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Environmental Degradation, Indigenous Displacement, and Non-Indigenous Belonging: Suburbia in Tim Winton's "Aquifer" and Liam Davison's "Neary's Horse"

Tim Winton and Liam Davison have written short stories that powerfully demonstrate the fact that suburbia is a complex and significant environment where the most pressing issues in Australian society are addressed. In this paper I argue that Winton's "Aquifer" and Davison's "Neary's Horse" use suburbia to explore the following crucial contemporary Australian social issues: environmental degradation, the displacement of Indigenous Australians, and non-Indigenous belonging.

In *Australian Short Fiction: A History*, by Bruce Bennett, the author identifies the major themes in Australian short fiction since the 1970s as the local environment, writing the self, postmodernism, the immigrant experience, grunge fiction, sex, "Black Writing," travel, Crime/Mystery and Science Fiction (291-295). Although Bennett briefly discusses short fiction set in suburbia within the chapter "Home and Away: 1980-2000," and suburban fiction fits into the category of writing about the local environment, Bennett makes it clear that Australian short fiction writers have rarely addressed suburbia. The Austlit database indexes 576 short stories about the "suburbs" and sixty-six short stories about "suburbia" and "suburban life." While 576 works of short fiction may seem like a significant body of work, the number is actually quite small, especially when compared to the body of short fiction that addresses other topics and settings. For example, Austlit indexes 8554 works of short fiction about "the bush" and 1072 short stories about "the city." Thus, the corpus of short fiction dealing with the city is twice the size of that examining suburbia, and the body of short fiction addressing the bush is almost *fifteen times* as large as the body of suburban short fiction. To put it another way, the body of short fiction dealing with the suburbs is less than 7% of the size of the mass of short fiction addressing the bush. Clearly, suburbia is not a common topic for Australian authors of short fiction.¹ Even writers such as Tim Winton and Liam Davison, who have each published several stories set in suburbia, cannot be labelled "suburban authors,"

1. Search conducted on March 8, 2010. Austlit is the most comprehensive database of Australian literature and Australian literary criticism. While the database is not totally comprehensive, and works may not always be indexed accurately, the figures cited above nevertheless clearly demonstrate that suburbia is not a common subject for Australian short fiction.

since their suburban short stories represent a very small portion of their total output. The majority of Winton's fiction, both novels and short stories, is set in rural areas and coastal towns in Western Australia. Likewise, Davison's work is mostly set in rural and coastal areas of Victoria, including Gippsland, Westernport Bay and small towns on the Mornington Peninsula.

Although the vast majority of Australians live in suburbia, the physical and social environment in which they live is frequently derided due to the long-dominant anti-suburban tradition in Australian culture. The fact that Australian short fiction rarely engages with suburbia can be largely attributed to the power of the anti-suburban intellectual tradition. Garry Kinnane describes anti-suburbanism in Australian culture as "almost exclusively" privileging "the city and the bush as the two poles of experience that matter," arguing that the privileging of the city and the bush "is clearly reflected in our fiction writers, who from Lawson through Vance Palmer to Prichard, White, Johnston, Hal Porter, Keneally, Moorhouse, Garner [and others] ... have idealised or found heroic suffering in the bush and the outback, or else have explored the fascinations of city waste" (42). Julianne Schultz notes that the stereotype of suburbia as "dull, ordinary, [and] predictable has been an article of faith, even as its accuracy diminished" (8). Likewise, Margaret Simons states that the suburbs have been viewed by intellectuals "as boring at best, vacuous, mean and racist at worst" (28). Bennett argues that during the first half of the twentieth century, "many Australian intellectuals and artists" contended that "A 'suburban spirit' ... stifled 'creativity and innovation'" (226).² While historians, sociologists, comedians, filmmakers, television scriptwriters and poets have devoted significant attention to Australian suburban life, the nation's fiction writers have given suburbia scant serious attention.³ Perhaps the single most significant effect of the anti-suburban tradition on Australian fiction is that it has led writers to set the vast majority of their works *outside* suburbia, hence the small body of work that may be deemed 'Australian suburban fiction.'

However, Kinnane argues that the anti-suburban tradition "has largely outlived its relevance," and fiction writers "who remain under its spell are in danger of blinding themselves to some of the more interesting, significant and dramatic material available to them ... suburbia is not a desert but a rich field of opportunities for narrative, character, drama and action" (54). Winton's "Aquifer" and Davison's "Neary's Horse" emphatically prove Kinnane's point. Despite the long anti-suburban tradition in Australian literature, Winton and Davison have

2. In addition to Kinnane, Schultz, Simons and Bennett, the anti-suburban tradition is discussed by Rowse, Gilbert, Gerster, Powell, McCann, and O'Reilly.

3. Australian novels engage with suburbia even less frequently than Australian short fiction does. For a detailed examination of suburbia in the contemporary Australian novel, see my dissertation, "Between the City and the Bush: Suburbia in the Contemporary Australian Novel."

both written short stories that powerfully demonstrate the fact that suburbia is a complex and significant environment where the most pressing issues in Australian society can be confronted.⁴ Winton's "Aquifer" and Davison's "Neary's Horse" both use suburbia to explore crucial issues confronting contemporary Australian society, namely environmental degradation, the displacement of Indigenous Australians, and non-Indigenous belonging.

Born in 1960, Winton is the most popular and critically acclaimed Australian writer of his generation.⁵ Winton is known for his description of West Australian coastlines and landscapes, depictions of working-class Australian lives, and a remarkable prose style that extensively utilizes the vernacular. In her recent study of Winton's fiction, Salhia Ben-Messahel argues that it "reflects a strong commitment to political and cultural issues, such as Aboriginal rights and reconciliation, the protection of the environment, and cultural heritage" (8). Winton's short story "Aquifer," first published in *Granta* (2000), reprinted in *The Best Australian Stories 2001*, and revised for inclusion in his short fiction collection *The Turning* (2004), is an anomaly within his body of work, as it is set entirely in a Perth suburb.⁶ Liam Davison is another Australian author who has dealt seriously with suburbia in his short fiction, namely in "Wires" and "Neary's Horse." Davison is the author of the novels *The Velodrome* (1988), *Soundings* (1993), *The White Woman* (1994) and *The Betrayal* (1999), and the short fiction collections *The Shipwreck Party* (1988) and *Collected Stories* (2001). Davison won the National Book Council's Banjo Award for Fiction in 1993 and has been shortlisted for the *Australian/Vogel* literary award, *The Age* Book of the Year Award and the Victorian Premier's Literary Award.⁷ Like Winton's "Aquifer," Davison's "Neary's Horse" is a retrospective story utilizing an adult male narrator focusing on a brutal childhood event; both stories use subterranean metaphors to emphasize the effect of the past on the present, the ineffectiveness of repression, and the power of guilt and shame.

Winton was born in the Perth seaside suburb of Scarborough and spent most of his first twenty years in Karrinyup, "a suburb freshly carved out of thick

4. In addition to "Aquifer," Winton has used suburban settings in "Neighbours" and "Scission" from his collection *Scission*, and "On Her Knees" from *The Turning*. Davison has used a suburban setting in "Wires" (published in *Collected Stories*).

5. Robert Dixon notes that Winton has won "a staggering number of national and international literary awards" (248). See Dixon for a detailed and fascinating analysis of Winton's career and the conditions that enabled it.

6. In their reviews of *The Turning*, Michael Fitzgerald and James Ley both argue that "Aquifer" is the collection's best story, despite it being a major departure for Winton.

7. Despite his awards and the publication of his work in leading Australian journals, magazines and newspapers for several decades, Davison has received little critical attention. Paul Genoni and Gillian Tyas have written on *Soundings*, while Fiona Probyn and M.D. Fletcher have published on *The White Woman*; however, apart from reviews, critics have largely ignored Davison's remarkable short fiction.

scrub on the outskirts of Perth" (Bennett 282; Flanagan 12). However, Winton rarely writes about suburbia, choosing instead to set the overwhelming majority of his work in coastal towns and rural areas. Martin Flanagan's description of Winton's childhood suburb is remarkably similar to the suburb Winton describes in "Aquifer": "The small, neatly aligned houses were erected not far from the sea in what, for Perth, is a hilly area. At the end of the street was a giant swamp; to the west, between the suburb and the sea, was the sort of bush you could lose yourself in" (12). It is clear from comparing Flanagan's description of Winton's childhood suburb with the description of the suburb in "Aquifer" that the story contains many autobiographical elements. Winton depicts suburbia negatively in his novel *Cloudstreet* and has expressed his dislike for the suburban environment in an interview with Andrew Taylor, calling it "bland" and claiming it produces "a kind of autism" (376); elsewhere, Winton states that he is not interested in writing about "people who have no real existential questions and are purely hedonistic consumers" (Qtd. in Rossiter 3). However, Winton creates a complex and powerful representation of the suburban environment in "Aquifer" which moves far beyond the stereotypes of boring, conformist, shallow suburbia that have long prevailed in Australia.

The story begins with the narrator watching the news on television. His attention is piqued "at the sound of a familiar street name," and he quickly realizes that the event being reported, the discovery of "four femurs and a skull," is taking place in the suburb where he grew up in the 1960s (37). The middle-aged narrator lives in Winton's fictional town of Angelus, which is a five-hour drive from Perth. After a sleepless night, the narrator sets out before dawn on a journey back to his childhood suburb. The majority of the action in "Aquifer" takes place during the narrator's childhood and is related in the present; Davison uses the same strategy in "Neary's Horse." Winton's narrator describes his childhood suburb as comprised of "battlers' blocks," and a "meager grid of limestone streets" that were "scoured from bushland so that immigrants from Holland, England and the Balkans, and freckly types like us, barely a generation off the farm, could build cheap houses" (38). Winton quickly establishes the working class character of the suburb and introduces one of the dominant themes in suburban fiction, environmental degradation, which he addressed in *Cloudstreet* and which has also been explored by Patrick White, Peter Carey, David Malouf, George Johnston, and Davison.⁸ The construction of the suburb involves the destruction of bushland, which is annihilated by "bulldozers towing great chains and steel balls" and burned to create space for new streets (47). Due to the newness and peripheral location of the suburb, the natural environment, rather than being totally destroyed, remains next door (38). Throughout the story, there is constant interaction between the suburb and the bush; the children continually invade the

8. See White's *Riders in the Chariot*, Carey's *The Tax Inspector*, Malouf's *Johnno*, Johnston's *My Brother Jack*, Davison's "Wires," and "Neary's Horse."

bush, using it as a playground, while nature exerts a powerful influence on the suburb and its residents through the swamp and the water table.

Winton's suburb occupies a liminal space between the city and the bush, and is encroached on by both. As the city expands, it pushes its suburbs further into the bush: "From high on the ridge the city could be seen forming itself into a spearhead. It was coming our way and it traveled inexorably in straight lines. The bush rolled and twisted like an unmade bed. It was, in the beginning, only a fence away" (38). The city, representing civilization, development, and capitalism, is continually growing, impinging upon the bush in straight lines, while the bush rolls and twists, moving in an unstructured manner. A few pages later, Winton employs the same rhetorical strategy: "We slipped through the bush together where there were no straight lines. Beyond the fence there were snarls and matted tangles" (41). The suburbs represent order and control, while the bush represents chaos, freedom and danger.⁹ Both Winton and Davison employ straight lines and strict boundaries in their suburban short stories to emphasize the opposite states of suburbia and nature.

The liminal state of the suburb and its peripheral and inferior status in relation to other sites is emphasized repeatedly throughout "Aquifer":

From the high ground of the schoolyard you could see the city and the real suburbs in the distance. You could even smell the sea. In the afternoons the blue bush plain was hazy with smoke and the dust churned up by bulldozers ... When summer came and the windows lay open all night the noise of frogs and crickets and mosquitoes pressed in as though the swamp had swelled in the dark. (40)

The narrator clearly perceives the city, sea and bush as more important than his own suburb; even other suburbs are valued as "real," presumably because they are more established and closer to the city and the sea. The implication is that the newness and peripheral location of the narrator's suburb are negative characteristics. Again, the natural environment continues to be destroyed in the name of suburban expansion, yet it remains an ever-present force. The haunting presence of the natural environment also plays a major role in Davison's "Neary's Horse."

As a child, the narrator of "Aquifer" is intrigued by the bush adjacent to his suburban home. While suburbia represents conformity and containment, the bush is equated with possibility and danger:

I grew up in a boxy double brick house with roses and a letterbox, like anyone else. My parents were always struggling to get me inside something, into shirts and shoes, inside the fence, the neighbourhood, the house, out of the sun or the rain

9. In her analysis of the White-vanishing trope, Elspeth Tilley argues that "Aquifer" is part of a long tradition of texts featuring White Australians who disappear in the bush. Tilley posits that Winton's use of a "separated semiosis of regular, deliberate, and finite settled space [the suburb] versus haphazard and infinite unsettled space [the bush]" is inherited from previous White-vanishing texts (37).

... I sat on the fence and stared at the noisy blue bush and in time I was allowed to roam there. (39)

It is the relationship between the children of the suburb and the bush, specifically the swamp, which forms the core of Winton's story. The children want to play in the swamp, but their parents forbid them from doing so because of perceived dangers such as "quicksand and tiger snakes, wild roots and submerged logs" (40). For the suburban parents, the natural environment is a threat to their children, and their children must be contained to ensure their safety.

Inevitably, the narrator and the other neighbourhood children disobey their parents and begin frequenting the swamp (42-43). Nature holds an irresistible attraction for the children, especially when compared with the manicured lawns of suburbia. The narrator describes the swamp as the most central and powerful site in the landscape: "Every wrinkle, every hollow in the landscape led to the hissing maze down there" (43). Once in the swamp, suburbia may as well not even exist: "From the water's edge you couldn't even see our street" (43). Despite nature's undeniable attraction and power within "Aquifer," suburbia affects it negatively in ways other than the construction of streets and houses. The swamp becomes a dumping ground for old cars, which "would just appear, driven in the back way from behind the market gardens, stripped or burned, left near the water" (45). Clearly, the children's attitude towards the swamp is not shared by many adults, who view the natural environment merely as a resource to be exploited, rather than one worth preserving.

During his childhood, the narrator is constantly bullied by his neighbour Alan Mannering, the child of English immigrants. The bullying climaxes when Alan presses a sharp fence picket into the narrator's chest, pinning him to the ground, then urinates in a circle around him while standing over him. Immediately after this act of territorialism and supremacy, Alan climbs aboard the roof of a wrecked car that he uses as a makeshift canoe. After pushing out into the water, Allan suddenly "went down, sliding sideways like a banking aircraft ... He didn't come up ... After the water settled back and shook itself smooth again like hung washing, there wasn't a movement. No sign" (46). Rather than raising the alarm, the narrator goes home and says nothing (49). Police drag the swamp but do not find Alan's body.

As time passes, the narrator keeps his guilty secret and often thinks about Alan "encased in the black cake-mix of sediment" (47). He learns about aquifers at school, and when the residents of the suburb sink bores and draw water from the ground, he thinks of his deceased tormentor "raining silently down upon the lawns of ... [his] street ... [He thinks of Alan] in lettuce and tomatoes ... Like blood and bone" (48). The narrator is haunted by dreams of Alan, waking in a sweat and examining the moisture on his forehead: "My neighbour had gotten into everything; he was artesian" (49). The drowning, decomposition and integration into the water table of an English immigrant functions as a symbol

and reminder of the invasion and settlement of Australia. The event can also be read as a triumph of the natural environment, as yet another example of a European immigrant being destroyed by the Australian continent.¹⁰ The narrator also thinks about “the others who might have drowned in our swamp. Explorers, maybe ... Even, startlingly, people like the Joneses [an Indigenous family] ... The houses weren’t old but the remnants of the bush, the swamp itself, that was another thing altogether ... I imagined a hundred years, then a thousand and a million” (49). The narrator’s contemplation of the vast amount of time that has passed and the long Indigenous presence on the continent emphasizes the newness of suburbia and European settlement, but surely also the fragility of non-Indigenous claims of belonging on the continent.

Indeed, the presence of an Indigenous family in a neighbourhood comprised of recent European immigrants and the descendants of European settler/invasers emphasizes the fact that the Europeans (of all types) are recent arrivals on the continent. Winton positions the Joneses as different from the white suburbanites, not only racially, but economically. The narrator states, “Everyone was working class, even the Aborigines around the corner whose name was Jones, though it seemed that these were Joneses who didn’t need much keeping up with” (39). The fact that the Indigenous family has a European name serves as a reminder of their colonization and displacement. Additionally, the Indigenous family is represented as violent, angry and threatening:

[They were] dark and loud. Even their laughter seemed angry. I never had much to do with any of them. I rode past their house careful not to provoke them. They gave my little brother a hiding once. I never knew why. His nose swelled like a turnip and he nursed this grievance for the rest of his life. It made his mind up about them, he said. (44)

Obviously, during his childhood the narrator did not understand or accept that the Joneses had a great deal to be angry about, from European colonization through to their present marginalized economic, legal and social state, and that as a representative of white society, he and his brother were natural targets. At the conclusion of “Aquifer,” the middle-aged narrator witnesses the eviction of the Joneses from their home (52); he is emotionally affected by the eviction, yet his physical response is to drive out of the suburb on his way back to Angelus. Like many non-Indigenous Australians, he decides that the plight of Indigenous Australians is not his problem.

However, witnessing the eviction triggers an epiphany, which concludes the story: “Seeing the Joneses out on the street, the only people I recognized from the old days, just confirmed what I’ve thought since Alan Mannerling circled me as his own ... that the past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over” (53). Ending the story with Faulknerian references to both the Indigenous

10. Burke and Wills and Patrick White’s *Voss* immediately come to mind.

family and the deceased English immigrant, while reflecting on the relationship between the past and the present, makes it difficult for readers to ignore the fact that “Aquifer” is a postcolonial story dealing with complex intertwined issues of European settlement and immigration, Indigenous displacement, land rights and ownership, race, nationality and non-Indigenous belonging. Actions that took place in Australia’s past have consequences that are being dealt with in Australia’s present, and suburbia is often the site in which the difficult negotiations occur.

Although Winton does not usually directly address contentious issues such as Indigenous land rights in his fiction, he often does so subtly, as he does in *Cloudstreet*, and has made it clear in interviews that he believes “White Australia” should value Indigenous culture highly: “we live with a contradiction in Australia: one of the most anti-religious European cultures on the most spiritual and religious of continents. It’s tragic – 40,000 years of Aboriginal wisdom completely ignored” (Qtd. in Rossiter 4). Winton’s position regarding Indigenous land rights is complicated, however, by his statements regarding his sense of belonging as a non-Indigenous Australian: “I’m not embarrassed about coming from here, although I’m ashamed of the way my forebears ... brought me into the country ... I’m not ashamed to be here as a white Australian” (Qtd. in Rossiter 13). Winton’s position is by no means unique; in fact, it is typical of many non-Indigenous Australians who recognize and acknowledge that the continent was stolen from its original inhabitants, yet simultaneously feel a deep sense of belonging.

Despite the complexity of “Aquifer” and Winton’s engagement with interwoven issues such as Indigenous displacement, European settlement/invasion and environmental degradation, the author sometimes describes suburbia in a manner consistent with the anti-suburban tradition in Australian literature, focusing on the conformity and lack of variety. For example, there are only “three basic designs” for the houses due to “the entire suburb’s origins in the smoky, fly-buzzing office of some bored government architect” (38). Winton suggests that little effort or imagination has gone into the design of the houses, which results in an aesthetically boring environment, echoing the architect and critic Robin Boyd, author of *The Australian Ugliness* (1961), who viewed suburbia as an “aesthetic calamity” (Qtd. in Caterson 60). Nevertheless, “Aquifer” examines suburbia in a complex and serious manner that is rare within Australian literature and uses the suburban setting to confront some of the most controversial issues in contemporary Australian society.

The action of Davison’s “Neary’s Horse,” first published in *The Best Australian Stories 1999* and reprinted in Davison’s *Collected Stories* (2001), takes place in an unnamed south-eastern suburb of Melbourne. “Neary’s Horse” is a shocking story about a group of children who violently chase a horse along a stormwater canal until it disappears into the network of drains beneath the suburb. The first-person narrator, telling the story retrospectively from adulthood, plays a central role in the action. Neary’s horse lives on the only undeveloped lot in a quiet suburban street; its owner is the son of the farmer who formerly owned the land occupied

by the suburb. Upon his father's death, Neary inherited the land and sold it. Neary visits once a week to feed, water and groom the horse, before returning to the city, where he lives and works.

The narrator and the other children are disturbed by the presence of the horse, which they do not think belongs in their suburb, as "There wasn't another horse for miles" (118). Not only is the horse seemingly out of place, it serves no apparent purpose: "It stood there all day, doing nothing" (117). The children are unable to accept that the horse has no utilitarian value: "None of us knew what it was there for ... It stood all year on its quarter acre, patiently enduring our torments, asking nothing and giving nothing in return" (117). The narrator explains that the presence of the horse would "have made more sense" if it were "further out," past "the industrial estate and used car yards" (117). However, there is no acceptable explanation for the horse's presence in suburbia and the children conclude that "things would be better with it gone" (117).

The children believe that they belong in their suburb, unlike the horse. The narrator describes the children as products of suburbia, stating, "We were born to asphalt streets with nature strips and concrete edgings. All of our houses looked the same. All of our streets ran straight. North Road. South Road. Centre Road. East Boundary Road. We knew exactly where we stood" (117). Davison's description of the unnamed south-eastern Melbourne suburb could well be a description of almost any suburb in any Australian city by any Australian writer; like Winton in "Aquifer" (and other writers not discussed in this article, such as Peter Carey, David Malouf, Neil Boyack, George Johnston and Melissa Lucashenko), Davison focuses on the sameness, conformity and precision of suburbia, all features produced through planning. The planned suburban environment produces a strong sense of belonging for the children raised there, who are on intimate terms with it, having thoroughly explored their territory: "We rode our bikes to the church or youth club, or to the strip of shops that faced each other across Centre Road and never questioned that the place had ever been any different to how we found it" (117-118). Despite their familiarity and comfort with their suburb, and their intense sense of belonging, the children lack a sense of history and have no curiosity regarding its origins.

Moreover, new suburbs are being built just "a mile or so further out" (118), yet the children do not make the connection between the ongoing development nearby and the short history of their own suburb. The narrator admits that the children largely "focused ... [their] attention the other way" (118), towards their own suburb and north-east to the city. The children understand their suburb as subordinate to the city, which their fathers depend on as the source of employment; they also realize that one day they too will travel into the city each morning (118). The narrator repeatedly emphasizes the sense of belonging that the children feel for their suburb, claiming that they "lived with the conviction that the station ... [their] fathers returned to, and ... [their] intimate knowledge of streets laid down in the same decade ... [in which they] were born set ...

[them] apart from others and provided some privileged understanding of who ... [they] were" (118). However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that the children not only lack an understanding of their own nature, but are unwilling to confront that nature or admit to themselves what they have done. Thus, the suburban children are ignorant, unreflective and in denial; their attitude can be read as a metaphor for contemporary Australian attitudes towards environmental degradation, Indigenous displacement and European settlement/invasion.

Because they are products of suburbia who have not considered that there may be environments of value beyond theirs, the children turn their backs "on the open land a short bike ride in the opposite direction [from the city], little realizing that before ... [they reach their] parents' age, the flower farms and market gardens would all be gone, buried beneath a vast, unbroken crust of brick veneer and concrete that would stretch to the distant hills" (118). The environmental degradation caused by the inexorable expansion of suburbia is a common theme in the small body of Australian fiction set there. However, what is most interesting about Davison's use of the theme is his decision to depict his narrator as being unaware of the process, at least during his childhood. Rather than being ambivalent, unconcerned or outraged about the destruction of the natural environment, Davison's narrator-protagonist fails to even notice the process until it is complete and the landscape is smothered by bricks and concrete.

Although the natural environment has been largely destroyed through the process of constructing streets, burying a network of drains and pipes, laying house foundations and inverting the soil, the remnants of flower farms and market gardens intrude upon the suburb, reminding the residents of some of the previous uses of the land:

Occasionally, people were surprised to find white tubers sprouting from their bluegrass lawns, or a line of onions pushing up beside the roses, and they thought for a moment about old Mr. Neary and what his son had done, and about the part they'd played in it themselves. They wondered at the resilience of the things he'd planted, then hacked them from the ground. (120)

Clearly, the suburban adults possess a sense of history, realizing that they are complicit in the destruction of the farms and gardens, and perhaps even feel guilty. However, by destroying the tubers and onions, the suburbanites demonstrate that maintaining a neat lawn and garden is their primary concern, and thus they privilege the concerns of the present over the actions of the past. For the suburban adults of the narrator's childhood, controlling the natural environment takes precedence over preserving it (just as it does for the adults in Winton's "Aquifer") and the present trumps the past.

Before describing the central event of the story, the expulsion of the horse from the suburb, the narrator tries to excuse the terrible action: "The horse was already out when we came across it. Confined to its block, it posed no serious threat ... finding it loose ... made all the difference" (121). The children falsely perceive

the horse as a threat to them simply because it is no longer contained. However, the horse does not roam the streets, eat anyone's lawn or trample anyone's rose bushes; it simply stands beside "the concrete canal eating the lush swamp dock and ribbon grass it hadn't been able to reach before" (121). Nevertheless, the narrator's descriptions of the horse focus on its perceived "air of proprietorial disdain" and "imposing bulk," noting that "its flanks twitched with the excitement of being out and we could see the muscles working in its neck as it ripped great clumps of grass from the earth with each savage toss of its head" (121). The power of the horse is emphasized and exaggerated, especially through the use of language such as "ripped" and (the loaded term) "savage." Ironically, observing the horse outside its suburban quarter-acre block causes the children to see their environment in an entirely new way. They realize that the horse "was at home exactly where it stood. It didn't belong to another place at all, but to this place before we knew it" (121). Not only does the narrator realize that the horse is the original inhabitant of the land, that it preceded the suburbs which have imprisoned it, he also presents the horse as the keeper of knowledge and memories alien to the children: "It still saw the furrowed acres we had never known and the clumps of melaleuca extending for miles on the far side of a trickling creek" (121). Like the Indigenous peoples who formerly inhabited the land, the horse possesses knowledge of the land and a relationship with it that the suburban children lack.

Nevertheless, despite the group's realization that the horse belongs, the children begin their brutal expulsion. One of them throws a small bottle at the horse, which shatters on the concrete, causing the horse to emit "a high-pitched scream as though the glass had found its eye, then it bolted, kicking up clods of earth with its hooves and arching its neck" (121). Immediately before describing this incident, the narrator engages in some self-conscious denial: "Memory tells me it wasn't me who threw it but I can still feel those markings soft against my hand" (121). The brutal behaviour of the children escalates as they follow the horse along the canal bank "mimicking the noise it made with ... [their] own excited screams" (121). Despite earlier excuses and denials, the narrator admits that the children "should have let it go then, should have been content with the damage ... already done" (121). However, the children are thrilled by the power they hold over the horse and continue their pursuit. The horse's path is blocked by a wire fence; it stumbles and falls "down the concrete embankment, its hooves slipping beneath it as it went until it was ... at the bottom of the canal" (122). The narrator reveals that at this point someone in the group suggests letting the horse go, while another was weeping "out of fear or pity" (122). The horse moves along the canal toward the stormwater drain; the narrator describes the group following, "shouting out like ... [they] were in control as ... [they] drove it further from its block of land with a triumphant determination ... [they] didn't know ... [they] had" (122). Like settler/invaders in the early days of colonization, the young suburbanites are intent on erasing every remnant of the previous occupants.

Once the horse arrives at the stormwater drain entrance, the children drive it into the tunnel by throwing stones (123). The horse disappears into a built environment from which it cannot escape. The children wait for hours, expecting the horse to return, and then go home silently, unable to acknowledge to each other what they have done, “for fear of what it would reveal” about themselves (123). The children’s silence in “Neary’s Horse” parallels the narrator’s silence in “Aquifer.” Neary’s horse does not return, and the children never mention the expulsion again. Before long, people forget that Neary ever had a horse, and life seems to return to normal. Neary visits the block weekly for six months, “walking along the top of the canal as though searching for some part of himself he’d lost” (123). Years pass, Neary sells the land, a house is built upon it, and the canal is enclosed. Fifteen years after the horse is forced underground, the narrator occasionally talks to childhood companions who suggest that there was a vacant block somewhere with a horse on it; however, the narrator claims to have no memory of it and the others agree, also choosing to continue repressing and denying the past and engaging in a deliberate process of forgetting.

“Neary’s Horse” can be read as an indictment of suburban attitudes and environmental degradation, and as a commentary on the brutality of human nature. However, like Winton’s “Aquifer,” it may also be interpreted as a commentary on land rights, ownership, Indigenous belonging, non-Indigenous belonging, revisionist history, forgetting, repression and denial, with the expulsion of the horse from its land symbolizing the displacement and massacre of Indigenous Australians by European settler/invasers. The guilt and denial of the narrator and his companions parallel the guilt and/or denial that many non-Indigenous Australians experience regarding the treatment of Australia’s Indigenous peoples, as indicated by Winton’s depiction of his narrator’s attitude towards the Joneses. All of Australia’s suburbs occupy land stolen from the original Indigenous owners, and thus suburbia and the displacement of Indigenous peoples are inextricably linked, a fact already discussed in reference to Winton’s “Aquifer.” Davison has commented that his fiction, just like Winton’s “Aquifer,” is pervaded by “the Faulknerian notion that ... [one] can’t escape the past, that the past influences the present and is not even past yet” (Probyn 61). Clearly, Davison believes that suburban development and environmental degradation cannot eradicate the history of the land and the peoples and animals that once lived there. Contemporary Australians living in suburbs must recognize and accept the fact that their quarter-acre blocks have the same shameful history as the rest of the continent. Environmental degradation and Indigenous displacement are not issues that are only relevant in the outback, the bush or coastal areas; they are central to the suburbs in which the vast majority of Australians live.

Although the suburban short stories of Winton and Davison discussed above contain descriptions of suburbia that conform to traditional Australian literary approaches to the suburbs, drawing in part on the anti-suburban tradition, their work is innovative in that it demonstrates that the suburbs are a complex

environment in which many of the most important issues in Australian society are present, confronted and worked through. Moreover, Winton and Davison reveal how issues such as suburban development, environmental degradation, the displacement of Indigenous Australians, and non-Indigenous belonging are intertwined on numerous levels and cannot be addressed in isolation. There are many other social issues, such as unemployment, education, immigration, multiculturalism, class conflict, sexuality and parenting that writers interested in suburbia are beginning to investigate.¹¹ In the short stories analysed above, which are just two examples of the depth and potential of suburban fiction, Winton and Davison provide clear evidence that the environment in which most Australians live is fertile ground for fiction, demonstrating that suburbia is an important and complex space deserving of further exploration, both by writers and critics.¹²

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11. Shaun Tan's *Tales from Outer Suburbia* and Christos Tsiolkas's *The Slap* are recent examples.

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