

New Possibilities of Neighbouring: Tim Winton's Cloudstreet

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Abstract: I intend to revisit Winton's popular family saga in the light of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity and Kenneth Reinhard's political theology, both built upon the Christian principle of loving thy neighbour. The story of two families, the Pickles and the Lambs, sharing house in post-World War II Perth, proves fertile ground for the analysis of the encounter with the Face of the Other, the founding principle of Levinasian philosophy. In his political theology of the neighbour, which aims at breaking the traditional dichotomy friend/enemy, Reinhard draws on Badiou's conception of love as a truth procedure, capable of creating universality in a particular place. Thus, the vicissitudes of the two families in coming to terms with each other in their "great continent of a house" invite a metaphorical reading and echo Winton's interest in promoting a sense of community in Australia.

Keywords: Levinas's ethics of alterity, Reinhard's political theology of the neighbour, community in Australia.

The English word "neighbour" comprises two meanings that are conveyed by different words in other languages. A neighbour is someone who lives close to you (*vecino* in Spanish; *voisin* in French). The neighbour is also a more elusive concept that, according to some dictionaries, is somewhat outdated. The *Collins Cobuild* defines it simply as "a person who you have dealings with". The *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, more comprehensively, provides two complementary definitions for what the Spanish call *el prójimo* and the French *le prochain*: "a person regarded as having the duties or claims of friendliness, consideration, etc., of a neighbour" and "a fellow human being, esp[ecially] as having claims on friendship". The *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* does not include a definition for this second meaning but offers instead the expression "love thy neighbour" with the following explanation: "a phrase from the Bible, often used humorously or with irony".

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas approached the summons to love thy neighbour in *Leviticus* with anything but irony or humour —there is, in fact, little of either in his writings. Eons before our conception and birth we are all branded by this massive ethical demand, since ethics precedes not only philosophy but also being. Levinas's ethics of alterity is founded on our infinite responsibility for the neighbour, or the Face of the Other, as he usually puts it. "A neighbor concerns me outside of any a priori", he says (2004: 192). This does not come from an altruistic will, but from something that exceeds my will. In *Totality and Infinity* (1969) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974), he elaborates on this extreme form of relationship, which many a philosopher has found excessive and self-destructive:

The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. [...] It is here that the Transcendent, infinitely other, solicits us and appeals to us. The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. His very epiphany consists in soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow and the orphan. (Levinas, 1991: 78)

Responsibility for the neighbour is inescapable and has no measure (2004: 47). I am the servant of my neighbour (87). I have been taken hostage by the needs of the other (11). The vulnerability of the neighbour awakens my compassion and I respond to the call with abnegation. "The exposure to another is disinterestedness, proximity, obsession by the neighbor, an obsession despite oneself, that is, a pain" (55), states Levinas. The command is made all the more difficult by the fact that the other, or the neighbour, should always already remain radically other, as reducing the other to the same —a common tendency in Western philosophy— would invalidate the encounter.

More recently, the neighbour was the topic of a series of intense conversations between three leading thinkers working in the field of psychoanalysis. In 2005 these conversations were made into a book, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, by Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner and Kenneth Reinhard. Taking as a starting point Freud's bewilderment at the biblical injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself, they undertake "the project of rethinking the notion of neighbor in light of the catastrophic experiences of the twentieth century" (2005:3). The concept of neighbour has lost its innocence, they say. However, "the call to neighbor-love [...] remains always in the imperative and presses on us with an urgency that seems to go beyond both its religious origins and its modern appropriations as universal Reason" (3). It is an enigma, they add, "that calls us to rethink the very nature of subjectivity, responsibility and community" (3):

Is the neighbor understood as an extension of the category of the self, the familial, and the friend, that is, as someone *like* me whom I am obligated to give preferential treatment to; or does it imply the inclusion of the other into my circle of responsibility, extending to the stranger, even the enemy?

[...] does the commandment call us to expand the range of our identifications or does it urge us to come closer, become answerable to, an alterity that remains radically inassimilable? (6-7)

The first to tackle the question is Kenneth Reinhard in his essay “Towards a Political Theology of the Neighbour”. Drawing on Freud and Lacan, he sets out to revise the two central categories of Carl Schmitt’s political theology: the sovereign and the friend/enemy divide. Unlike contemporary liberal thinkers, who have altogether abandoned the idea of political theology, Reinhard puts forward an alternative political theology of the neighbour (7). The key is to be found in Lacan’s logic for feminine sexuation, built around what he called the *pas-tout*, the not-all, which opens up the field totalized by a sovereign exception to “an infinite series of possible encounters, one without limit and without totalization, a field without the stability of margins” (8). The second essay of the volume, by Eric Santner, is entitled “Miracles Happen: Benjamin, Rosenzweig, Freud, and the Matter of the Neighbor”. Taking as his point of departure the concept of miracle as theorised by the German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*, Santner defends that it is precisely the miracle that allows fidelity to the commandment of neighbour-love, since it implies a “capacity to intervene into [the] dimension of creaturely life”. The miracle is “the possibility of releasing the energies contained there, opening them to genuinely new destinies” (9). Finally, Slavoj Žižek in “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence” turns the injunction to love one’s neighbour against itself and challenges “the so-called ethical turn in contemporary thought”, associated with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (9).

Readers of Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (1991) are aware of the centrality of miracles and neighbours. It is precisely a failed miracle that brings the two protagonist families together in the same house, the Lambs and the Pickles becoming neighbours in both senses of the word. Winton’s novel was instantly popular, with its first edition selling out within a few days of publication (McGirr, 1999: 81). In the year 2003, the novel was chosen “Australia’s Favourite Australian Book” in a poll carried out by the Australian Society of Authors in celebration of its 40th anniversary (<http://www.abc.net.au/corp/pubs/media/s1001783.htm>). *Cloudstreet*, Winton states (In Wachtel, 1997:72), is a homage to the city of Perth, where the novel is set for the most part, and a lament for the changes it underwent in the decades of rampant development. He dedicates it to his grandparents, on which some of the main characters are modelled. Being a family saga, the theme of interpersonal relations features prominently. But families in Winton, as Salhia Ben-Messahel reminds us (2006:30), are also “an opening into history”, since their experiences transcend the local and “construct a social tale about Australia”. In “Nostalgia for Community: Tim Winton’s Essays and Stories”, Bruce Bennet reads *Cloudstreet* as “a pointer to the powerful need [...] for the rediscovery of the sources of community in Australia” (1994: 72). Similarly, Stuart Murray analyses how the novel renegotiates personal and communal identity against “the standard markers of Australian nationalist orthodoxy” that consolidated in the myths produced by Gallipoli (2003:84). The novel, Murray states, promotes a form of “new tribalism” characterised by the need to understand “the nature of the everyday and the mundane, by the fraught nature of fate and

faith, and by an acceptance of versions of family and humanity that refigure an idea of community” (84).

In what follows, I intend to read *Cloudstreet* against Reinhard’s essay to analyse up to what point the novel predates the author in his re-founding of political theology upon the concept of the neighbour. It is my contention that *Cloudstreet*, borrowing from Žižek, Santner and Reinhard, not only invites an expansion of “the range of our identifications” but also urges us, in line with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, to move towards “an alterity that remains radically inassimilable”, combining a desire to converge with the realisation of the need for separation and respect. My reading hinges on Reinhard’s reevaluation of the figure of the neighbour, which aims at breaking the dichotomy friend/enemy on which traditional political theology is built. Since Reinhard draws on Badiou’s conception of love as a truth procedure, capable of creating universality in a particular place, the vicissitudes of the two families in coming to terms with each other in their “great continent of a house” invite a metaphorical reading and echo Winton’s interest in promoting a new sense of community in Australia.

During a family outing by the river, Samson Lamb —known as Fish— is trapped in the net his father and brother have cast to catch prawns. When they pull him out of the water he is dead. His mother Oriel attempts resuscitation:

Quick heard her shouting at the Lord Jesus.
Blessed blessed Saviour, bring him back. Show us all thy tender mercy and
bring this boy back. Ah, Gawd Jesus Almighty, raise him up! Now, you raise
him up! [...]
Lord Jesus
Whump!
Saviour Jesus...
Whump!
And she made sounds on him you only got from cold pastry. (30)

Fish is brought back to life, and the Lambs, “God-fearing people”, take him into town to the Church of Christ, “singing and wildeyed” (31): “Fish Lamb is back! Praise the Lord!/
But Quick held his brother’s head in his hands and knew it wasn’t quite right. Because not all of Fish Lamb had come back” (32). Fish suffers from brain damage and never forgives his mother for not letting him die. The family lose their faith. After the accident and failed miracle the Lambs leave their farm and settle in Perth. They rent half a house at number 1 Cloud Street. This big old house is owned by Sam Pickles, a compulsive gambler, who lost part his right hand in an accident at work. The Pickles do not believe in God, but on his Shifty Shadow. Lady Luck rules over the moods of Sam Pickles and decides the fate of his family. The house is the only thing they own, since Sam has gambled away all their money and can no longer work. It was left to him in a relative’s will on condition that he did not sell it for a period of twenty years. Sam puts up a fence in the middle of the garden and rents the sunny side of the house out to the Lambs. The novel focuses on the twenty years—from the early forties to the early sixties—in which the two families live under the same roof.

The narrative sets in contrast two very different lifestyles: the Lambs are thrifty and hardworking, while the Pickles, with the exception of Rose, the daughter, are idlers. This is metonymically expressed by the house, which “seemed to have taken on an unbalanced life with all that activity and foment on the Lamb side, as though the place was an old stroke survivor paralysed down one side” (59). The garden is “wild on the Pickles side of the tin fence” and “bountiful on the Lamb side” (293). Their kids are described as “opposing platoons” (51) and the parents either ignore each other or give vent to their mutual dislike. The most striking contrast is that between the two mothers. Oriel is masculine both in physique and in character. She is described as plain and bossy. Dolly, as her name suggests, is feminine and attractive. Unlike Oriel, who denies herself any kind of pleasure and is always on the go, Dolly has frequent marital and extramarital sex, neglects her family and spends her days in the pub, drinking away her disappointment with life. Borrowing Lacan’s comment on Moses reincarnated as father-God in Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (Reinhard: 42), we can say that Oriel is all will and no *jouissance*, while her neighbour is all *jouissance* and no will.

The subject of the political theology Reinhard propounds is woman, who in her uniqueness “*opens up* the space of the neighbor” (59). He draws on Badiou’s argument about how love creates humanity through the agency of women. For a woman, Reinhard puts it,

the human world (made up by the truth procedures of science, art, love and politics) is only valuable insofar as there is love; when love is present, it infuses itself throughout the field of humanity, linking and correlating its elements. For the man, this is not the case; the truth procedures of life are independent of each other, love is only one field among four in which life unfolds. [...] For women the elements of life are threads that are meaningless in isolation and that only love can tie into a knot. (61, 62)

However, neither Oriel nor Dolly seems in a position to promote this new form of political theology. Dolly, born to one of her sisters and raised by her grandmother as her own, is unable to love herself, let alone her family and neighbours. Oriel’s case is more complex. Despite having lost her faith, her life still revolves around the Christian tenet of neighbour love. “Oriel could spot weakness and need a mile off”, says the narrator (183). At some point in the narrative she invites a widow to move in and offers her a job (186). She also insists on helping the Pickles even if her help is unwanted. She nurses Dolly back to health when she is brought home half dead with alcohol poisoning and tidies up their part of the house. But her kindness scalds (391). She imposes her views and cares on others and believes in just one way of doing things —her own (400). She is bent on fixing people’s lives and this brings about resentment rather than gratitude. In the light of Levinasian philosophy, her problem is that she does not respect the alterity of the other but considers the other an extension of the self. Totalitarianism, asserts Hanna Arendt (Reinhard, 2005: 25), stems from the overwhelming presence of the neighbour, “whose unbearable closeness makes the self ‘equivocal’”.

Oriel can be read as a personification of one of the three pillars of traditional political theology, the sovereign. As Salhia Ben-Messahel puts it (2006: 35), she is “‘the man of the house’ —a female patriarch rather than a matriarch”. Like the sovereign, Oriel dictates the law and decrees the exception to the law. It is she that decides to set up shop in Cloud Street (55). Opening and closing times and holidays are also decided by her. She even declares war on G.M. Clay, their most direct competitor, and victory over him —he closes his shop down in the end— is celebrated as their private Victory Day (VD), in an allusion to the end of the Second World War earlier in the novel. She runs “the best shop this side of the river” and the trams even stop for her (230). On New Year’s Day, 1949, Oriel moves out of the house and into a tent in the garden, where she will live for the following twenty years. The reason for her moving remains a mystery even to her (133). According to Schmitt, “sovereignty is a borderline concept”, both inside and outside the law (Reinhard: 15). Oriel’s liminal position is also that of God and the Father in Lacan’s theory, existing “at the limit of the worlds they orchestrate” (Reinhard: 54). Oriel is both feared and admired by friends and enemies alike. In fact, it is she that decides who is friend and who is enemy, “us” and “them”. The difference between good and evil is crystal clear to her: “We make good, Lester”, she tells her husband. “We make war on the bad and don’t surrender” (230). Conscious of her strength, she takes the weak under her protection (269). She is said to be “prouder than the British Empire” (28) and the idea of the Nation and its glorious memories are sacred to her and her family, who help at the local Anzac club (144).

The Lambs seem to be carrying the nation upon their backs, thinks Sam Pickles, and he describes them at work in the following terms: “all that scrubbing and sweeping, tacking up shelves and blackboards, arguing over the situation of jars, tubs, scales and till. Stinking dull work, the labour of sheilas at best” (76). The reference to gender is not gratuitous, as Tim Winton is known for his atypical portrayals of masculinity. “Others have written about men in a traditional way and I guess I’m writing about it from an orthodox female point of view”, he tells Elizabeth Guy at an interview (1996-1997: 129). Some of his novels and short stories challenge hegemonic masculinity in featuring soft males versus strong female characters. Those who care in Winton’s fiction, are more often than not men. “It is precisely their ‘feminine’ qualities that Winton highlights in his male characters —their abilities to love, to relate emotionally, to be intuitive, to nurture, to cry, to be hurt— to the detriment of other typically masculine qualities like the desire to dominate or to be competitive” (Arizti Martín, 2006: 280-281). Winton’s unconventional approach to masculinity opens up the possibility of studying the male characters in *Cloudstreet* as the promoters of Reinhard’s political theology of the neighbour, a theology that he sees as supplementing, rather than eradicating the politics of sovereignty. The neighbour, as a “third term”, inaugurates a form of political relation not based on the traditional dichotomy friend/enemy (Reinhard: 13). Sam and Lester are in fact the first to start a more friendly relationship. In contrast to Dolly, who decides never to speak to Oriel after being looked after by her, Sam donates a pig to the Lambs to show his gratitude. Lester offers his neighbours help in a less intrusive way than his wife, and his help is gladly welcomed, especially when he pays off Sam’s debts and finds a hiding place for him when his creditors threaten to beat him up. They both weep and are capable of showing emotions and their approach to the other is more in line with Levinas’s theory of alterity. “People are

... who they are”, says Sam (169), the dots at the heart of the sentence reproducing the distance—the breathing space— necessary for respect.

But the definite boost to the political theology of the neighbour in *Cloudstreet* comes from the younger generation of males. It is Quick and Fish Lamb that challenge duality in all its forms, including the traditional opposition between friends and enemies, interiority and exteriority, the rational and the irrational. The key is to be found not in the strong and mighty but in the weak and inarticulate. Early in the novel, Mason Lamb, known as Quick “because he is as unquick as his father” (27), expands the concept of the neighbour through what the narrator refers to as “the gallery of the miserable”, a collection of pictures he cuts out from the newspapers and pins to the wall, including a “blinded prisoner of war”, “a crying baby” and “some poor fleeing reffo running with a mattress across his back” (61). He has, the narrator says, “a sadness radar” (89) which makes him sensitive to both close and distant suffering. It is true, however, that he keeps the pictures there “to remind him of Fish, how Fish had been broken and not him” (140), as he blames himself for his brother’s accident. The reduction of the public and the political to the private and the personal seems to detract from Quick’s more universal concern for the other. However, the novel presents this as a first step in a quest for a more comprehensive approach to the neighbour. The pictures and reports on Hiroshima and the Holocaust that his history teacher shows him to make up for his biased approach to the Japanese in an essay represent a further stage: “Now he sat with pictures in his lap that were beyond sadness and misery. This was evil [...]. Here were all those words like sin and corruption and damnation” (140). As an adolescent, Quick goes bush and severs all links with his family. In the outback he undergoes a profound transformation through some sporadic encounters with an Aboriginal, a recurrent dream, and a sort of mystical experience after a car accident in which he nearly kills himself. The Aboriginal, who urges him to return to his family, bears many connections with the figure of Christ. The wine and bread he shares with Quick seem inexhaustible (209) and he walks upon the water (217). The terms in which Quick’s enlightenment is described also defy the natural laws: “Quick was lit up like a sixty watt globe and he wouldn’t stop crying. They brought him inside, bathed him and made him drink iced water, hoping the fluorescence would ease off. But by evening [...] he was giving off a light all the more clear in the dusk and he wouldn’t say a word” (219). In the end, he is taken to his family and goes back to normal after being nursed for seven days. The story of the Nedlands Monster, a serial killer that terrorised Perth from 1959 to 1963, is another milestone in his development. A kid drowns in the river and Quick, now a policeman, is called to lift his body: “That’s the sight of the world ending, someone’s son dead. Then it hits him. That’s my brother. This is my life over again. This will always be happening” (398). He is even more affected when it turns out that the kid is the Monster’s son. It is then that Quick becomes painfully aware of our common humanity: “A man. With evil in him. And tears, and children, and old twisted hopes. A man” (399); “It’s not us and them anymore, it’s us and us and us” (402). The encounter with the Monster is also the encounter with the Face of the Neighbour, who summons me from his utter otherness. “For Levinas”, summarises Reinhard (48), “ethics is based on my radically asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relationship to the other as the ‘neighbor’”. The policeman and the killer represent extremes of unbridgeable difference, but in Quick’s new perspective, binary polarisation gives way to the simultaneous acceptance of heterogeneity and sameness. Far

from collapsing the other into the same for instrumental reasons, Quick's "us and us" resonates with Levinas's form of radical humanism. The evolution from duality to non-duality that takes place in *Cloudstreet* has been investigated by George Watt (2004: 59), who affirms that Quick's idea that "we all join up somewhere in the end" (402) partakes of the core of Zen Buddhism and Aboriginal spirituality, both professing the belief in the interrelatedness of existence.

Cloudstreet begins and ends with Fish's second drowning. Its circular plot is just one of the many ways in which the novel points at how everything is connected. Reinhard speaks of the dual axis that structures political theology: the horizontal axis "defined by the imperative *to love the neighbor*" (38) and the "vertical relationship implied by the commandment to *love God*" (39). The vertical and the horizontal converge in Fish. His first partial drowning left him hanging in between two worlds: "It's like Fish is stuck somewhere. Not the way all the living are stuck in time and space; he's in another stuckness altogether. Like he's half in and half out" (69). Throughout the novel we are told about his nostalgia for this supernatural world he just sampled in his first drowning: "Fish's pain stops, and suddenly it's all haste and the darkness melts into something warm. Hurrying down towards a big friendly wound in the gloom ... but then slowing, slowing" (31). His physical side is this retarded boy wholly dependent on his family's cares. The part of him that has direct access to the numinous can travel in time and space, knows what the other characters are thinking, communicates to them in dreams and worries and cares for them. Like the Aboriginal character, he can perform miracles. Interestingly, Fish also bridges the levels of story and text, as part of the novel is narrated by him: "The tarp flaps, the junk rattles, and it goes on and on, me in Oriel's arms, smelling her lemon scent, seeing the flickers in their heads, knowing them like the dead know the living, getting used to the idea, having the drool wiped from my lip" (47). In line with other novels by Tim Winton, like *The Riders* and *That Eye, the Sky*, *Cloudstreet* combines realism with other more experimental narrative forms that try to account for that part of the human experience that escapes reason and cannot be grasped by traditional modes of representation. The novel moves from the vernacular into the poetical and the fairy tale, and guides the reader through the intricacies of the plot by giving a heading to most of the fragments of which it is composed. Although Winton has repeatedly rejected the label "magical realism" (Watzke, 1991:97), *Cloudstreet* brims over with the tropes of this literary phenomenon: a house that breathes, a pig that speaks in tongues, a black angel, characters returning from the dead, flying and glowing like bulbs, etc. The novel also complies with some of its textual strategies, like the problematisation of the storyline and the use of a language that is "both lexically and syntactically inventive" (Linguati, 1999: 6). Magical realism seems, in fact, the most suitable form for Winton's purpose of unveiling the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary and the mundane. Furthermore, Elsa Linguanti, writing about the use of the form in contemporary post-colonial literature, affirms that "these texts often embody their very own encounter with otherness; where the Other is everything that is not at its ease within monolithic structures, everything outside the order, rules and logic of the West" (1999:3). For her, magical realism promotes "inclusiveness, the non-disjunction of contradictory elements" and a conception of the Other in line with the philosophy of Levinas (5). Thus, the form of *Cloudstreet*, despite the text's apparent fragmentation,

conspires with its other aspects in its tendency to connect rather than separate and in reconciling modes of opposition that are regarded as somewhat outdated.

In an Australian context, the politics of the neighbour cannot obviate the country's past history of colonisation and its everlasting impact upon the present. The house the two families inhabit is haunted by the ghost of its first owner, a nasty rich widow who, convinced by the priest, turns the house into an institution for native women: "She aimed to make ladies of them so they could set a standard for their sorry race" (36). The girls "had been taken from their families and were not happy". One of them is found "dead on the floor of the library from drinking ant poison" (36). It is also in the library that, shortly after, the widow dies of a stroke while playing the piano: "She cried out in surprise, in outrage and her nose hit middle C hard enough to darken the room with sound" (36). Since then, the library is haunted by the shadows of a grey old lady and a dark girl. No wonder nobody in the two families likes the room, which, significantly enough, occupies the centre of the old house: "[Rose] came to a door right in the centre of the house but when she opened it the air went from her lungs and a hot, nasty feeling came over her. Ugh. It smelled like an old meatsafe. There were no windows in the room, the walls were blotched with shadows" (38). Fish is the only exception, as he loves playing the old piano. He knows the house is alive and is able to communicate with it, as he does with the family pig: "The house sad, Lesteh. [...] It talks" (166). He also fights with the shadows on the walls. Stuart Murray has noted that, "for the Lambs and the Pickles, although they do not realise it, the house is a palimpsest of the nation even as it is the domestic space that contains individual struggles". "The note from the piano", he adds, "rings throughout the house in an echo of the barbarity of racial prejudice" (2003: 87). Aboriginality, nevertheless, is not confined to the past in *Cloudstreet*. It also features in the present in the form of the black man who reaches out to some of the characters. The figure, part bird, part human, part angel, appears at climatic moments and gives advice mostly about preserving family bonds and connecting to place. The main characters, all white, experience different forms of unbelonging throughout the novel and it is the Aboriginal that teaches them how to belong. The portrayal of the black man in these terms brings him closer to the divine and the sacred but at the same time precludes the hardships of the real and the contemporary. The only allusion to the actual situation of the Aborigines at the time the novel is set comes through Rose, who reminds her father that they did not have the right to vote in Western Australia in the 1961 federal election (411).

The principle of neighbour love is explicitly mentioned by the characters in the last part of the novel:

"Mum's principles are work, work and work", says Quick. [...]
Lester took off his glasses a moment: You don't understand what she works at, do you? [...] Then [he] pulled a little book out of his shirt pocket the size of a harmonica. He found a page and read: *Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy*

neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (395)

At this stage, several things have moved the politics of the novel in the direction of a theology of the neighbour. The relationship between the two families has definitely been transformed, especially through the marriage of Rose and Quick. Their lovemaking in the library and the fact that their son is born there, free the house from its past and open it up to new forms of relating to the other. Following the advice of the black angel, Sam decides not to sell, and Rose and Quick, who had bought their own new house in the outskirts, decide in the end to move back to the old place. Lester and Oriel have regained their faith. The tin fence in the garden is brought down and celebrations are held. The last one, by the river, is the moment Fish chooses for his second and definite drowning: "I'm Fish Lamb for those seconds it takes to die, as long as it takes to drink the river, as long as it took to tell you all this, and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me" (424). Fish's role as a narrator is asserted prior to the moment of dissolution. In fact, as McGirr (1999: 87) points out, "the whole story is told in the split second in 1964" when the reunification of Fish's two halves takes place. George Watt reads the second stage of this death as an expression of "the elusive concept of Nirvana, which relies on the non-dual and the interrelatedness of existence" (2004: 61). Besides, Fish's drowning is preceded by a magical moment in which he sees a crowd gathering around the two families —"I can see them in the shade of trees, the river of faces from before, the dark and the light, the forgotten, the silent, the missing" (422)— turning the family party into an all-embracing event.

My reading of *Cloudstreet* in the light of Levinas and Reinhard has consequences for both the notion of the individual and the idea of the nation, since it discloses an appetite for a more inclusive and at the same time more respectful approach to alterity. In the words of Murray, "the 'new tribalism' of the Cloud Street house is, by implication, a reformed national space as well, a gesture towards a world that is more supportive and just". In his opinion, Winton's "acknowledgement that he had to learn that Australia contained 'many ways and many wisdoms' establishes a viewpoint that extends beyond European notions of the nation" (2003:88). As if to prove this point, the novel ends in a very short fragment by an external narrator that describes Oriel folding down her tent with the help of Dolly and taking it inside "the big old house whose *door stood open*, pressed back by the breeze they made in passing" (426; my emphasis), the ways of the sovereign outshone by those of the neighbour.

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