Article:
Huddart, D and Huggan, G (2022) Australian Landscape Memoir as Conservationist Vehicle: Winton, Tredinnick, Greer. Cultural Geographies, 29 (2). pp. 203-217. ISSN 1474-4740

https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474020978489

Australian landscape memoir as conservationist vehicle: Winton, Tredinnick, Greer

For the historian Simon Schama, 'our entire landscape tradition is the product of shared culture, [and] is by the same token a tradition built from a rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions'.[1] But whose tradition and culture are these? And whose myths, memories and obsessions do they inscribe? Without necessarily acknowledging it, Schama is referring here to a European composite tradition that may have reached across much of the world, but has not proved equally applicable in all places. Australia is one such place. European ideas of landscape, and the cultural references upon which they depend, have never worked particularly well in Australia, a challenging place which, in the words of the Western Australian writer Tim Winton, has been stubbornly 'resistant to Eurocentric notions of beauty', and defiant towards those conventional forms of pictorial framing and 'spatial curtailment' upon which the European landscape tradition rests.[2]

One obvious problem is scale. Australia is the world's largest island, a geographically circumscribed space but also one that has historically dwarfed human presence. If landscapes are among other things particular ways of seeing,[3] then it is never quite clear what is actually being 'seen' in Australia, or what epistemological assumptions underlie that vision. On such a vast continent, it is less a case of people altering the landscapes they observe than of landscapes altering the people they act upon, rendering them strangers to their own origins and reminding them of the paltry limits of their own vision in the face of nature's all-encompassing geo-physical power.[4] This goes for memory as well; for if, as Schama claims, European landscapes are in large part 'work[s] of the mind, [their] scenery built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock',[5] their Australian counterparts offer up no such reassurance, their ancient geological presence operating less as an amenable vehicle for human memory than as an incalculable supra-historical agent, an actively diminishing or potentially estranging force.[6]

This suggests in turn that Australian landscape writing – that narrative mode in which 'land, life and knowledge are intertwined'[7] – will likely differ from the dominant European model, in which landscapes tend to be considered as 'culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock'.[8] For one thing, Australia is sometimes cast as a place where 'there is more landscape than culture',[9] but it would probably be fairer to say that for many Australian writers, both present and past, landscapes are as much living presences as cultural artefacts, and are thus individually inhabited even as they are collectively inscribed. Such landscapes are perhaps best seen in terms of open processes of absorption and immersion that reinforce the corporeal basis of knowledge, experience and perception, and in so doing register the profound entanglement of nature and culture and the mutually constitutive relationship between inner and outer worlds.[10]

It follows from this that Australian landscape writing should be particularly susceptible to those broad phenomenological approaches to be found in the work of, say, the anthropologist Timothy Ingold, for whom landscapes are everyday worlds in which to live, densely textured natural-cultural spaces where material and imaginative practices, far from being separated out from one another, are inextricably interwoven and incessantly interact.[11] It also implies that Australian landscape *memoirs* – the more specific subject of this essay – may prove at least in part to be exercises in deep time that move beyond the purview of the human, gesturing instead towards those kinds of grand-scale 'earth writing'[12] in which landscapes, with or without the help of humans, record a multi-layered ancestral past. To some extent, such exercises are in tune with the Aboriginal concept of *Country*, a complex multifunctional term that encompasses traditional ways of experiencing and understanding the earth that are not readily available, if available at all, to non-Indigenous Australians.[13] The struggle to accommodate, without appropriating, such understandings has been one of the great historical challenges to confront generations

of non-Indigenous Australian landscape writers and painters, whose contemporary counterparts continue to face the seemingly impossible task of choosing between imported (European) cultural traditions that are clearly incompatible with their own daily experiences and Indigenous (Aboriginal) ways of seeing and thinking that are essentially inaccessible to them, whether on a material or spiritual level, a physical or metaphysical scale.[14]

In what follows, we propose to study three recent Australian landscape memoirs – Tim Winton's *Island Home* (2015), Mark Tredinnick's *The Blue Plateau* (2009), and Germaine Greer's *White Beech* (2013)[15] – all of which demonstrate the capacity of landscapes to act as perceptual conduits for the fundamental tension between world and self.[16] Our main contention is that landscape memoir acts as a pre-eminent vehicle for this tension, which is captured across different times and spaces and among multiple, intricately co-constituted life-worlds. Landscape memoir, in this and other ways, functions as both a multi-sensory phenomenological instrument for the recording of physical and emotional engagement with landscape and a distinct, episodically organized mode of life writing that seeks to understand the fractured nature of individual selfhood in the context of a more-than-human world.[17]

The need to *protect* this shared world emerges in all three texts as an issue of paramount importance – hence each author's conservationist sympathies – but what also accompanies this recognition is a tacit awareness of the vulnerability, and consequent need for protection, of the individual human self. The self or, perhaps better, the multiple, temporally and geographically distributed selves inscribed by memoir are by definition insecure, especially when seen in relation to memoir's more ostensibly self-stabilizing counterpart, autobiography, while modern memoirs in particular are widely acknowledged to be mnemonic vehicles for the exploration of fractured subjectivity in the context of an only ever partially comprehended and always unevenly experienced world.[18] Nor are

memoirs beholden to the so-called 'autobiographical pact'[19] which, in theory at least, vouchsafes the truthfulness of autobiography; and while they still require plausibility, not least in order to be distinguished from fiction, there is nearly always some degree of performative licence in them that allows their authors (a capacity in turn recognized by their readers) to make things up.

It is this sense of a *distributed* self – a self that is scattered across time and space, but is also unevenly spread between (allegedly) remembered and (potentially) fabricated elements – that looms especially large in landscape memoir. Landscape memoirs are, among several other things, reflexive attempts to explore the different places that the self inhabits or claims to inhabit: places which are infused with forms of subjectivity that have the capacity to operate independently of the self and to challenge its world-making pretensions to generative power. The idea of landscape can be seen at one level as an instrument of individual human control, a framing device that allows for a certain 'structuring of the world by a detached individual spectator'.[20] But this is *not* the idea one generally finds in Australian landscape memoir, where the observing subject is more likely to be controlled, in turn, by the various landscapes he or she imaginatively creates or physically inhabits, and in which there is no single privileged source or site of agency, human or otherwise, but rather what new materialist theorists might call an assemblage of bodies, energies and forces that are as diverse in composition as they are in their physical and emotional effects.[21]

A few caveats are in order here. This essay does not attempt to establish a counter-tradition for Australian landscape memoir, or for landscape representation more generally. Nor does it seek to claim that its three primary texts are somehow representative of this tradition (although Winton's text, in particular, is hardly shy of making generalizations about Australia as a place which is 'lightly inhabited [but] deeply known').[22] The texts we have chosen here *are* all landscape memoirs of a kind, but the particular places they

explore are more regional than national – from Winton's Western Australian coastline to Mark Tredinnick's Blue Mountains hills and valleys to Germaine Greer's south Queensland rainforest – while, as one might expect from their genre, all three are imprinted with a distinctly personal sensibility that goes some way towards making these places their own.

In each case, landscape mediates between an insecure self and a world or worlds that are portrayed as being threatened, but this is not enough in itself to establish a basis for the three works as 'conservationist' texts. However, all three can be seen, at least in part, as individual enquiries into different *kinds* of conservation that use the techniques and characteristics of landscape memoir to reflect on the material possibilities of personal and collective recovery (Winton) and ecological restoration (Greer); or, over and against these, to mark the elegiac registration of irretrievable loss (Tredinnick). Conservation is usually seen as being about putting practical measures in place to combat the threat of future loss or to limit the damage of previous losses.[23] But as Tredinnick in particular makes clear, loss can be the very stuff of memoir, its partially realized retrospectives only serving to remind its author that s/he is 'made of pieces and the spaces between them where other pieces used to be',[24] and that the supposedly 'recovered' self is the necessarily incomplete sum of these scattered parts. As he puts it, 'Most of me is the memory of where else, and who else, and with whom, I have been and no longer am'.[25] Conservation in this context is the direct opposite of recovery narrative, a failed attempt to hold on to people and places that are no longer who or what they once used to be. In the detailed readings of three Australian landscape memoirs that follow, we will seek to trace these texts' movements between alternative imaginings of places that are seen as being gradually 'brought back to themselves'[26] and others that appear to be beyond all possibility of human repair or ecological restoration. We will also look to examine these texts' alternative understandings of the reciprocal, if not always fully recognized,

relationship between the fashioning of self through landscape and the fashioning of landscape through self.[27] Finally, we will assess the contributions these texts make to current understandings of conservation as both a private (individual) and a public (institutional) practice, along with the larger contribution that landscape memoirs, and literature and literary studies more broadly, might make to land-based conservation initiatives, in Australia and elsewhere.

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While the Western Australian writer Tim Winton is best known for his award-winning novels, he is almost as popular for his autobiographical writings. In these writings, notably *Land's Edge* (1993)[28] and the text on which we will focus here, *Island Home* (2015), Winton uses a privacy-based medium to think about the public realm, more specifically to reflect on the question of what constitutes the mainstream. Winton's life writing is less concerned to persuade us of the rightness of environmental perspectives – though his own conservationist views are forthright enough – than to ask us to rethink what we believe we understand so well about majority attitudes. His autobiographical work, seen as a whole, assembles a family biography of white Australia that turns out to be less about the involuntary association of *filiation* than about voluntary processes of *affiliation*, which he relates to Aboriginal cultural knowledge in particular (e.g. through his support for the 1993 Native Title Act). In the following section, we will see how Winton interprets these affiliations in the context of a particular autobiographical sub-genre, the landscape memoir, which provides the paratextual ('instruction-for-use') subtitle for *Island Home*.

Winton's main claim in *Island Home* is that: 'In my own lifetime the environment has started to make the kinds of claims upon us that perhaps only family can'.[29] The text investigates these claims in relation to his family, but also a broader vision of the majority Australian family. The Australian landscape itself is seen as familial, indeed parental, exerting a pull that is often resisted. 'The land speaks to so many of us, and like any long-

suffering parent it yearns for a little recognition. But not everyone is paying attention'.[30] This lack of attention is not restricted to Australia, but Winton locates his life narrative as specifically as he can, writing about dominant Australian self-perceptions, and constructing an all-too-familiar Australian mainstream that imagines itself in terms of conquering the rugged outdoors. As Winton states, 'For the bulk of history since 1788 Australians' attitude to the land has been almost exclusively warlike'.[31] Mainstream Australian self-understandings have been ones in which the dominant (white) culture has seen and celebrated itself as fighting a battle against the forces of the natural world. This martial self-perception has recently been reinforced by the deadly forest fires that have swept suburbs whose creature comforts – the ostensible spoils of battle – are recognized as only ever provisional, and as perennially hard won.

Running alongside this mainstream view is another version of the Australian imagination based on Aboriginal associations of the word *Country*. This view is less dependent on martial language, and is expressed instead in relational or ecological terms. These currents and counter-currents in Winton's work lead to a reconciled vision of contemporary Australia in which the mainstream turns out to be more in line with environmental perspectives than might have seemed possible even in the recent past. Through the various colourful figures he weaves into his memoir – from the nineteenth-century amateur botanist Georgiana Molloy to the late Aboriginal artist-activist David Banggal Mowaljarlai – Winton traces significant changes in sensibility that have slowly shifted mainstream Australian culture towards an apprehension of the sacredness of the landscape. Here, Winton places his family history within a dissenting tradition – derived from the eccentric and the private – that has become increasingly central and public. Environmental perspectives are now so clearly mainstream that it is political and commercial resistance to them that has begun to seem heretical. At the same time, Winton accepts that the fight to save the Great Barrier Reef, for example – which is potent

evidence of the success of conservationist mainstreaming – offers a case of certain battles won, while the war itself is lost. The transformation of the mainstream remains very much a work in progress.

Island Home explores this (partially) transformed mainstream in both direct and indirect ways. The more direct the way, the more likely it is to run up against the reactionary position that insists traditional and mainstream values are aligned in a territorial mindset. It is this resistance that Winton's life narrative attempts to pre-empt, and one he recalls from his personal experience of environmental action. For example, *Island Home* recalls the transition in attitudes towards whaling that Winton saw himself in the 1970s, and that are also dealt with in some of his fictional works.[32] However, direct action and the questioning of norms were intertwined back then with what he calls a 'cult-like' air that was dismissive of working people. Gradually, he suggests, the Australian environmental movement began to shift in its strategies towards forms of advocacy.

It is telling in this regard that Winton has never formally belonged to an environmental organization and that, even in his own public conservation work – his repeated calls for the protection of Ningaloo Reef, for instance – his role continues to involve less direct forms of engagement.[33] This doesn't mean that he shies away from naming names or stating facts, but the impact of his work still largely derives from its avoidance of direct public engagement and its focus instead on private experience. Nevertheless, the public and the private become blurred in Winton's work, and a privacy-based ethics of life writing increasingly gives way to a relational or orientational ethics.[34] It is thus significant, in *Island Home*, that he situates his own life narrative in the wider context of a constellation of biographical sketches involving a variety of historical and contemporary figures who have focused on orienting themselves in the landscape rather than imposing their personal expectations on Australia. Similarly, beyond mere quirk of personality, Winton's writing continues to explore the necessary if reluctant orientation of

even the most private individual to the public good. This orientation is the more important in so far as his work is explicitly concerned to explore ecological relations. In this and other ways, Winton's constitutes a form of *multispecies life writing* in which the human self is repeatedly oriented to a more-than-human world.[35]

Island Home wonders aloud what kinds of perspective might be necessary to underpin this orientational approach, and, where such perspectives can already be found, how these might be conceptualised. This requires the complication of a mainstream perspective that is basically understood as a form of self-distancing from landscape. Two examples stand out in *Island Home*, and each of them demonstrates that it is not easy to reject such distancing. The first is high-level flight, from which perspective the vastness of the Australian landscape can be measured; the second is the road trip, in which the landscape is framed, but also separated from the viewer, by the window of a speeding car. While Winton is drawn to more immersion-based forms of orientation in the landscape, he also makes it clear that the alternatives are not simply opposed. What is necessary, he suggests, is to gain access to *littoral* space. The sky is a membrane of a kind, not unlike the veranda – another privileged vantage point – or the shoreline. From Winton's perspective, the Australian sky neither closes in on you, nor does it offer you protection. The sense of immersion it offers is accompanied instead by a corresponding sense of fragility: the fragility of the human body, and more broadly that of human culture. Immersion is similarly explored in *Land's Edge*, in which the sea is called 'the one rare wild card left in the homogeneous suburban life'.[36] But rather like the landscape, the Australian seascape never allows you to feel belonging: it is neutral in its relation to human fragility. For Winton, this fragility is positive, forcing an awareness of our (human) immersion in ecosystems that are far greater and more powerful than we are ourselves.

The alternative perspectives Winton explores are present in the dominant culture, however much they have been obscured; the tussle between dominant and alternative

perspectives is thus between tendencies that co-exist *within* that culture. This tussle begins early in life, and Winton accordingly privileges childhood perspectives. When he spends time with his family living in Europe, he sees marshalled children inhabiting marshalled space; this then prompts him to think back to his own free-ranging childhood, and to recall secret places and experiences that fell outside the rational calculations of adult life.[37] Children intuitively understand that there is a need for secret places, Winton suggests, and for incalculable experiences in physical spaces. Children are capable of creating not just the experience, but also the space itself. For Winton, ageing opens up a *re*-learning of things known in childhood, but since unconsciously lost.

The dominant (adult) perspective is an impatient one, rushing to assign value through rational calculation. This impatience helps explain the protracted nature of the family history Winton sets out to tell, in which duration dissolves the need for domination and control. 'Immersion and duration are clarifying',[38] he insists, and environmental perspectives value these experiences of duration: 'When you're not trying to dig a place up with your eyes, a feeling for what's present will creep up on you, seep into vision and consciousness. Sometimes seeing is about duration and experience. This is the hard lesson newcomers have had to learn here on this continent'.[39] The key word here is 'seep', evoking the feeling of immersion over an extended period. While vision remains important, it is not the eye that is privileged in the *longue durée* of the Australian past; rather, the dominant culture has had to learn to trust other senses in order to come to a greater – and inevitably gradual – understanding of the landscapes within which it is physically immersed. *Island Home* dramatizes numerous experiences of this kind, linking them to slowly dawning understandings that are intensely personal, but also operate on a wider cultural scale. Such shifts in perception have been quietly going on over centuries: 'Everything I saw was an unfinished and perpetually open-ended process'.[40] But as

Winton also acknowledges, while these alternative perspectives may have taken centuries to announce themselves, the luxury of time has long been lost.

It is worth wondering how much of this is distinctively Australian. Life narrative tends to rely on situated knowledge, as is the case in *Island Home*, but Winton also suggests that the sense of immersion that is so integral to the text often originates with distance. Winton's evocation of his family's time in Paris and Ireland suggests that Australians, great travellers that they are, begin to experience a 'familial ache'[41] when they are far from home. Proximity invites the easy comforts of filiation, but Winton by contrast dramatizes hard processes of *af*filiation. Landscape presses down in the same way as family, he suggests, but at the same time family relations do not have any necessary meaning. What is needed is an embodied perspective in which personal experiences are allied to ethical and emotional deepening, and in which family values are affiliated with people and places, both near and distant, to create a more inclusive sense of 'home'.

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As we have seen, *Island Home* is organized around kinship ties that link country to family, turning landscape memoir into a collective enterprise even as it continues to be characterized by a distinctly personal touch. In the essay's next section, we will expand on this argument by considering the implications this has for *heritage*, with reference to Mark Tredinnick's 2009 *The Blue Plateau*, which we will see as a 'heritage text'. While there are numerous interpretive possibilities for understanding heritage, it is generally defined in terms of a loose constellation of ways in which the past is produced in and for the present – particularly when that past is considered to be at threat. Heritage and conservation thus tend to go together, although to 'conserve heritage' can mean very different things, from the conservation of crumbling buildings (so-called tangible heritage) to the protection of endangered languages and cultures (so-called intangible heritage), to that cluster of

individual and institutional practices that addresses, and offers putatively sustainable adjustments to, environmental change (a combination of both).

Important differences need to be observed here between *heritage* conservation and *nature* conservation, although the natural world clearly has heritage value, as in those areas – part natural, part cultural – that are designated as World Heritage sites. UNESCO's working definition of 'cultural landscape' is relevant here, i.e., those landscapes, designed intentionally by humans, which embrace 'a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment'.[42] However, as new materialists have shown, it is often difficult to separate out 'nature' from 'culture' in such landscapes – in any landscape – and it is increasingly recognized today that that there are few if any parts of the so-called natural world that are free of human interference, or that can qualify in any meaningful way as being untouched.[43]

In this context, the separation between 'natural heritage' and 'cultural heritage' becomes questionable at best, belonging to what Bruno Latour has famously described as the philosophical Great Divide between nature and culture, human and non-human.[44] The British-based heritage scholar Rodney Harrison, who also takes this view, bases it on his fieldwork in Australia with Aboriginal people, whose working concept of country implies a deep-seated form of 'ecological connectivity' – Deborah Bird Rose's resonant phrase – in which culture is inextricably bound up with lasting obligations to the natural world.[45] As Harrison says, 'Kinship structures the system of connections between people, group and country; but country is not only a place or an object, but is also a subject in its own right [as well as a] source of the overarching principles that govern the world'.[46]

Country, as we have already seen, is connected with Indigenous Australian ontologies that are not just challenges to white-settler ways of seeing, but may not necessarily be accessible to white folk (whitefellas) at all. What happens, though, when the kinship structures on which such ontologies are based are effectively copied over onto

white-settler families? What are the heritage implications of this transference for the various natural-cultural landscapes under scrutiny, and whose heritage is it that is being conserved? These are questions at the heart of *The Blue Plateau*, Mark Tredinnick's affecting account of his time spent in the Blue Mountains, a combined heritage area, an hour or so from Sydney, parts of which have been designated as a World Heritage site.

The Blue Plateau is many different things at once: part auto/biography, part oral history, part concatenation of rural myths and legends, it is described by Tredinnick himself as a 'kind of divination, an experiment in seeing and listening' rather than as a guidebook or natural-cultural history; as an inevitably partial attempt to fathom the meaning and spirit, the 'sacred geography', of place.[47] To some extent, the text conforms to landscape memoir's dictation of self by place: 'A man might write you a memoir by telling you where he lives', Tredinnick muses in the book's epilogue, only to question this immediately: 'But what happens if he leaves? Who is he then?'[48]

This sets up the text retrospectively as a study of exile in which feelings of home and belonging are only ever temporarily registered, and what is left is 'the ache of exile from wherever it is that you are not and cannot now be again'.[49] Memoir, in this context, consists less in the attempt to shore up what is left than to reflect melancholically on what remains missing, with self and landscape mirroring one another as mere residues or remnants: 'A terrain is only what weather and the larger movements of the earth leave behind. A landscape, like a work of art, is what remains of a larger work'.[50] Similarly, the people who move through and act upon this landscape are either temporary visitors, like Tredinnick himself, who freely admits he will never belong there, or anachronistic relics, like his main biographical subject, Les Maxwell, who pay the ultimate price for their belonging, and are portrayed as slowly diminishing figures in a landscape that is itself diminishing, and will eventually be lost.[51]

Seen in *this* context, *The Blue Plateau* reads as a record of loss – lost land, lost livelihoods, lost human lives – in which the narrative effectively anticipates the losses it repeatedly recalls. The key term here is *erosion*, which Tredinnick connects to love. 'Each of us erodes and is eroded by what we love. We are made into what we become by what we lose of ourselves in intimacy. Who we are in the end is what love leaves behind'.[52] This in turn connects to the land: the eponymous plateau, another of Tredinnick's 'landscape[s] of loss',[53] is described as slowly but inexorably 'fall[ing] into itself' until such time as it disappears altogether, and there is 'no plateau left [at all], nor any valleys, but just a great plain'.[54] The plateau, like the people who try to make their lives there, is literally worn down, creating an 'emaciated sculpture of itself' that also reminds us of the ultimate futility of human striving in the face of deep time.[55] This is memory less as mourning than as melancholia, in the spirit of Timothy Morton's work on ecological elegy, which, in asking us to 'mourn for something that has not completely passed', holds out the dismal possibility of a 'mourning without end'.[56]

This is perhaps the most telling sense in which the plateau is 'blue', though technically it is named for the atmospheric convergence by which the sky seems to 'fall down into the valleys the plateau is abandoning', infusing the landscape with an eerie, cerulean light.[57] Seen through this lens, *The Blue Plateau* emerges as a failed attempt to read a landscape that will not allow itself to be read any more than it will permit itself to be inhabited: a landscape that cares little for those generations of settlers (e.g. Les Maxwell) who try to stake a claim on it, and which promptly forgets those latecomers (e.g. Mark Tredinnick) who attempt to commemorate it, effortlessly regenerating itself even as the human beings that live there cannot.[58]

One primary reason for this failure is *language*: the loss of words to describe the landscapes that make us. 'To know ourselves and name ourselves', Tredinnick suggests about halfway through the book, 'we're going to need a literacy that is ebbing: words and

songs for landforms and life forms, for clouds and watercolours, for family histories and places on maps'.[59] Warming to his theme, he goes on to compile a lengthy list of the different landscapes and their botanical components that, together, make up the ecology of the Blue Plateau, only to concede that this is little more than a veneer over the countless other stories and associations that he has no time to relate.[60]

A second failure revolves around conceptions of *heritage*. Tredinnick does not comment explicitly on the current status of the Blue Plateau as a World Heritage site, but he seems to have little time for the statist interference that comes with its designation as a National Park.[61] Meanwhile Katoomba, the town closest to where he used to live (as we discover late on in the text, he now lives in Sydney), is summarily dismissed as having become 'nothing but a tourist attraction', a 'tawdry theme park' albeit one 'perched in an astonishing terrain'.[62] The contemporary heritage industry, Tredinnick suggests, has not served the region well, and in that sense his text can be seen as an exercise in *counter*heritage, Denis Byrne's composite term for that array of often unsung heritage practices that resist commodified nostalgia and the accompanying idea that heritage is a set of objects to be 'conserved'.[63] Counterheritage, as Byrne sees it, seeks to remember those who are largely forgotten or ignored in official historical accounts; it celebrates the achievements of those, like Les Maxwell in *The Blue Plateau*, whose lives – if they are records of anything at all – are records of failed attempts to persuade themselves that they belong to a place that consistently rejects them: a place, as Tredinnick describes it, 'that doesn't mean you to stay'.[64]

However, counterheritage doesn't quite work either in confronting 'the broken pieces of a broken plateau'.[65] It is not so much that the modest human lives that are associated with the place *can't* be remembered, rather that they are inevitably dwarfed by non-human presences far greater and older than themselves. Maybe they are not *worth* remembering in so far as the wider Australian settler history to which they belong is

fraught with guilt: a shared inheritance that is not necessarily shameful, but that is still marked by successive 'war[s] against nature that [were always] sure to be lost'.[66] Wars against Indigenous peoples, too, that offer indelible reminders of white-settlers' violent attempts to register 'the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous'[67]– or as Tredinnick puts it more cautiously: 'Anyone from a settler culture who opens themselves to the landscape where they find themselves and the history they inherit must carry indigenous presence, past and present, in mind. All settlers belonging in Australia must feel subjunctive'.[68]

It is in this broader context that *The Blue Plateau* plays out as an idiosyncratic landscape memoir that both gestures towards a shared vision of country as a 'common inheritance'[69] and simultaneously recognizes the impossibility of that exercise, in part by confronting a unique landscape – that of the plateau – which both echoes with the voices of the dead and is dying in its own right.[70] The plateau, Tredinnick insists, is always 'someone else's country':[71] it is an unforgiving place where establishing myths quickly founder, and 'settlement stories', like the land itself, end up collapsing in on themselves.[72] It thus seems significant that Tredinnick acknowledges only at the end that he has spent too little time in the plateau with first peoples[73]– a belated acknowledgement that accompanies his vision of himself as a latecomer to the region carrying 'the guilt of the inheritor of unearned wealth'.[74] And it also seems significant that the 'earth writing' (Lorimer) the text inscribes – from its complex geological motifs to what Tredinnick calls its 'lithology of indigenous presence'[75]– reveals a densely layered history in which any lasting knowledge of self through knowledge of place turns out to be illusory, just as any lasting Indigenous understanding of country that might deepen that knowledge, buried deep among those layers,[76] appears indefinitely forestalled.

Finally, it is significant that – itself buried in the book's endnotes – there is a brief reference to a conservation project. His life of the Maxwells, Tredinnick tells us there, has

been drawn in part from a conservation plan for Les's slab hut in the Kedumba; from a deliberate and tangible attempt to shore up a vision of the historical past.[77] Conservation doesn't work that way in the text, which can never decide what kind of heritage it wants to draw upon, and is left to probe the gaps between different heritage stories, much as the plateau's stones 'speak in fragments [and] never seem to finish their sentences', leaving the frustrated narrator-geologist at a loss to fill in the cracks.[78] Conservation, the text seems to suggest instead, is remembrance against the odds: the present's inevitably inadequate way of registering what it has definitively lost, and of commemorating a past that is beyond recovery even as the present gradually crumbles. As for the landscape of the plateau itself, it is slowly changing shape, and like the self that contemplates it, 'even what remains is already on its way out; it's on its way to becoming somewhere else'.[79]

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The Blue Plateau, like *Island Home*, supports conservationist initiatives of different kinds, but is circumspect about the motives that underlie them. A more robust approach can be found in our third example of landscape memoir, Germaine Greer's *White Beech* (2013), a spirited account of the author's attempt to set up the Cave Creek Rainforest Rehabilitation Scheme (CCRRS) in southern Queensland. The book seems to be an outlier in Greer's career in so far as her personal identity recedes to make way for multispecies life writing. The changing nature of the CCRRS project is mirrored in a narrative trajectory that moves from the personal search for a plot of Australian land (which turns out to be montane rainforest) to its management through intervention, its ecological recovery, and eventual biodiversity (plant and animal) return. A further change sees the conversion of private enterprise into conservation charity. But *White Beech* offers at most fragmentary narrative, and in its later chapters it moves decisively away from Greer herself, much as she – having fronted the money and done the legwork – shifts the management of 'her' project to a UK-registered charity. As Greer comes to realize, she owns neither the project nor the

land; if anything, 'the forest owns me.'[81] Multispecies memoir becomes the vehicle by which Greer refuses ownership of her narrative.

In receding from her life writing, Greer emphasises *niche* as a category, whether for plants or for the autobiographical subject. Damage to Australian ecosystems has often come from the introduction of exotics, and a key aim of Greer's project is the conservation of the niche. This aim has an intuitive connection to the modest role the individual can play, and Greer duly compares the ecological and the personal: 'Making a niche for them means finding a niche for you too.'[82] While this niche quality is not readily associated with Greer's rumbustious media persona, it is implicit in memoir as a genre. Memoir is structured by worlds and times without the memoirist – a before and an after – and this in turn provides a guiding insight for anyone seeking to understand the webs of multiplicity and entanglement within which conservation projects unfold. Greer assesses the scale of the project: 'Could I rebuild the forest? The job was immense but I felt sure that it was doable, just about, if I lived long enough.'[83] Scale is imagined within the space of the individual life, but Greer increasingly describes the project as something that will outlive her, and the transfer to charity management is another acknowledgment of that alternative scale. Even if the linked processes of intervention and restoration are ones that never end, the rainforest has been given the 'time and space to come into its own again.'[84]

If memoir counter-intuitively emphasizes that which precedes and succeeds the memoirist, implying the perspective of deep time, other elements of life writing are well suited to Greer's project. A key argument in *White Beech* is that public bodies in Australia are not able to undertake the kinds of conservation project necessary. It is to the private that Greer suggests we must turn, and again the finely poised nature of life writing is appropriate. Dismissively insisting that 'conservation in Australia is largely a matter of pious intentions',[85] she suggests instead that in the public realm there is neither the will nor the funding to encourage care for the landscape. Like Winton,[86] Greer turns to the

possibilities offered by private initiatives, reflecting that 'if conservation is to be done at all, it will have to be done by dedicated individuals and organisations on privately owned land.'[87] Her argument is that public bodies, unlike private landholders, are constrained by the need to provide 'amenity'; it is thus a particular understanding of private enterprise – with caveats in place about ownership and the absolute priority of Aboriginal land claims – that permits the freedom to take on a conservation project with as few compromises as possible. It is hard to disagree with Tim Flannery's suggestion that 'some consolidation will be required if efforts like Greer's are to be sustainable.'[88] But the relational qualities of memoir itself, opening out onto non-human others (from the microbial to a memorable discussion of 'python personality'), straddle the apparent opposition between public and private. In receding from her own life narrative, Greer is effectively signalling her dependence on ecosystems of all kinds, from the montane rainforest through to the cultural webs of Australian life.

The Australian context of Greer's memoir is important here, as it is for both Tredinnick and Winton. For *White Beech* not only relates to the rainforest ecosystem, it also inscribes a broader *cultural* relation that foregrounds the question of ownership. Greer's personal identity *must* recede, alongside her formal ownership of the land, because of her commitment to Aboriginal sovereignty. She acknowledges the incompatibility between her property purchase and her ideals, observing that she will surely be judged to have betrayed her commitment to Native Title. In response, she stresses dynamic process rather than static property: 'I didn't buy a home. I bought a project. It would never have occurred to me that my whitefella freehold title endowed me with proprietorial rights.'[89] While this defence is not entirely plausible, it has the virtue of being appropriate to the structure of memoir. *White Beech* uses this structure to set out a project in which, after undertaking the initial labour, Greer begins the process of abstracting the individual from an ongoing collective commitment. This process of abstraction shows, in turn, that she has

mobilized the resources of life writing in service of an ecological feminism.[90] The book abounds in withering descriptions of the 'blokiness' of botany, with explicit references to the masculine mastery of the settlers, as well as the underlying mechanisms of control that are evident in botanical classification. In *White Beech*, Greer draws on landscape memoir's distributed self to explore an entangled ecological ethics. This move suits her overall project well – so much so that the book finally only *appears* to be an anomaly in her work.

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In this essay, we have made a case for landscape memoir as a vehicle for reflection on conservation practice, concentrating on the example of Australia but with broader implications for conservation across an ecologically threatened world. Our three texts use memoir, an ostensibly private form, to shed light on conservation as a predominantly public practice, though in all three cases the lines between private and public become increasingly blurred. Greer's text, in particular, shows the benefits of opening conservation to the private sphere, but also problems with this approach: elitism, inefficiency, the widening of divisions that operate in society as a whole. In their different ways, *Island Home*, *The Blue Plateau* and *White Beech* are at once devoted to the self and highly critical of (human) selfishness: the nurturing of personal fantasies about the land that are ultimately more protective of a certain, broadly liberal view of human subjectivity – as ethically aware, as socially responsible – than they are of the land itself. To that extent, all three texts, *The Blue Plateau* most conspicuously, can be seen as exercises in the sort of damaging self-exposure that memoir can frequently foster: the laying bare of a vulnerable self to forces that it fails to master, or the fracturing of the self into distributed subjectivities that are seemingly no sooner attached, whether to land or people, than they disperse into multiple fragments that intensify the original pain of separation and loss.

To that extent as well, the three texts – and indeed this essay itself – also contribute to *conservation humanities*. Conservation humanities is a relatively new if rapidly growing field that works across numerous disciplines, literary studies and cultural geography among them, to understand the humanistic aspects of biodiversity loss and environmental destruction, and to provoke the kind of reflection that might eventually transform human society and its prevailing attitudes towards the natural world. The study and practice of conservation first emerged from ecological sciences, and its key postulates were taken from biological concepts, but much of conservation is about understanding and changing *human* behaviour and attitudes.[91] Conservation humanities have the potential to provide unique insights into questions of human culture, values, history and behaviour. They also have the capacity to help broaden the remit of conservation beyond specialist circles, showing us that private individuals have the capacity to become conservationists, too, if not always in ways that are especially helpful to the spaces and/or species they are looking to support. As we aimed to demonstrate, literature and literary study are useful tools in opening up conservation and its accompanying imperatives and ideals to non-specialist audiences, helping to create a conservation that is more culturally aware, more aware of human behaviour and values, and of the ethical complexities of its work. But at the same time, literature and literary study tend to challenge the 'success stories' that drive conservation initiatives worldwide. And they also complicate the ideas and ideologies on which these initiatives thrive, just as landscape memoir complicates the symbiotic relationship that it seems to depend upon: the mutually informing, but also sometimes mutually corrosive, relationship between inhabited place and inhabiting self.

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[1] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Knopf, 1996), p.14.

[2] Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (London: Picador, 2017 [2015]), p.161, p.9. Another major challenge to the European landscape tradition in Australia, of course, is Native Title and the various Aboriginal cultural traditions that surround it, some of which cohere in the composite term 'Country'. It would be impossible, not to mention presumptuous, in an essay of this length to debate the different

meanings of Country, but for some definitions and discussions of the issues at stake, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners, see Tim Bonyhady and Tom Griffiths, *Words for Country: Landscape and Language* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004); Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Laklak Burrarwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr and Djawundil Maymuru, 'Writing with and learning from Country: decentring human authority', *cultural geographies*, vol.22 (2), 2015, pp.269-283; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); and Deborah Bird Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics of Decolonisation* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004).

[3] Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble); see also John Wylie, Landscape (London: Routledge, 2007).

[4] Winton, *Island Home*, p.23.

[5] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p.7.

[6] *Island Home*, p.6.

[7] Wylie, *Landscape*, p.208.

[8] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p.161.

[9] *Island Home*, p.13.

[10] Wylie, *Landscape*, p.149.

[11] See, for example, Tim Ingold, *The perception of the environment: Essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill* (London: Routledge, 2000). For an overview of phenomenological approaches to landscape, see also Wylie, *Landscape*, Ch. 5.

[12] Hayden Lorimer, 'Memoirs for the Earth: Jacquetta Hawkes's literary experiments in deep time', *cultural geographies*, vol.19 (1), 2012, pp87–106.

[13] See note 2 above for a preliminary list of books and articles about Country. The term 'Country' implies the limits of Western, property-based understandings of the relationship between people and land, but it also opens up relational understandings that may potentially bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together. One example is the Bawaka Collective, an all-female research group that includes both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, and whose vision of Country, though firmly centred on Indigenous values and understandings, is effectively shared. See Country *et al.*, 'Writing with and learning from Country'; also Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Laklak Burrarwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru and Jill Sweeney, 'Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a relational understanding of place/space', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol.40 (4), 2016, 455-475.

[14] For a detailed discussion of this dilemma, seen from a non-Indigenous perspective, see Bonyhady and Griffiths, *Words for Country*; see also note 2 above.

[15] Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (London: Picador, 2017 [2015]); Mark Tredinnick, *The Blue Plateau: An Australian Pastoral* (Minneapolis: Milkweed); Germaine Greer, *White Beech: The Rainforest Years* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015 [2013].

[16] Cf. Wylie, *Landscape*.

[17] The term 'more-than-human' is usually attributed to the American philosopher David Abram. See Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

[18] For an informative introduction to memoir, see G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[19] Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[20] Cosgrove, *Social Formation*, p.55.

[21] See, for example, the essays in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); also Lorimer, 'Memoirs'.

[22] Winton, *Island Home*, p.12.

[23] See, for example, Clive Hambler, *Conservation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) and William B. Adams, *Against Extinction: The Story of Conservation* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[24] Tredinnick, *Blue Plateau*, p.1.

[25] *Blue Plateau*, p.1.

[26] Greer, *White Beech*, p.343.

[27] Christopher Tilley, 'Introduction: Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage', *Journal of Material Culture* vol.11 (1/2), 2006, pp7–32.

[28] Tim Winton, *Land's Edge: A Coastal Memoir* (London: Picador, 2014 [2012]).

[29] Winton, *Island Home*, p.110.

[30] *Island Home*, p.49.

[31] *Island Home*, p.92.

[32] See, for example, Tim Winton, *Shallows* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984).

[33] See, for example, Winton's pieces on Ningaloo Reef for *The Guardian* (14.10.2018; 30.10.2019)

[34] Cf. John Paul Eakin, *The Ethics of Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); David Parker, *The Self in Moral Space: Life Narrative and the Good* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
[35] Broadly speaking, the term 'multispecies' describes the inextricable entanglement of human and non-human lives. See, for example, Thom Van Dooren, Eben Kirksey and Ursula Münster, 'Multispecies studies: cultivating arts of attentiveness', *Environmental Humanities*, vol.8 (1), 2016, pp.1–23.
[36] Winton, *Land's Edge*, p.92.
[37] Winton, *Island Home*, p.61.
[38] *Island Home*, p.76.
[39] *Island Home*, p.86.
[40] *Island Home*, p.76.
[41] *Island Home*, p.10.
[42] UNESCO, 1992 World Heritage committee report, quoted in Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge), p.125.
[43] One of many possible examples is Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
[44] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015 [2003]).
[45] See Deborah Bird Rose et al, *Sharing Kinship with Nature* (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003), also quoted in Harrison, *Heritage*, p.211.
[46] Harrison, *Heritage*, pp.211–212.
[47] Tredinnick, *Blue Plateau*, p.239.
[48] *Blue Plateau*, p.228.
[49] *Blue Plateau*, p.120.
[50] *Blue Plateau*, p.129.
[51] *Blue Plateau*, p.159, p.14, p.135.
[52] *Blue Plateau*, p.211.
[53] *Blue Plateau*, p.1.
[54] *Blue Plateau*, p.132.
[55] *Blue Plateau*, p.132.
[56] Timothy Morton, 'The Dark Ecology of Elegy', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 [2010]), p.253, p.254.
[57] Tredinnick, *Blue Plateau*, p.237.
[58] *Blue Plateau*, p.220.
[59] *Blue Plateau*, p.105.
[60] *Blue Plateau*, p.108.
[61] *Blue Plateau*, p.93.
[62] *Blue Plateau*, p.231.
[63] Denis Byrne, *Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[64] Tredinnick, *Blue Plateau*, p.9.
[65] *Blue Plateau*, p.11.
[66] *Blue Plateau*, p.156.
[67] Terry Goldie, *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), p.13.
[68] Tredinnick, *Blue Plateau*, pp235–6.
[69] *Blue Plateau*, p.236.
[70] *Blue Plateau*, p.16.
[71] *Blue Plateau*, p.20.
[72] *Blue Plateau*, p.20.
[73] *Blue Plateau*, p.233.
[74] *Blue Plateau*, p.235.
[75] *Blue Plateau*, back cover, n.p.
[76] *Blue Plateau*, p.14.
[77] *Blue Plateau*, p.240.
[78] *Blue Plateau*, p.128.
[79] *Blue Plateau*, p.129.
[81] Greer, *White Beech*, p.141.
[82] *White Beech*, p.342.
[83] *White Beech*, p.93.
[84] *White Beech*, p.343.
[85] *White Beech*, p.40.
[86] See 'Repatriation', in *The Boy Behind the Curtain: Notes from an Australian Life* (Melbourne: Penguin Random House Australia, 2016).

[87] Greer, *White Beech*, p.342.
[88] Flannery, 'Rewilding Oz', *Nature* vol. 505, 23 January 2014, pp.480-81.
[89] Greer, *White Beech*, p.114.
[90] Lara Stevens's work situates Greer in terms of a new materialism-inspired ecological feminism. See 'From *The Female Eunuch* to *White Beech*: Germaine Greer and Ecological Feminism', in *Feminist Ecologies: Changing Environments in the Anthropocene*, eds. Lara Stevens, Peta Tait, and Denise Varney (New York: Springer, 2017), pp.115-133; also '"Mother? Nature?": Germaine Greer, Contemporary Feminisms and New Materialisms', *Hecate*, vol.44 (1/2), 2018, pp156-170, p201.
[91] One way it does this is by fostering 'ecological conscience': see Aldo Leopold, 'The Ecological Conscience', in *The River of the Mother of God*, eds. Susan L. Flader & J. Baird Callicot (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp.338-346. Thanks to George Holmes for first alerting our attention to the conservation humanities field.