

THEME OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN TARA JUNE WINCH'S *SWALLOW THE AIR*

Lalita Kumari

Associate Professor of English, S.A. Jain College, Ambala City

Jyoti

M.A. English, UGC-NET, Former Student, M.N.S. Govt. P.G. College, Bhiwani

ABSTRACT

Swallow the Air by Tara June Winch is also an important addition to modern Aboriginal literature since it is a narrative that does not investigate the Indigenous identity as the stable inheritance but, on the contrary, as the relational, broken, and burdened process, including its historical aspects. The novel explores the disruption of belonging to settler-colonial structures and permanent reworking of belonging through memory, kinship, and Country through the journey of May Gibson into spaces of grief, poverty, displacement, and partial cultural reconnection. This paper posits that the text by Winch does not entertain simple readings of aboriginal recovery but rather, it offers identity, which is negotiated in connection with the broken inheritance, the emotional survival, and the movement of space. With the help of critical commentary, Indigenous centred frameworks, and literary criticism, the discussion reveals that *Swallow the Air* is not purely a work of a coming of age story but rather an intervention in discussions concerning the topic of Aboriginality, land and cultural continuity. In the paper, it is further argued that fragmented form is of central politics in the novel: discontinuity is the form of narration of dispossession, and narration is the tool by which the loss is borne, understood and challenged. Through identity in relation to land, language, memory, and mobility, Winch repositions memberships out of the terms provided by the settler nation. The novel finally fantasizes belonging not as a completion but as a continued and challenging and moral coming back to Indigenous relation.

Keywords: Indigenous identity, belonging, Tara June Winch, *Swallow the Air*, Aboriginal literature, Country, memory, displacement, colonialism, cultural survival

1. INTRODUCTION

Swallow the Air by Tara June Winch inhabits a paradigmatic and discontinuous territory in the modern Australian literature of the Aboriginal, which functions as a fundamental shift in the discourse of national identity, settler-colonial violence, and Indigenous survival. The text appears in 2006, having won the prestigious David Unaipon Award as an unpublished Indigenous writers, and it escapes the standard generic fundamentals of the Western novel, instead adopting a fragmented, episodic form, suggesting that the text reflects its disjointed realities of the protagonist. The story follows a physical, psychological and spiritual path of May Gibson, a young Wiradjuri woman who finds herself in a precarious situation of nearest extremes after the suicide of her mother. Nevertheless the text resolutely does not take the route of May as a straight and linear coming-of-age narration and a nostalgic revisiting of a pristine ethnic ancestry. Instead, it presents Indigenous identity not as something, which easily passes with the blood, but as a highly contentious, dynamic, and historically weighted procedure that has to be maneuvered upon hostile terms (McDonnell 75).

The novel chronologically demolishes the illusion of a post-colonial, reconciled Australian nation through May moving across the socio-geographical landscapes of the modern

Australia, the working-class margins of Wollongong coastal to the urban displacement of the Redfern Block, and, ultimately, into the rural space of Wiradjuri country. The writing strongly demands that the present-day Aboriginal subject is manoeuvring through an environment filled with continuing to reinvent the afterlives of imperial violence, the policies of assimilation and the institutional disregard. By doing this, Winch compels a critical re-assessment of belongingness when there has been active cultivation of extinguishing of Indigenous kinship systems, spatial knowledges and linguistic traditions by the colonizer state (Clarke 22). The extremely poor conditions, the brokenness of families, the unfair distribution of social space that continuously forces Indigenous bodies to the periphery form the world the novel is set in.

This is an exhaustive research report that offers a detailed analysis of the *Swallow the Air*, where it is stated that the novel forms the identity as a consistent negotiation process that involves intergenerational trauma, material precarity, and spatial dislocation. Based on a rich repertoire of critical writing, such as a reading of the text as an anti-recovery narrative that uses Melissa Lucashenko, a conceptualization of the deep temporal reservoir by Nicholas Birns, the framework of a crisis of nonrelation by Dorothee Klein, the analysis of precarity by Sue Kossew, and the postulation of the Aboriginal bildungsroman by Jeanine Leane, the report logically identifies the place where race, class, gender, and geography encounter each other in the text (Birns 31). Moreover, it is seen that the formal fragmentation of the novel reflects the discontinuity of the process of dispossession and that storytelling carries out an essential counter-move of survivance of cultures. Connecting identity irrevocably to land, memory, and locomotion, Winch re-replaces Indigenous belonging long after the assimilative terms the settler-colonial nation may want to propose, and variously envisions belonging as neither an ultimate declaration, but as an on-going, challenging, and ethical renegotiation of Indigenous relation.

2. THE "DEEP TEMPORAL RESERVOIR" OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Nicholas Birns is another very important theoretical prism through which one can see the psychological and physical landscape of May. Having elaborated on the observations made by the Wiradjuri academic Jeanine Leane, Birns supposes that the traditional Western bildungsroman has a protagonist who goes through his or her trials and develops independently, eventually becoming a functional member of the society. But, the Indigenous protagonist is deactivated within completely different temporal, social and historical frames. Birns suggests that characters such as May Gibson have an obsessive sense of time known as deep temporal reservoir of the debilitating circumstance (Birns 27). Although May is a modern day teenager, who is too young to have been directly affected by the state-sanctioned policies of the Stolen Generations or the frontier massacres of the nineteenth century, she is nevertheless intensely and irrevocably haunted by them (Cornwell 3).

This is the idea of a deep temporal reservoir, which represents trauma not as the past incident, but rather as a continuous, intergenerational haunting working to determine the present. The poverty, drug addiction, and destroyed family life, which May is subjected to, are not just a few cases of personal moral deficiencies, as developed by neoliberal and conservative political discourses in Australia perhaps habitually. Instead, these are the immediate, accumulative, and desired outcomes of centuries of colonial policies that were aimed at destroying of Aboriginal sovereignty, language, and kinship (Kossew 18). Thus, the identity of May and her suffering cannot be separated on the historical trauma of the Wiradjuri people; her personal crisis is a micro-system on a larger, systemic crisis of colonial violence that exists over time.

Dorothee Klein and Sue Kossew elaborate much more upon the socio-economic and relational aspects of the text, and they dwell on the precarity acuity that characterizes the everyday life of May (79). After her mother commits sudden suicide, Klein presents the notion of the crisis of nonrelation which is modified after postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi, who uses the concept to denote the existential alienation that May experiences after the suicide. Prior to the tragedy, the mother was the weak and yet crucial connection between May and her culture, place and a basic meaning of ontological security. This abrupt breaking of this maternal connection denies May any place of refuge and she is in an extreme nonrelation state as she is completely disconnected with her surroundings, her past as well as individuals directly around her.

Kossew is no exception to this theoretical framework since she explores the material precarity of May in its raw form. Winch is no stranger to the ugliest, most corporeal description of the underclass life: neglected housing commission estates, abusive partners, crippling drug addiction, and the ever-present and threatening spectre of homelessness and institutionalization. Winch, according to Kossew, reflects these overlapping vectors of harsh disadvantage, not to meditate or play into anti-racism tropes about the tendency of aboriginal people, but to explicitly criticize the institutional failures of the settler state (Kossew 78). Aggressively unapologetically prefiguring underclass facts, Winch actively sabotages the national myth of Australia, rampant as a myth about a classless, egalitarian society. Precarity May and her brother are facing is structurally created; it is a logical result of a society that systematically leaves indigenous bodies out of the mechanisms of prosperity, security, and tending, and disciplines them by continuing to exist on stolen lands.

3. THE RUPTURE OF THE MATRIARCHAL ANCHOR AND THE METAPHOR OF ASPHYXIATION

Swallow the Air has the inciting incident of the tragic suicide of the mother of May, whose suicide acts as the emotional and structural epicenter of the trauma of the novel. In the Indigenous Australian epistemologies and literary depictions, motherhood and aunties often become the major channels of cultural inheritance. They are the mother rocks of Country and kinship, that seemed to keep the intricate structures of those against insidious disintegrating currents of colonialism. The very fabric of the whole world around May crashes the moment May loses her mother who is said to be head sick as the mother dies under the jacaranda tree trailing in their housing commission backyard. This is an in-depth grief and not just the loss of a beloved parent, but the sudden and vicious ending of the main link that May has to her Wiradjuri identity and her feeling of security in the world (Grossman 112).

This great psychological effect of this loss is very closely connected with major repetitive, metaphors of water, drowning, and air of the novel. The ocean used to be a place of great happiness, oneness with nature and offenses before the time of the tragedy, which May and her brother, Billy saw as their home. Following the death of the mother, the natural world turns into a cause of existential terror due to their internal emptiness, as well as their sudden exposure. Winch adopts a very lyrical fragmentation of prose to view this change, which sets the trauma down in a visceral text of the form that defines the crisis of nonrelation of Klein in its purest form:

*When Billy and me lost our mother, we lost ourselves. We stopped swimming in the ocean, scared that we'd forget to breathe. Forget to come up for mouthfuls of air. We lost trust because we didn't want to touch something that was going to fall away. Like bubbles, too delicate, too fragile, too brief.*⁵

It is the maniacal clinging of a person who is literally drowning in metaphorical streams of sorrow, poverty and neglect within the system. The terror of not remembering to breathe underscores the complete contingency of the state of mind of May; the natural order of things no longer offers survival, but it is an agonizing, conscious and sustained effort. The bereavement death central to the destruction of the so-called, trust, goes way beyond the immediate grief that has a paralyzing effect. May loses faith in the integrity of the world itself, seeing that in the extremely unstable situation of marginalized Indigenous family, anything beautiful, comfortable, and stabilizing is too delicate and will be violently taken away by events or by the state (Lisle 210).

Asphyxia metaphor runs through the entire text since the first pages of the text. The absence of air, as an element in the text analyzed, symbolizes the fragility of identity and suffocation that May experiences because of the socio-economic levees. The family structure which was working together with the frail appearance of the mother falls apart. The two, May and Billy, are also placed in the custody of their Aunt, a woman who truly loves them but is profoundly undermined by the burden of her own familial traumas and is currently engaged in chronic gambling, severe alcoholism, victimizing herself in a relationship full of violence and sadism (Heiss 88). The home territory, which is supposed to provide an escape against the hostile world of the settlers, becomes a terror area. The unending domestic abuse drives Billy to the borderline drugs addiction and eventually to physical and emotional exile in the person of May (Interview" 2).

When May changes to adolescence and tries to find her way around her local surrounding, she develops a painful awareness of the spatial containment imposed by the current Anglo-Australian society. The socio-geography of the New South Wales town along the coast is thoroughly mapped in the novel, showing that the racialization and weaponization of physical space are very intense and created to ensure the exclusion of the Aborigines. As Melissa Lucashenko points out, the idyllic life of May as a child initially looks like the clichéd, idyllic life of Australian beaches, with bikes, fishing lines, and sand between the toes, but poverty and the racially colored label of marginalization wait right under the sun.

The beach, which through pressurized popular culture has established universal definitions of egalitarianism, leisure and national pride in Australian cultural identity, is disclosed by Winch narrative to be a highly disputed and contentious zone of exclusion. To May and Billy, the beach has stopped being a playfield and turns to be what Lucashenko describes as theatre of war perfectly. The prevailing culture of white surfers in the area is portrayed as hyper-protective, arrogant and aggressively racist. The geographical terrain is desecrated with the verbal signs of such aggression, a system of unseen borders meant to keep the Indigenous youth within their respective, poor areas. Winch depicts this institutional exclusion where May finds out that she is unwelcome by herself in a painful way:

... as we got older we began to feel like we didn't belong on that side of the creek either. Trailing behind the graffiti tags strewn among the grey. 'Mull up lads... fuck off coons.' I began to hide... (23)

This spatial disowning causes deep interiorization of the shame and deep need to escape the policing gaze of the white society. The racial epithets written in graffiti act as a force of violence of control of the borders, directly informing the Indigenous young people that they are unwanted guests on their own ancestral land. This dynamic is also a straightforward demonstration of what Sue Kossew explains relying on the commentary made by Winch himself, which is the deep-seated pain of inability to belong to the land they inhabit (78). The coast landscape has been completely colonized by the settler state who has grossly

commodified the landscape into half a million dollar beachfronts and at the same time putting the family of May in a half a million dollar fibro housing commission estates which will one day be demolished (Vassos 92). Moreover, such spatial marginalization is necessarily connected with intersectional vulnerabilities, in particular gendered violence. It is multiplied especially on the issue of racism, where May is constantly threatened with sexual violence perpetrated by the dominant white male society. In such a terrifying expression of this intersectional trauma, May is a savage victim of an assault in which the offender directly employs racial slurs as the means of ensuring her complete deprivation of bodily and spatial possession. The aggressor scowls, "you have family in the town too girl, gunna take you where you do not belong dumb black bully, you know you are not an Abo" (Korff 5).

This attack is a gut-wrenching, frightening performance of the power of the settler colony wherein the physical assault of the Indigenous female body is in direct line with the historical assault, control, and embezzlement of the Indigenous land. It is also important that the attacker specifically taunts her by saying that she does not look like an Abo as that serves to further weaponize the awkward industrial policy of miscegenation and forced assimilation, an attempt that aims to profoundly deprive May of her own cultural identity and also to punish her because of it at the same time (Martinez 134). The burden of all this racism, abject poverty, and home disintegration ultimately drives May into physical and emotional exile. She appreciates the fact that she is not able to live in her home town the stifling environment. Her flight afterwards is not a love story, but its necessity to survive a destructive attack- to flee in the world of violent attack to find somewhere her identity can be accepted instead of being subject all the time to some kind of punishment.

4. THE SUBVERTED JOURNEY: DECOLONIZING THE TRAVEL NARRATIVE

Out of desperate necessity to find her ruptured identity and get out of the stifling city, May sets off on a very tangible voyage out of Sydney and across the vast rural landscape of Australia pursuing her extended family of Wiradjuri, her missing father, the white. This structural movement of the form of Indigenous travel writing is read by scholar Arif Furqan (Furqan 77). Traditional Western travel discourses are usually those which portray a privileged, autonomic subject in active movement through a passive, exoticized scenery to the end of discovery, conquest, or philosophical self-actualization. Winch overtly rips off this colonial paradigm of literature (Leane 77). The freedom of movement of May is purely necessitated by necessity, trauma, poverty, etc. She hitchhikes, recklessly, all over the continent, and puts herself at the mercy of strangers, upon the possibility of being abused by males, and at the parting, cold, and indifferent expanses of the outback. However, her travel is not a claim of being a powerful world master, but a very fragile walk to know her uneasy situation on the landscape.

Among the most essential and politically antagonistic of her stops on the way to May is the visit to an old Aboriginal mission at Euabalong. The mission system is just one of the darkest, most destructive periods in Australian colonial history -they were extremely controlled areas where the Indigenous peoples were supposed to be relegated and kept there, the indigenous languages were to be suppressed, the family bonds were to be broken and old cultures of ancient peoples were to be broken systematically. Here, amid the specters of assimilation policies, May battles the entire, swallowing bulk of the temporal reservoir of depth by Nicholas Birns (5).

During the mission, May encounters Graham, an elderly Aboriginal man whose whole life has been determined by arbitrary violence of both the state and the church. The text has Graham acting as a mouthpiece of historical memory where he directly connects the explicit

violence of the colonial past with the structural violence of the neoliberal present. He brutally destroys any mainstream comfort of a closed historical adage the trauma of the Stolen Generations (Bryne 130). Within one of the most forceful devastating monologues, Graham describes how the genocide against Indigenous people remains constant, cautious and physical, through constitutional neglect and fabricated hopelessness. Winch is a writer who records his raw and unvarnished anger in a very real ethnolect:

no one to talk about it. And they die, kill em selves, than those governments just put another numba, nother cross in they list. They still trying to do it, kill us of, tell us that its always been they plan (67).

This passage of dialogue is a masterpiece in terms of political criticism and is a part of a conversation between characters. The presence of non-standard English forms of pronouns and grammars used by Graham to refer to them, both as a linguistic tool of opposition to the language of the colonizer, and simultaneously to highlight the lack of place in society that Graham occupies. His pessimistic claim how the tragic epidemic of Indigenous suicides are seen by the government as just another numba, reveals the ugly biopolitical truth of the settler state. Indigenous death is an administrative inevitability, a bookkeeping measure, not a humanitarian disaster to be addressed immediately, and hence the government calculates it (Lucashenko 1).

Graham clearly relates the modern destruction of alcoholism, poverty, and self-destruction, among Aboriginal people, to the deliberate, governmental plan in the past, specifically,-- tell us that its always been they plan. This goes hand in hand with what Jeanine Leane argues that the dysfunction portrayed in the Aboriginal literature need to be interpreted as a structural consequence and not a natural racial weakness. To May, the testimony of Graham is one of the key events of political awakening. It puts her tragic suicide of her mother and crippling alcoholism of her aunt in a giant and centuries-old scaffold of systemic oppression (Holland and Huggan 104). Not being a failure in herself, but a planned, calculated uncovering of the history of her people by the repressing power, makes the "big missing hole" in her identity a revelation instead of a defeat.

The search of May in an attempt to find refuge in a friendly, unbroken kinship system eventually carries her to Lake Cargelligo where she is hoping she can finally meet the Gibson side of her extended family. In a typical, heartfelt story, such a return to the family motherland would be triggered by a happy reunion, and in an instant the protagonist would have that cultural spirit that she has been missing after losing her mother back at home. Winch, nonetheless, is very strict to the ugly, violent reality of the intergenerational trauma and poverty in the countryside.

She expects to be warmly received when May conditions at the quaint white house in Lake Cargelligo and pushes the door. what she makes is not any open arms, but the surrendering gaze of the old cousin, Percy Gibson, deep and tired with profound suspicion. Percy is a man who has been hardened by the years of his lifetime of just surviving in a hostile world that has limited resources. His response to what May suddenly appeared at his residence is cynical because he believes that she has come to money, or resources, and not to encounter a spiritual relationship.

Inside, she finds her distant cousin, Percy Gibson. He asks her skeptically if shes wants money, and laughs at her when she says she's looking for "stories." He tells her she's just like her grandmother, who left the town "looking for...meaning" and returned destitute with several children.

The deep structural difference in the Indigenous community can be seen as Percy is bitterly mocking May when she diligently tries to seek stories and meaning, and fails to get any. To people who have never left the outback regions of the countryside setting, who have had to bear the daily, grinding reality of being poor and victims of systemic racism they see the romanticized search of cultural meaning as an abstract luxury that they just cannot do without. The fact that May left the town in search of meaning, only to come back as a totally impoverished person, as mentioned pointlessly by Percy, reminds one of the relatively inescapable cycle of precarity affecting the family line. This nasty experience destroys the idealistic notions which May had that she can only need to seek out some blood family members and that this would automatically sew her fractured identity. It confirms the dubious main thesis of the novel colonial trauma has deepened into Indigenous kinship system, and the task of belonging recovery becomes a challenging, highly contentious, and even impossible one.

5. FACING THE MONSTER: THE INTERSECTION OF PATRIARCHAL AND COLONIAL VIOLENCE

The culmination of the disappointment in the nature of the trip May undertakes is after she follows her missing white father to the remote Northern Territory. May had had a desperate preconceived notion about her father that he would be restorative and heroic--a man who would at last bring her the kind of stability, protection and love that were so lacking in her life since her loss of the mother. But when she eventually finds him, the truth that she is facing is all disgusting. She finds a man who is incredibly immersed in the hyper-masculine, violently racist culture of the rural outback (Birns 45).

The long-repressed memories of her childhood brutally reappear, as she observes him playing with another hare, as part of a bloody scene of carnal pleasure, with other men. The story deconstructs systematically the idealistic protective veil May had created round her lost patriarch:

There he was, watching the men bleed faces. There he was, Dad. The day I truly faced him, at his side, not the stranger I'd wished for, or made myself imagine... He was the monster I'd tried to hide (89).

One of the most important aspects of the novel as far as intersectional politics is concerned is the metaphor of the monster. May comes to a ravishing realization that her father is no savior, but the source of domestic terror within her family. The fact that she could not recollect his abuse before was a frantic mental defense mechanism (Upstone 41). This challenge to face him makes May realize both vectors of violence, both structural such as the colonial state, and intimate, patriarchal violence of white men into the domestic world, which cannot be reversed ever.

The salvation can not be found in her bloodline at all; it brings only violence and oppression. After this horrific rediscovery of the reptived familiar truth, May consciously makes the choice of turning her back on him. She makes this decision, thus dissolving her connection to the fatherly source of her trauma, refusing to assimilate into the world of the violence inhabited by her father, and makes a conscious choice to re-focus her eyes to her maternal, Indigenous origins (Bhabha 12). Such rejection is a decisive point of agency as it indicates that it is impossible to find belonging by following the frame of the oppressor.

When systematically raised against the possibility of a perfect family reunion, refutes the savior father figure, and recognizes that a perfect reversion to an untainted Edenic past may be impossible, where does May Gibson get these feelings of belonging? (Thompson 63)

The resolution of May's overwhelming trip is not related to the human relations, but to the immense ontological discovery of the land itself. It takes May the touring of the continent, observing how many of her people have been removed, taking in the stinging historical recollections of the aged such as Graham, the cynical practicality of the old Percy, May finds herself back at the sea of her childhood. With the knowledge that she has acquired, a fundamental paradigm shift comes to her. She finds out that belonging is not a gift bestowed upon her by the settler state, but also not solely reliant on excitement or closeness of her broken immediate family. One of the rights granted by the earth and sky and by birth is belonging:

And it all makes sense to me now. Issy's drawing in the sand, boundaries between the land and the water, us, we come from the sky and the earth and we go back to the sky and the earth. This land is belonging, all of it for all of us (41).

This discovery is a form of radical de-colonizing. However, the physical displacement, enormous trauma, and the "big missing hole" of the lost cultural knowledge do not obstruct May in realizing that her cosmology is still connected and cannot be denied. She gets to learn to practice what Ken Gelder describes as a displaced sense of belonging a strong faculty of associating spiritually and intimately with the surrounding to the extent that even after the state has stolen physical accessibility or legal ownership. She recognizes that it is complicated, that even though this was not the country of her mother, even though they are fresh water, not saltwater, she, nonetheless, belongs to this place, their history belongs to this place... They are part of this place". Winch dramatically inverts the colonialist capitalist land ownership paradigm by claiming that the land has continued to belong to its place. The land is not an object of conquest by the Indigenous subject but the subject is the kin of the land, creating the condition of mutual support and everlasting affixion (Furqan, *Swallow the Air* 56).

Winch, however, is an undesomely candid author and she strictly insists on letting the novel close with a note of transcendental, romanticized curing, or easy political reconciliation. The mystical identification with the earth fails to work magic to eliminate the harsh material precariousness of the life that May lives. The last chapter, appropriately named Home, gets May back to the housing commission estate, which she was escaping all along. The narrative structure is cyclical as it is being visually and thematically stressed with a necessity to emphasize the state of inevitability represented by Aboriginal poverty and structural traps (Furqan, "Tara June Winch" 4).

When May goes back the structural violence of the apparatus of settlement is awaiting her. She still has to deal with an alcoholic aunt, still struggling with heavy drinking, the house is in poor condition, and the whole neighborhood is actively being torn apart by the government to build gentrified and open up to what is left to further displacement. The inner serenity she experienced by the banks of the water is instantly after being harshly torn in opposite sides with the violence of the machine that was the colonial progress. The last, sewing paragraph of the novel is the very best summary of the constant offensiveness between Indigenous persistence and settler erasure:

An excavator starts its smothering engine over the torrent of each barrel. Over the sun. Over the blue. And I wonder, if we stand here, if we stay, if they stop digging up Aunty's backyard, stop digging up a mother's memory, stop digging up our people, maybe then, we'll all stop crying (111).

The visual of the excavator is very symbolic and highly dreadful. It is an unforgiving, insensitive machine of the colonial apparatus that is continually digging up Indigenous lives, demolishing homes, and erasing histories to set the stage of white futures. The machine literally suffocates the sun and the blue of the natural world, depicting how industrial capitalism and state violence actively unmistakably block the cosmological links that May is about to become aware of.

Dorothee Klein comments that the novel ends with an atmosphere of profound uncertainty with the sense of desperate repetitiveness in the use of the conditional word *if*. The survival of May and the survival of her people will solely depend on whether the settler state would ever stop its ruthless digging of the Aboriginal trauma and land. (Short 295). The resolution is hanging in suspension. The marginalized, trauma-stricken individual will never heal on their own but it will require the dominant authority to put hostilities to a halt. Nonetheless here in this gloomy insecure situation is an overwhelming silent claim of resistance: if we stand here, if we stay. In rejecting the possibility of being transported once more, in insisting on their physical presence, in the dust and rubble of their destroyed houses, May and her family perform a defiant act of survivance.

6. CONCLUSION

Swallow the Air by Tara June Winch is a milestone, needed thing in the modern Australian literature since it eloquently and brutally traces the complexity, traumatic, and exceedingly tenacious essence of contemporary Indigenous identity. Through vigorous rejection of the simplistic, linear tropes of the conventional Western bildungsroman and the highly consumable, romanticized image of recovery, Winch invites the reader to reconnect with the rough, multifaceted, and oftentimes painful reality of Aboriginal survival in the country that has not quite come to terms with its own history, as well as its continued existence, of violence. The Australian landscape is shown to be living with the ancestral spirits and memory through the lyrical, eco-critical reinterpretation of the land, which creates a strange sense of belonging completely overriding the arbitrary laws of property and exclusion of the settler state. Ultimately, *Swallow the Air* arrives at the conclusion that Indigenous identity is not a fixed, latent legacy to be uncovered by some fortunate traveller, but a process that is extremely relational and must be negotiated under severe hostile circumstances. It is an everyday, tiring habit of taking breath--of swallowing up the air--of breathing in an air specially planned to fatally poison. Winch leaves May Gibson without any comforter in the shade of the excavator, floating in the existential limbo of the most tragic consequences of colonial erasure and the most weakly yielding power of her relation to land. It is still incomplete, disjointed, and excruciating, but it has not stopped, instead it is stubborn and envious and insists on being acknowledged on the ground level.

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