

Panel 28
Music and Text

The Musical Construction of Place in Tim Winton's *Dirt Music*

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In his novel *Dirt Music* (2001), Australian author Tim Winton's depictions of different genres of music are intertwined with his characters' complex relationships with local landscapes. Music plays a crucial role in the construction of place and characters' relocation, evoking and organizing collective memories and experiences of place with a unique intensity. The novel, set within the Australian landscape, locates this idea in a literary exploration of the profound connection between people and the natural world. Protagonist Luther Fox's raw guitar compositions, born from trauma and performed at clandestine fishing expeditions, contrast sharply with the structured country tunes of the White Point fishing community, revealing music's dual capacity to both heal and alienate. Winton constructs a sonic ecosystem where Georgie Jutland's classical radio playlists signify urban dislocation, while Indigenous songlines pulse as an ancient counterpoint to colonial displacement. Through these auditory layers, the novel interrogates how modernity's musical fragmentation mirrors ecological disconnection, positioning Luther's outlaw "dirt music" – spontaneous creations using found objects – as a radical reclamation of authentic place-making. Winton critiques postcolonial Australia's cultural amnesia while proposing musical hybridity as a bridge between ecological stewardship and personal redemption by weaving Aboriginal cyclical timekeeping with Western melodic traditions. This acoustic framework ultimately positions the novel itself as a literary composition – its cadenced prose and thematic repetitions mirror musical structures that mourn environmental degradation while orchestrating hope through art's transformative resonance. By focusing on music's role in shaping identity, community, and moral hierarchies, Winton's narrative invites reflection on the role of music in contemporary society. This essay explores the intricate relationship between music and the construction of place in the novel and analyses how different musical genres mourn, trace, and reconstruct Winton's ideal relationship between people and place.

Biography

Yunjin Li is a Ph.D. candidate in English Literature at Shanghai International Studies University, specializing in Caribbean and Postcolonial studies. She has contributed to China's National Social Science Foundation's major project "Studies in the History of Caribbean Literature," co-authored the Derek Walcott poetry volume and published related research in peer-reviewed journals.