels, where the “I” of the woman is clearly enacted by the “eye” of man.

The act of looking as a variable phenomenon can represent, challenge, affirm and deconstruct existing social and cultural micro- and macrocosms, while functioning as an act of surveillance, control and subversion. Viewing the opposite sex, the same sex or oneself is a prevalent element in Winton’s portrayal of character relations. Looking in his novels is manifold: a woman may scrutinise her body in a mirror; a man may spy on a woman; a mother may look at her daughter; a girl may silently observe a boy; or two lovers may openly confront each other and their desire via provocative gazing. As exemplified in Breath and other novels, feelings of fascination, fear, distrust, disappointment and curiosity are transmitted via glances that are directed towards the opposite sex. Voyeurism, deriving from the French voyeur (“one who looks”), defines the character relationships by exposing the

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14 Ibid., 47.
15 Carole Spitzack, *Confessing Excess: Women and the Politics of Body Reduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), 53. See also Nita Mary McKinley, “Feminist Consciousness and Objectified Body Consciousness,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2011): 684-85; McKinley and Spitzack respectively see women’s self-judgment and struggle for mastery over their bodies as deriving from masculine constructions of femininity, which reflect men’s privilege and power of naming within a given culture. Also see Phelan, *Unmarked*, 16. Phelan unravels French psychoanalytic theory on sight and the gaze: “All seeing is hooded with loss – the loss of self-seeing. In looking at the other (animate or inanimate) the subject seeks to see itself.”

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desperate need of some of the fictional personae to look at their object of desire. The practice of peeping at someone in a compromising position of nudity is vividly and still rather innocently presented in Breath, when the teenage boys Loonie and Pikelet are spying on Margaret Myers, a new inhabitant of the town, through a peephole, while she is having sex with Loonie’s father:

It turned out that the spyhole was hardly required to prove Loonie’s point. The squeak of the bed next door, the slap of meat and the low growls coming through the wall were evidence enough. But that bit of gum was a provocation. I peeled it off, pressed my eye to the gap and let out a grunt of surprise that must have been audible from the other side of the wall. Because what I saw first, not two feet distant, was a woman’s lipstick-smeared face turned my way. Her green eyes were open but unfocussed. She had big pores and her skin shone damply beneath her jouncing curls […] A hot jet ran down the leg of my jeans, and I made a stupid sound as Loonie pulled me aside to see for himself. (Breath, 108-9)

The still unfulfilled sexual fantasies of the boys become reality when they peek at this particular woman from their hiding place. This scene sets the starting point for Pikelet’s obsession with Eva as the lustrous, promiscuous woman, who deviates in her femininity from the girlish and motherly images that he has grown up with. The sexual arousal is initiated by his own act of looking, whereas the release through ejaculation is given by the knowing glance of the female, whose eyes meet his gaze and expose its secrecy: “At night in bed I conjured up the knowing smile Margaret Myers shot me that day in the pub and I jerked off morosely while the wind poured through the trees and the house creaked on its stumps” (ibid., 131-32).

In most Winton novels there is no obvious imbalance in terms of who looks at whom. Although the female body is frequently the focus of male attention, Winton also attributes a large part of the voyeuristic activities to his female characters. At first glance, a form of empowerment seems to take place by having the women adopt the active stance of looking at men as desired “objects,” and not being mere objects of male longing themselves.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that this form of subjectivity is granted to them as fictional constructions, whose agencies are directed and filtered through the largely masculine perceptions of the narrator, the writer and, to some extent, the reader. Thus, instead of inhabiting an active, desiring and empowering female gaze, as promoted by critics such as Naomi Segal, Winton only allows his women characters a look that is testing, defending, rebellious or suspicious – challenged rather than challenging within a highly masculinised environment. The double standard and subjugation that takes place in Winton’s genesis of the gendered gaze will be demonstrated in the following discussion.

In Cloudstreet, Rose is both the bearer of the hidden glance and the object of that glance. As a girl, she often peeks at Fish from behind a window or a doorframe – being inevitably drawn to him but only able to express her desire from a distance (Cloudstreet, 158-59). Interestingly, Quick accidentally sees Rose in the process of looking at his brother and realises that she is in love with the disabled boy. The process of gazing here is rendered more complex by doubling the gaze, so that Quick as the silent and unseen observer is eventually in control of the scene, and able to interpret it (ibid., 128). Believing herself to be securely hidden from another person’s view, Rose now turns from the knowing, active but hidden onlooker to the unknowing object of the gaze herself, being bound within the dialectic of seeing and being seen. Deviating from this early stage of innocence, Rose commences to challenge the gaze of the people around her through her self-starvation – people who respond to her undernourished figure with concern and compassion (159-60). In her mother’s case, however, looking turns into rivalry and revenge, and is actively controlled by Rose, who enjoys the satisfaction that comes with Dolly’s jealousy and depreciative judgement. Rose’s stare has become an open revolt – a haunting threat against Dolly and the qualities she stands for: “Rose looked frightening now, like a ghost, with those big eyes. Her wrists looked like twigs and she did nothing but stare. Dolly knew what it meant, that stare” (153-54). The schadenfreude Rose feels when her body is scrutinisingly and envously

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18 Segal, “Why Can’t a Good Man Be Sexy?” 35-47. Just to give a few examples of the Wintonian female gaze: Eva looks at the boys, and Pikelet in particular, suspiciously and rebelliously – her gaze trying to challenge and intimidate the boy, which exposes her underlying need for defence. Similarly, Rose’s and Georgie’s glances exceed the feeling of desire and indicate a self-serving appropriation of the men they have chosen in order to escape their unfulfilling lives. Jennifer (possibly) sees her husband and child walking past and her gaze in its secrecy only contributes to brand-marking her as the absent, egocentric mother figure, who places priority on her life in Europe than having an open and clarifying conversation with her desperate family. Ida’s glance at Maurice towards the end of In the Winter Dark communicates disappointment, fear and defence, positioning her in a space of fragility, terror and alienation, which ends in her death, rather than in an empowering new start without her husband.
looked upon by her mother (143) encourages her to push this visual power game of daughterly rebellion and maternal envy to the limits, by increasing the control over her body and becoming thinner every day.

In contrast, Dolly fully defines herself through the looks directed at her and craves this signifier of male attention: “She’d be happy, crack jokes, catch blokes looking her way […] She liked to be liked, and didn’t anyone? No one wants to be forgotten, have eyes glide past you without even seeing you there” (152). The confusion and fear of not being seen anymore is one of the prime reasons for Dolly’s drinking, which routinely recasts an otherwise anxious reality:

Hell, she didn’t care what anybody thought […] No, she didn’t care…but bugger it…well she didn’t know. It was all too complicated. Everything was. Unless you were full as a goog. Then it was simple, then all of it was straight in a girl’s mind. (152-53)

The substitute world of intoxication and emotional paralysis that she creates for herself temporarily frees her from any confrontation with her social surroundings, her role as a mother and her own fading beauty. Instead it installs a one-dimensional illusion of simplicity, which proves her accompanying inability to deal with the multi-complexities of everyday life.19 It is not the appreciation of her husband that she needs for her sense of self-value and confidence, but she obviously relies upon the sexual advances from other men to maintain the only capital that she thinks she owns: her body. In response to her worries about age, however, Sam’s attempt at reaffirming her, by judging her behind, illustrates that her body is actually regarded as representative of the passing of time. The marital and simultaneously sexual gaze here, though intended to be reassuring, only increases Dolly’s fear of old age. By drawing direct parallels between a sexualised female body part and transience, Sam highlights the temporary and fleeting character of his assertion: “We aren’t that old, she [Dolly] says/Anyone with an arse like that isn’t real old [Sam]” (78). Dolly’s rising alcohol consumption in the progression of the story mirrors her fear of rejection, which grows with every day she turns older.

19 To be noted: Winton neglects to take the cathartic function of alcohol into consideration, merely presenting it as a measure of escape and intoxication. Alternatively, it can be argued that Dolly’s alcoholism is inspired by the hope to receive a deeper understanding of herself, to detach herself from her superficial life and traumatic past in order to create an alter ego that knows a world beyond pain and boredom. She may be looking for revelation, for some form of truth, which opens up a new approach to life – “in vino veritas.” See Anthony Cunningham, “In Vino Veritas?” in Writing Addiction – Towards a Poetics of Desire and its Others, ed. Bela Szabados and Kenneth G. Probert (Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2004), 93.
Her open jealousy of Rose illuminates these strong anxieties, which, in the face of her daughter’s youthful beauty, expose her as being middle-aged – her body soon to become a reflection of it:

She fell back on the floor, breaking her nails in the rug, foaming and spitting and squealing till she was hoarse. Her breasts flapped on her, and her nightie rode up to expose her naked, mottled body, her angry slash of a vagina, her rolling bellyfat and Caesar scars. (*Cloudstreet*, 338, also see 143)²⁰

Here Dolly’s body is presented as grotesque, and even repulsive, in her hysteric fit of sorrow after the death of Ted, her favourite child. The complete exposure of her pain and shame in this passage culminates in the literal and metaphorical uncovering of her aged body. Having once been the epitome of female sexuality with “curls and lips and hips and everything” (ibid., 48) and “a deep vee between her breasts, big as a drinking trough” (48) that left men (in this case Lester Lamb) speechless and feeling like a “dumb animal” (48), her image now reveals the opposite side in its marked monstrosity.²¹ It has become the site of Dolly’s fear itself – a stage upon which the effects of her age are played out. The reader is forced into the position of the involuntary spectator, who witnesses the complete degradation of the female character, unable to escape.

To illuminate Winton’s choice here of presenting Dolly in such a radical and humiliating light, it is important to briefly refer to the issue of the grotesque – the monstrous – in this context.²² Judith Halberstam argues that the representation of monstrosity reflects a fear of the foreign and the perverse, “the difference between an other and a self.”²³ In her view, the monster is a cultural creation which articulates aspects and impurities within a

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²⁰ See Maguire, *Princesses & Pornstars*, 133. Maguire discusses the beauty myths of contemporary popular culture, in which the exposure of body marks (hair, caesareans, fat etc.) stigmatises a woman severely. With this in mind, Winton breaks a taboo by presenting Dolly in this compromising position. At the same time, however, he confirms exactly the standard beauty stereotypes imposed on the feminine in Western cultures today, by presenting her “scars” as deviant and crazed, bordering the perverse and monstrous. This passage links with a description of Dolly earlier, when she observes herself in the mirror. See *Cloudstreet*, 152: “Dolly was shaky and fragile with headaches, most mornings. She felt older than she was, and she could see it in the mirror the way the smoke and the grog were curing her, making the flesh on her face puffy and shredded with lines. Her teeth were yellow. Her bottom lip had begun to hang.”

²¹ Similar characteristics of outward appearance are given to Margaret Myers in *Breath*, who, also, is marked by her age and sexuality: “lipstick-smeared face,” green, unfocussed eyes, “big pores,” and damply shining skin beneath jouncing curls (108-9).


community that have to be abolished in order to support and maintain the status quo of economic, social and sexual hierarchies. This echoes the Foucauldian idea of knowledge and discourses as instruments of power, in order to channel people into functional, “correct” and normative ways of acting and thinking.24 Similarly, Kimberley Tyrell points out that monstrosity “offers us a way of investigating anomaly and alterity in a concentrated, direct fashion. Yet at the same time it demands attention to the dominant norms and values to which anomaly and alterity are inextricably tied.”25 According to Tyrell, monstrosity “traces a particular graphic form of encoding and maintaining difference as negative.”26 Within the “process of othering,” which marks a body or body parts as abnormal and monstrous, the monster never inhabits a stable position or static entity but frequently mutates in its appearance, depending on the shifting perspectives of different individuals.27 The body here is not female but “bears the marks of the construction of femininity.”28 Presenting someone or something as monstrous thus allows to not only expose deficiencies in contemporary “societies of normalization” (Foucault), but also to spot and maintain existing hegemonic power systems and their consequential tendencies to marginalise those that deviate from what is considered the norm.29 The monster, therefore, embodies and enacts a range of anxieties within Western culture in the act of confrontation. This point of view is shared by Rosie Braidotti when she argues that “[w]oman, as sign of difference, is monstrous” and “[i]f we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the

24 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge – Selected Interviews and Other Writing*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 107; see Michel Foucault, *Ethics – Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 2000), 290-92; James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 27. See also Young, “Abjection and Oppression,” 207: Young refers here to Kristeva’s concept of the abject and argues that it is “the feeling of loathing and disgust the subject has in encountering certain matter, images, fantasies; what is horrible and to which one can respond only with aversion, with nausea and distraction” while the abject is “at the same time fascinating; it draws the subject in order to repel it.” Following Kristeva’s view, Young points out that signification becomes possible through the movement of abjection by “creating a being capable of dividing, repeating, separating.” In this process of expulsion, separation and ensuing repulsion the subject and the other are placed in close vicinity, while the expelled self threatens to re-enter and obliterate the border between its full and its rejected self. Also see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10, 170.


26 Ibid., 53.

27 Ibid.; Tyrell, “‘The Monsters Next Door,’” 53.


norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror.”

Challenging the reader with Dolly’s image in such a provocative way, Winton seems to be playing not only with Dolly’s personal nightmare but also with the reader’s perceptions and feelings. The exposed body, as Ussher argues, crudely stages the fears of a society that is obsessed with beauty myths and youth:

In Western society, the ageing body is the epitome of the abject – with none of the redeeming features of youth or maternal femininity to save it from complete exclusion from the symbolic sphere. Older women are all but invisible within both high and popular culture – with the post-menopausal woman represented primarily as the crone, the hag, or the dried-up grandmother figure, her body covered, and her sexuality long left behind. If the older woman is depicted as alive, as sexual, this in itself makes her an object of fascination (or disgust), threatening again to evoke the fear of the feminine, of the devouring, powerful Medusa who is outside the control of men. Or she is represented as witch, and condemned, as witches always are.

Although this statement does not cover recent changes in popular culture which deliberately show the ageing, sexual body of women past forty-five, it nevertheless addresses prominent structures within contemporary social and cultural representations that still portray the ageing body as grotesque, pitiful and even threatening (or not at all). Dolly’s torso, brand-marked by her maternal history and age, turns into a mirror and embodiment of the social subconscious and its terrors, testing the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not, while being “deeply inscribed with an ideological construction of femininity emblematic at any particular historical moment.” As Bordo suggests, it is the bodies of particularly disordered women, such as Dolly, that are read as a cultural and social statement about

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33 Elizabeth Ettorre, Revisioning Women and Drug Use – Gender, Power and the Body (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 127.
gender, and the rules for how femininity is to be culturally constructed.\(^\text{34}\) It is the difference, as described above in the context of the monstrous, that comes into play and places Dolly in a liminal space outside of the feminine status quo.\(^\text{35}\) Interestingly, the difference described here is not merely her naked body, which in itself represents so many real and imagined bodies in their material and fictional makeup, but it is the unveiling of this body in alignment with her own malaise of adultery, bad mothering and alcohol that brings this difference and marginalisation to life. Furthermore, the drastic verbalisation of this scene determines the perverse and shocking effect it may have on the reader. Thus, it is not Dolly who is monstrous, but her literary representation, in which Winton describes a desperate woman as a “social abjection,” whose story of sex, excess and childbirth is written on her flesh, while the illusion of beauty seems to be breaking with her nails in the rug.\(^\text{36}\) Dolly’s pent-up anger and aggression are conveyed within the image of an “angry slash of a vagina,” seeming to hint at the violence of the female sex in general.\(^\text{37}\) The “beastly” person presented here evokes the reader’s sympathy, mingled with a slight disgust and lack of respect for the woman, whose terrors of loss and self-loss are crudely imprinted on her naked body.\(^\text{38}\) A body and a soul stripped bare. This moment of crude un-covering marks a breakage point in the novel – a point that renders Dolly literally an “old girl.”

\(^{34}\) Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 168-71.

\(^{35}\) See here Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 24-26. See also McClintock, 26: liminality is a term very prevalent in colonial discourses on conquest and invasion, and marks a dangerous margin or boundary often associated with the female. It describes a “liminal condition,” which, according to Victor Turner, as quoted in McClintock, eludes the “network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (24).

\(^{36}\) See, for example, Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 190. Also see Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body,” 99-100. Bordo sees obesity as socially stigmatised. In her view, obese people are seen as abnormal, unable to control their desires. In response they “must be put in their place, humiliated and defeated” (100). In *Cloudstreet*, Dolly’s “rolling bellyfat” signifies her loss of control and functions as a symbol of unrestrained consumption, which stands in contrast to the social obsession with regulation and control (as insinuated in Rose’s anorexia) (Bordo, 99). Her diegetic and representational humiliation is the consequence, as shown in this passage.

\(^{37}\) Ambiguously, in Freudian terms, the female “sex” is connoted with male fear, illustrating the castration anxiety at the sight of female genitals. See Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” in *The Future of an Illusion – Civilisation and its Discontents and Other Works*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 154. However, in this literary context, the source of that anxiety is revealed and exhibited, reducing a private body part to an object of public (the implied and actual readership’s) scrutiny and judgment. Thus, a former taboo is violently demystified and, to some extent, ridiculed. It is also worth mentioning here that the use of the term “vagina” is technically incorrect, as it is the “vulva” that marks the external part of the female sex organ. The vagina describes the internal part, reaching from the vulva to the lower uterus. Cf. Maguire, *Princesses & Pornstars*, 129.

\(^{38}\) The readers are pushed into the role of voyeur, becoming not only the witness of female perversity but also turning into perverts themselves. See Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, 46-47: “[T]his pleasure in looking [scopophilia] becomes a perversion (a) if it is restricted exclusively to the genitals, or (b) if it is connected with the overriding of disgust (as in the case of voyeurs or people who look on at excretory functions), or (c) if, instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, it supplants it.”
Does Winton hope to criticise social ideals by his depiction of the female as a haunting and haunted presence within the social unconscious, or is he actually representing the same ideals by deliberately marking Dolly as the negative counter image to “ideal” femininity and motherhood? Regardless of what his intentions are, the harsh representation of this and other female characters in his fiction paints a deeply unsettled and corrosive image of the female, locating femininity within a very narrow, pre-conceived framework of ideals that focuses on femininity as troubled and troubling. Continuously, the women are presented as incompatible with the world around them, destructive in their attempt to compensate for a lost state of grace and to retrieve control over their lives. The texts reflect the value system and ideologies of the writer’s social background, education, Protestantism and culture, as shown in the previous chapters. However, they first and foremost evoke both familiarity and estrangement within their readers, who are either susceptible to self-scrutiny and criticism when they recognise facets of their own lives in Winton’s stories, or they may adopt the presented values unquestioningly as a result of their upbringing and possible cultural dogmatism. The question is worth asking: at what point do genuinely interested, informed and critical readers cease to be critical of what they read, and can this failure to ask questions be derived from a paralysing fear of seeing fiction and reality increasingly blurring? The fact is that critical voices about female self-harm and death in Winton’s fiction have been fairly quiet, while views on masculinity and belonging in his works have been flourishing – a tendency that to me indicates the persisting centrality of masculinity and the cultural difficulty of addressing the expropriation of the female body in the work of a male writer who is as highly celebrated and nationally treasured as Winton. The question of critical silence in regard to the treatment of femininity in Winton’s novels, also addressed in Dixon’s and McMahon’s work, may help to position the discussion of his oeuvre more critically and hence encourage readers to develop critical counter-stories.

In none of his other books is the fear of female ageing so prevalent as in Cloudstreet but the drastic depiction of women’s noticeable difference reappears consistently in most of Winton’s stories, finding its climax in the depiction of Eva, whose erotic fetishes and self-

39 See Breath, 170-71. Although using minor disclaimers (“Yes, we had some things in common, Eva and I”), Winton aligns egotism, a “near-autistic narrowness,” directly with Eva.
threatening rage put her into the abject position of the aggressive, assertive and dangerously seductive female.\textsuperscript{41}

As indicated earlier, in \textit{Breath} Eva becomes the prototype of the fetishised object of the male gaze. Similar to Dolly, she plays with the male glance directed at her, which hints at the ambiguous empowerment of women in saying “Yes” to being looked at – something that is often perceived as a non-Australian trait.\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless, this form of female power simultaneously and paradoxically ensures a gradual disempowerment for Dolly and Eva respectively, as both women, though to varying degrees, grow dependent on the male gaze as a defining, life-sustaining and enhancing necessity. Despite not matching Pikelet’s erotic fantasies, Eva’s bodily appearance draws Pikelet into a spell of sexual fascination, excitement and terror, which mirrors the tragic “no risk no fun” attitude of the entire novel. As a woman, Eva incorporates exoticism and difference in the way she speaks (\textit{Breath}, 52), the way she behaves (ibid., 179) and the way she looks:

My fantasies lurched from Suzi Quatro to Ali McGraw and back in a moment. The rockin chick, the dark waif. But Eva was stocky and blunt. As a blonde she tended toward the agricultural. She lacked rock-and-roll insouciance on one hand, and on the other she failed to give off the faintest aura of fey sensitivity. If anything she was abrupt and suspicious, handsome rather than pretty. Her limbs were shapely enough though tough and scarred. Yet the idea of her had taken hold. The fact of her body overtook me. (164)\textsuperscript{43}

This description of Eva’s appearance focuses persistently on what she is lacking, juxtaposing her in close vicinity to a steady void, which corresponds to both Eva’s and Pikelet’s trauma of deprivation and disillusionment. The gaze of the narrator dominates the perception, attempting to justify his obsession with her, despite his better knowledge and also against his own liking. He explicitly “others” Eva, on the one hand, reducing her to the passive object of his desires, while, on the other hand, placing her into the perpetrating role of the unpredictable, angry, sexually-demanding but still sometimes fragile and tragic femme fatale (170-71). He stresses his own passivity and surrender to the sexual domination initiated by her, and, therefore, inhabits the role of the subjugated victim in the relationship:

\begin{footnotes}
\item[41] It should be noted that she could also be read as brutally honest in the way she educates Pikelet regarding sex, reflecting social realities in rural communities where sexual (mis-) conduct with minors is a given fact. As such, Winton creates a revolutionary character of social currency. Still, her representation remains problematic and is further complicated by the fact that he resituates social guilt in the transnational, siding it with America and femininity. This point is to be further discussed in a future paper entitled “Waltzing…Pollyanna – Reading American Women in Contemporary Australian Fiction.”
\item[42] See Garner, \textit{The First Stone}, 85.
\item[43] Again the emotional ambivalence of America as both fascinating and repulsive in Winton’s novel is taken up in this quotation in the sense that Pikelet’s objects of desire are all American, including Eva.
\end{footnotes}
Eva’s hair was unwashed and her mouth tasted of hash and coffee. Her fingers were stained with turmeric. She smelled of sweat and fried coconut. She was heavier than me, stronger. Her back was broad and her arms solid. There was nothing thin and girly about her. She did not close her eyes. She did not wait for me to figure things out for myself. (161)

The ambivalent feelings of the boy towards Eva, ranging from lust and love to repulsion, concern and hate, are illustrated in his depiction of her, which always seems to incorporate a hint of disgust and judgement. His portrayal of Eva characterises her as deviating considerably from the accepted norms of female hygiene and self-care, as proven in her unwashed hair, the smell of sweat and fried coconut or her tongue’s taste of cornflakes and brassy painkillers (174). More than once the narrator repeats the fact that she is bigger and stronger than him (174, 161), emphasising her threatening womanhood, which is neither “girly,” nor in any way similar to Pikelet’s understanding of motherhood (174). Towards the end of the novel, his observations again blur her femininity, presenting her as both masculine and feminine simultaneously: “I considered her wide shoulders and broad back, her narrow waist, the square, womanly buttocks and the way she favoured one leg even while dragging a brush through her long, wet hair” (193). As mentioned previously, and again exemplified in this passage, Eva shares Dolly’s and many other female characters’ fate of inhabiting a liminal space of “in-between-ness” – geographically, emotionally and physically. Interestingly, once they have left the house, Pikelet’s perception of Eva’s body turns more positively and decisively feminine, as it goes hand in hand with him gaining control over her:

Halfway home she couldn’t walk anymore. Her face was white […] I was forced to piggyback her across the wild, uneven country. The first few seconds, when she hitched up and clamped her thighs around my waist and pushed her breasts tight to my back, I was delirious with pride and lust and a stupid sense of triumph. In my mind I was carrying her home like some warrior prince. She rested her hot cheek against my neck and I could smell the pear scent of her hair as I stepped it out. (188)

The Sanderson home is inextricably linked with Eva and Sando’s lives, placing Pikelet into the position of the outsider, who becomes the “playboy” of its female inhabitant – wavering between active and passive, never granted full control of either the one or the other. He becomes the passive invader whose naivety denies him a full understanding of his appropriation, while his sexual desires and fascination with the extraordinary, incorporated here by Eva, repeatedly initiate his return back to her, despite his uneasy intuitions (165). The “wilderness” that they hike in is empowering for the boy, whose youth and fitness give him a physical advantage over
Eva, so that he is converted into the saviour – the knight. This aligns him with his general role of watching over her life, assuring that the final step is not crossed, but unlike his lack of power during the events happening in the house, he is full of confidence. Any ambiguity is dissolved and he has adopted the controlling stance of male protection, which, however, he increasingly loses again the closer they get back to the house: “But the feeling only lasted a minute. She was heavy. I remembered how far it was to the house. By the time we got to her place I was spent” (Breath, 188).

In following Butler’s question of how the materialisation of the norm in bodily formations produces a domain of abjected bodies – a field of deformation which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms, this argument requires further elaboration with reference to how the body actually is constructed in Breath and how the male gaze contributes to the varying fantasies. Also, the topic of female gazing and its effects need to be analysed. In the novel, Eva’s gaze evokes in Pikelet the feeling of being trapped within that stare, making him feel self-conscious and uncomfortable (Breath, 135). Similarly, he is not only passively caught within her glance but also within his own active voyeurism, the most intense marker of his obsession:

I watched her when she was present and conjured her when she was not […] And I simply couldn’t stop looking […] When she complained about my dog-eyed stare and waved me away I found ways to watch her without her knowledge. I particularly loved to watch her sleep, for then she was the picture of a body smitten […] I watched her so long that I saw her body was a sequence of squares and cubes. Her teeth were square, so were her ears. Her breasts and buttocks were block-like. Even her calf-muscles, which squirmed beneath my fingers, had corners. She had wide, blunt hands with square nails and deep ruts at the joints, and her feet were the same […] How I watched her, what a catalogue I made of her movements. I saw her pee, watched her shave her armpits. She said I was a pervert and I wondered if I was. (Ibid., 174-75)

The fascination that Eva has on the fifteen-year-old boy is all-consuming and turns into a form of addiction for him, which is mingled with the physical sensation of his first sexual experiences. The fact that he enjoys most to watch her sleep is telling. Being awake, the female character is linked to danger and emotional unpredictability, turning from a communicative, sensual human being one minute into a cynical, cold and raging Medusa the next (179). Looking at her sleeping, Pikelet can let his imagination take control – developing a fantasy that is otherwise suffocated – and create the ideal female partner. His

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44 This is redolent of courtly love, when the love-object has surrendered.
45 Butler, Bodies That Matter, 16.
voyeuristic mechanisms, to use Mulvey’s term, also render Eva a threat, which needs to be circumvented by watching her, spotting her weak spots that are reflected in the scars on her leg (*Breath*, 169).\(^{47}\) Similarly, confronted with his own addictive personality by a random female acquaintance later on in his life, his glance defensively and derisively seeks to expose the self-inflicted marks on that woman’s body: “Somebody once told me I was a classical addictive personality. I laughed at her [...] I sat there smiling at the thousand cuts down the inside of her arms” (ibid., 189). Illustrative of his desire for Eva’s body, Pikelet’s excessive staring takes its toll on the boy’s perception, so that eventually the female shape disappears and is replaced by geometrical forms, which literally objectify the female and reduce her to a mere body devoid of identity and human signifiers (174).\(^{48}\) Even if just in Pikelet’s fantasy, she has suddenly become a deformation, a monster that is detached from reality but at the same time connotes real-life concerns, anchored in Pike’s insecurity and fear of the uncontrollable. His gaze can be considered an act of supervision, supporting Ussher’s thesis that the fecund female body “stands at the centre of surveillance and policing of femininity – both externally, and from within.”\(^{49}\) This aspect is further illustrated in Pike’s assigned role of needing to watch Eva’s self-asphyxiation during intercourse, in which her identity is again blurred:

The plastic was pink and translucent and behind it Eva’s features looked all out of focus. Pretty soon the bag fogged up and I could only see the contours of her nose and chin and the deep indentation of her mouth with each indrawn breath. (183).

The monstrous element here is submerged in the erotically perverse act of asphyxiation, which conceals Eva’s features, so that, eventually, it is merely the body and its responses that are exposed and actually depend on the male gazer. Femininity, presented as the focal point, is again marked by unhindered expressions of difference, which converts Pikelet’s fascination into hate:

In time I saw that for her everything else was mere courting, payment for what she really wanted. I hated the evil, crinkly sound of the bag and the smeary film of her breath inside it. I came to hate all masks and hoods and drawn faces without features and in retrospect I see that I probably hated Eva as well. (189)

\(^{48}\) Her contours are not blurring as Young states in the context of female fluidity, but become a cubist abstraction. See Young, *Throwing like a Girl*, 192-93.
This difference is further illuminated after their separation, when Eva’s pregnancy motivates the narrative voice to restore her femininity as thriving and alive, unmasking her beauty in the face of fertility and womanhood:

She wore a ragged straw hat and her hair was glossy and her skin was tanned as I’d never seen before. She cut quite a figure in a polka dot bikini. Her breasts were huge and her belly shone [...] I took in the lavish sway of her back and smiled. (Breath, 198)\(^{50}\)

As clearly expressed in this quotation, Eva is again reduced to the level of the body that re-incipits desire within Pikelet – her individual body parts are clearly visible. Her pregnancy and her sexuality merge within the provocative act of showing her body in a bikini – a revolutionary performance at the time.\(^{51}\) This performance reaffirms her role as the overtly seductive, sexual object of the gaze but also positions her as its challenger, who, being the bearer of life and death, uses her sexuality as the site of agency, autonomy and transgression.

Eva shows affinity with second-wave feminism, which, however, is conveyed in a rather negative light, when she painstakingly picks on the word “unmanly,” used by her husband Sando to describe the importance of embracing fear and reaching a state of spiritual grace (ibid., 115). Also, she feels she is treated like an inferior due her “fee-male-ness” (133). As a result, her gaze resembles a weapon in contestation with, and distrust of the men around her: “She stared at him [Sando] a moment, hands on hips, before limping inside, and only then did Loonie come upstairs to stand against the verandah rail” (97). The disgust that can be read from her “scalding glare” (137) seems an expression of her own depression and frustration, reflecting the boredom with her life in general (171). In contrast to Pike’s passionate, consummating “dog-eyed stare,” Eva’s “rueful stare” (171) is provoking, doleful, ambiguous, but, above all, defensive and mingled with (self-) disgust. In its ambiguity, the regret mirrored in that stare alludes to Eva’s troubled conscience and ability to reflect upon her actions, thus, after all, opening up a vague possibility of female redemption through self-loathing.

In Dirt Music, it is the female protagonist who becomes the prime voyeur by looking at, and looking for, the extraordinary distraction from her life of monotony, displacement and self-deceit – a distraction and chance personified in the appearance of Luther Fox. As argued earlier,

\(^{50}\) Also cf. Breath, 200: here the narrative juxtaposition of fertility, beauty and health (physical and mental) is highlighted, insinuating the allegedly healing nature and potency of motherhood: “I knelt and lifted her dress and kissed the hard projection of her belly [...] Her breasts were long and heavy and between her legs everything felt fat and ripe.”

Lu, unlike Jim, can offer her the prospect of motherhood and family, something she has never openly desired but which becomes her last resort in the attainment of spiritual fulfilment and happiness. Winton establishes the female gaze as the dominant energy in this novel and aligns it with the restlessness and alienation of the main woman character. It is the woman who desirously looks upon the male and judges what she sees according to her interests and needs:

Handsome in a blocky way, of the sort she usually avoided, he [Jim] was forty-five and looked it. Georgie gravitated towards lounge lizards, men with pointy sideburns and a cocked eyebrow. Whereas this bloke was a citizen. Although he was an imposing physical presence he looked hesitant, even fearful, as if he’d just woken to a different, a harder world. He shouldn’t have rated a second glance, but that charming desolation so intrigued her that Georgie decided to find a way of bumping into him. (*Dirt Music*, 57)

This memory of her first encounter with Jim differs from her perception of Lu (ibid., 68). Jim is an established, rough man who has an air of threat and mystery attached to him (50). Instead, Lu resembles the image of an innocent, vulnerable boy, who, in Georgie’s Sheraton hotel room, holds her bag out to her “like a good boy for his mother” (79). The Oedipal association here is obvious and creates a triangle between Georgie and Lu as lovers, Georgie’s need for a family of her own, and the premature, accidental death of Lu’s mother, when he was still a child. It culminates in the final scene of the novel when Georgie’s life-giving function is highlighted in her resuscitating measures (461). Returning to the profession, or rather vocation of nursing reiterates her deepest wish to care for someone, and reinstalls her self-image as an active and, to some extent, mothering subject, who saves lives and not just has life happening to her (324).

Illuminating the significance of the female portrayal in this context, the beginning of the novel manifests Georgie’s position as the one who looks. Her relationship with Lu commences in a moment of intrusion, marking both Lu and Georgie as trespassers, who cross personal and legitimate boundaries respectively. While Lu is a shamateur, who illegally fishes in the waters of White Point without a licence, Georgie becomes the silent observer, who entangles herself in habitual acts of surveillance:

After a week of watching the shamateur launch, Georgie knew that she’d let it go too long. She couldn’t tell Jim or anyone now without condemning herself. A couple of times she’d even fed the bloke’s dog; unleashed it again and swum in the lagoon. Somehow she felt complicit and it left her exposed, nervous. (43)

Her initially innocent gaze has opened up a realm of secrecy that allows her for the first time in three years to be painfully and “completely present” (10). By complying with the unknowing Lu through her early morning lookouts, Georgie is introduced again to the real world outside of her own evasive existence, which is strongly defined by alcohol and Valium abuse and dubious chat
rooms. By visually committing herself to the mysterious, outlaw scenes on the beach, she herself is dragged into the unknown – giving herself over to the presence of a shadow (Lu). The beach here features as a liminal space where, according to Kate Cantrell and Elizabeth Ellison, the role of the traditional relationship between gazer/gaze as a male-female fixation is reversed, and the female is constructed as the perpetrating, discovering observer, who spies from a distance:

Unlike the welcomed, protective gaze of the male lifesaver, Georgie is constructed as a kind of disruptive, unruly woman – drunk, unhappy in her marriage and eventually punished for her surveillance. In the end, the act of gazing generates “oblique” guilt within her.\(^{52}\)

In modifying the view brought forward in this quotation that Georgie is punished for her voyeuristic activity by feelings of guilt, the following argument solidifies the idea that the guilt addressed (\textit{Dirt Music}, 43) does not primarily relate to her failure to pass on information, but to the realisation that her life with Jim and the boys is a lie, which will never give her the fulfilment she demands. The guilt is, therefore, not punishing but cathartic, setting the foundation for a life in the present.

Georgie’s need for catharsis and change, but also her role as the invader of Lu’s private space, are illustrated in one of the first nights of her surveillance when she walks to the beach and familiarises herself with Lu’s car and his dog – both left behind on the sand. Being overwhelmed by the liberating intensity of the moment, Georgie strips off her clothes, unleashes the dog and goes for a swim – a behaviour that not only emphasises the beginning of her compliance with the shamateur, but also the rejuvenating and re-inspiring effect of this (until that point) purely one-sided relationship: “She stripped off and laid her clothes on the truck. The blouse was past its use-by date; she picked it up, sniffed it and tossed it back” (\textit{Dirt Music}, 8).

The nakedness implied here correlates with the act of un-covering, which again stands in close parallel with Georgie’s discovery of Lu’s illegal fishing practices. On the one hand, she undresses herself to rid herself of the identity linked to her clothing – to forget her past and proceed to the future. On the other, she seeks to create a common ground with Lu, stripping herself bare to metaphorically unveil her secret role as onlooker, and to assume the role of the desired object of the voyeuristic glance – the naked female body. She simultaneously

incorporates the role of gazer, and of being gazed upon, though only indirectly, by the reader. The “use-by date” of her blouse stresses the point that it is time to let go of the past and embrace life in the present – fully and without regrets. This scene is linked to Georgie’s trespassing of Lu’s farm – another boundary she ignores – and her literal cleansing of the place to destroy the memory cues of the Fox trauma (Dirt Music, 326-29). In this chapter of the novel, Georgie’s gaze repeatedly disrupts the memory of the place: she goes through the private belongings of the deceased family members, the music collections and recordings, Lu’s books and photo albums. Eventually, she looks at Sally’s clothes, tries them on but only to find out that she herself is “not enough woman” to fill out these dresses (ibid., 327). Her realisation of having neither enough belly nor breasts to fit these shapes turns the outward gaze back to herself and re-connects the passage with an earlier incident of self-scrutiny, ambivalently merging embarrassment and pride, but, more importantly, reflecting back on her own look: “She had the stare of a cattle dog. No wonder she’d scared people at school and on the wards” (56). Her “cattle dog stare” even unsettles herself and becomes one of the dominant traits in her mirrored appearance. Georgie’s perception of her body image in the mirror has been discussed in detail in Chapter One, whereas the function of the mirror, which in colonial terms can be seen as an “emblem of Enlightenment self-consciousness,” needs further elaboration.

Representing the female body, the mirror splits the woman into object and looking subject, while connoting cultural prejudices of female vanity and narcissism. Margaret Higonnet points to the “reflexive doubling” of selfhood that constitutes the fragmentation of the female self, as often symbolised in mirrors. Directing harsh criticism against the higher middle class, Winton portrays reductionist stereotypes about women’s perception of their bodies and outward appearances, linking them closely to social class and money. Georgie’s relationship with the reflection of her own image, as shown in the quotation at the start of this chapter, is ambivalent, and defined by a deep dislike of the deliberate act of admiring the self, confirming the view that the mirror has both self-enunciating and self-denunciating functions for women (see Dirt Music,

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53 These acts can be aligned to the passage in the novel when Georgie searches Jim’s desk and comes across one of Debbie’s blouses – a neatly folded, angelic relic (Dirt Music, 290).
54 My expression here stands in paradoxical relationship to Warwick Jutland’s words, which describe someone being “too much woman” (Dirt Music, 327).
55 McClintock, Imperial Leather, 32.
Having been raised in a bourgeois household, where outward appearance and performance of femininity were considered a prime duty, Georgie knows that she has always been different from her mother and sisters, not paying much attention or care to the way she looked. Mirrors to her are bound to the memory of her mother and the perceived superficiality of her affluent class background, in which beauty turns into a competition and an act of mimicry – a role that she, Georgie, was unwilling to play. For her family members, the reflection of their own image in the mirror affirms their self-perception and their representative position within their social context. For Georgie, however, seeing her own body as a reflection re-enforces her liminality, being outside of the family circle, unable to share their ideal of femininity, and being marked by her mother’s disappointment: “Her mother was hurt by her lack of excitement and, long ago, her sisters took Georgie’s refusal to shop as a rejection they found hard to forgive” (Dirt Music, 168).

The mirror here becomes synonymous with an oedipal trauma, stressing Georgie’s image as an obstinate projection of difference. As a child and young woman, Georgie had a rebellious spirit, misreading fear and dislike among her peers as respect (ibid., 167). Her earliest memory depicts a shopping trip with her mother, herself on a leash, “straining at her bonds” (166), which, to Georgie, sums up the nature of the mother-daughter relationship and the incompatibilities involved (166). She is the one who does not wear Chanel suits (176) and defies social convention, as further highlighted in her skinny-dipping, when her sister finds her in the family pool, shortly before Vera Jutland’s funeral. Again, her nakedness signifies Georgie’s emotional and ideological distance from the mentality and lifestyle around her and places her at the margin of society, where love has been replaced by shame (177). The capitalist self-indulgence and arrogance presented here increases Georgie’s alienation. However, she uses her position of outsider to reflect upon the lives and values of her sisters, spotting the fractures and pretence that undermine the glossy lifestyles. Being alone with her mother’s stain on the carpet, Georgie mourns her death and with it the missed chance to renew their mother-daughter bond. Also, she regrets not having been granted the chance to say goodbye, and see Vera and herself finally united in their respective difference and liminality, through life and death:

The place felt desolate. It was just her, and her mother’s stain […] It was that ghostly damp patch on the carpet. The sign of a final opportunity gone begging. None of them would understand but she really would have cherished just half an hour alone with her mother before the undertakers arrived. To undress her, yes, and wash her, to sponge away the

cosmetic crust that had disguised her in life, all that lippy, the foundation and rouge, the pencil and eyeshadow. Gently. With reverence. Not in anger or triumph, but as a daughterly offering. To relieve each of them of their burden. (175)

In wishing to give her mum the duty of washing away the mask that has defined her all her life, Georgie also expresses the wish to “uncover” her mother and take a look behind the put-on face, to (possibly) discover a woman whose memory she can cherish. Georgie thus attempts to challenge the perfect mirror image of her mother. Although the narrator stresses the fact that this wish happens out of daughterly respect, without any feelings of triumph and anger, the egocentricity of the act is still painfully obvious: Georgie hopes to find a clue to confirm her mother’s humanness and love by stripping her of any form of disguise, literally and metaphorically. In her own and her mother’s nakedness, she is searching for a common ground – a chance of post-mortem reconciliation. Thus, she is the one who does not accept and respect her mother’s life-long ideals. Instead, she makes the attempt to deconstruct her mother’s image for her own peace of mind, without considering the possibility that her mother might not have wanted to have her appearance destroyed, but had instead desired to maintain the illusion for all the world to see her – even her daughters. The desired look behind her mother’s mask, however, is denied to her and leaves Georgie with a stain that not only dominates the carpet but also burns itself into her memory, and hence becomes a mirror of the failed relationship between mother and daughter.

The portrayal of the Jutland women, and Georgie’s troubled connection with her mother in particular, evokes the Freudian interpretation of female narcissism as being linked to the mother-child bond and hence the mother’s recognition of herself in the child.58 Vera’s disappointment in Georgie derives from the fundamental difference of interests, attitudes and values between the two women, and the pleasures that define Vera’s self-image but are lacking in Georgie’s life. The child as “love-object,”59 as Freud calls it, deviates from her desired role and becomes an independent actress in her own right, neither mirroring the maternal narcissism, nor sharing the meticulous devouring of her own body. Unlike Georgie, the other Jutland girls fulfil the Freudian ideals and satisfy the motherly desire. Instead of growing from a solitary state of social exclusion into a state of narcissism herself by developing a fantasy of “the return to the primary state of narcissism” during infancy and

59 Ibid.
adopting “the ego ideal,” as Freud suggests, Georgie contradicts her mother’s expectations and thus strangles the rebirth of her parent’s self-love.⁶⁰ Although I follow Spivak’s and other feminists’ highly critical attitude towards Freud, the obvious hints in the text, disguised within the overtly stereotypical relations between a class-conscious mother and her deviant, rebellious daughter, cannot be ignored.⁶¹ The Freudian drama that Winton presents in this and other character constellations in the novel confirms the archaic representation of his women characters, which again places the female spirit within phallocentric ideals of dichotomising simplification. Presenting the female in close vicinity to lack, as unhappy, unsettled, psychologically and sexually unhinged, immoral and distanced from social and motherly standards reflects the Freudian perversion and, thus, an obsolete, but still incumbent displacement of the feminine.

Winton equips his female protagonists with an obstinate social mask, which distinguishes them from their male counterparts. Their bodies become the site of masquerade, which ambivalently stages the women’s assumed inclination to perform – to act out – their “hystories”, as Elaine Showalter calls it.⁶² These acts, however, are directed by a pervasive narrative force, which declares female excess and difference as other to the masculine norm from the outset. Even the desire to unmask only receives validity in the process of masking the self. The masked bodies of her relatives represent everything that Georgie despises and, in opposition to her desire to unmask, highlight her obvious deviation from the norm of Winton’s depicted upper-class femininity in Western Australia. Joan Riviere, one of the most influential and debated theorists in the discourse of masquerade as well as an eminent psychoanalyst and translator of Freud’s work, holds the view that the “mask of womanliness” and “genuine womanliness” are the same, for they both expose femininity as a construct and a disguise of masculinity.⁶³ Despite Butler’s justified criticism

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⁶⁰ See ibid., 556.
⁶¹ See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Echo,” *New Literary History* 24, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 18. Spivak summarises her perception of Freud as an “intimate enemy” with the following remark: “If even minimally successful, my reading should incite a degree of rage against the gendered/imperialist narrativization of history, that it should produce so abject a script for him.” Also see De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 72-73.
of Riviere’s ideas relating to homo- and heterosexuality, the points made by the British scholar regarding femininity as mimicry and mask are of importance in feminist and cultural discourses. According to Riviere, both the woman in masquerade and the woman who defies masquerade mimic the authenticity of their womanliness – a point that has caused much controversy and has given rise to two notions of masquerade – the view of the female disguise as: inevitably linked to conformity and submission to dominant social rules and codes; and as a disruptive and resisting measure towards patriarchal norms. Epitomising the disruptive force and trying to (un)mask herself through a literal and metaphorical lack of clothing and makeup, Georgie exhibits her miniscule body shape and marks her own definition of masquerade as an open revolt against the social expectations that her family submit to. Wishing to discover her “real” nature by taking the makeup off Vera’s lifeless face, Georgie self-deceivingly assumes a difference between the feminine as natural and the feminine as artificial, hoping to find a common truth behind her mother’s beauty mask and elevating herself to a higher, knowing position. Film critic and scholar, Mary Ann Doane argues that masquerade “manufactures a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image,” which enables the woman to use her body as a disguise. In this sense, it is Georgie’s nakedness – her mimicry of “authentic womanliness” – that functions as a mask in its signification of difference and aversion. In contrast to Lu (Dirt Music, 249), she requires stripping, not covering, in order to simultaneously disguise and expose her dilemma of being trapped between worlds and her corresponding self-images: Georgie as a Jutland, Georgie as the “fish wife” in White Point, Georgie as the lover of Lu, and Georgie

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Butler, Gender Trouble, 64-69: Butler criticises the idea of femininity as a mask to dominate or resolve a masculine identification and tries to find an explanation in the pressure exercised by “compulsory heterosexuality” of patriarchal culture (68).


For another example, see Dirt Music, 173: “‘What are you doing?’ – ‘Undressing,’ she said kicking off her shoes and shucking her shorts. ‘Jesus Christ Almighty!’ He bellowed as she got out of her smalls and her sleeveless top. ‘Have you lost all decency?’”

Doane, Femme Fatales, 26.

And also her obsessive revolt as visualised in the military image of her helmet-like hair cut (Dirt Music, 56).
the nurse. A similar occurrence of competing conceptions or mimicries of the feminine can be witnessed in Rose’s and Dolly’s relationship in *Cloudstreet*. They both wear their individual masks of femininity and are both equally deluded – or blinded – by its expression: Dolly obsessing about youth and attractiveness in the face of her ageing body, and Rose starving her body as a revolt against the dominant image of her mother’s sexuality and womanliness. It is exactly within this fictional symbiosis of female embodiment and stereotype where the intrusive narrative gaze reveals itself, centralising its analytic attention to the female body as the site of ambiguity, trauma and sexual charge. The women are marked in their painful corporeality while the men largely escape this heightened visualisation.

Relating the element of female masquerade back to Eva in *Breath*, it needs to be pointed out that the pink plastic bag which she pulls over her head during masturbation dissolves the dichotomy between femininity as mask and femininity as authentic. It is in these moments of arousal that she seems to feel most liberated and detached. Her body is not determined by its limitations anymore but by its ability to transgress her corporeal boundaries and offer her a sphere where she is again alive, imaginatively reuniting her with her former self on the skiing slopes. Eva challenges the idea of femininity altogether by reducing it to a mere body in erotic struggle, exposed in its essentialism to the judgement and control of the male gaze (*Breath*, 183-84). However, this body is clearly that of a woman and is exposed to a highly promiscuous act of sexual perversion that is gendered female (the “pink” bag). This erotic act condemns the main representation of femininity in this novel again to the monstrous grotesque and declares it deviant, perverse and dangerous.

Coming back to the gaze as the prime focus of discussion, the activity of voyeurism and the implication of the gaze in general is not as stringently developed in Winton’s earlier work as it is in the novels of later years. In *Shallows*, published in 1985, the dominant onlooker is mediated by the shifting male narration that decodes and evaluates the female body (or the male body). Queenie is presented as hard, uncompromising and insensitive towards her “weak” husband Cleve. Her outward appearance stands in utter contrast to the

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69 Sexual or autoerotic asphyxiation is much more frequent in men than women, as stated in, for example, Cowell, “Autoerotic Asphyxiation,” 1321, and also confirmed by Anna Motz in an interview that I conducted on 23 April 2011.

70 For deeper insight into the grotesque, see Russo, *The Female Grotesque*. Also by marking Eva as deviant, Winton defies the act of female masturbation as natural and healthy and thus promotes a silence that unfortunately reflects, rather than challenges, the social norm. See Maguire, *Princesses & Pornstars*, 71-75.
thin, fragile physicality of her husband (“thin and whip-haired,” *Shallows*, xiv). She is depicted as a big, broadbacked (ibid., xiv) girl with “big, tanned limbs” (245) and skin “the colour of almond kernels” (xiv). In the convention of cross-narrational re-appearances of characters in Winton’s work, Queenie marginally features in *Breath* as well, adopting the role of Pikelet’s teenage girlfriend. Here a back-story is created in retrospect, and the most excruciating episode centres the reader’s attention on the early development of Queenie’s breasts:

> [T]wo army cadets from the year ahead of us made the general announcement, at full military volume, to the entire non-fiction section of the library, that Queenie Cookson had great tits. Whereupon the poor kid bolted to the toilet, leaving me in the care of a book about Helen Keller. I felt my face go hot – from recognition rather than shame – for those pillocks were, in their brutal way, completely correct about something I’d barely noticed. Yes, Queenie Cookson did have great tits and this was news confounding enough in itself, but how was I meant to react to it being broadcasted like this in the library? (*Breath*, 78)

The fetish of the female breast in heterosexual male writing is nothing new and often relates to other “mysteries” of female sexuality and fertility like the menstrual cycle. The fascination with female bleeding is illustrated in *Shallows* when Queenie accidentally leaks onto her boyfriend’s trousers, sitting on his lap on the school bus (*Shallows*, 133). This embarrassing moment is used to explain Queenie’s distrust of people, men in particular, and her fear of disappointment that she vehemently tries to shield herself from. Her fresh flow of blood connects with the only dried-up remnant of her absent mother Eileen, who left her daughter and family soon after Queenie’s birth. So Daniel Coupar, Queenie’s grandfather, explains “the only sign of his daughter having ever existed in this place was that…thing he found behind the wardrobe, that sanitary pad, black and hard as a biscuit, wedged in and iced with tiny and delicate spiders’ webs” (ibid., 200). Daniel’s biased memories and Nathaniel’s diary entries are the only insight we get into the family history and the patriarchal violence involved. Winton unravels the maturation of an old man, who, towards the end of his life, admits the oppression of the women in his family and voices his regrets as

71 For example, she is leaving Cleve after being given the impression that he does not support her environmental endeavours

72 See here *Shallows*, 98: Daniel’s cross-generational misogyny still shines through his confessional epistolary, in which he attempts to reconcile with womanhood and his role as prime guardian, whose only inheritor is a woman: “You are the last real Coupar. Funny how it ends up being a woman. A woman. To be a Coupar and a woman has never been much of a life, you know […] She [Maureen] was a wonderful bitch. Remember the time you came off the school bus trying to hide your mess, your blood? You think I didn’t know? Oh, I wanted to laugh and hug you and even rub my nose in it to show it didn’t matter […] Maybe if I was a woman it would’ve been easier for you – maybe if I was a better man.”
well as his mourning for his late wife Maureen in a letter to his granddaughter (97-99). Irresponsive to her grandfather and husband, however, Queenie joins the long line of Winton’s unlikeable female characters, who act rather selfishly and arbitrarily, often on behalf of the men that care or worry about them (see Cleve, Sam, Jim (Open Swimmer), Jim (Dirt Music), Sando/Pike, Scully). Commonly, as Grosz argues, women are culturally represented as bodies that leak, bleed, that are conditioned by and dependent on hormonal and reproductive functions, that are, in short, uncontrollable:

Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order?  

The association of uncleanliness, of pollution, plays into these representations and is closely linked to the eroticism of the flesh, as Young describes it, that “goes hand in hand with the other side of the border [other side of the pure, platonic love in motherhood], where lies the despised body, bad, impure.” The uncontrollable body, therefore, leaks, often profusely, and marks sexuality as primarily female in these patriarchal constructs addressed by Grosz.

But it is not only Queenie who needs to endure the humiliation imposed on her by the social, heavily male gaze in response to her awakening sexuality and onset of reproduction. Rose has to cope with her dad noticing her womanly change, commenting on her breasts (Cloudstreet, 159). Her period pain becomes part of the narrative and creates a smoothing bridge between her first sexual encounter with Toby Raven and her blossoming reproductivity (ibid., 294). Giving birth and being a mother constitutes for Rose a chance for emotional survival and healing by re-settling her into an ideal image of motherhood that is fundamentally different from her own mother’s deficiencies as nurturer. Also, in Dirt Music, Georgie is literally leaking, when Lu’s sperm trickles out of her, leaving her with a sense of sadness and loss (Dirt Music, 84). Here, the sensation of male fluids in the woman’s body is not presented in the negative as a source of pain or embarrassment, but as something stately, pure, and essential to a woman’s well-being. The eventual oral consumption of the remaining sperm emphasises the point made earlier, that Georgie sees her future as the

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73 Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 203. See also Kristeva, Powers of Horror.
74 Young, “Breasted Experience,” 198.
75 See in this context Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 106-207. Here, she refers to and critiques the cultural significance and representation of sperm as cleansing in opposition to the female “uncontainable” flow of the menstrual period. She refers to and critiques Kristeva’s theory on female blood as dangerous.
mother of Lu’s children – his sperm becoming inextricably united with her and giving her the peace of mind she so ardently desires. Equally, Eva is remembered most beautiful (and controllable) in sleep when the wet drops of her drooling remind the narrator of the “silver tracks of moisture inside her thighs” (*Breath*, 174). The ambiguous tracks described here can relate to the sweat of sexual arousal, but they may also refer to his sperm colonising her skin. Again, the representation of the passive, leaking female, who is not in control of her bodily fluids (or other’s bodily fluids) dominates the picture and directs attention away from the corporeality of the man:

> It is not the case that men’s bodily fluids are regarded as polluting and contaminating for women in the same way or to the same extent as women’s are for men. It is women and what men consider to be their inherent capacity for contagion, their draining, demanding bodily processes that have figured so strongly in cultural representations, and that have emerged so clearly as a problem for social control.76

The male gaze as exercised, or implied, in Winton’s stories celebrates the purity and life-enhancing quality of the essential emblem of its own masculinity, forcefully and delicately visualised in metaphors of silver and potency: “[W]hen it did finally spill to the linen beneath her folded thigh, she half-expected to hear a crash, a hiss upon impact” (*Dirt Music*, 84). These descriptions affirm the patriarchal stereotypes of sperm as nurturing and life-giving as opposed to female menstruation as polluting and staining. The female body here accommodates the traces of male sexual pleasure, which seems to become a valued treasure and a sign of hope. Instead of foregrounding the woman’s body parts, however, they are used as a background foil to foreground the sperm (potency) itself, which is detached from the man’s fluid circuit and his self-representation and, thus, demarcates his body as “clean and proper.”77

The techniques of masquerade and sight, as applied by Winton in *Dirt Music* and other novels, stresses the degree of pretence and rebellion innate to his women characters, whose masks wear the dismissive stamp of (male) fear in the way they are reduced to oppositional stereotypes and sexual imagery/imagery of reproduction. Whatever form it takes, the mask of femininity, whether inscribed as excess or lack, always covers an unfathomable amount of rage within these women and is modified by self-harming.

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76 Young, “Breasted Experience,” 197.
77 Ibid., 201.
tendencies. The effects of self-harm on the female body contribute to creating a mask that narrates different stories of femininity as accepted and repulsive, desired and rejected, granted and denied. All of Winton’s female protagonists show explicit traces of being at odds with their own identities as women. The different forms of masquerade adopted by them unmask the feminine as an idealised fiction of a displacing phallocentrism, but at the same time deconstruct the feminine gender without giving a satisfying alternative. What is behind this mask? The desire to know the answer to this question pervades Winton’s novels, most prominently conveyed in Pikelet’s inability to read Eva and the ambiguity of her gaze, as well as Daniel’s ambivalent fascination with Queenie’s mysterious non-Coupar side, “the hopeful part” (Shallows, 201). Sight in Winton’s fiction becomes the marker by which the feminine as subject or object of the gaze is controlled and judged, either through the characters themselves, the narrator or the reader, but it also marks the ambiguity of the female in male consciousness.

The women in Winton’s fiction perform their gender vividly, within either socially accepted or unaccepted forms, and self-harm fulfils a set role within this performativity. Notably, it is primarily the women who resort to this gendered performance of the feminine, while most of Winton’s male characters do not approach their masculinity in self-harming ways, as compared to, for instance, Fiona Capp’s depiction of the troubled masculinity in Last of the Sane Days. Although Winton often portrays the “man-in-crisis,” as outlined by Murrie, it is not his characters’ masculinity that is fundamentally questioned. Merely, they

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78 In response to Butler (1990/1999) and Riviere (1929), who see within the masquerade a form of sublimated aggression, directed against masculinity and male hegemony, McRobbie (2007) underlines that in a post-feminist age the masquerade remains the source of sublimated anger in the sense that flawless makeup, short skirts and perfect hairstyles function to mask the rivalry with men in the workforce while reassuring that women remain sexually desirable. This concealment of competition, though, renders the post-feminist woman submissive to men in order to avoid sending out wrong signals (726). See also Efrat Tseelon, The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life (London: Sage, 1995).

79 See here Heath’s “Joan Riviere and the Masquerade,” 50-51: Heath raises a similar question referring to Nietzsche’s misogynist concept of the feminine and the mask as “das ewig Weibliche” (the eternal feminine, a term deriving from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s play Faust) as well as to Riviere’s view of man’s suspicion of danger behind the female mask: “The philosopher is fascinated and threatened, seduced and mocked: woman is the vanishing point for which he lacks any true perspective, since the perspective he has guarantees he cannot know her, while the impossibility of knowing her is itself his perspective, woman produced as ‘the woman’ […] the function of this discourse of mask and behind, that mask behind which man suspects some hidden danger.” (51)

80 Daniel insinuates here that the known maternal side of Queenie’s heritage is a disappointment, whereas the potential in the girl lies in the unknown mystery, the paternal side.

81 See in this context Butler, Gender Trouble, 170-77.

82 Capp, Last of the Sane Days, 230, 248.

are locked in a crisis of emotional, existential and ethical dilemmas, which are not related to specific male gender roles but to traumatic experiences of loss. Their masculine self-definition in its diversity, as blokey and tough, though feminised and sentimental, is steady; the crisis they find themselves in is not induced by internal doubts about their gendered role but by the life hardships and the women they meet. Winton’s protagonists differ from the male norm around them but this difference is shown as welcome, offering the prospect of maturation and deeper understanding of the world and the self. Thus, it is Jerra who understands the hypocrisy of society and his role within it, and, consequently, is able to distance himself from it (*An Open Swimmer*, 113). Similarly, Jim seeks redemption for his immorality and receives it through the final reunification of Georgie and Lu (*Dirt Music*, 401). Pikelet learns how to live with his difference, Scully’s domesticated masculinity is accommodatingly and positively restored and Lu becomes the artistic, peaceful and feminised counterpart to the rough and violent nature of the surrounding clientele in White Point. Unlike most of Winton’s female characters, the men in his fiction mature throughout the narrative and find a path to self-reflection and redemption. Thus, the narrative gaze remains upon the female in her process of coming to terms with gender and the social function of herself as a woman. This imbalance in the different gender portrayals, however, suggests a crisis of masculinity in the outer-fictional, socio-cultural context of the text’s genesis, a crisis that is inextricably linked to the female as an unstable social category and the fear of changing power-relations: “The imaginative strategies pursued by […] Winton, for example, suggest that the desire to encompass change is compromised by the need to escape from the uncertainties of contemporary gender dislocation and by the fear of male disempowerment.”

The represented female body in the novels discussed so far actually is a cultural and historical product that mirrors the effects of socio-cultural change and forms a story of male fear and fantasy in times of increasing gender ambivalence and subversion.

The next chapter, on dead bodies, which correlates with the reading of motherhood in Chapter Two, exemplifies this argument further, arguing that Winton’s female characters, as already implied in Chapters Two and Three, are positioned in close proximity to death and thus have transience literally written on their bodies. In the following chapter, suicide as an act of communication, and the dead female body as a wound on the social consciousness, modify the second chapter on female self-harm as a male rather than a female articulation,

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84 Ibid., 176.
and adds a new insight to the Winton discourse, which, so far, has overlooked the significant relation between death, suicide and the female, maternal body in his fiction.
4.3. Shadow of the Dead: Stories of Transience

And now you sit there, saved from her needs, and your responsibilities, because she sorted herself out, swam out past the breakers after they had left her to recollect herself, maybe it was a shark or maybe she swam to Atlantis, either way you will never see her again.

Susan Bradley Smith, *Supermodernprayerbook*¹

Death in the novels of Tim Winton makes a sound. It is the elemental sound of air and water; the sizzling, “wheezy” rasp of Eva Sanderson’s breath (*Breath*, 174); the “horrible wet noise” of Sally Fox (*Dirt Music*, 117); the “wheatbag noise” of Bird (ibid., 118); Bess’s premonition of her own mortality in Arvo’s death music (ibid., 252); Ida’s “hollow gurgling” (*In the Winter Dark*, 107), and the laughter of Maureen Coupar as she falls over a cliff into a great nothingness (*Shallows*, 82). Indeed, death as a gendered metaphor in literature and the visual arts is a Western tradition, and thus a portrayal of women as closely related to death and dying in canonical narratives has been a source of considerable critical interest.²

The association of death and woman, sharing with each other the space of the other, has inspired many classical and modern texts. It is frequently used by female writers as a matrix of subversion to promulgate female agency and autonomy denied them in a large range of male texts with Oedipal narrative structures.³ But despite these attempts to challenge the dominant discourse of female representations in male writing, it is still very much the case that women are persistently portrayed as images, as objects to be looked at, and thus, they convey socially-determined norms and standards of beauty and abjection:

The representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty – and the concurrent representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze) is so pervasive in our culture […] that it necessarily constitutes

² Karl S. Guthke, *The Gender of Death – A Cultural History in Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). This study shows the various forms death takes in cultural artefacts and gives a detailed overview of examples from literature, visual art and film across centuries. Similarly, Elisabeth Bronfen’s influential study *Over her Dead Body* considers the relationship between death and the woman as shown by female artists and discusses the relationship between authorship and dying (395-434).

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a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference and its ideological effects in the construction of social subjects, its presence in all forms of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{4}

The academic discourse surrounding female death in contemporary literature, especially when it comes to death and dying as a gendered sphere, is small in comparison with the extensive scholarly attention paid to death and the female in nineteenth to early twentieth century literature.\textsuperscript{5} This chapter contributes to the deconstruction of female literary representation in contemporary Australian literature by considering the female corpse and the dying, decaying body with specific reference to Winton. It explores the female characters in \textit{An Open Swimmer} (1982), \textit{In the Winter Dark} (1988) and \textit{Shallows} (1984) to elucidate the significance of the ephemeral – fragility and death, both caused by suicide, disease or accident – imprinted upon the women’s physique. As such, motherhood is brought into relation with the idea of the woman as lacking self-containment – a point discussed in Elizabeth Grosz’s \textit{Volatile Bodies}. The deaths of the angelic mother figure (Mrs. Coupar, Ida) and the maternal femme fatale (Jewel)\textsuperscript{6} are shown to demonstrate how femininity, motherhood and death are interlinked in Winton’s fiction. The chapter further underlines how the female body as “Madonna” or “whore” is “always already transgressive – dangerous, and in danger” within these literary representations.\textsuperscript{7} Death here becomes an allegory that exposes femininity as simultaneously a threatening and regulating force within dominant socio-cultural discourse and a pre-condition for the healing and maturation of the male protagonisists.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{4}] De Lauretis, \textit{Alice Doesn’t}, 37-38. See also Bronfen, \textit{Over her Dead Body}, 110. Recent feminist studies deal with the representation and perception of male bodies in women’s writing as a means of subverting patriarchal constructions of masculinity, thus creating an interesting counterfoil to the large repertoire of texts on the female body: see Bode, \textit{Damaged Men/Desiring Women}; cf. Griselda Pollock, \textit{Vision & Difference. Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art} (New York: Routledge, 1988), 188: “Definitions of women’s femininity are constructed primarily on the body: in its procreative capacity and as fetishized object – ‘to be looked at.’”
\item[\textsuperscript{5}] See Judy Maloof, \textit{Over her Dead Body – The Construction of Male Subjectivity in Onetti} (New York: Peter Lang, 1995). Maloof offers a feminist reading of Juan Carlos Onetti’s work, which she characterises as follows: “[M]ale subjectivity in Onetti is usually based upon the silencing of women, frequently through death” (175) and “it is usually over a woman’s dead body […] that the male narrating subject […] tells his story” (177). See also Bronfen, \textit{Over her Dead Body}; Bronfen and Webster Goodwin, “Introduction,” in \textit{Death and Representation}; David Holbrook, Images of Woman in Literature (New York and London: New York University Press, 1989), who offers a very essentialising and reductionist perspective on female death in British literary master narratives, though not contemporary ones. For an illuminating study on death in Australia see Pat Jalland, \textit{Australian Ways of Death – A Social and Cultural History 1840-1918} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
\item[\textsuperscript{6}] It needs to be stressed here that despite a clear tendency in Winton’s portrayals towards the Victorian dichotomisation of “good mother and bad mother,” “Madonna and whore,” many of the rather promiscuous women characters are also mothers, including Jewel, Sally, Dolly – a role, however, that seems rather secondary to these women’s sexual adventures.
\item[\textsuperscript{7}] Russo, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” 217.
\end{itemize}
Consider the image of the dead woman in *An Open Swimmer*. Jerra Nielsam is a young man who embarks upon a journey of self-discovery. He quests to define his masculinity, to come to terms with a past heavily shaped by a love affair with his best friend’s mother, Jewel. Traumatised by her alleged suicide, Jerra seeks difficult answers to the presence of her violent death in his dreams and memory. She becomes a ghostly female presence dominating Jerra’s past and present. Her memory is most poignantly captured within a painting-like impression of her corpse floating in the water (*An Open Swimmer*, 113, 177), a nexus wherein facets of impressionism, surrealism, realism and naturalism converge; in short, a postmodern creation. This image of death evokes a traditional binary, displacing the woman from the corporeality of her decaying body while placing the male viewer (Jerra) on the side of life. Here the female corpse is depicted as a crucial memory trail for Jerra: the “non-visible [that] is given figure, visual presence.” It reaffirms security, control and empowerment, all of which are linked to the visualisation of what has hitherto been out of sight, absent. Jewel’s body, apart from being a signifier of fractured maternity, is an allegory for the woman as other and thus becomes a decisive matrix of self-realisation for the male protagonist.

The association between violent death and heroic enterprise in Western societies is repeatedly linked to masculinity and war. We need look no further than John Howard’s insistent adoration of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) tradition to recognise its prevalence in modern-day Australia. By contrast, women are still aligned with the private act of suicide and its attendant mystification. Anne Sexton once remarked: “When (to me) death takes you and puts you thru the wringer, it’s a man, but when you kill yourself it’s a woman.” In the Australian post-colonial context, Allan Kellehear and Ian Anderson argue that the way death is represented in literature and the arts is a telling of existing dominant values and norms in the broader context of history, society and identity itself:

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8 All these elements of style refer to Jerra’s dream sequence in combination with the actual discovery of Jewel’s corpse later in the story. Both depictions combine the beauty and shock value of the dead female body in an analogy to Renaissance mythical figures (Ophelia), surrealist simulacraums of interiorities, impressionist observation, realist/naturalist depiction of death in all its detail and horror.

9 These tracks/cues extend their effect as cultural memory to the male narrator, reader and critic alike.

10 Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, 123.

11 Jewel endures a number of miscarriages and her relationship with her son Sean is troubled (*An Open Swimmer*, 167, 175-76).

There has been, and there continues to be, a masculinist, European tradition of death in Australia but it has dominated the Australian imagination at a cost. That cost can be seen in the way broader experiences of death are hidden away from popular view. The hidden nature of that broader cultural experience of death serves to remind us, yet again, that dominating images of death reflect dominating influences in life itself. For national history and identity, the politics of death reflect the politics of everyday life.¹³

What are the politics of representation that influence Winton’s portrayal of death? In his novels the experience of death is visualised through the dead or dying female body. Thus, female death, unlike that which is understood in other Australian masculinist traditions, establishes a network of “lost” women – either through death, disease or addiction.¹⁴

In order to understand and explore postmodern and postcolonial examinations of the role of women in Australian fiction, both alongside the nature of their representation in male writing and with reference to their sociological reflection of present Australian gender relations, I now briefly turn to Kathryn James’s study *Death, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Adolescent Literature*. James discusses the influence and power dimensions of death as a biological and a cultural marker, whose representation in literature (of colonial settler-cultures in particular) explicates Australian gender relations and gender constructions. Death, according to Foucault, is the domain and the instrument of power at the same time.¹⁵ Through an insistent dichotomisation in Western cultures of life and death, which can both only exist in relation to the other, death is mythologised as a form of the other, the constant representation of the unknown.¹⁶ Life, on the other hand, receives an immediacy and practicality that turns death, in Jean Baudrillard’s words, into an evasive “form in which the determinacy of the subject and of value is lost.”¹⁷ Life is thus strictly demarcated by the exercise of power and the limitation of death. With reference to Goodwin and Bronfen’s anthology on the representation of death, James actively uses this niche within a power-structured cosmos in order to suggest the birth of an alternate metaphorical power within the literary spheres of death representations.¹⁸ Similarly, Bronfen remarks that the woman is a

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¹⁴ Ibid., 9.
¹⁵ See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 137. Also see James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 13.
¹⁶ James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 10.
¹⁸ James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 17. For a detailed study on death as either male or female in different cultures, see Guthke, *The Gender of Death*, 7-37. In his first chapter, Guthke examines the personification of death as masculine or feminine. Images of death in close linkage with the feminine have pervaded the arts for centuries as is illustrated in, for instance, Matthias Claudius’s poem “Death and the Maiden” (Der Tod und das
“symptom of death’s presence, precisely because she is the site where the repressed anxiety about death re-emerges in a displaced, disfigured form.”

She further argues that the association between woman and death – which, from the side of patriarchal imagination, is seen as a mysterious, ambiguous, non-representable, silent and threatening stability, a metaphor of disruption and transgression – constructs masculinity as life that lacks death.

In response to Bronfen, Australian scholar Susan K. Martin contends that death or dying stands in for and negates the threat of female sexuality – a twofold danger defused by dominant representations that invoke fantasies to reclaim power.

James asserts that “literal or symbolic death represents one of the ways that the ‘perverse’ body can be removed from the sexual economy (and thus work to reinforce the heterosexual norm).” Sexualty, as Judith Butler points out with regard to Foucault, is thus loaded with meanings and power: “the body is not ‘sexed’ in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an ‘idea’ of natural or essential sex.” Rather, the body is given meaning within discourse merely in the framework of power relations.

In the process of transforming sexuality into a cultural discourse, norms are created and defined along the Western Christian tradition of reproductive sexuality, which brand-mark deviations from the “normal” as perversity and monstrosity. To refine the discussion of the female body as a site of memory, subjugation and power struggle within and outside the narrative, the issues of death as gendered metaphor and woman as cultural symbolic have to be kept in mind. In this chapter, they are aligned with the vivid transience inscribed upon the bodies of Winton’s female characters.

In *An Open Swimmer*, the single explicit description of Jewel’s body is granted immediately after her decaying corpse is fished out of the sea. Jewel’s lifeless body, as perceived through the eyes of Jerra, is rendered a monstrous, postmodern Ophelian symbolic:

Mädchen, 1824), Edvard Munch’s “The Maiden and Death” (Pigen og døden, 1894), Ferdinand Barth’s “Death and Young Woman” (1867), Jeanne Hyvrard: “Mother Death” (Mere la Mort, 1976), Eduardo Rodriguez-Solis: “The Fickle Finger of Lady Death” (Las Ondas de la Catrina, 1994).

19 Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body*, xi. See James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 15.


22 James, *Death, Gender and Sexuality*, 17.


Jerra hated. And he would not forgive – not even her – that grinning slit that cleaved open the skin of her throat which was cracked, black and green, with her seaweed clump of a head half-buried in the sand that the storm had heaved up. On the same beach. ‘Didnt’t they know she would?’ he called out to the darkness. ‘She was gonna go back all the time!’ […] Green plastic peeled back to show her grins. ‘Been in the water a long time,’ said the man next to him […] Jerra looked down at the naked legs and scarred, slack belly. A jade tinge to the blown fingers. ‘Slit herself and went for a swim,’ said the man beside him, adjusting his coat in the drizzle. ‘Crazy.’ ‘Yes,’ said Jerra. ‘They reckon.’ ‘Know her?’ ‘No,’ said Jerra. Gulls hovered. The other man cocked his head at him. ‘Not personally, no,’ said Jerra at the man. (An Open Swimmer, 177)

The female corpse is exposed in its nakedness – an act that posits the body as a faceless, clinical object to be investigated. Jewel’s “scarred, slack belly” is reminiscent of Dolly’s grotesque depiction in Cloudstreet (338, 143). No longer the epitome of female sexuality, the markings of time are literally inscribed upon Dolly’s flesh as caesarean scars and rolls of fat. Similarly, Jewel’s scarred belly is marked by violence and age, symbolising the “omphalic death baby” that is carried in the womb from the moment of birth.25

The inherent ambiguity in the slitting of the throat compared to more common methods of suicide like hanging and gassing defines the scene.26 Jewel’s grotesque grin is commensurate to the “grinning slit” in her throat, a disfiguring smirk that resonates uncomfortably with Jerra.27 Echoes of Sylvia Plath arise through this impression of female death as visualised in her poem “Edge”: “The woman is perfected/her dead/body wears the smile of accomplishment.”28 Invoking Winton’s earlier intertextual allusion to Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus,” Jewel is now situated amidst a group of well-known female artists who

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25 Elisabeth Bronfen, The Knotted Subject – Hysteria and its Discontents (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 329, who uses the term “omphalic death baby.” In her theory of the omphalic, Bronfen describes a strategy of representation that is rooted within the symbolic, oscillating “between sublimation and the celebration of a traumatic remnant harking back to the site of unbearable plenitude” (21). It is the anxiety evoked by the traumatic effect that initiates sublimation and, though never fully repressed, continues wandering as a foreign body through somatic and psychic systems (21). It is what “knots symbolic death” (86). Hence, Jewel’s body combines her maternal traumas with her own death – literally and symbolically – which in its scarred representation becomes the corporeal symbolic of the weaknesses of its own construction: “While the act of sublimation allows the subject to knot itself into an integrated self-representation, the stain of this traumatic knowledge insistently points to the vulnerability of this construction” (86).

26 See “Causes of Death, Australia, 2009: Method of Suicide,” Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed August 31, 2011, http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/EBAD06C492CEFC61CA25788400127CEB?opendocument. Jewel’s suicide is a self-harming act that again re-appears in Dirt Music when Georgie dreams of her mother: “Vera Jutland had the doll-like rosiness of complexion that only a mortician could supply. There was an uncharacteristic look of concern on her face. In one hand she held a shard of mirror. The fingers of the other hand lay on the wattles of her neck. As Georgie came close she looked up a moment without recognition. I don’t feel anything, she murmured” (Dirt Music, 416-17).

27 “Slit” as a colloquial term for “vulva” further confirms the sexualisation of death in this brutal imagery from An Open Swimmer.

have sought redemption in death: Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, Alfonsina Storni, Alejandra Pizarnik, Sara Teasdale and Sarah Kane, to name a few. The image of the dead female as the seductress, a “madwoman” or hysterical, responsible for the protagonist’s personal tragedy (in which she resembles Eva in *Breath*) is taken up in *An Open Swimmer* and eerily aligned with the maternal: “The memory of the loved and cherished aunt – the incestuous partner – along with the echo of her own voice through the text, which is very much comparable to the chant of the siren, possesses Jerra to the point that he consciously transgresses the confines of reason.”

Jerra, according to Ben-Messahel, is caught in the thrall of a Homeric Calypso lapsing into the phantasm of her own secluded world: “a queen, dainty in slippers that scuffed the lawn” (*An Open Swimmer*, 167). To Jewel, Jerra is both lover and child juxtaposed against a destructive, suffocating arena of marital and maternal unhappiness, a remnant of reality that gradually merges with her “insane” (ibid., 176) dreams and unfulfilled maternal desires (168). By contrast, Jewel is both Jerra’s muse and critic, sharing his deep love of poetry and language. But when suffering exceeds personal values, meaning becomes irrelevant and is replaced by final surrender: “Let’s not have ideals, let’s surrender to the men of Ends” (97).

What is striking in the aforementioned passage is the difference between life and death: the “living male” protagonist (who, rather interestingly, is surrounded exclusively by other men, see *An Open Swimmer*, 177) and the solitary “dead woman,” immobile and fixed. Here, female suicide is a necessary development within the male protagonist’s rite of passage – the cliché whereby knowledge of the other leads to knowledge of the self. As such, Jewel’s body is merely an instrument, “a matrix and matter,” as De Lauretis phrases it, for Jerra’s maturation. He learns to see himself as part of the systemic oppression, driving

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30 Ibid., 52.
31 Ibid., 198, where Jewel is described as “mythical Calypso.”
32 In her letter to Jerra (*An Open Swimmer* 175-76), Jewel alludes to an alleged miscarriage, which poses a deep psychological dilemma for a mother and one of the reasons contributing to her precarious mental situation. Also, she considers her relationship with her “Jeremiah” (98) as indestructible and thus transcends their sexual relationship, eternalising their spiritual bond – possibly beyond death (98). Later on, Jerra recognises signs of depression in Judy’s eyes, which reminds him of Jewel: “Her eyes were different. Make-up, perhaps, he guessed […] No, it wasn’t make-up; he had seen those shadows in eyes before; he ignored it.” (*An Open Swimmer*, 125)
33 See De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn’t*, 118-19, who argues in relation to mythical-textual mechanics that the hero as human being and male is the “active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences” whereas the female is the obstacle (the womb). In this role Jewel’s body resembles the “uncanny female body” in *Cloudstreet*, as Morrison implies in “Figures of the Many and the One,” 17: “Although the text promulgates the importance of generativity and community, the female body as origin and point of generation
Jewel to suicide. The memory of Jewel’s death pursues Jerra through his darkest dreams helping him to realise his failings toward her:

He went in darker and found something soft. It trembled, the skin almost tightening. He rolled it over, the legs fanning wide, and saw the open slit reflecting green on the backs of his hands. Scars of old slashes gathered, pale on the flaccid pulp. Navel a stab-hole. In a dowdy gown, she was arching pathetically, spreading her speckled hair, clutching […] But she wasn’t her. Just a bald slit and light showing through. They hadn’t made her different, or even someone else; just nothing […] he was no different from the others taking advantage, helping to destroy, helping her in the delusion. (An Open Swimmer, 113)

Jewel’s inability to transcend her social environment paints an imaginary reflection of a striking Western frontier that separates male survival and female death as two distinctive domains in Winton’s narrative.

In Shallows it is Daniel’s wife, Maureen, who commits suicide under the shadow of patriarchy. Like Jewel, she is ascribed all the hallmarks of female hysteria as she succumbs to mental and physical deterioration:

For weeks Maureen had been depressed and restless, wandering about the house clutching her gown about her in the night, sitting out on the veranda where thick nets of mosquitoes descended upon her […] He [Daniel Coupar] began to wake in the night with her flailing about beside him, calling out, sobbing. He found her sleepwalking, tearing her hair. (Shallows, 80)

Moreover, she is troubled by a dream: a girl – whom she identifies as either her granddaughter, Queenie, or herself – attempts to swim in a parched waterhole but succeeds only in writhing upon the sun-blasted red dirt. The girl’s bony ribs are noticeable on her starved, naked body. Her desperate hunger is expressed through a dry and swollen mouth whose teeth have turned black. Unable to make a sound, she begins to bite herself; she bleeds “like red dust” (ibid., 81). This bleak, grotesque and almost surreal expression of hunger and self-mutilation is directly linked to the state of being mute, of being unable to voice basic feeling. The dream, as brought forward in Maureen’s consequential question: “What’s going to happen to our Queenie? And me?” (81) signifies an existential crisis,

is displaced by a transcendent ‘beyond’ as the ‘place’ from which narrative and subjectivity yearns to return. The uncanny female body is both the element of generativity that is celebrated as part of the utopian complementarity of heterosexualty, and the repressed multiplicity that returns to disturb masculine singularity.”

35 A similar passage that evokes the connection between women and “madness” can be found in Winton’s Lockie Leonard: Legend, 51: “Her hair hung down in strings. Her legs were like sticks in the bleary light […] At the end of the drive Mrs. Leonard stood with the empty pram, singing quietly […] Hair hung all over her face. She hardly looked like his mum.”
reflecting the perilous topography of Maureen’s social and geographical isolation. Her existence is emblematic of the privation of love and respect, leaving only a suffocating void.

Carrying signs of death and dying on her body, the girl in the dream foreshadows Maureen’s own death a few hours later, when she falls off a cliff after experiencing the first moment of happiness with her husband in thirty-four years (81-82): “When she stumbled and was taken, Coupar heard her laughter, saw a hand, and was conscious of his trousers flapping from a nearby bough. He heard a shallow sound that might have been her impact or the shock of a magpie leaving a tree” (82). If Daniel sees the fall as an accidental stumble, Maureen’s laughter as she tumbles toward her death suggests suicide has been invoked in order to eternalise one fleeting moment of bliss. But the ambiguity of her death stands in stark relief when compared to Daniel’s explicit suicide (also preceded by a nightmarish dream) nearly twelve years later (266). Daniel’s realisation of his family’s complicity with the oppressive forces of patriarchy begins the process of regret and healing; he has obtained a deeper knowledge of his world. Eventually, Daniel comes to the conclusion that he, his father and his grandfather are guilty of “sins of inaction” (98). As such, his death is constructed as a means of reconciliation, an act of redemption to free the world of the darkness within him.

Ida Stubbs in In the Winter Dark bears a stark resemblance to Maureen. Both women suffer oppressive marriages and the tensions associated with the inherent isolation of rural life. Like Maureen, Ida has given birth to girls but is unable to conceive a son. She links her failure to have a boy to “the sins of the fathers” – Maurice’s guilt for setting fire to Minchinbury House, and consequently, the killing of an old woman (In the Winter Dark, 95, 90). But unlike Maureen’s death, which, in its ambiguity offers suicide as a possible motive, Ida is accidentally gunned down by her husband before being buried in the forest with Ronnie’s still-born baby son (ibid., 109). Once again the maternal is paired with death. Ida’s “lack” or “failure” is assuaged through her spiritual unification with the son who never lived. Critics see in the dead child the reflection of the inhumane: the life-negating effect of an environment that borders the supernatural and hence prevents Ronnie from successfully

36 Cf. Helff, “Sea of Transformation: Re-writing Australianness in the Light of Whaling,” 91-104. Helff sees in Daniel’s death a way towards reconciliation and redemption, which, in her view, deconstructs the mythical figure of the Australian settler and his connection with the land. It is noteworthy that his father Martin and grandfather Nathaniel Coupar also killed themselves.

delivering the child. More important, however, is the question of guilt and redemption, which, in this instance, carries Faustian overtones. When Goethe’s Gretchen receives godly forgiveness for her earthly sins, she sees her innocence restored through divine redemption. Similarly, Ida’s sins and corresponding shame, derived through her marital bonds, are alleviated in the moment of death. She embraces innocence through Ronnie’s still-born child, who functions as both a symbol of forgiveness and deliverance. From her husband’s point of view, Ida is presented as precariously clinging to sanity: “pretty damn wild” (In the Winter Dark, 89); “her breasts rolled about in her nightie” (ibid., 89); “crazy woman’s scream” (89); “her eyes shone madly” (90). As such, she follows the trajectory of Jewel and Maureen in being depicted as “hystéric” and “wild.” Maurice’s account contrasts deeply with Ida’s own sense of alienation, a dark and suffocating habitat she resolves to leave behind:

Ida shook. She looked at Maurice. She didn’t know him. Not the way a wife should know a husband. There was a terrible cold rushing into her, a winter wind blowing right through. She was a stranger here, and they were impostors. There was just a hollowing wind and she was going. (99)

The competing voices of the narrative reveal an intense gender struggle. “Blood [is Ida’s] only voice,” a “hollow gurgling,” the sound of death (107). But Winton invariably leaves the final articulation of this struggle to Jacob and Maurice, who both cannot escape the “Darkness” of their own past and secrecy. For the men, “Darkness” is at once master, confidante and accomplice. It swallows the deaths of Ida and the baby, serving as Maurice’s playground of confession, although it denies him, at the last, redemption: “I can’t redeem myself. That’s why I confess to you, Darkness…Listen to me!” (110)

In all these stories, Winton exposes the societies depicted in the narratives as fractured, unaccommodating for both his male protagonists and female characters. The obvious limitations imposed by patriarchy are presented as the foundations for the characters’ feelings of displacement and unease within their communities – feelings that

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38 See Ben-Messahel, Mind the Country, 112. Ida receives a decent discussion in Ben-Messahel’s work, neatly outlining her existential predicament (see e.g. 55, 64-65, 78-79, 156, 185). For a study of the Gothic in In the Winter Dark, see, for example, Pilar Baines, “The Haunting the History and the Feral Self in Tim Winton’s In the Winter Dark,” HJEAS – Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 17, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 71-84.
often manifest as diseases for women. Looking beyond the issue of mental illness and self-harm, this feeling of “dis-ease” can be seen in a lengthy line of female characters, their physical condition weakened by chronic illnesses: Rachel Nilsam’s asthma, Debbie Buckridge’s cancer, Bess’s bowl cancer, Vera Jutland’s cerebral haemorrhage, and various other incidents which claim female life. Ultimately, female death is appropriated as a narrative tool for the maturation of the male protagonists, who are given ample opportunities to re-consider their past, present and future in order to make significant improvements. Thus, Jerra eventually moves on, becomes able to see through the hypocrisies of his society and finds happiness with Rachel. Similarly, Daniel creates a space for regret through his awareness of generational guilt. He nonetheless sees himself as being too old to make a difference and therefore decides that the greatest contribution he can make toward putting old stories to rest is by taking his own life. In the end, he ruptures the family dynasty of male egocentricity by leaving Queenie, a woman, as the sole inheritor. This tendency of Winton’s male characters to mature and reach a state of higher understanding is captured in Maurice Stubb’s confession from In the Winter Dark: “That’s how I live know, knowing I’ll only have this time for a little while. I should have known earlier to always live like that” (109).

Elizabeth Grosz’s idea in Volatile Bodies that the female body is often culturally represented as lacking containment, of being fluid and thus transgressive, is taken up by Susan Martin and transferred from the living to the dead body of the virgin: “The status of the virgin body as representing the closed system, the intact body, contests the supposedly available and open body produced by death, even as death, literally, breaks the seal, and removes this illusion of closure.” Winton’s representations of the dead female body denote this lack of containment. This is most poignantly described in Dirt Music when Sally Fox, Lu’s sister-in-law, dies in a rollover:

He can hear Sally now but not see her in the darkness of the cab. She’s just a horrible wet noise in there […] He smells shit and Juicy Fruit, gropes one-handed until he finds her wedged under the steering column, bits of metal protruding from her trunk […] He feels the breath go out of her before he can pull his hand away. The hot rain of her urine sluices his face. (Dirt Music, 117)

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39 See Susan Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor, which famously discusses diseases and its representation in Western culture and society. She also highlights their metaphoric quality within the body politic.
40 Martin, “Good Girls Die, Bad Girls Don’t,” 33; see Grosz, Volatile Bodies, 203.
41 Vera Jutland’s death is also associated with lacking containment, expressed in a big urine stain on the living room carpet where she died (Dirt Music, 175); Bess’s cancer is related to spasms of diarrhoea.
These elemental characteristics of wetness, excrement, exhaled breath and urine define Sally’s dying body, impaled by pieces of metal, signifying the moment it transforms from living organism into dead waste product. Trapped within the wreck of the car, Sally’s death image is similar to Jewel’s body when it is found on the beach. What both have in common is the “wetness” that permeates their close environment – sharp metal and entangling seaweed – in addition to the absence of heavy bleeding. Sally’s accidental death finds symbolic expression in the suffocating interior of the smashed car; Jewel merges with the living, breathing ocean, and in doing so, arguably finds a way to transcend the gruesome nature of her own death; Maureen’s death evokes the waterfall (Shallows, 82), its fluidity serving to symbolise the symbiosis of the female, the maternal, danger and transience (a point suggested in Winton’s other stories as well, e.g. The Riders, 235).

There is something further to be said about the deaths of Jewel and Maureen. Both women seem to have staged their deaths in exemplum, theatrical performances promulgating a cathartic purification of the self; an emotional and spiritual release through death. Bronfen argues convincingly that “[d]ying is a move beyond communication yet also functions as these women’s one effective communicative act, in a cultural or kinship situation otherwise disinclined towards feminine authorship.”42 Such acts are defined by a considerable amount of self-reflexivity as “death is chosen and performed by the woman herself, in an act that makes her both object and subject of dying and representation.”43 The woman, therefore, constructs herself in an autobiographical fashion by “undoing her body.”44 But this merely allows fantasies of gender to re-emerge in the textual mythologisation and fetishisation of death and the female body. Consequently, through the act of disembodiment to escape the constraints associated with the stigmatisation and cultural mythologisation of her body, the woman only re- emphasises her materiality and thus confirms pre-existing cultural attitudes and stereotypes.45 The narrative focus in both An Open Swimmer and Shallows filters the perception of female death through male consciousness, a cultural reclaiming of the female body, twofold, occurring in the signification of the event itself and in the memories of the male characters. For Bronfen, the female is literally positioned between self-inscription and

42 Bronfen, Over her Dead Body, 141.
43 Ibid., 141-42.
44 Ibid., 143.
45 Ibid.
an inscription of otherness.\textsuperscript{46} Maureen’s death occurs during an ecstatic, eroticised dance with her husband. Plagued by embarrassment and guilt, Daniel recasts her death to the wider community as the tragic outcome of a tractor accident (\textit{Shallows}, 98). The theatricality of her death is more subtle than Jewel’s in \textit{An Open Swimmer}. Jewel’s return to the scene of the boating accident as the stage of her “final performance” dramatically enacts her alienation and mental confusion. She is trapped between life and death, imagination and reality. The beach embodies this hybrid space, a mediating position between land-as-finite and ocean-as-infinite. As Alistair Rolls and Vanessa Alayrac argue, the beach not only functions as a “bridge from self to alterity” but also as an edge that leads the way into dreams, fantasy and evasion – a point well illustrated through Jewel’s suicide.\textsuperscript{47} Notwithstanding the inherent morbidity of what the sea washes up onto the shore, the body with the “seaweed clump of a head” (\textit{An Open Swimmer}, 177) evokes the curiosity of a show. This is the last “Act” of her tragedy. A crowd of people gather in the distance watching intently while gulls circle the scene from above. Jewel’s husband, Jim, cries into the coat of Jerra’s father (ibid.). The death of the heroine exposes order as a hypocritical farce, its unveiling serving as a source of catharsis for both bystanders and the reader. The novelty of the body discovered on the beach corresponds with the events of the ill-fated party on the boat:

He saw the red lights in the sky, fizzers and rockets cartwheeling red, red, red up into the vast blackness with their spent, smoking carcasses hitting the water with quiet smacks […]
The tide rose, edging them off the reef and into the deep, sinking quickly as Jim fired flares up into the sky with all the other gay lights […] Hurrahs and hoots on the beach… (176)

Affected by her near-death experience of the boating accident, Jewel chooses this beach for her final goodbye. She comes back to this environment to die and thus reconnects past and present, pain and desire, intoxication, fear and excitement with each other in a final showdown, staging suicidal fantasies in the corpo-real:

Suicide, in turn, is both the literal attainment of alterity through death and the performance of an autobiographical desire. For suicide implies an authorship of one’s own life, a form of writing the self and writing death that is ambivalently poised between self-construction and self-destruction; a confirmation that is also an annihilation of the self, and as such another kind of attempt to know the self as radically different and other from the consciously known self during life.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Bronfen, \textit{Over her Dead Body}, 142.
Now it is the woman who exceeds the boundaries of social and marital constraint and creates a form of autonomous authorship that positions her within a power of her own.49 This moment of self-chosen exile from a life-long displacement re-unites her fractured self and reinstates a creativity that finally allows her to articulate her story. However, it is, once again, only men who surround her body, interpreting her death, her story, as a fatal outburst of lunacy (An Open Swimmer, 177) and thus reiterating the chasm between what is life, normality, rationality, the male, on the one hand, and death, abnormality, lunacy, the female, on the other. Instead of perhaps nurturing the autonomy she achieves in death, Winton resituates Jewel within the domain of otherness, reduced to a mere body, a grotesque grin, deprived of voice and identity.

In this context, a brief look at the issue of spirituality and how it shapes the representation of suicide in Winton’s novels further illuminates the female characters’ “fall from grace,” as so often depicted in his works. As a devoted orthodox Christian, who believes in the power of the spiritual, Winton brings the value system of his faith into his writing, seeing himself as an ambassador:

You only have to scratch a little to apprehend a universal religious or spiritual yearning in people. Australians bury it in embarrassment and irony, but it’s there. Given the reception my work has had, in particular the work where I’m fumbling towards some kind of accessible spiritual language that might contravene orthodoxies, I’d have to say there is a hunger there below our shell of dour materialism.50

While That Eye the Sky and Cloudstreet can be regarded as most obvious in their spiritual content, the religious structures are also manifest in works like Dirt Music, In the Winter Dark, Shallows, The Riders and Breath. Protestantism, the major confessional influence on Winton, traditionally condemns the act of self-murder as sin. Accordingly, the female characters depicted in this chapter fall outside of the spiritually accepted framework of grace.51 In their suicide they are marked as other, and the violence that underlies their death

49 Ibid., 401.
evokes impressions of divine punishment. Although Winton considers himself a nonconformist Christian with a Protestant background, the strong moral codes, sense of justice and compassion that are intrinsic to Western religion still underlie his fictional portrayals.\(^{52}\) Particularly in his interpretation of female death in *An Open Swimmer, Shallows, In the Winter Dark* and *Breath*, a pervasive sense of morality permeates the way the women characters die and how death is visualised on their bodies. As described earlier, violence against the self, though instilled through oppressive social structures, is judged in Winton’s stories, where the woman’s body is disfigured and she becomes a grotesque, haunting memory for the male characters. Elements of adultery, abortion, “cougar-ism,” divorce and lack of faith flow into the characterisation of women like Eva, Jewel and Ida, for example, who all die alone in heightened states of ambiguity. Hardly any of Winton’s women die peacefully andrespectably, for death is violently imposed on them through accident, disease, murder or self-harm. Although I see the prospect of female agency in the performance of death in some of Winton’s novels (*Breath, An Open Swimmer, Shallows*), this performance is always only a shadow in the zenith of male perception and articulation. In these novels the noticeable tendency to represent female bodies as abject suggests an appropriation and gendering of death and suicide in particular – a masculine performance of Christian spirituality that sexualises death alongside the feminine and inscribes suicide as a “sin of/in the flesh.” The materiality of the body is thus rendered distinctively female, while spiritual revelation and healing seem to remain within the sphere of the masculine in Winton’s stories. The mind/body, male/female binary, therefore, receives new currency, which, instead of contravening, re-affirms common orthodoxies. Not having the space to pursue this topic here, I nevertheless regard this discussion worth developing in future projects.\(^{53}\)

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In concluding this last chapter, the female body in Winton’s fiction, both living and
dead, is a hypertextual, cultural allegory that provokes a necessary discussion of gender and
power relations in Australia.\textsuperscript{54} Its representation in his oeuvre highlights troubling
discrepancies between male and female authorship and artworks as highly gendered
battlefields of representation.

It should be noted that Winton continues to present the female as being on the
periphery of society, always bordering the extreme and the dangerous.\textsuperscript{55} His women are
consistently depicted as broken characters, infused by elements of hysteria and depression,
unable to articulate their emotions verbally and thus compelled to measures of self-harm and
suicide. In his representations, women like Georgie, Dolly, Rose, Tegwyn, Jennifer, Eva,
Maureen, Ida and Jewel are not only stigmatised through the male gaze that controls the
narratives, but they are also denied a respectful and redeeming alternative to the confined
economy they live in. Possibilities of liberty and redemption are only insinuated in marriage,
motherhood or death – elements that compose a very narrow framework of female agency.
Whether implicated in the cliché of materialism, sexuality or death, the woman in Winton’s
work is consistently portrayed as bound to the body, captured within the domain of the
material. Particularly in death, the transcendental function of female suicide can only be
established in feminist explorations of the difference between male and female suffering and
its expression.

As John Kinsella already identified in his review of \textit{The Turning}, Winton’s work is
extremely “heterosexual,” and “behind the different personae – male or female, of varying
ages – there’s a clearly unified voice at work, a kind of holistic unity.”\textsuperscript{56} This voice, as I
have argued, is distinctively male, revealing Winton’s directing presence behind his works.
In the end it is the female body where the gaze and voice of the masculine meet. In this
location, male subjectivities write down their stories of crises, pain and insecurities,

\textsuperscript{54} In this respect it is fair to mention that the male body in Winton’s fiction has an equally metaphoric function,
though, in my view, less controversial and complex than has the female body. It is expressed within the various
momentums of crisis for masculinity, the need for the re-definition of maleness within the discourse of the
“man-in-crisis,” as well as in the challenging and confronting activism of the feminist, queer, indigenous and
whiteness movements. The dialectics between the male and female bodies as memory places need to be
considered in this context – a discussion, though, that exceeds the scope of this paper and needs to be pursued
elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{55} See Chase et al., \textit{A Portrait of Progress}, 53. This report discusses the history of women in “the man’s state”
WA. See Marilyn Lake, “Mission Impossible: How Men Gave Birth to the Australian Nation – Nationalism,

\textsuperscript{56} Kinsella, review of \textit{The Turning}, by Tim Winton, 70.
remembering a “unified vision of reward, salvation, and the potential for damnation.” It is a story of men’s spiritual survival, in which women inhabit a mediating role that leads the men towards maturation, reconciliation and knowledge. In this masculine drama, however, the woman never receives holistic legitimisation as a fully-centred subject. Her self-harm, as the incubator of the narrative desire for expression and understanding, always places her in the position of difference and the abject – a necessary status for male projection and reflection. Hence, in its physical and metaphorical function, the woman’s body becomes what Nora calls his “lieu de mémoire,” a repertoire of cultural realities that define social relations in their historical significance and present constellation:

*Lieux de mémoire* are created by a play of memory and history, an interaction of two factors that results in their reciprocal overdetermination [...] The lieux we speak of, then, are mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile. For if we accept that the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial – just as if gold were the only memory of money – all of this in order to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs, it is also clear that lieux de mémoire only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.

Individual, collective and cultural memories merge within the allegorical textuality of the woman’s body – a contested site of controversy, conflict and expression. Winton’s underlying critique of family, colonisation and patriarchy is effectively compromised by an appropriation of the female body as a nexus of male experience and enlightenment, reducing the woman to a site of trauma, transience and otherness. It communicates a bias that is intrinsic to women’s invisibility in the Western imagination – an invisibility that paradoxically finds expression in the visibility of the female body: the white masculine norm, and femininity as its difference. However, it is exactly this difference that enables the masculine to articulate itself as the standard – a point illustrated in Winton’s stories. Unlike Robert Drewe’s *The Drowner*, the novels of Tim Winton more often than not reaffirm the very gender stereotypes he seeks to undermine in the first place. In a speech for the Melbourne Writer’s Festival 2011, Sophie Cunningham discusses the fact that women’s

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57 Ibid., 71.
58 Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 19.
59 Robert Drewe, *The Drowner* (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin Books, 1996). Drewe plays with the perception of gender stereotypes in his novel, eventually exposing one of the central characters, Axel Boehm, who was introduced and presented as male throughout the novel, as female and hermaphrodite. For a detailed and investigative review that outlines the deconstructing elements of the text, see Rolls and Alayrac, “Changing the Tide,” 154-67.
invisibility and marginalisation within Western culture and society persist and are seen as normal. As bias works generally unconsciously, she argues that people need to make a “conscious effort to adjust blind spots” and work against the bias of normativity and difference. Viewing Winton’s writing as part of the system that creates these blind spots, I have taken up Cunningham’s point and applied it to his fiction. As Julian Thomas points out, it is only “through the act of interpretation that we can gain a knowledge of the body at all.” In the end, it falls to the reader to fill the blind spots in a text, to discover a story’s hidden complexities and to re-create characters and their stories. In doing so, they learn to understand how the presentation of women in contemporary literature reflects actual social realities, exposing the existence of ideologies and power structures behind a text.

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60 Cunningham, “Why we still need Feminism?” Also see Cunningham, “A Prize of One’s Own”; Summers, “Opening Address.”

CONCLUSION – Tim Winton and the Public: Marketing a Fiction?

So is that all there is in the end, to accept oneself, to be finally and irrevocably responsible for oneself? Jude, I wanted to find in this dirty, scheming, contemptible world something, some kind of miraculous insight…

[To audience] I had a tremendous world in my head and more than three-quarters of it will be buried with me.

Dorothy Hewett, *The Chapel Perilous or The Perilous Adventures of Sally Banner*¹

Referring to Winton’s *Cloudstreet*, Tanya Dalziell indicates in her study *Settler Romances and the Australian Girl* that the conditions of settler capitalism – both material and discursive – are still actively affecting Australian socio-cultural structures and cannot be considered to be securely resolved.² Indeed, white values and ideologies of colonial heritage and patriarchy influence existing power relations in Australia today, creating a political and cultural framework in which the question of literature’s purpose needs to be asked. James Baldwin believed that the “responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him” – a point that receives particular resonance in relation to Winton, who identifies himself as a “child of [his] culture.”³ In Winton’s view his fiction mirrors life as his readers know it – “authentic somehow.”⁴ The exhumation of common experience between writer and reader is an important part of Winton’s work, presumably accounting for a good deal of the positive reception it receives. Readers feel encouraged to join Winton in their “search for location, belonging, and the past that makes [them] what [they] are.”⁵ As demonstrated in this thesis, I have seen the popularity of Winton as a writer closely aligned to the idea of nationhood and belonging as occurring in an accommodating, rather than a

⁴ It is difficult to directly link the act of writing in the public sector with social or cultural responsibility due to the idiosyncrasies that inspire and shape individual writers’ approach to their artform. See Pradeep Trikha, *Delphic Intimations: Dialogues with Australian Writers and Critics* (New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2007), 182. Here David Carter points out that readers and critics cannot demand social and cultural responsibility of writers. See also Peter Manning, “Writing in an ‘Age of Terror,’” in *Just Words? Australian Authors Writing for Justice*, ed. Bernadette Brennan (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2008), 26.
⁵ Kinsella, review of *The Turning*, by Tim Winton, 71.
critical context, which leaves important questions about his textual representations largely unexplored: female embodiment, transience and self-harm in relation to sexuality, motherhood, perversion and hysteria.

As a “regional celebrity writer” of national and international acclaim, Winton plays an important role in the process of re-defining sustaining myths of identity and belonging in Australia. Emerging as a West Australian prodigy Winton hit the popular nerve right from the beginning as the quintessential national Australian writer of the post-feminist age – a role that now, nearly thirty years after the publication of his first novel, is firmly rooted in an exceptionally successful literary career. Even today at the age of fifty, Winton still largely appears the way he did when he was twenty. His look is defined by his characteristic long ponytail, sun-impacted skin and an overtly casual outfit. He is the affable but intensely private and sensitive “nature-boy” from the Western frontier, deeply committed to both family and the land around him. He is the epitome of a new masculinity that is strangely familiar – down to earth, unassuming, grateful, egalitarian, emphatically ordinary, emotional and sometimes brutally honest, always guided by an intractable Christian morality and faith. But what hides behind this commercially marketable image? What is it that we miss in our devotion to a writer who understands so well how to enthrall us through nostalgic descriptions of the basic human conditions: love, death, childhood, youth and the overarching spirituality of the harsh but alluring landscape?

As I have shown in this thesis, Winton knows how to satisfy a romantic desire for stories that are firmly settled within the homebound, the landscape and the past. In his fiction he captures intense emotions and human drama that are intrinsically linked to the land and the question of belonging. Although not all of Winton’s works can be described as nostalgic,

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7 In this context also see Dixon, “Tim Winton, Cloudstreet and the Field of Australian Literature,” 252-53. Heather Scutter, “The Country of Feral Boys,” in Manning the Next Millennium, ed. Sharyn Pearce and Vivienne Muller (Bentley, WA: Black Swan Press, 2002), 116: “Lockie’s wild masculinity is predicated upon anti-capitalism and anti-feminism […] This is a different kind of lostness indeed, in which the boy gets lost to find himself, in Romantic terms, just what he was in the beginning, incidentally keeping the unholy trinity of women – Little Girl, Lover, Mother – firmly in their patriarchally assigned places.”

8 See Tim Winton, “Place and Interview,” Fremantle Arts Review 1, no. 1 (August-November 1987): 10. Winton mentions here that his stories have their roots in nostalgia.
they are nevertheless inspired by nostalgia and the force of memory. John Kinsella points to the quest for light, resolution and hope that always seem to accompany Winton’s stories – a possible reason for his popularity: “The faith is a collective one – difference, ultimately, becomes secondary in our shared plight – a search for location, belonging, and the past that makes us what we are.”9 As a storyteller Winton draws his readership into a credible simulacrum of the world they know, eliciting responses of sympathy and recognition. However, when it comes to reading his work for more than just pleasure there are still too many discursive silences that need to be addressed.10

And these silences, as I have argued, are particularly prominent in Winton’s depiction of femininity as opposed to a very lively discussion of masculinity, religion and belonging in his works. The inevitable question “Who are we?” has been part of the Australian literary project for decades – a question that reflects the difficulty settler Australia has in defining a sense of belonging in national and cultural terms. Whether explicitly expressed in the narrative stance or revealed through the individual character portrayals, Winton’s stories persistently seem to direct this question of identity from the female back to the male, constructing a masculine topography of stories that intersect through the concept of femininity as transient, ambiguous, troubled and troubling. I feel that looking at the intricate connections and similarities between most of Winton’s novels in sentiment, character relationships and style – with his first novel An Open Swimmer and his latest one Breath as starting and end points of an artistic continuum – suggests a stagnation in Winton’s character portrayals, which leaves his works firmly grounded within colonising structures of a gendered economy. This is conveyed in his problematic representation of femininity and corporeality as well as in the primarily inwards-backwards looking nature of his narratives. Australian writer Eva Sallis is critical of the silences connected to this spirit of looking backwards and inwards, which is often infiltrated by political interests. She instead advances the question: “Who are we becoming?” and highlights the necessity for Australians (and others) to look to the future, to extend borders and minds, especially in times of increasing

9 Kinsella, review of The Turning, by Tim Winton, 71.
10 Elizabeth Furness discusses the importance of studying public silences in postcolonial contexts. She refers to the concept of “ethnography of silence” to enhance her study on indigenous and settler society’s historical narratives. See Elizabeth Furness, “Challenging the Myth of Indigenous Peoples’ ‘Last Stand’ in Canada and Australia: Public Discourse and the Conditions of Silence,” in Rethinking Settler Colonialism – History and Memory in Australia, Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand and South Africa, ed. Annie E. Coombes (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 185-191.
social, political and cultural instability.\textsuperscript{11} Along these lines, Susan Sontag, in “A few Weeks After,” refers to the silencing of critical voices in America, lamenting the tendency of criticism to turn “inward” and avoid political and cultural debate as a result of censorship and fear. She argues that “self-censorship, the most important and most successful form of censorship, is rampant. Debate is identified with dissent, which is in turn identified with disloyalty.”\textsuperscript{12} This question of lacking critical dissent has also been raised in the Australian context, as Bernadette Brennan points out when she says, “Australian readers recognise this strategy by which debate is characterised as dissent and is further dismissed by being labelled ‘elitist’ or ‘unAustralian’.”\textsuperscript{13} Despite the many critics within Australia who do speak out about the big questions (take for example Brennan’s \textit{Just Words?}) the inward-looking characteristic of literature and criticism and its ensuing silences are still evident in Australian mainstream culture, especially in relation to Winton’s fiction. The power and responsibility connected with the purpose of literature to work against silence and to foster discussions outside of a “safe” reading of a text, do not lie primarily with the writer, but eventually depend on the readers themselves. Failure to follow Sallis’s advice to look into the future by raising questions about specific silences inevitably leads to artistic and critical stasis that prolongs, rather than fills the existing void.

In this thesis I have positioned myself against the perpetuation of dominant silences in the literary discourse surrounding Winton by addressing and evaluating a defining constancy in his novels: the symbiosis of femininity, self-harm and transience. In the process of doing so, I have been forced to confront the question of whether or not I am doing Winton an injustice by prioritising my critical concerns over my enjoyment of his work. How shall I balance the divergence between the popular reception of his fiction as enriching, private and human as opposed to my critical demarcating of the same as lacking public and political dimension? The problematic, “schizophrenic” relationship between the reader as critic and the critic as reader – two selves combined in one – has finally resurfaced in my discussion of Winton’s work. While still admiring his poetic prose, my feminist concerns about the cultural instrumentalisation of the female body and the reductionist, narrative approach to


\textsuperscript{13} Brennan, “Introduction,” xi.
self-harm in his fiction have motivated me to pursue this thesis project. As a result, I have added what is thus far a missing component in the prevailing discourses on Winton by highlighting female self-harm, absence and death as cross-narrational signifiers of Winton’s fictional representations.

In once again reflecting on the arguments made in this thesis, it needs to be stressed that Winton inscribes fragility and memory onto his women’s bodies, creating stereotypical constructs of corporeality and femininity that are defined by male desire for representation and understanding. The process of “othering” the woman, as a constant source of difference, illuminates both the contested male fear of the female, as expressed in so many feminist works, and men’s dependency on the feminine as other in their search for belonging and identity. However, the representation of the female characters largely proves that they remain outside of male comprehension; their agency marked significantly, though not entirely, by masculine subjectivities. Winton’s portrayals of women reflect the male characters’ quest for “who they are,” which is, by extension, related to the exclusive positioning of the female as unpredictable, excessively present or strangely absent, and fragile, but still fiercely rebellious and threatening in her determination. It is in between these positions of female categorisation that a reader of Winton’s female characters can find prospective spaces of subversion, which are created through feminist readings of his texts. As Bronfen argues, cultural representations undo the threat posed by femininity in a two-fold manner:

The feminine body is either used as a scapegoat, to exteriorise threatening values rhetorically, to expel these values by sacrificing Woman, or turned into a fetish so that Woman becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. Where the former will result in her complete disappearance, the latter preserves her presence in part, as auto-icon or doubled portrait, but does so outside linear time, occulting both feminine sexuality and facticity.

All of Bronfen’s observations are eerily mirrored and collapsed in Winton’s fiction where female self-harm literally stages the exteriorisation of women’s sexuality and threat – their difference – on their flesh, making it visible and interpretable, thus graspable, to the masculine “I/eye.” Winton’s women inhabit a space that is still subordinate to colonial standards, trapped in liminal positions. Living on the edge, or outside of social convention

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15 Bronfen, Over her Dead Body, 123.
and morality, these women mark the blurred border between the known and the unknown for male consciousness, symbolising an ambivalent state of existence that seems necessary to justify the notion of the Australian “man in crisis.” I have shown in Winton’s work how the bodies of female characters become a post-feminist allegory in a “state of injury,” which can be read as staging the social complexities and violence of difference within Australian society and hence conditioning the re-centring of masculinity.¹⁶

The aim of this discussion of Winton’s work has been to critically highlight the facet of femininity within the Winton “canon,” using feminist criticism to prove the point that Winton’s popularity suggests the representation of the feminine as a deviation from the masculine norm – being continuously marked as other in its collapse with the body and transience – runs the danger of being culturally stabilised as the norm of female representations. Although self-harm is often perceived to be a measure of articulation and survival for the women in Winton’s stories, female self-mutilation, self-harm and suicide are used in these texts to mediate male trauma and recovery, while pushing the female characters into the sphere of the visible, the corporeal, the other. Thus, self-harm and death, although in some cases interpreted as serving the need of self-authorisation and expression, can easily transform into means of narrative control and oppression that oversimplify or abject the female in favour of masculine maturation and stabilisation. Diegetically, the female body, conventionally read as a wound that is violable and penetrable, becomes the target of the woman herself, whereas the explicit status of “wounded being” is transferred to the male characters in Winton’s adult novels.¹⁷ The violent act of using their own bodies symbolises the need of these women to express themselves, to subvert the dominant structures of articulation and tradition, and also to transform a traumatic history of lack and sacrifice into a coherent story – an act that often fails or ends in tragedy in Winton’s stories, due to a lack of an alternative argument.

In this study I have shown that Winton’s texts are embedded within a monoclastic culture of the (extra)ordinary, which stereotypes, rather than deconstructs, gender difference, while, however, being aware of its own restrictions. His popularity seems inherently connected with the desire for an accommodating nationhood – a nostalgic realm that favours

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¹⁶ The term “state of injury” is borrowed from Wendy Brown’s *State of Injury – Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), although used in a different sense.

clearly defined structures to the exclusion (or stigmatisation) of that which is different. Through the high adaptation rate of his novels, Winton increases his national and international reception and acclaim, especially after the latest Foxtel television series on *Cloudstreet* was released in May 2011 and his first play *Rising Water* premiered in July the same year.\(^\text{18}\) It would be unfair to Winton and his fan-base to connect them too overtly with strong national and monocultural movements but Rutherford is right in saying that there is a tendency in the white Australian community to “re-enjoy nation” and shy away from uncomfortable realities:

\[\text{[I]ntrinsic to this enjoyment is the attempt to restabilise a destitute imaginary through the genesis of new narratives able to remobilise the traditional fantasies and antipathies of Australia qua nation, while at the same time short-circuiting the unpalatable history that has brought this enjoyment into question.}\(^\text{19}\)

It is not the case that Winton’s fiction is not critical of past and contemporary social conditions – this is something that is addressed in a great number of his novels, *An Open Swimmer*, *Shallows* and *Dirt Music* in particular. The underlying national imaginary is more subtly manifested within his narrative structures, often finding expression in significant details that are disguised through their marginality. Kathleen Mary Fallon and Susan Bradley Smith, for instance, have lamented the lack of critical insight regarding the stage adaptation of *Cloudstreet*, which was gloriously received, while important racial undertones and discrepancies were conveniently dismissed.\(^\text{20}\) Similarly, critical engagement with Winton’s fiction has discarded many other stories and voices within his narratives by directing attention towards the defining denominators of his career: the landscape, the beach, the water, family, the man – overall a hopeful, “arcadian imaginary” of smalltown life in Western Australia.\(^\text{21}\) There is suffering and hardship, love and hate as well as violence, life and death, but it all happens within a very narrow circuit of a predominantly white and masculine culture with the occasional indigenous presence as the exotic exception to the

\[^{18}\] The character of Dolly in the series, played by Essie Davis (who also stars as Anouk in the adaptation to Tsiolkas’s *The Slap*), did not seem to age or have rather grotesque moments of complete mental and physical breakdown as it is the case in the novel; the representation of the different women characters in this film is much more vague and perfected, perhaps being slightly put into perspective by the extremely matriarchal and bossy behaviour of Oriel.

\[^{19}\] Rutherford, “The Irish Conceit,” 199.


norm. His stories are the nostalgic defenders of family values, ordinariness, hope and spiritual faith, while instilling collective images within the settler psyche that reconnects it with its own personal histories – “Opium fürs Volk” in its purest form. Firmly settled within “nostalgic realism,” his writing corresponds with what Leigh Dale has referred to as a wave of nostalgia that is “powerfully expressed in the need to hear a simple national story that sets a clear agenda for the future based on a mythically stable past,” as opposed to a threatening, quickly-changing, unstable present.

Consequently, the big question I have asked about Winton’s stories explores the significance of the self-harming woman as a stereotypical construction, wavering between “Madonna” and “whore,” finding redemption in motherhood or death, and epitomising Summer’s concept of “God’s Police.” For me this question is crucial. It needed to be asked in order to justify the continuing need for feminist endeavours to show how “nationally” celebrated Australian literature is still infused by stagnating ideals and stereotypes that continue to write the “national” story in the name of the masculine. For many readers, however, this concern does often seem to be overcome by Winton’s beautifully poetic style and nostalgic landscape painting, which generate a broad enthusiasm for his writing and repeatedly catapult him to the top of the bestseller lists. Still, there are readers who respond to these textual sensitivities, which reveal ideological and cultural traces and realities within and outside of the text. Literary critic Kerryn Goldsworthy is one of them. On her blog she passionately presents the problematic gender representation in Winton’s writing and connects it with a wider social and cultural network of power relations, while explaining the reason for her criticism of his work:

[I]t’s this: that the masculine world view is still the norm, the feminine world view a lesser variant; that the masculine representation of women is still accepted as the truth, while female resistance to that representation is seen as some kind of wilful rebellion; that masculine values are still (mis)taken as universal values, and feminine ones seen as aberrant and unimportant in the world […] I suppose I’m trying to make visible what appears to have been invisible to a large number of people […] and to analyse how cultural norms get reinforced.

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22 German; engl. translation “opium for the people” (my translation). This phrase is an album title of a German Punk band, “Die Toten Hosen.” The album was released in 1996 and alludes to Karl Marx’s famous phrase that religion is “das Opium des Volkes” (“people’s opium,” my translation).
24 The myth of the fallen woman and the bad mother is rooted in biblical analogies with the image of Magdalene as the whore. See here Podnieks and O’Reilly, “Introduction: Maternal Literatures,” 4.
25 Goldsworthy, June 18, 2009 (7:26pm), “Biblical World Legitimised (blog).”
Throughout this thesis, I have followed Goldsworthy’s example of considering the normative reinforcement of cultural norms and stereotypes. Taking up Rutherford’s idea of the Irish conceit and expanding it further, I have argued that Winton’s work, in its totality, functions as a comforting, maybe even intoxicating cultural conceit. Whatever criticism one might direct at Winton’s literary persona and the very specific white Anglo-Australian marketing of the writer as an articulate, environmentally-aware “Australian icon” and a declared “National Living Treasure” by the Australian National Trust, his writing and his statements are taken very seriously by a large number of people.

In this context, critics become increasingly important in their mediating and revealing function, exposing, as Graham Huggan says in reference to Henry Louis Gates, “the hidden ideological traces, both in the literary texts he or she studies and in the critical approach that he or she brings to bear upon them.” My thesis has followed this specific task and has reflected one specific individual voice within the growing discourse of Winton studies – a voice that has attempted to show the potential of criticism to overcome existing silences in the discourse – even if it is from a transnational perspective. As a monographic study in response to Salhia Ben-Messahel’s 2006 account, I have elucidated Winton’s work from a different, less glorifying, though still appreciative, critical place. It shifts the focus from the author to the reader and highlights an important issue that so far has been under-represented in the critical approaches to Winton’s novels: his women, their bodies and the ambiguous nature of their (auto)objectification, self-harm and death.

27 In an ABC Perth Radio interview on May 19, 2011, Winton is asked by Geoff Hutchison about his feelings of being a Living National Treasure, which Winton replies to by drawing a comparison with Mick Jagger and stating that it does not have a big significance in his personal life but is merely a public role. In response to the question how he feels about so many people valuing what he is saying, Winton replies that it makes him nervous and indicates the fear that people might misinterpret his words. See Tim Winton, interview by Geoff Hutchison, Mornings, 720 ABC Perth, May 19, 2011, accessed June 28, 2011, http://blogs.abc.net.au/wa/2011/05/tim-wintona-rare-audience.html.
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