

Some Fearsome Memory in Stones:
Sentience, Syncretism and Relationships with Country in Two Australian Novels

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Figure 1: A map of Australia.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Outline

The physical environment has been a recurring theme throughout the history of Australian literature. Many writers have imbued space with character in order to explore the emotional geography of the continent. In recent decades place attachments have been treated according to the differences between European and Aboriginal relationships to space. In particular, the inseparability of the political and spiritual implications of space has emerged as a theme in some modern Australian novels. This thesis looks at two such novels, finding similar resources being exploited for the investigation of how modern Australian identities are tied to place. Place, or country, as it will often be referred to in this thesis, is treated as a manifestation of the sacred, to the extent that the physical universe is understood as sentient. The intimate relationship characters are portrayed as having with country carries religious and political significance.

How Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001) and Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* (2013) treat country as sentient is in line with a growing awareness in mainstream Australian society of the role Dreaming plays in Aboriginal culture. Dreaming is a holistic philosophy encompassing mythology, ecological responsibility and the religious significance of the material world. The two novels use descriptions of spatial relationships, liminality and aural phenomena such as birdsong and music, as a way of demonstrating the sacred qualities of Dreaming; the very intangibility of sound being akin to the insertion of spirituality into the mundane world of terrestrial facts. Moreover, both novels navigate the differences between Aboriginal notions of the sacred on the one hand, and Christianity on the other, giving rise to an expression of religious syncretism, which in turn underwrites both a pan-Aboriginal project of return and a White Australian search for a new, non-European identity. Space is posited as saturated with the sacred, such that little is entirely profane, while spatial boundaries are associated with white Australia, and used to signal a fundamental difference between White and Aboriginal relationships to land.¹ The liminality of the protagonists in both novels is representative of their passage out of a non-indigenous relationship with country and into either an Aboriginal one or a quasi-Aboriginal one.

¹ See also Kühlenbeck (2007, 63) on the “reciprocity of identity and space”.

The structure of this thesis is based upon three essential aspects: the significance of the division of space in the novels, the expression of sentience and sacrality, and references to music and sound as signifiers of both the sacred and the status of protagonists. After a short introduction to the novels themselves, the second chapter provides a set of definitions. This is necessary as some terms have multiple meanings, while others are specific to the field of Aboriginal studies. Chapter 3 outlines three theoretical concepts I will apply in my analysis of the novels, namely the spatiality of literary texts, hierophany and liminality. The analysis of the novels has been split into three chapters: Country, The Sacred and Music. Chapter 4, Country, applies spatial concepts to the ways relationships with country are expressed in the novels, as the expression of spatiality is fundamental to themes of spiritual growth. Chapter 5, The Sacred, looks at how specific manifestations of the sacred expose the connection between country and religion, as well as studying the significance of religious syncretism. Chapter 6 takes the relationship between country and spirituality and sets it to music, as it were. It deals with how the embrace or rejection of musicality demonstrates the protagonists' spiritual progress, and their status relative to a community. My argument, that the novels present country as sentient and imbued with sacrality, and that the religious and political significance of this speaks to contemporary forms of Australian identity marking, is built upon the premise that there exists a similar connection between country, the sacred and music in both novels.

1.2 *Dirt Music*

Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* was first published in 2001; a moment when mainstream White Australia was starting to look to Aboriginal culture for new ways of marking Australian identity in the twenty-first century. The novel features two protagonists, Georgie and Luther, who live in the fictional fishing village of White Point, north of Perth (Figure 1). It traces the psychological development of the two, albeit focusing primarily on Luther. His family having all died under tragic circumstances, he leads a reclusive life on his farm, but takes flight after being outed as a 'shamateur', an unlicensed professional fisherman posing as a hobbyist. The story is essentially a romance, culminating in the rescuing of Luther by Georgie (she searches for and finds him), the subsequent rescuing of Georgie by Luther (he pulls her out from a plane crash), and the penultimate rescuing again of Luther by Georgie (she then resuscitates him after he rescued her from the sinking plane). This trajectory of love as an act of saving someone is

intertwined with the spiritual growth of Luther, whose journey to the Kimberley coast in the Far North is not only an attempt to forget the past, but also a process of redemption through which he reestablishes a connection with home, affirms his love for Georgie, and discovers the spirituality of land. It is this new spatial consciousness that is of concern here, for it is the absorption of pan-Aboriginal religious and cultural concepts that re-define his relationship to place. Central to *Dirt Music* is the treatment of music and sound as symbols of religious transmission. Luther is a talented guitarist who no longer plays. Descriptions of his visceral relationship to music provide a link between the way spirituality is conceived in the novel and the association with place that Luther has.

1.3 *Mullumbimby*

Melissa Lucashenko's novel *Mullumbimby* (2013) is set in the Byron Shire hinterland on Australia's east coast. Jo Breen, the protagonist, struggles to make ends meet while raising her teenage daughter. Unlike Luther in *Dirt Music*, Jo's spiritual progress is not characterised by spatial mobility. Rather, she purchases a small farm; seeking fulfilment within the confines of the Australian Dream of home ownership which has defined mainstream Australia for generations. Jo's relationship with the mainstream is fraught, however, as she is a Bundjalung² woman. Thus Jo has a dual relationship to land: home as a place of safety is defined within the context of freehold title, but simultaneously her connection with land is communal and characterised by open space, outside the parameters of the legal framework. Jo, like Luther in *Dirt Music*, is a liminal figure, navigating the differences between these conceptions of space and attempting to reconcile them. Her romantic affiliation with Twoboy, a claimant to native title in the valley where her farm is situated, throws her own relationship to place into relief. Paradoxically, Twoboy's attempt to enter into the communal space of a traditional Aboriginal relationship to country is being made through the legal system, rendering it decidedly non-spiritual in character. Despite having "grown up in the culture", his own search for the sacred is thwarted by an acquisitive attitude and the fact that the land does not recognise him (Lucashenko 59). While Twoboy's playing of guitar symbolises his political identification with space, the fact that Jo does not play signals her as an outsider. To stop the music, at least within the logic of these novels, is to disrupt one's relationship to country. The liminal status of both

² The Bundjalung are an Aboriginal people.

Jo (*Mullumbimby*) and Luther (*Dirt Music*) is treated as resulting from their disconnection from society, and as a transitional state in their journey toward spiritual redemption and a new relationship with country. Jo's liminality is marked by feelings of coldness, as if she were dead. Her job at the local cemetery serves as a constant reminder of the link between death, liminality and the sacred, at the same time as marking her exclusion from sacred knowledge.

2. Definitions

2.1 Space and Place

For the purposes of this essay, space is understood as the measurable, quantifiable expanse that pertains to geographic area or volume. I follow Malpas' view of place as existentially substantial. That is, we do not retrospectively construct the meaning of a place so much as discover our own subjectivity through the fact of being situated in meaningful locations (Malpas, *Topography* 35). Therefore, place is space rendered meaningful. Yet as meanings and human relationships to a location in space change, a place is necessarily situated in both space *and* time. Thus if "places can be conceptualised in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. They are processes" (Massey 155). I will refer to place especially in relation to home as an emotionally significant location, temporality becoming relevant through the function of memory.

2.2 Land and Country

Land is more than simply that part of the surface of the planet not covered with water. Land is equivalent to place in that it is meaningful, but in the physical sense of outdoor, terrestrial space. Land is political as its ownership may be contested by Aboriginal people, and even when not, might still carry a history of dispossession. Country is that space to which

Aboriginals belong through historical presence and Dreaming. Country sums up a particular sense of place, space and land, with the addition of the presence of the sacred:

A particular formation, like a stream or hill, for instance, may embody a particular dreaming figure, whose location on the dreaming track has a particular significance to a person's own life, 'totem', clan relationship and identity because that person may have been conceived near it. The idea of not owning the land but in some sense being 'owned by it' is a way of seeing the world that is [...] different from the materiality and commodification of a colonising power... (Ashcroft, *Key* 179)

This is precisely the sense of a spiritual relationship to place that is embodied in the Aboriginal use of the word country, whereby the connection is religious, philosophical, genealogical, political, and most importantly, communal. An Aboriginal notion of country sits apart from its Western counterpart because one does not own country, one is owned by it. Country is a holistic notion in which sentience pervades all things, as all things are expressive of the Dreaming. In Aboriginal usage, country implies a loving, personal relationship to land that arises from the coalescence of culture and environment. Country is both landscape and language: it is the physical place and an expression of it because, for Aboriginal people, their very presence in country is a part of what constitutes country itself.³

2.3 Dadirri

Dadirri is a term used throughout Aboriginal Australia to refer to a meditative act of "deep listening", or mindful observation of the immediate environment. Where it differs from other forms of meditation is in the emphasis placed on intersubjectivity and reciprocity. In this sense, dadirri is an act of listening to the stories of others, as well as a mode of being present in the physical world, whereby the physical world is not distinct from the Dreaming, and thus is understood as capable of acts of communication. Thus, dadirri is posited on a belief in the sentience of the physical environment. A proponent of dadirri explains it not only within the context of the Dreaming but also her Christian beliefs, whereby dadirri as an act of quiet contemplation and waiting for events to unfold is the same as waiting for God to "make his Word clear to us [because we] know that in time and in the spirit of *dadirri* (that deep listening and quiet stillness) his way will be clear" (Ungunmerr-Baumann 2). Thus Dadirri is not specific to a particular Aboriginal identity, but a cultural and spiritual resource upon which

³ See for example Bradley (2011) and Rose (1996).

anyone can draw, including non-Aboriginal people. Within an overtly Christian framework, Ungunmerr-Baumann proposes it as a tool for reconciliation (3).

2.4 Dreaming

The Dreaming is a holistic knowledge system incorporating law, mythology, genealogy, geography and ecology, in which all living things are mutually dependent. The Dreaming of an individual orients him or her in the physical world through the mnemonic devices of songs and stories. Although Aboriginal concepts of Dreaming vary, they all refer to a mythical period of creation. Because myths are not located in historical time, the past is “believed to be eternally relevant to all living things...” (Berndt 479). Thus Dreaming brings the past into the present and turns the natural world into a set of totemic features. The connection to country that the Dreaming is predicated upon is both specific, in that ancestry defines which land constitutes one’s Dreaming, and general, in that it suggests the place of humans on country as religiously significant (Morphy 197). For those with Dreaming, “living as a human being is in itself a religious act. For men assume the responsibility of preserving the world as it was made by the Supernatural Beings, periodically regenerating the world through rituals...” (Eliade, *Australian* 620). The relation of a person to the land for which their Dreaming ascribes responsibility is not dreamt as such,⁴ but remembered. The function of memory is crucial in that the stories are transmitted verbally from generation to generation. The eternal nature of the Dreaming renders it less a historical source of law so much as an embodied and ever-contemporaneous fact of existence. The prohibition on speaking of the dead that exists among many aboriginal nations makes ancestry a matter of direct connection to the land into which one is born: “The shallowness of genealogical memory is not a form of cultural amnesia but rather a way of focusing on the basis of all relationships [...] It is not necessary to trace back through many generations to a founding ancestor to make a claim” (Bell 2481). This investment of the land with the memory of its people is one operation of Dreaming.

As a story of the formation of country, the individuated Dreaming of a given person will describe how the spirit Ancestors travelled across the land, creating its features as they went. It thus gives an account of creation shared by the community, but at the same time describes the movement of the particular Ancestor in whose tracks one follows:

4 ‘Dreaming’ is not a translation of any particular word so much as the expression of an idea. (cf. Bell 2478)

The entire continent is criss-crossed by tracks that the Ancestors made on their travels. An entire myth complex might traverse several linguistic groups which each 'own' that tract of land for which they are guardians and caretakers. Those responsible must take care of country by periodically following songlines pertaining to these myths, thus maintaining their connections to the land... (Hume 127)

Thus Dreaming is a map of country. Memorised as a set of mythical events, it provides a way of navigating across terrain. The information one needs to know and be known by country may be stored in song, and these songlines are trajectories across space that record geographic features as significant events and as manifestations of the sacred.

Within this holistic system, land "has a will and a need of its own" (Bradley 50). Because the Ancestors created both the physical world and culture there is no separation between the two. In Western thought, cognitive processes are separate from the external, physical world. In Dreaming, however, language is not independent of the environment it describes (58). Rose describes this reciprocity as "respect for other living things as participants in recursive and entangled bonds of mutual benefit" (Rose, *Indigenous* 301). This is a system in which humans are not the only subjects. Indeed, subjectivity is not confined to the living, the consequence of which is that humans are not autonomous, but are "called into action by the world" (Rose 303). Thus the world is posited as sentient. Knowledge of the world as an ecological system and as a dispenser of law is central to an individual's Dreaming and their place within the social system. Knowledge of both sacred and mundane facts of topology and biology are intertwined, and only available to those initiated into the culture (Hume 127). This exclusion of those without access to a traditional education has led to pan-Aboriginal approaches to cultural knowledge, where a familial link to a region, language or tribe suggests itself as enough for an "intuitive, or genetic, transmission of spiritual knowledge" (Hume 129).

2.5 Pan-Aboriginality

For many people identifying as Aboriginal the knowledge and traditions of their ancestors have not been handed down comprehensively and intact. It goes without saying that this is due to the various effects of colonisation. In order to reclaim an Aboriginal identity or to fill in gaps in their cultural knowledge, some indigenous people have looked to other Aboriginal cultures as a source of lore potentially similar to that which they lack. This is typical of urban Aboriginals, whose traditional lands have been subsumed into the built environment, or whose ancestors

may have arrived in the city already lacking a specific connection to place. Such people, having been “displaced from their places of origin and their traditional religious and social contexts have had to learn what being 'Aboriginal' is within a newly configured [sic] system of meaning” (Hume 125). The complete loss of tradition results in either a surrender to the non-specificity of urbanity or a creative attempt to piece together new cultural practices. Concepts from non-traditional sources such as the New Age movement or Christianity may be employed (Hume 130).⁵ Pan-Aboriginality has become a political tool through which most Aboriginal people, regardless of language or affiliation define themselves:

The construction of a pan-Aboriginal identity was created within a climate of racism and the Aboriginal fight for equality, autonomy and land rights. The subsequent projection of a pan-Aboriginal past is often accompanied by the view of pre-contact Aboriginal life as simple and noble [...] This new self-image seems to be particularly important for displaced persons who have lost their spiritual connection with specific land locations, but who nevertheless feel that there is an intrinsic spiritual connection. (Hume 137)

The Aboriginal characters in *Mullumbimby* are attempting to define their identities through such a mixture of sources, while the Anglo-Australian protagonists in *Dirt Music* redefine their relationships to place in light of generic notions of Aboriginal spirituality and philosophy. In both cases, the ideological nature of pan-Aboriginality becomes evident, not only in its use as a way of securing political rights and identity, but also in the insistence upon an inherent ability to commune with the natural world. The character Twoboy in *Mullumbimby* is an example of how pan-Aboriginal ideology is blended with remnants of local knowledge. Twoboy is positioned in the novel as noble himself, yet not uncontentious. The protagonist, Jo, for example, tells Twoboy that she heard the voices of the deceased ancestors singing in the Bundjalung language in the forest behind her home. The disembodied voices were apparently emanating from the land itself. Twoboy believes he should also be capable of hearing this talga, or sacred song cycle, purely because his grandfather was from the region. His inability to do so is posited as due to a loss of contact with country, whereas because Jo and Ellen have not strayed from country they are able to hear country speak. To be spoken to by country is a sign of acceptance: the country knows them. Identity in *Mullumbimby* is closely tied to Dreaming and the idea that the physical environment is sentient. The use of pan-Aboriginal methods of identity formation is a form of empowerment.

⁵ See Everett (2010) for a fascinating description of emergent traditions on Sydney's outskirts.

3. Concepts

The sentience of country in both *Mullumbimby* and *Dirt Music* is expressed through sound, the manifestation of the sacred, and through the structuring of narrative space itself. How the structural spatiality of the text builds a platform for the expression of sentience and community can be demonstrated by applying Yuri Lotman's theory of artistic space to the novels, while Mircea Eliade's notion of hierophany is useful for explaining the sentience of country in terms of sacredness. The way the protagonists embody this connection between the depiction of space and its metaphysical function can be understood using the concept of liminality. Bringing spatiality, hierophany and liminality together shows how sound and music express the sentience of country, and how the withdrawal of music functions as a symbol for the disengagement of protagonists from their social milieu.

In 3.1, elements of Yuri Lotman's structuralist approach to spatiality in literature are summarised. His theory of the differences between open and closed space and the selectively penetrable boundary between them illustrates how characters in the novels form new relationships to place. Chapter 3.2 explains the term hierophany; a manifestation of sacredness in the physical world, whereby tangible phenomena take on religious significance. Hierophany is useful for explaining the function of spirituality in the novels. Chapter 3.3 briefly describes Victor Turner's concept of liminality, which helps to identify processes of character development, as well as the protagonists' withdrawal from and return to community.

3.1. Spatiality

According to Lotman the construction of a text mirrors its spatiality. The world described by a text is necessarily finite, yet may reflect the infinite space of reality external to it (Lotman, *Structure* 217). The spatial characteristics of a text may be distilled into oppositional binaries such as high-low, right-left, near-far, open-closed, demarcated-not demarcated, which "come to mean valuable-not valuable, good-bad, one's own-another's, accessible-inaccessible, mortal-immortal and so on" (218). For Lotman, nearness pertains to what is understandable or familiar, and distance to what is incomprehensible or alien. Near and far are used as a binary structure in *Dirt Music* in the form of north and south, the south being equivalent to the protagonists' home, and the north to a form of anti-home.

The symbolism of open and closed space is another key example of how the binary distinctions we use to conceptualise the world around us carry over into literature:

Closed space is interpreted in texts in terms of various common spatial images — a house, a city, one's motherland — and is endowed with certain features: "kinship," "warmth," "security," and so on. It stands in opposition to open-ended, "outer" space and its features: "strangeness," "enmity," "cold," and so on. (Lotman, *Structure* 229)

The opposition of open to closed space in *Dirt Music* and in *Mullumbimby* can be found in descriptions of material space and in the meaning that tracts of land have for the protagonists.

Lotman argues that the symbolism of these spatial relationships is allocated by the author for his or her purposes and is not some obtrusive, external principle. Yet for a great many literary texts the boundary *between* spaces functions symbolically as well. The division of space can be "between insiders and outsiders, between the living and the dead [...]" What is more important is that the boundary which divides space into two parts must be impenetrable... (230). The meaning of different spaces is maintained through the impenetrability of boundaries. Lotman remains open to the possibility of multiple interpretations of how spatial relations, such as the distinction between open and closed space, will be applied. He cites fairytales as a type of text in which open space is associated with threat and closed space with reassurance. A different genre might use open and closed spaces to signal the reverse, whereby closed spaces such as the home might be dangerous for a protagonist, exposing him to the corrupting influence of creature comforts. Lotman remarks that in such circumstances "walls and fences look less like a defence than like a threat" (231). Regardless of how they are perceived the boundaries between the spaces remain intact, ensuring that spaces remain non-intersecting. Yet there is a qualification: there may be differing, even incompatible spatial divisions for different characters within one text. This is referred to as "spatial polyphony" (Lotman, *Structure* 231). An example of this from *Dirt Music* might be the descriptions of the terminally ill Bess, whose journey north is characterised by her immersion in the arts. She listens to the funereal compositions of Pärt and quotes from poems on death by Melville and Sexton (Winton 251). She shares Luther's romantic world view, but remains entirely within the European cultural register, whereas he crosses into that of Aboriginal Australia. The aural quality entailed by spatial polyphony is not lost in its application to *Dirt Music* and *Mullumbimby*, where music is used to channel the religiosity of spatial relations. Spatial polyphony also brings us back to the notion of a selectively permeable barrier:

The notion of boundary is an ambivalent one: it separates and unites. ...it is the place where what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal', it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics while retaining their own characteristics. (Lotman, *Universe* 137)

The polyphonic space is a site of semiotic absorption, such that what is external to a spatial realm might become internal, or in other words, what lies on the far side of a barrier may be assimilated. Leaving aside the overtly political usage of multiple languages in *Mullumbimby*, where the encapsulation of language and culture is both resisted and enabled by the linguistic strategy⁶, it is possible to see how the assimilation of cultural concepts external to the characters underwrites their blossoming relationships to land. In the case of *Dirt Music*, both Luther and Georgie demonstrate the desire for and necessity of closed, comforting space, while simultaneously defying it through their association with the open space of the harsh Australian landscape. In *Mullumbimby*, on the other hand, Jo Breen and Twoboy are figured as products of closed space and domesticity. Like Luther, Jo has a desire to find redemption in a new relationship to space, specifically the outdoor, open space that typifies the notion of country. While clearly demonstrating the distinction between open and closed space, boundaries are treated in both novels as permeable and unstable, and the relationship to land that any character has is manifold. Land as an aboriginal text is external and its assimilation is the objective.

The open/closed distinction is similar to that between home and anti-home (Lotman, *Universe* 185). For Lotman, the anti-home is a living space characterised by "neglect, a lack of cosiness", or perhaps even death (186 and 188). In other words, the anti-home is a liminal zone. A protagonist might pass through anti-homes when searching for a real home. An ideal notion of home provides the safety of spatial demarcation. The relationships the protagonists have to homes clearly trouble this idea of safety; a feature that may in part be due to a contestation of the differentiation between indoor space as safe and outdoor space as dangerous. For it would appear in both novels that what lies out of doors, whilst clearly harbouring danger, is not necessarily unknown, nor is it indifferent to the trials of the protagonists.

What the oppositions of near and far, open and closed, and home and anti-home have in common is the logical necessity of a boundary. It is not just the differentiation of space that is important, but also the degree of permeability in the polyphonic space of the novel. Where there is impermeability, there is stasis. The movement of characters between semantically

⁶ The seamless incorporation of Bundjalung and Yugambeh into the English text would have repercussions for a discussion of the politics of space in contemporary Aboriginal writing, especially as Lucashenko has acknowledged both a conscious post-colonial strategy akin to Achebe's act of writing back to Empire, and a professed inability to write about the area without using those languages properly belonging to it (personal correspondence).

defined worlds is evident in the plot progression of *Dirt Music*, where Luther's movement through physical space coincides with his spiritual development. This is also true of Jo in *Mullumbimby*, although the analogy between physical movement and spiritual progression is enacted somewhat differently and with a convoluted sense of proprietary right. Spatiality in the texts is a necessary precursor to the attribution of sentience to country. A second means by which this is achieved is through the manifestation of the sacred, also known as hierophany.

3.2 Hierophany

Eliade defines the sacred as that which is not profane; the profane being the natural, non-transcendental world of discrete objects and causally explainable phenomena (Eliade, *Sacred* 10). This allows for a very wide interpretation of what is sacred, encompassing the beliefs of any religion. Essentially, the sacred denotes a connection to God or a spiritual realm. Eliade takes cultural expressions of the sacred at face value: "The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities" (10). The use of 'reality' simultaneously denotes the tangibility of transcendental phenomena and their relevance for the upholders of a religious tradition, while positioning Eliade as non-judgmental in his treatment of the objects of his study. For the members of a given religious community, sacredness is a facet of reality.

Eliade coined the term 'hierophany' to designate the manifestation of the sacred in the profane. A sacred tree, for example, is a hierophany in that it is understood by those who believe it to be sacred as both a normal tree, one which "continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu", and as a "supernatural reality" (Eliade, *Sacred* 12). The very form of the tree limits the degree to which the sacred can be manifest. Were the tree to be purely sacred, it could have no form in the profane (mundane) world. Thus Eliade writes that hierophanies are "at once real and inadequate simply because in every case the sacred manifests itself limited and incarnate" (Rennie 54). Hierophany is paradoxical, then, because any object or phenomenon manifesting the sacred is also simultaneously profane, and because the manifestation can never be a revelation of the full extent of the sacred. It reveals but a part of it. Further, as a supernatural presence the sacred is a form of power, and because of this efficaciousness must be taken to be *more* real than the profane (Eliade, *Sacred* 12).

As hierophany is situated in a location, an object or a phenomenon, it must necessarily occur in space. Eliade makes the link to space in the Australian context himself, where the meaning of any geographic feature is preserved in myth:

Humans can return to these places in each generation, to commune with the power that has revealed itself there. In fact, the Aboriginal peoples express a religious need to remain in direct contact with those sites that are hierophanic. One may say that the hierophany, connected with the transformed place of its appearance, is capable of repeating itself. (Eliade, *Hierophany* 313)

Eliade touches on the paradox of hierophany again here in citing ‘religious need’ (i.e. the need of the people who enact the sacred) as the motivation for the connection to places, as well as allowing that the power reveals itself. The attribution of power to a site or object is posited as the prerogative of the human agents whose need it is. Yet the power is understood as able to broadcast itself. Nevertheless, it is the investment in a cyclical notion of time, or eternal return that maintains the relevance of the sacred in space (Leach 284).

There are parallels here with both *Dirt Music* and *Mullumbimby*. For Luther, one of two protagonists in *Dirt Music*, memories of the recent past are sacrosanct; he only challenges their value once he has embarked upon his journey of self-discovery. They are personal memories, yet the possibility of a collective memory invested in country and thus accessible to a figure imbued with numinosity is hinted at throughout the novel, such as when it occurs to Luther that there “is indeed some kind of spirit which rolls through all things, some fearsome memory in stones, in wind, in the lives of birds” (Winton 370). Conversely in *Mullumbimby*, only collective memory is problematised. It is available to those whose ancestry marks them as belonging to country, but not if they have not been on country, as in such cases country cannot recognise them. In both novels, one can see the sacred in descriptions of sensory perception, physical space and the effects of music or environmental sounds. Hence hierophany is useful for analysing religious syncretism in the novels, as well as the hybrid and liminal nature of the protagonists.

3.3 Liminality

Lotman’s description of spatial boundaries bears close resemblance to Turner’s study of the rites of passage, in which the pain of separation from childhood renders the initiate an adult. The liminal space in ritual is that middle stage between childhood and adulthood. It is a space of uncertainty, chaos and loss, giving rise to wisdom and renewal. Turner describes a shared

sentimental effect that the status change can have on members of the tribe, highlighting the importance of liminal processes to the production of community and kinship bonds (Turner 116). He also notes the ambiguity of the liminal zone, describing people on the threshold between a former, lower status and a higher one as “neither here nor there”. This blurring of distinctions may be expressed in various ways, one being symbolically as death (Turner 95).

Turner describes a series of binary oppositions which characterise the difference between a state of liminality and the bounded status of a person before and after. For example, the liminal person is in transition, whereas a non-liminal person is in a fixed state of being. Further dualities are sacredness and secularity and the absence or ownership of property. Turner goes on to note the similarity between these oppositions and Christian concepts of religiosity. He puts this down to the institutionalisation of the liminal stage, arguing that “traces of the *passage* quality of the religious life remain in such formulations as: ‘The Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveler, with no place to rest his head.’ Transition has here become a permanent condition” (107). This is similar to Jo in *Mullumbimby* and Luther in *Dirt Music*, whose journeys encapsulate the new relationship to country being explored in the novels, save that transition is not a permanent condition for them as their reaction to religious experience is syncretic and not dogmatic. The liminal, in its applicability to any religion is exactly that state of being which brings Dreaming into contact with Christian faith within the novels, and makes awareness of the sentience of country possible.

4. Country

It is now possible to begin an analysis of how sentience is attributed to physical space and what implications this has within the novels. Section 4.1 demonstrates the significance of homes, and how they compare to the notion of country. 4.2 discusses the division of space as signs of ownership and liminality. 4.3 looks specifically at Luther's liminal status in relation to Lotman's notion of the anti-home. In 4.4 the embodiment or internalisation of maps will be analysed as an example of how the sacredness of country becomes manifest in the novels.

4.1 "Staying put": home as country in *Dirt Music*, and country as home in *Mullumbimby*

Homes are those places most personal and often most meaningful. In both *Dirt Music* and *Mullumbimby* the meaningfulness of the home as a nurturing, protective space is interwoven with the expansiveness of country. Luther's farm in *Dirt Music* is as much a repository of memory and feelings of loss as it is a home. Homes are normally synonymous with a sense of security or respite. Yet from the first Luther's home is described as an "unpainted weatherboard house that hunkered on its stumps", as if it might at any moment get up and leave (Winton 68). The sense of orderliness accrued to Luther is set against the remoteness of the house: it is not in town, but on a "sunblasted farm". While it has the form of a home, replete with family photos and "real books", including a volume of Romantic poetry lying on a rocking chair (itself an image of both comfort and instability rolled into one), it is not safe space. The clapping, slamming and whacking of doors suggests not only a degree of antagonism that jars with the idea of refuge, but also the interpenetration of indoor and outdoor space (69-70). The differentiation of space into open and closed, or indoor and outdoor, is simultaneously maintained and collapsed in *Dirt Music*. Whilst Georgie feels immune to the "grip that places [have] over people", it is her presence that finally turns Luther's house back into a home (98). For Luther, the house, with its memories, is a place he must escape. Indeed, after Georgie's first visit to the farm, he "feels driven out of the house", toward the relative security of his "special place" at the limestone pinnacles.⁷ Finding himself alone in the house without her leaves him feeling "just plain scared" (383). Later, after Luther's flight into the North, Georgie returns to Luther's farm and gains entry by breaking a window with a stone. She then turns the house back into a home (322). Yet Georgie does not symbolise a traditional notion of domesticity set

⁷ The pinnacles (Luther's equivalent of a sacred site), termite mounds and baobab trees are used anthropomorphically throughout the novel to suggest the interpenetration of human consciousness and the physical environment.

apart from the perceived dangers of the outside world. The gender stereotyping that frustrates the very depiction of her as a sovereign protagonist also turns her presence in the house into a reminder of the difference between open and closed space. The rock through the window suggests that the boundary between inside and outside, or between safe and unsafe space is still not clear, for a rock is very much a part of outside space. In fact, Luther's desire for Georgie is treated as being the same as his entering into a new relationship with country, for she is "like hot, wet earth", just as the pinnacles, his special place, are "hot and damp inside" (89 and 372). Georgie can make home anew and dispel sad memories because she is grounded. As someone for whom a "sentimental attachment to geography" is but an irritation, she figures as "real" (6 and 461). Realness is at once an effect of earth (she acts as a substantiation of sentient country) and a denial of those romantic persuasions that might place significance on a relation to country in the first place. However, these are not the feelings of an indigenous Australian that are at stake. Luther Fox, his name referencing his European origins twice over, feels at one with the land.⁸ Through his heroic journey to the Far North, where his access to the sacred becomes apparent, Luther realises his need for Georgie and for home. For all its anthropomorphism, the open country, where "amorous" boabs are assembled like "solemn mobs", is ultimately not home for Luther (450, 382).⁹ Home is *his* country, down south where tuart trees roar and "stone shadows interlock" (360, 102).

The symbolism of home in *Mullumbimby* is also subject to contradictory readings, resulting in spatial polyphony. On the one hand there is a clear-cut distribution of territory marked by fence lines, whereby the house and adjacent fields are combined as a place of refuge. This is evident in moments of return such as when Jo, struck with fear by a sacred ceremony she inadvertently witnesses, "flung herself through the wire and bolted across the Big Paddock, back to safety and home, back to some semblance of normality" (Lucashenko 257). The perceived normality of such spatial divisions clearly places Jo as an inheritor of Western notions of space, in which land is owned either by individuals, institutions or the Crown. The tension in *Dirt Music* between indoor space as home and outdoor space as country, however much the two may inflect one another, is clear, for the possibility of the outdoors being a constituent of home is dismissed when Georgie cleans and maintains the house. In *Mullumbimby* however, the Big Paddock is as much a part of home as the house itself, housing as it does those equine family members to which Jo aligns herself by having "bolted", not run. On the other hand the house as a home is insecure, penetrated by outdoor space because of the

⁸ The name is suggestive of the Lutheran missions and of an introduced species known for its cunning.

⁹ Mob is used in Aboriginal English to designate a family or a tribe.

insufficiency of barriers. Their material quality is exploited to full effect when Jo exchanges breaths through the kitchen screen door with the young colt, Comet. Such doors are often found at the back entrance of rural Australian homes, allowing air to flow, but not insects. They are lightly built, usually made with an aluminium frame and wire gauze. Thus in their very physical structure they are symbolically opposed to the inviolability of the full metal door of the caravan which Jo and Ellen occupied when living at the cemetery, for it was a metal door; one capable of keeping out mooki (ghosts) and memories of the dead (10).

When Jo brings the colt inside as a joke, there is a blurring of spatial distinctions and a realignment of the meaning of family to potentially include non-human species. She even thinks of the horse as *her* “beautiful boy” (69). The fact that family is not limited to a particular species, and safe space is not the same as closed, indoor space, suggests that there are multiple conceptions of space at work in the novel. It appears, however, that they add up to a single intent: the troubling of distinctions between indigenous and non-indigenous relations to place, and the ultimate revelation that a full-relationship is premised upon a holistic philosophy in which belonging to country is not only the preserve of humans. Country is home, and both Jo and Ellen are staying put (258).¹⁰

In both novels houses are not what makes a place a home. It is the physical environment that Luther has an intimate relationship with, not the house. That his country is sentient is hinted at when river banks are described as having “open veins”, as if land were carnal, alive. That this living country figures as a community to which he belongs is also evident when, in his memory of the death of his mother, he lies amongst the leaves of the fallen tree which “felt like protection”. The leaves made him feel “dreamily safe” (360). By the end of the novel, Luther “knows that the world lives in him. And for him and beside him” (451). The insight comes from crossing a threshold, and it is the ability to cross, or not to cross, that will be now be treated in relation to Melissa Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby*.

4.2 Horrible bloody fences: open and closed space

For Jo, the female protagonist in *Mullumbimby*, fences are a bind. At once necessary for staking out her personal claim on land through freehold title, they are simultaneously deemed an imposition on the unity of country. Fencing is but one job to be done on the newly purchased farm, albeit a critical one. The previous occupants have left rubbish everywhere, including fences which in their placement do not suit Jo’s needs. She both removes *and* installs

¹⁰ See also pages 81 and 231 for Jo’s determination to stay on the farm.

fences, which is to say she is breaking down the barrier to a full relationship to country, only to restate it by relenting to an established notion of individual property ownership. She is opening and closing space by making selectively permeable barriers. Within a single chapter Jo shifts from identifying fences as an adversary, “Jo *nil*; fenceposts *too many to count*”, to a symbol of her pride and attachment to place:

You mow and spray and weed all week in Mullum for Basho so you can come home and mow, and weed, and clear away the Mooney’s shit, and plant and fence here. It’ll be worth it, one day, when the place looks like somebody loves it. When the land knows somebody loves it, she corrected herself. Ya caring for your jagan, girl, it’s gotta be more than just words. (Lucashenko 47)

Using the Bundjalung word ‘jagan’ instead of the English ‘land’ suggests an entwining of pan-Aboriginal and Bundjalung relationships to country, if only because a specifically Bundjalung notion of what a relationship to jagan entails may not be available to the protagonist. More importantly, a tension arises, in that “your jagan” now suggests private ownership as well as the sense of country as land with which both community and the individual have an intimate relationship. In *Mullumbimby*, fences are necessary yet “horrible”, crossing songlines indiscriminately and symbolising the dislocation of the Bundjalung people from their ancestral lands (165).

Conflicting notions of ownership are therefore reflected in the value placed on fences. Jo needs and rejects fences at one and the same time. A possible way out of this bind comes when Comet, the colt, drowns as a result of having become entangled in a new fence built by Jo’s neighbour, Rob Starr. That the neighbour is a dugai, or White Australian, goes some way to explaining, in Jo’s mind, why the fence is “a nonsense *wrongfence* that shouldn’t be here” (117, emphasis added). A fence can be right or wrong, depending on where it is placed and by whom. Toward the conclusion of the story it is revealed that the fence is indeed wrong for having been set where it could be washed away. What Jo does not know, and indeed cannot know in her liminal, uninitiated state, is that the fence was placed there specifically to protect a sacred site (274). Thus it is also a *right* fence that, in being washed away, becomes a “murdering” fence. Jo’s surrogate ‘son’ is an introduced species, albeit one widely associated with rural Aboriginal identity,¹¹ therefore ‘murder’ has both political implications through a rejection of what is not properly native (an ecological ideology not limited to Aboriginality), and historical associations through the history of genocide on the east coast of Australia. Out of this incident arises the broader question of who is murdering who. The easy distinction

¹¹ See the history of Aboriginal stockmen and outback rodeos.

between the good Goorie (an Aboriginal from northern NSW) and the bad dugai is avoided. All are implicated, and all must take responsibility for country. It is therefore possible to see how fences close space, creating selectively permeable boundaries that protect country from the uninitiated. Boundaries relate to the liminal status of both Jo in *Mullumbimby* and Luther in *Dirt Music*, in that they signify the rite of passage into knowledge of country, which results in access to community and the sacred. In *Dirt Music* the role of fences is less overt, and less nuanced politically. It is the lack of fences that characterises the demarcation of space; the unfenced boundary between the south and the north marking Luther's rite of passage.

4.3 "The end of the South": liminality and the Far North as anti-home in *Dirt Music*

Luther's trip north is an attempt to escape from painful memories and the hold that place has over him. Yet within the logic of the romantic storyline, which has the final word in this novel after all, Luther is not running from his emotions so much as toward them. Thus he sends Georgie pink dirt from Broome; a terrestrial token of love if ever there was one. He settles upon a destination when he sees Georgie's special place on a map. A place she had somewhat mysteriously "always known", as if, regardless of her pragmatic character and racial profile, she might herself manifest sacred knowledge (102). Yet for Luther going north is a trip into the unknown. It is akin to a hero's quest. Well over two thousand kilometres away, the Kimberley is so vastly different that it functions well as a geographical foil to White Point, with its infestation of disagreeable characters.¹² The transition from known country in the south to the alluringly unknown and dangerous north (it killed Luther's father) is marked not by a clear barrier, but a slow change. The interminable plains of the Pilbara, where fences are no longer to be seen, is excruciating for Luther who puts up with "odd flashes erupting behind his eyes", cramps, tingling lips and the fug of marijuana in the cabin of Rusty's van (Winton 240). The Pilbara at large and his execrable journey through it form a boundary of sorts between two worlds, one which effects physical changes as well as psychological. If we apply Lotman's concept of the hero's journey across a border, we can see Luther's destination as at once a foreign and inhospitable anti-home but also as a place of potentiality. Descriptions of the harshness of the environment are suggestive of wilderness: uninhabited, uncultivated, untouched, unknown. Indeed, Luther is obsessed with "the idea of a place to be truly alone in", for a wilderness provides solitude (Winton 294). Worth noting here is how the romanticised

¹² White Point is a fictional town, positioned by Winton some two or three hours north of Perth.

notion of wilderness, so closely associated with the environmental movement in Australia,¹³ is a form of indigenous erasure. Or as Bayet-Charlton puts it, the “concept of wilderness as nature without any trace of human interaction, dehumanises the Indigenous peoples living within that landscape. [...] The whole of the continent has been affected by Aboriginal people living out their Dreaming obligations” (Bayet-Charlton 174). Georgie’s recollection of the island as “a wilderness within a wilderness” doubles the erasure of Aboriginal history while also imbuing the term with a biblical quality: the island is a Christian wilderness, or liminal zone, engulfed by a terrestrial one (Winton 208). Yet Winton has placed two uninitiated Aboriginal men there, Menzies and Axle, ostensibly to symbolise both the loss of Dreaming and the ongoing presence of Aboriginal people in spite of the devastation caused by colonisation. For Aboriginals, the loss of a relationship with place and the difficulty of accessing ancestral knowledge about country is a form of alienation, whereby absence from country “may become a dynamic boundary of separation between a contemporary Aboriginal experience of everyday life, and an increasingly distant ancestral knowledge; a distinction between the familiar and the local on one hand and the remote and the external on the other” (McWilliam 178). The presence of Menzies and Axle signals country as a zone of potential, a trace of the sacred. Liminality in the novel is not found in the physical border zone, then, but in the anti-home and in the changing relationship to country that it engenders.

In his interrogation of whiteness in Australian literature, Huggan identifies the figure of the ‘white blackfella’, and Anglo-Australian thrown into or in search of an indigenised identity. A figure whose “acquisition of indigeneity” does not actually make him Aboriginal. He remains white, but has simply extended his field of privilege into the cultural property of the ‘blackfella’ (104):

Going native, in other words, is about the performative exercise of identitary options. In a trope predicated on return, the white blackfella may be suitably chastened by his experiences among the natives, but these will rarely prevent him, once he is home, from thinking of himself as white. Going native thus offers a simulacrum of change that reinforces white privilege; its conditions, needless to say, rarely operate in reverse. (Huggan, 104)

Huggan is describing characters who live with and immerse themselves in an Aboriginal community, for the most part one with tribal affiliations and a semi-traditional lifestyle. In spite of this, Huggan’s notion of performing “identitary options” seems entirely appropriate for

¹³ One of the most successful environmental lobby groups in Australia is called The Wilderness Society.

Luther, whose indigeneity¹⁴ seems to have little to do with “concern for indigenous societies and customs, but rather an intuited panacea for a white Australia lapsed into cultural servility and philistinism and in desperate need of spiritual release” (107). Unlike Axle who wanders the mainland without a Dreaming, Luther has access to a sacred relationship with space because of his liminal status. And although Axle is on country, not belonging to it is a permanent condition akin to limbo, whereas Luther’s condition is transitory. White privilege indeed. In *Mullumbimby*, the Aboriginal protagonist’s lack of a full relationship to country puts her in a state of liminality, not limbo, because she has pan-Aboriginal identitary options at her disposal. The next section looks at the difference between cartographic maps and internalised maps, the latter being treated in the novels as equivalent to a full relationship with country, or the possession of a form of Dreaming.

4.4 “Go on the country”: losing and finding maps

Anxious relationships to country in the two novels are typified by the dual notions of mapping that are portrayed, for recording spatial distributions is not necessarily performed cartographically, and when it is, such mapping can speak equally to both graphic and mnemonic representation. This is to say that while mapping in the diagrammatic sense is static, hegemonic and associated with colonialism, Dreaming can also be understood as mapping in that series of places are memorised (McWilliams 187). A map of country is embodied, because:

the Dreaming is not a simple metaphor for a mythic time of origin characterised by fairy stories. There is a reflection nourished by generations of mental and psychosomatic experience, both individual and collective, depending on an identification with the environment which works a little like a mirror, whereby the body reads the earth by its traces which are reproduced on the body and by the voice in order to give life to the forms and reproduce them. (Glowczewski 6)

Internalised maps provide geographic data in the same way as printed maps do.¹⁵ Drawing on Foucault, Harley explicates the authority of cartography: “Especially where maps are ordered by government (or are derived from such maps) it can be seen how they extend and reinforce the legal statutes, territorial imperatives and values stemming from the exercise of political power” (Harley 163). They are a performance of authority, and it is exactly this authority, as an

¹⁴ Winton appears to be manipulating the difference between the “shamateur” and the faux indigene. Luther’s status as a fraud in *White Point* could be read both as pointing to the superficiality of his performance of Dreaming in the Kimberley, or as underwriting the performance as a mark of whitefella Dreaming.

¹⁵ See Wagner (2001) for a discussion of mythology, spatial relations and mapping in Aboriginal culture.

extension of the colonialist project in space and over time, that Axle rejects when he throws Luther's maps into the campfire:

There's nothing Fox can do but pull the maps out and watch them burn.

Fuckin bastards, mutters the boy standing over the flames.

Shit, says Fox. That's torn it.

Got a thing about em, says Menzies. Just trouble, maps. You can't really blame him. Like they suck everythin up. Can't blame a blackfulla not likin a map, Lu.

Go on the country, says the boy almost pacified now. Not on the map. And what the fuck does that mean?

Menzies shrugs. Then he smiles. Means, be careful you don't get lost.

(Winton 312)

What Axle rejects is the ordering of the world according to a European vision of space. He prioritises a *relationship* to country: an alternative way of reading geography. Ostensibly, the text posits Axle not as an embodiment of the true relationship to country, however, but as a tragic antithesis to Luther, whose spiritual journey the novel tracks. Axle, wanting to believe that his very Aboriginality makes him central to the operation of Dreaming, tells Luther that the "[w]heel turns on me" (309). Menzies has already reported how Axle came to him out of the bush, having been in search of people still living a traditional lifestyle, but that he is "not a proper Aborigine man", meaning he has not been initiated into Aboriginal law and thus has no access to Dreaming (304). Axle's lack of a musical education is equivalent to not knowing the songlines in which spatial orientation is preserved. Menzies spells out another crucial division of space for Luther. It is not the way in which it is mapped, so much as whether or not one has the right to be there. Menzies concedes that the land is a part of a national park and therefore not privatised. Yet he cautions Lu not to go to the western shore of the gulf, into "business places", acknowledging that he and Axle cannot go there because they are "lost people" (311). The implication here is that space *could* be sacred, but that the "lost" Menzies cannot be sure. Axle is convinced that "them islands" are where his ancestors, the "spirit people", reside, but ultimately only the mobile protagonist can penetrate the anti-home of sacred space in the Far North (309). It is the hero, in Lotman's terms, that may respect the sanctity of places without being excluded from the knowledge they contain. For he himself is not lost.

The destruction of Luther's maps signals his new relationship to country. The opposite is the case for Jo in *Mullumbimby*. Caught up in the dugai system of property rights, she has no true relationship to country as communal, sacred and cultural. This lack of connection makes her a liminal figure. Three significant revelations supervene to mark Jo's transition out of liminality and into both a general correspondence with country and a particular correspondence

with a site which other local Aboriginals are caring for and keeping secret (Lucashenko 278). The first revelation is the hearing of sacred music, or “talga” in the forest near her new (or old) home (97). The second is the discovery of a map of country on her teenage daughter Ellen’s palm, and the third is the witnessing of a sacred ceremony (246 and 256 respectively). The map is literally an expression of Ellen’s genes, in that it is made from the natural creases in the skin. It describes all the ways in the lower Brunswick River Valley, riverine and terrestrial, with the accuracy of a topographic survey. In that very image lies the conundrum at the heart of the novel, for the map is at once a reflection of European cartographic conventions, a genetic imprint, and a pattern incorporated into a work of art mimicking generic stylistic traditions and executed on a car door. As a literary device, it brings together the various identificatory strategies at play; mainstream Anglo Australian, pan-Aboriginal and Bundjalung, as well as exemplifying the cultural synthesis that Jo, Ellen and Twoboy are all struggling to achieve.¹⁶ The map on Ellen’s hand becomes cultural knowledge through its incorporation into a work of art, but still within a distinctly pan-Aboriginal stylistic register (231). Finding the map embodied in her daughter causes Jo to think, “*I gave birth to the valley*” (246, emphasis in original). She thus absorbs her own identity into her sense of what a communal, Bundjalung identity might be. It marks her self-perception as hierophanic, and is an affirmation of her possession of hereditary rights.

The status of a place as home or anti-home, the transgression of boundaries as a mark of entering and leaving states of liminality, and internalised maps as a mark of belonging are all indicators of the evolving relationship the protagonists have with country. It is accompanied by an increasing awareness of or exposure to hierophany, or moments in which the sacred qualities of country erupt into the profane.

¹⁶ These characters all identify as Bundjalung, yet many of their ways of expressing Aboriginality are informed by pan-Aboriginal conventions, not local knowledge.

5. The Sacred

The way the authors of *Dirt Music* and *Mullumbimby* imbue spatial relationships with sacredness has implications for their portrayal of how indigenous and non-indigenous people relate to their environment. Song is used as a medium for linking land to the sacred. This gives rise to depictions of religious syncretism that underwrite both pan-Aboriginal projects of return and a white Australian search for a new, non-European identity, so that people may be linked to country through music as individuals or as a community. The function of sound has already been touched upon, but before returning to it in the context of Jo and Luther's eschewal of music, I want to use section 5.1 to demonstrate how meditative states in both novels give the protagonists access to the sacred. Then in section 5.2 I will discuss the synthesis of Christianity and Dreaming, both as a social reality and as a literary device.

5.1 "Actually stop thinking": death, dadirri and totemic animals

In Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*, Jo's late guardian, Aunty Barb, taught her the little Aboriginal lore she knows and counselled her on the importance of dadirri. Standing on her newly purchased farm and reflecting on this advice, Jo sees a wedge-tailed eagle circling above, and with its shadow making a matching circle on the ground below. Jo recalls Barb's words: "Circles protect you if you let them, girl. But ya gotta let em. Gotta not get in their way." The eagle soon departs, "becoming a tiny black dot above the ridge-line" (Lucashenko 22). The heaven-bound eagle is reduced from its status as bestower of protective circles to a dot, the hierophany receding back into the distance. The symbolism of dots and circles as a trace of the sacred, or Dreaming, is returned to when Jo muses over her daughter's hopes for a career as an artist, whereby commonplaces of Aboriginal iconography are invested with local significance. (214).

Similarly in Winton's *Dirt Music*, Luther recalls finding his niece Bird at his special place among the limestone pinnacles, drawing with a stick in the sand. She matter-of-factly reports that she has seen God, describing "him" as a "dot in a circle, sort of. When I close me eye and poke it with me thumb he floats across the sky. Right into the sun" (Winton 110). The very fleetingness of her ill-fated life sustains the portrayal of Bird as "the nearest thing to an angelic being". A short while later, over dinner, Bird's brother claims to have seen an eagle, which is then weighed against the sighting of God. The connection between Bird, hierophany and an animal with totemic potential is thus made, all within Luther's recollection of "another

life” (109). The chapter concludes with all members of his family dead and Luther feeling like he has “seen the end of the world” (119). Through the association of his niece with God, and his nephew with a totemic animal—both as parts of one memory that itself reinstates Luther’s liminality—the entire family is sacralised. They are delivered into the hands of God, just as the accident returns them to the earth. This collapses the distinction between heavenward and earthbound movements, as earth is itself hierophany. It also gives substance to the images of (a) Bird drawing in the sand and a rising eagle, as both are instances of the sacred made manifest.

The permeation of physical bodies with the sacred is evident in *Mullumbimby* when Ellen’s body is revealed as a map. Jo, whose physical labour puts her in touch with the land, manifests a sign of the sacred when her fall in the cemetery leaves an exceptional scar, one reminiscent of those previously made during marriage rites (Lucashenko 237). She also hears Aunty Barb talking to her “from the Picabeen cemetery” and the voices of the Ancestors in the hills while practicing dadirri (98). Similarly in *Dirt Music*, Luther thinks back to the farm and how “the place was alive”. As he walks along the river, Luther remembers having entered trance-like states when observing nature or the effects of light on water:

Those days you could come down here and clear your mind. Stare at the sun-torched surface and break it into disparate coins of light. Actually stop thinking and go blank. [...] A speck of light, you were, an ember. And happy. Even after his mother died he had it, though it waned. Later on only music got him there. And now that is gone there is only work. (Winton 104)

The meditative quality is reminiscent of dadirri (the recurrent marker of the approach of the sacred in *Mullumbimby*); this time, however, it is Luther imagining himself as a “speck”, and of nothing less than light itself. To be light is to be ethereal, hardly there. To be an ember is to be the remnant of a former blaze. In both cases, it is to be extramundane, not far removed from death. The imagery promotes Luther as liminal and as an instance of hierophany. He is permeated with the sacred. But although Luther hears and sees extramundane phenomena, no claim is put upon him by country. Just as he shirks obligations placed on him by society, his relationship to country is purely the *sense* of belonging, not the duty of care. A European sense of a division between mind and body still informs the treatment of spirituality in the passage quoted above, where descriptions of the spiritual evoke the intangibility of light. This is one way in which Christianity affects numinous imagery in *Dirt Music*, just as Bird is associated with angels and, in *Mullumbimby*, a rising eagle is associated with the transcendence of the soul.

5.2 “A crucifix backlit by the emerging dawn”: combining Christianity with Dreaming

In *Dirt Music*, conspicuous references to Christianity are rife. The synthesis of religions is subtle and achieved through descriptions of sunlight, water, apparitions and Luther’s mental state all as moments of hierophany. The conclusion one draws is not that Christian doctrine itself is brought into confluence with Dreaming, but rather a generic Western notion of the spiritual as similar to and congruous with the Dreaming’s emphasis on holism. In *Mullumbimby* however, Christianity and Dreaming are overtly synthesised. This reflects an historical reality in that many Aboriginal people are today Christian, due largely to the influence of missions set up in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many Aboriginal Christians see no discord between their Christianity and the upholding of traditional culture. The local significance of place is not encapsulated by Christianity, however. It “is just not present [...] no matter how hard Aborigines (and others) might try to find it” (Hume 135). Edmonds has also observed this in the Roper River region of the Northern Territory, where “the significance of ‘place’ for Aboriginal people [...] is particular to specific locations” (Edmonds 205). Christianity is conceptually independent of place, whereas the Dreaming is not. The Dreaming exists as a way of maintaining place relations for the sake of the people *and* for the sake of the place by enfolding an environmental care-taking ethic into a set of anthropocentric creation stories. Putting aside the Dreaming as a regionalised phenomena and instead treating it as a pan-Aboriginal construct derived from a range of sources, it is possible to ascribe to it an ethical code with an entirely different provenance to that of Christianity. Bowles brings the differences between the religions into focus:

The Christian story is one of humanity’s sin and redemption. For this reason, transgression occupies a more central place in Christianity than in most other religions. Aboriginal society before settlement lacked the top-down social and spiritual control that marked the development of Christianity. People negotiated relationships with each other, ancestral beings, and the land in an interactive way. (Bowles 212)

A primary difference between the religions, then, is the central authority of Christianity; a singular power, the defiance of which takes on a moral quality, rendered as guilt. Aboriginal people on missions used Christianity to understand the guilt-oriented social relationships they were forming with whites. They could absorb influence because “holistic systems are open to accommodation of that which is new, and [...] Aboriginal systems of philosophy and ecology accommodate the new according to the logic of country” (Rose, *Nourishing* 42).

Each Aboriginal community in Australia that came into contact with Christianity and absorbed it did so on its own terms. The Dreaming was never voluntarily abandoned. Rather it was augmented by Christian belief as a way of making sense of new circumstances, which goes some way to explaining how pan-Aboriginal cultural practices come to exist alongside both localised Dreaming and Christian doctrine. This is exactly what characterises the religious identity of the Bundjalung community as depicted by Lucashenko.

Three revelations mark Jo's transition out of liminality. The first was the hearing of the sacred song cycle, or talga. The second was the discovery of a map of country on her daughter Ellen's palm. The third revelation marking Jo's social and spiritual progress is the inadvertent witnessing of a sacred ceremony. She is drawn toward the ridgeline above her farm early one morning, where, surrounded by a "mass of tiny feathered souls",¹⁷ she sees a young Aboriginal boy from the area "facing west with his arms outstretched, a crucifix backlit by the emerging dawn" (Lucashenko 256). The boy is performing a ceremony to protect a sacred site, but the gesture lies entirely within the Christian iconographic register. The significance of the event is later explained to her by Granny Nurrung, a Bundjalung elder whose public face is that of a staunch Christian. Nurrung is on country and secure in her acquaintance with "the culture". She sees no disagreement between the Aboriginal concept of country and a Christian concept of the afterlife as "home" (275). Her priority is to protect sacred sites; battles over native title being nothing more than a distraction. Granny Nurrung's hierophanic explanation of recent events underscores the possibility of sentient land both within the context of Dreaming and Christianity. She explains the mysterious appearance of the map on Ellen's hands as being "just the Lord's way of bringing your girl home to country", and the disembodied sound of traditional Aboriginal song that Jo heard in the forest as "a miracle", but qualifies it in terms of sentience: "That talga you bin hearing, that's the lyrebird singing out to you, calling you. Telling you that you found the right jagan there, you and your girl. Telling you you're home" (276). Thus Granny Nurrung melds Christianity seamlessly with Dreaming. The Dreaming comes from country itself; Nurrung is just an interpreter, and Bundjalung culture is made to replicate the generic notion of what constitutes Dreaming. In *Mullumbimby* at least, spatial polyphony does not necessarily entail conflict.

¹⁷ Fairy wrens. Throughout the novel, the author signals various avian species as potentially totemic.

6. Music

Chapter 4 (Country) demonstrated how the sense of home can consist of both open and closed space, and how boundaries are a necessary but troubling adjunct, enabling a sense of country-as-home by establishing what home is not. Chapter 4 also looked at how a certain kind of mapping secures a sense of belonging to country. Chapter 5 (The Sacred) looked at how protagonists contemplate their surrounds and thus witness the sacred or even become physically aligned with it. It also discussed the synthesis of Christianity and Dreaming that informs contemporary Aboriginality. This chapter discusses ways in which the authors use music and sound to demonstrate the protagonists' sense of belonging to country. It will be shown that the protagonists have an intimate relationship with country that parallels their human-to-human relationships. How this relationship with country has distinctly religious overtones is underscored by the attribution of sacrality to certain sounds. The first section of this chapter looks at the significance of not playing music and how it signals stasis. Music is abandoned precisely because it is meaningful, and not playing (a form of privation) signals that meaning is the preserve of those with whom country wants a relationship, while only those who are in a relationship with a community can play. The second section then looks at how in *Dirt Music*, Luther returns provisionally to music while still in a liminal phase, acquiring a sense of Dreaming. The third section outlines the sacred function of song in order to show how the use of sound as hierophany in *Mullumbimby* marks the entry of Jo into a specifically Bundjalung community, which is not the same as the broadly Aboriginal identity she already possesses.

6.1 “No more, no more”: stasis and liminality

Jo, the protagonist in *Mullumbimby*, has a teenage daughter named Ellen, who asks her why she gave up music. Jo explains that she was forced to by changing circumstances. In recognising the responsibilities that arrived with the birth of her daughter, Jo left off the bohemian life of a musician. Thus her response to Ellen is, “Ecclesiastes, and a crying baby girl” (Lucashenko, 92). Jo refers to a passage in the Bible describing adulthood as being marked by the acceptance of changing roles and responsibilities.¹⁸ Yet Jo's answer is evasive,

¹⁸ “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). Reference derived from a personal communication.

for as the following passage makes clear, there are other fundamental, albeit not entirely unambiguous reasons why Jo is *unable* to play:

[I]nside her chest there wasn't a flicker of whatever it was that made you stand in front of of a mob of punters and see them wild for your song. [...] No, she was no musician, no more, no more, I ain't gonna sing no more, she chanted aloud to the fire. The music had left her as quickly and mysteriously as it had arrived in her teens, and there wasn't a lot anyone could do about that.

Jo glanced over at the headstones.

'You mob might try and help a woman,' she told them matter-of-factly. 'Sling a bit of inspiration this way, eh?' But nothing happened. (Lucashenko, 10)

Jo Breen recognises music as a manifestation of the sacred: it arrived and left mysteriously, unbidden and irrespective of her will.¹⁹ The disavowal of music is given linguistic force when she chants, "no more, no more, I ain't gonna sing no more". This is a variation on Ethel Waters' song 'Ain't Gonna Sin No More', suggesting the renunciation of an unrestrained musician's lifestyle. The repetition of "no more" also forms an association with Bob Dylan's 'Ain't Gonna Grieve', a song written in support of the civil rights movement (Karlin 200). In "chanting aloud to the fire", this network of references is brought into the context of both Aboriginal tradition and contemporary performance; "chanting" and "fire" being suggestive of corroboree. Jo is in a liminal state and detached from her former life as a musician. Yet the casual attempt at communication with the dead and the suggestion that they might help ties the performance of music to the Dreaming. The Ancestors may speak through sacred manifestations, but the recognition and interpretation of them is not available to Jo, whose own rite of passage has not been performed. This inability to communicate with the dead is later posited as being a result of Jo's unwillingness (she is scared). In addressing the dead, the fact that "nothing happened" may also be a problem of identity, for the cemetery where Jo works is a burial place for whites. Nevertheless, what Jo feels she lacks is a spiritual guide. Her customary knowledge is only partial, having been raised by the now deceased tribal elder Aunty Barb, who is buried elsewhere. Stubbornness, and absorption in the "dugai" world of cosmopolitan, modern Australia, arrests her journey toward personal and communal growth. Similarly, Twoboy may be able to give a reasonable rendition of Marley's 'Redemption Song' (his agency is entirely political), but the music of the Ancestors evades him; he has no access to the sacred (Lucashenko 233-4). Twoboy embodies the pan-Aboriginal response to the loss of the specificity of place.

¹⁹ Coincidentally perhaps, the surname Breen is shared by the author of a landmark study of Aboriginal music.

Dunbar-Hall and Gibson point to an interesting aspect of performance that sheds light on the significance of Jo's state of musical suspension. In their discussion of the similarity of some Aboriginal rock concerts to corroboree, where people from various tribes would gather to perform and exchange information, they explain how symbolic expressions of Aboriginality can serve to foster acknowledgement of dispossession: "Territorialisations may be physical [...] or textual—for instance in songs. Musical practices can thus constitute acts of owning in a symbolic, if not literal, sense" (Dunbar-Hall, *Deadly* 77). The very act of playing music in front of an audience, then, is akin to corroboree, and produces a textual territorialisation. Twoboy, therefore can be understood as evincing the terrestrial and pan-Aboriginal politics of space (albeit only with an audience of two), whereas Jo's liminal state, in which she does not play at all, is symbolic of her lack of engagement with the spirituality of place, which is equivalent to having no place in the culture.²⁰

The relevance of music to land in *Dirt Music* is encapsulated by Luther, when Georgie asks him what sort of music he used to play. He answers:

Anything you could play on a verandah. You know, without electricity. Dirt music.

As in...soil?

Yeah. Land. Home Country. (Winton 95)

He elaborates on this explanation in saying they played "rootsy stuff". This is more or less a description of folk music, which, although Lu doesn't feel entirely comfortable with the designation, is the very form of music in which the cultural origins of a people are overtly expressed. Crane points out that it is because Luther does not play *folk music*, of all possible styles, that he is disconnected from the community in White Point. For folk music is exactly that: music by and for the people. As a communal form of music, folk is necessarily attached to locales, or sites of social meaningfulness (Crane 28). Similarly, Aboriginal rock is chiefly associated with the land-rights movement and the recording of protest songs in general, and thus has at its heart the sense of coming together in order to exercise political agency (Dunbar-Hall, *Nitmiluk* 45). In no longer playing, Jo (*Mullumbimby*) temporarily steps out of the broader community, eventually to return, but as a member of a local one bound up with knowledge of place. She has not severed all contact with community as Luther (*Dirt Music*) has, but since music is a vehicle for community solidarity, return is symbolic of her passage through to a new status. Luther's eschewal of music, on the other hand, is a withdrawal from society. His return is posited in similar terms but with the fundamental distinction of race, for he is not entering a tribal affiliation. Return is no less a mark of identification with place than it

²⁰ For a discussion of the political and economic significance of rock music in Aboriginal communities, see Gibson (2006).

is for Jo, but still within the Anglo-Australian logic of space as bounded and owned, not communal. In Luther's case, returning to society is simply returning to Georgie and the farm, nothing more. Where Jo gains access to secret knowledge invested in country, Luther gains access to a vague notion of grace. In his experience of the anti-home, a field in which memories are vivid and his sensory perception is heightened, Luther is alarmed to find himself "hearing dead people and singing their words" (Winton 373). Such an expression of his relationship to place and experience makes Luther exemplary of the simultaneous salutation and appropriation of Aboriginal culture by White Australians, resulting in what Miller describes as a "tangled web of bad faith relations" (Miller 415). The dead people are ostensibly his own relatives, but the concept that he might, in his heightened state of awareness, hear the songs of the deceased, is entirely Aboriginal. A white protagonist for whom Romantic poetry is a significant reference point has access to indigenous cultural forms—forms which are treated purely in terms of their aesthetic value as other to the rationalism of modernity. By the end of the novel, Luther has survived his stay in the wild north, but the survival of his culture was never in doubt.

6.2 "Just outside nature": sound as hierophany

In *Dirt Music*, Axle's lack of musicianship is a symbol of his disconnection from place. He is on country, but without the sacred knowledge that music maintains. Luther, however, having temporarily abandoned music, forges a new relationship to place through his resumption of playing, only this time within a decidedly Aboriginal register. The specificity of place is empowering for Luther because he is musical. He can tap the sacred through the meditative drone of the fishing line he uses as an instrument; "a sound just outside nature but not dissimilar to it" (Winton 368). In other words, hierophany.

Both Winton and Lucashenko manipulate the familiar singularity of bush soundscapes in their novels, producing a sense of the ineffability of the sacred. That is to say, on occasions hierophany may register as sound rather than as a body in space. In *Mullumbimby*, the hierophanic nature of sounds is pointed to when the protagonist practices dadirri and hears birdsong. In *Dirt Music*, the repetitive, monotone sounds of the Australian bush, such as cicadas, frogs and birds, are similarly used to mark the hierophanic nature of both the protagonist and his environment (Richards 7). These environmental sounds are reminiscent of the "plangent" and "manifold" monotone of Luther's drone, which itself echoes the quality of the didgeridoo, that quintessentially Aboriginal instrument associated now with pan-Aboriginal

identity (Winton 402 and 369). Playing the drone in the Kimberley is a symbol of Luther's impending return to society. It links him to holistic notions of spirituality, as when he plays he enters a trance-like state in which he is "so damn far into ones" that he experiences himself not in his isolation in the Far North, but as a part of a "resonating multiplication" (388). Nature supplies the drone of bees and the "whorrr" of the earth itself, while Luther's dreams are filled with similarly hypnotic intonations (193, 232 and 53). Droning also makes a link to modernity through the sound of cars, aeroplanes and generators fulfilling their mechanical tasks (217, 383, 51). Thus modern Australia, dominated as it is by Anglo-Australian cultural norms, invades the natural environment (or wilderness) and thus by extension the space of Aboriginal tradition through the resonating "one" of an appropriated holism. Holism is open; it can incorporate the trappings of modernity, and indeed anything else.

Luther enters into communion with his environment while playing the drone, an environment characterised by hierophany in the form of boab trees, whose trunks are like bodies; quolls, with numinous "moonsplashes" that make osmotic disappearances; and the very "rock that swallows the quoll" itself (451). In the mediative state that playing the drone procures, Luther travels songlines of his own, back to his country where "limestone stirs" and "rock moans" (372). Luther is not dreaming, rather, he is Dreaming; a state of remembering and of mindfulness, in which he can hear sounds otherwise inaudible to humans, such as the "scratchy gossip" of ants (369). This is precisely the sort of listening that characterises *dadirri*, which Jo in *Mullumbimby* uses in order to (hopefully) learn from the sounds of nature. Jo hears various bird calls, as well as chanting, or "ancient human voices". Indeed, she recognises this as an eruption of the sacred, as if the "hills were singing to her" (Lucashenko 97). Sound and music, then, are signal ways of revealing the extent to which the protagonists are in touch with, or a part of, the sentient environment. The interconnectedness and the attribution of agency to country is summed up toward the end of *Dirt Music* when Luther sings, for in that moment he is also sung. (Winton 451).

6.3 "Hearing the talga again": the religious and political function of song

What is particular to Aboriginal musical traditions, and what sets them apart from Christian cultural influences in Australia, is the direct relationship between song and land. For the Dreaming is a mnemonic system of mapping land, of remembering its features, as well as an affirmation of land as the trace of a creation story. Singing the land, in the sense of actualising his or her Dreaming, makes the singer a partaker in creation, but the relationship is not a

historical one. Rather, the sacred act of creation is immanent, and country bears witness to this (Broughton, Ellingham and Lusk, 455). Song transmits “knowledge to succeeding generations about their belonging to the land and their responsibility to care for it. Such singing of the land has entailed communal performance and ceremonies, which involve and belong to each member of a group” (Reed 66). Thus when Jo hears “the talga again” she is being recognised by country as responsible (Lucashenko 256). Song is sacred for the protagonists in both novels.

In *Mullumbimby*, Twoboy’s playing of Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’ speaks of a transnational response to the experience of colonial exploitation (77). Through it, he affirms his politicised, non-White identity, but also demonstrates the range of influences that have filled the vacuum left by the loss of traditional songs. Reed describes how song is a way of transmitting knowledge between generations; maintaining the presence of traditional, historical lore in the present. An example of the continuation of Aboriginal musical traditions into contemporary genres can be found in Kev Carmody’s songs, in which exists a direct connection between identity and an emotional investment in land. Carmody sings in the folk rock genre about the spiritual progress he expects to make after death, whereby he envisages himself entering into the nurturing embrace of country, while rejecting the idea of memorialising individuals through, for example, the erection of headstones (Reed 70). Lucashenko points to this connection between the pan-Aboriginal folk rock genre and the desire to regain a localised connection to land based on sacred knowledge and immersion in community. Like Carmody, the narrator posits the erecting of headstones as a specifically Anglo-Australian phenomenon (Lucashenko 2). Then, in chapter twelve, Jo sets out in the car with her family to visit Lake Majestic, which is intimated as a site of sacred power:

The busy clamour of highway traffic was replaced by a Kev Carmody CD and by the wind rushing past Jo’s right ear. As they hit the first stretch of dirt and heard the kids shriek with excitement at the potholes, she slowed even more, and realised that the drive was going to take a lot longer than they planned. (Lucashenko, 236)

The realities of contemporary Australian life exemplified by the reliance on cars and time spent in traffic is compared to the slower progress made over a potholed road toward spiritual redemption. This is another example of spatial polyphony, whereby the modern, mechanised space of the highway is contrasted with the tranquility of the hinterland. Jo and her family navigate both realms.

The politics of land rights and displacement are expressed through Aboriginal rock music (Dunbar-Hall, *Deadly* 56). The attachment to place in such music is both spiritual and political, expressing a sense of responsibility for land as well as a yearning to return:

[t]here are songs about specific places and their significance to the members communities from which musicians come. Another set of songs is about country in general; these songs do not name specific sites or language speaking areas. [...] We perceive this distinction as representative of the provenance of songs as either expressing an individual language speaking community's attachment to named sites, or as representative of a pan-Aboriginal land rights ethic. (Dunbar-Hall, *Deadly* 73).

As a member of the Stolen Generation²¹ himself, Kev Carmody's music belongs to the latter. It has in common with 'Redemption Song' the desire to return to an idealised way of living prior to the effects of colonisation and dislocation on the one hand, and a degree of political realism on the other: that the journey might take longer than planned. Redemption comes for Jo in the form of limited access to sacred knowledge, and thus not only an improved relationship with country but also an enhanced sense of political sovereignty. The twinning of a traditional mindset with a pan-Aboriginal reality is signalled in the closing pages of *Mullumbimby*, when Jo chooses to sing Marley's classic in honour of Granny Nurrung (Lucashenko 279). As a song sung and admired by all, it achieves a political synthesis: a distinction between a Bundjalung identity and a broader, pan-Aboriginal one need not be made. Nor should the surrounding Anglo Australian culture be taken as necessarily external to Aboriginal identity, as Marley songs have a broad iconicity that transcends racial identity. Sung in honour of the local elder who puts her faith in Christ, Redemption Song is also an indirect expression of religious syncretism, as Nurrung herself exemplifies the successful synthesis of religions.

²¹ People forcibly removed from their families by state governments up until the 1970s.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated ways in which physical space in *Dirt Music* and *Mullumbimby* is depicted as sentient and responsive to the protagonists. Country, understood as hierophany, has agency and remembers its people, just as through song its people remember it. Both novels can be analysed with respect to the meaning of spacial divisions. The boundary between spaces act as a filtering mechanism, such that what is foreign becomes domesticated. In *Mullumbimby*, the domestication of non-indigenous cultural products, species and spatial relations is a fait accompli, while boundaries express liminality as the rite of passage. Passage into knowledge gives access to country, and country is the sacred community. Further, in *Mullumbimby* the responsibility of care is posited within the context of both specifically Bundjalung and broadly pan-Aboriginal concepts. In *Dirt Music*, however, indigenous cultural knowledge is treated as foreign in so much as it lies outside of the closed space of what is known; the paradox having consequences for the indigenous characters rather than for the protagonists. Both novels bear witness to the synthesis of Christianity and Aboriginal cosmology, expressed through relationships to country. In the case of *Mullumbimby*, the synthesis entails a grudging acceptance of the internalisation of White culture by an indigenous protagonist. Implicit in *Dirt Music*, on the other hand, is a White protagonist's aspiration to an Aboriginal consciousness. Winton contrasts Axle's vain search for Dreaming with Luther's successful appropriation of a Dreaming-like connection to place. Despite a sensitive portrayal of Axle, only the protagonist is liminal enough to be capable of perceiving the sentience of the land, and ultimately rediscover his place in it. Axle, the self-proclaimed centre or origin, remains displaced. Both music and sound are associated in the novels with the sacred: the withdrawal of music signalling the liminal status of the protagonists. The political import of music becomes evident in *Mullumbimby* through multiple references to Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song'.

In light of all this, it is possible to ascribe a hybrid character to the protagonist in *Mullumbimby*, embodying as she does three cultural reference points: incomplete local Aboriginal knowledge, pan-Aboriginal politics, and the all-pervasive reality of a modern, White-dominated Australia. The protagonist in *Dirt Music*, on the other hand, illustrates the appropriation of cultural forms, receiving the benefits of a relationship to country through grace and without the burden of responsibility that initiation into Dreaming entails. Luther's relationship to country pertains to the troubled notion of non-indigenous belonging. Lotman's explanation of ambivalence in spatial polyphony then evokes the similarly ambivalent politics of reconciliation in Australia, in so much as reconciliation is intended to be a process of

healing through the acknowledgement of past wrongs, but can also be understood as an annexation of aboriginality by a hegemonic, Anglocentric society in need of assuagement. *Dirt Music* was written in 2001, a time when White Australia was engaging with Aboriginal Australia on new terms, due largely to the reconciliation movement and increasing public awareness of the instrumental role played by government in the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Using Aboriginal cultural forms to describe the way a white protagonist relates to the Australian environment is indicative of this. *Mullumbimby*, published in 2013, uses many similar devices as *Dirt Music* to explore the way an indigenous protagonist relates to the physical environment. In doing so, it recasts the exploration of place as a claim to the continuity of a localised, indigenous sense of belonging; a sense of belonging preceding, situated within and complementary to a broader, Australian identity.

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